HM Courts & Tribunals Service

HMCTS Digital Support Service – early market engagement event feedback

12th November 2024

Recap on market engagement event

Thank you for participating in the early market engagement session on 12th November 2024 on the future of HMCTS Digital Support Service.

The break-out discussions, looked at the lessons learned from delivering digital support, future scope and delivery considerations and helped gather insight to feed into the future service.

We will recap some of the key discussion points and feedback from the breakout groups in each of the three areas covered, as well as some FAQ's about the service.

1. Lessons learned from delivering the service

Overall, there was a common understanding that digital support needs often do not exist in isolation. Rather, users often have multiple needs and face many barriers that can cause digital exclusion which requires a more holistic approach. Feedback from the session highlighted user vulnerability, understanding court and tribunal processes as well as knowing how to access support as some key challenges for HMCTS to consider in delivery of DS going forward, with a variety of suggestions for addressing this.

What we have learned

1. The complexity of the legal process and the importance of the situation in a person life impacts their digital confidence, therefore increasing prevalence of digital exclusion in HMCTS users.

2. Users going through a court or tribunal case are often not in the mindset to gain digital skills and are focused on seeking a resolution to their legal issue.

3. Digitally excluded users and users of HMCTS services also often have multiple needs for support. Not addressing all these needs can mean that even with digital support these digitally excluded users cannot access HMCTS services.

4. Not all users know what their support needs are or are able to articulate the different support needs they have, with additional needs often being identified during the provision of support.

5. There is an estimated higher volume of digitally excluded users than we are currently reaching, and it has proven difficult to raise awareness of the service to those who need it.

Feedback from market engagement

1. From the perspective of frontline support, **users often struggle to articulate their needs** and may not be aware they have a legal issue. Understanding and navigating court or tribunal processes can be the main barrier for many users, particularly those who are vulnerable.

2. Key to addressing this in future is **support staff being trained to identify the multiple needs a user may have** and helping the user to understand the nature of the issue they are experiencing. The overall consensus was that support must be holistic, considering the user's circumstances and their HMCTS journey as a whole

3. It was also suggested that **more information on court/ tribunal processes and how or where to access support, could be made available to users.** There were various ideas about how this could be addressed, including collaboration with other government departments (for example DWP), having self-directed learning on gov.uk landing pages, and engaging further with the generalist/ legal support sector.

4. There were various suggestions about how to **identify the 'hidden' users DS had not yet reached.** For example, through evaluation of user journeys, utilising AI technology, engaging further with third sector and digital inclusion specialists on wider work on user barriers to accessing government services. It was felt that low DS volumes can also be a result of a **wider lack of awareness about support to use government services**, and that cross-government support strategies should be considered in response.

2. Breadth of support provision

Provide only digital assistance to users	Provide Digital Support with additional procedural, emotional support when required by a user.	Provide generalist support to users in which digital support is also provided.	**Out of scope** Funding user support which includes the provision of legal advice. This can only be funded under LASPO

- Attendees noted that DS users can be vulnerable and often have multiple needs, and that these needs can be compounded by navigating an unfamiliar legal process. It was felt that navigating this required widening the lens beyond digital skills and access alone and taking a more holistic approach to user needs. For example, acknowledging that there are many barriers or life circumstances a user may face that can contribute to digital exclusion.

- It was noted that there is an increased demand for generalist support and advice, however many users are unable to access support. This can be for a variety of reasons: lack of awareness of available support, geographical provision and wider funding and resource challenges in the sector. This is also often the case for legal advice. There is significant cross-over between these users and those who may require digital support but do not access it. HMCTS was encouraged to look at how future service delivery could bridge this gap.

- Whilst HMCTS cannot fund legal advice, there was emphasis on ensuring a clear route to accessing support through appropriate identification of needs and partnership working across different agencies and funding structures.

- In terms of awareness of support, some attendees felt that using the word 'digital' could be misleading, as not all will know what digital support means, additionally the term itself can be difficult to define due to the overlap in support required by digital support users.

- Some feedback on funding and payment model, and the challenges of an outcome-based model, as this will not always reflect the time spent supporting or the types of help provided.

HMCTS Digital Support Service

3. Likely Requirements for Digital Support delivery

Likely requirements for the delivery of digital support

1. **A light-touch triage process** to best identify that the user requires digital support and any additional needs such as a reasonable adjustment.

2. **Nationwide face-to-face provision.** Many users prefer or require an in-person session. For example, this could be due to not having a device or having communication needs. They should be able to receive equal support regardless of their location. The quality of the provision should be consistent across locations.

3. **Users to receive digital support at different stages of their case.** Most HMCTS digital services have multiple digital touchpoints post-submission of the initial application or response that a user must engage with to progress their case.

4. **Support is needed for broader digital tasks.** This includes helping to set up an email address if it is required for a HMCTS form and helping a user to navigate this.

Feedback from market engagement

1. **Challenges of geographical provision:** The challenges of face-to-face provision were highlighted, noting the issue of support 'deserts' in areas of South-West England and Wales. Attendees noted the need for flexibility on a local basis, considering what the support landscape looks like for each local authority. Some suggestions of exploring if remote support can be expanded and the need for this even outside of a digital support context.

2. **Awareness of the service:** understanding where HMCTS users go in their local area for support – many will naturally go to the places they know and trust, so engaging with a government department for support can be intimidating for some. Some suggestions of engaging with recognised trusted intermediaries who can signpost to the service.

3. **Remote hearings scope**: this was highlighted in some of the discussions, as some users who require DS will also need to engage with remote hearings. The technological aspect can be a barrier, as well as legal support needs in this stage of the user journey, as this can again create a barrier to using the service effectively.

4. **Use of technology to make HMCTS services more accessible**: there were some suggestions of how HMCTS can make digital processes easier to use and more efficient for users through tools such as AI and voice-assisted technologies.

HMCTS Digital Support Service

Next steps

- Conducting further engagement in 2025 to explore further the future of the digital support service.

- The Digital Support Service evaluation report will be published by IFF Research by Autumn 2025 and will provide greater detail on user needs and experience of the service.

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