

Press release: Video hearing pilot launched

The first hearings will take place this spring, and will enable people to have their tax appeal heard through a video hearing. This will save them the time and money spent travelling to court and waiting for their hearing – which can mean taking an entire day off work. It will also make it easier for people with health problems that can make it harder to attend a physical court building.

By testing and evaluating the pilot, HMCTS will explore how video hearings might be used to improve access to justice and help cases progress faster.

Video technology is already used in criminal courts to allow some victims and witnesses to give evidence without having to come face to face with the accused – examples include a 97 year old victim of an aggravated burglary, and a witness to a gang murder who was not comfortable giving evidence in court. This pilot is taking this concept a step further – with all attendees, including the judge, participating in the hearing via video technology. Making use of technology to hold video hearings for technical parts of cases that mainly involve legal professionals and judges could save court time and help cases to progress faster. Technology is used in a variety of ways in courts and the various ways in which video links are used in proceedings are kept under regular internal review by HMCTS.

Justice Minister Lucy Frazer, said:

We are spending £1 billion on transforming and modernising the justice system. Video hearings have the potential to improve access to justice and speed up cases.

This pilot will provide important information – together with an increasing body of evidence from other countries – to drive innovation to make the wider system quicker, smarter, and much more user-friendly.

HMCTS are writing to potential participants this week to invite them to take part in the pilot. The video hearings will take place over the internet, with each participant logging in from a location of their choice, using a webcam and, for the purposes of the pilot, the judge located in the court room.

HMCTS are working closely with the judiciary to ensure the majesty of a physical courtroom will be upheld. The choice to use this new type of hearing would always be made by the Judge in the case. It will be possible for private online conversations to be had before the hearing, and the format and process of the hearing will be the same as in a usual court room.

The move is part of the Government's £1 billion investment to modernise the

court service, making it swifter, simpler, and easier to access for everyone. HMCTS is exploring how justice can best be served in the digital age.

Other examples of the Government's court reforms which are making access to justice easier for everyone include:

- Launching the first divorce application services online at four sites – making the process easier to understand for divorce applicants and helping to progress applications.
- A new paperless system, in operation at Lavender Hill Magistrates' Court, which means thousands of offenders caught dodging fares or using fraudulent tickets can now be punished more swiftly and effectively.
- A new service which allows people to submit their tax appeals online – drastically cutting the number of applications being returned as incomplete or inaccurate.