31 July 2019

Dear Chair

When I appeared before the committee in June 2018 as part of your inquiry into our courts and tribunals transformation programme, you set out a number of recommendations. The first was that we should provide assurance against our updated timetable for delivery. I wrote to you with a progress report against the twenty-three milestones due at the end of January, and set out fifteen key milestones which we planned to deliver by July 2019. I am now pleased to provide you, in annex A, with an update on the progress HMCTS has made against those milestones.

As you will see, we have fully delivered eleven of the fifteen milestones, and our response sets out our progress against the other four. I have also set out the milestones we plan to deliver by the next way-point in the programme (known as Interim State Three), in May 2020, and will report progress to you again then.

HMCTS is pleased with the progress which has been made since January 2019. We are developing a range of digital services to support the resolution of civil, family and tribunals cases fairly and speedily, and give new routes to justice. The reformed probate service now covers the full process – including, most recently, providing a version for those who seek probate for someone who has died intestate. Similarly, the work on divorce now covers the full process for litigants in person, all the way to decree absolute, for uncontested divorces (which are the vast majority). Users continue to like our services, with satisfaction across all civil, family and tribunals digital services remaining above 75%. We have also published a new reform update, giving information about the programme and our progress to the public. I am enclosing a copy with this letter.

We have also made good progress in criminal court reform, where we are developing a joined-up system to allow all the parts of the system to work from the same information. The new digital case management system to support the single justice procedure (SJP) for summary offences has handled over 31,000 Transport for London cases, cutting delays and waste; and the new ‘common platform’, as well as being in pilot use in the Crown Court in Liverpool, is now being used in magistrates’ court hearings for the first time, to support hearings in summary cases.

Four of the commitments we made have not been met on time. First, we said that ‘The Civil Money Claims mediation pilot will launch with an “opt out approach” for defended claims up to £300 in value. The pilot is expected to last for six months.’ While this pilot is technically ready for deployment, we have decided to launch it at the same time as another piece of work, allowing
legal advisers to support the work of the civil court, which is not yet ready; both will be launched together when the second part is ready.

The second commitment which has not been met was that ‘User satisfaction for the Single Justice Procedure online plea will not fall below 75% as we introduce new prosecutors.’ User satisfaction for this service (which allows people to plead guilty or not guilty to minor offences online rather than by post) currently stands at 73% ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’, with 18% ‘neutral’ and 9% ‘dissatisfied’. A dedicated team is working to increase engagement and user satisfaction.

The commitment ‘We will have completed further pilots of Video Hearings in the Civil and Family jurisdictions’ has not yet been met. The pilots have started in Manchester and Birmingham Civil and Family Justice Centre, but have not yet been completed – they will run longer in order to make sure we have enough hearing observations for an effective evaluation.

Finally, the commitment ‘We will have started piloting Flexible Operating Hours at Brentford County Court and Manchester Civil Justice Centre’ has not been met. After discussion with stakeholders, we decided not to begin the pilot over the summer holiday period, and so the pilot will begin on 2 September 2019. Cases are currently being listed into the pilot hours in these courts for 2 September onwards.

I hope this update it helpful to you, and to the committee.

Yours sincerely

Susan Acland-Hood
Chief Executive, HM Courts & Tribunals Service