



**BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL, EAST SUSSEX
COUNTY COUNCIL, SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL AND
WEST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL**

ORBIS PUBLIC LAW JOINT COMMITTEE

DATE: 2 JULY 2018

**LEAD OFFICERS: PHILIP BAKER (ASSISTANT CHIEF
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CHIEF OF STAFF, SCC),
ABRAHAM GHEBRE-GHIORGHIS (EXECUTIVE
LEAD OFFICER FOR STRATEGY,
GOVERNANCE AND LAW, BHCC),
AND
TONY KERSHAW (DIRECTOR OF LAW AND
ASSURANCE, WSCC).**

SUBJECT: DIGITAL COURT

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

To update the Orbis Public Law Joint Committee on the digital court project progress in the Surrey courts and to outline the plans for progression in the Sussex courts.

INTRODUCTION

1. Digital court is the term used to describe the change of provision of bundles to the family court in hard copy lever arch files to electronic bundles (E-bundles).
2. The Joint Committee Members were first introduced to the project in October 2017 when it was at an early exploratory stage. Since January 2018, the project has rapidly picked up pace and achieved great success which OPL is pleased to be reporting on.
3. OPL made a strategic decision to lead the transition to digital working in the Surrey and Sussex family courts in order to utilise technologies to gain efficiencies. Following a successful pilot in the Guildford family court this has now been fully rolled out to all the judiciary in the Surrey courts and we are now moving forward with implementing the system for all family cases across in Sussex.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Orbis Public Law Joint Committee is recommended to note the update and plans.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure Members have oversight of the work underway in the partnership and to be aware of the benefits this project will bring to each authority.

DETAILS

How it works

4. Working with colleagues in the Surrey and Sussex family courts, OPL is changing the way bundles of evidence are made available from hard copy lever arch files of paper to electronic bundles (E-bundles). Instead of printing off hundreds of sheets of evidence from Prescient Plus (the OPL case management system) and sending them to court, the bundles are 'transported' electronically via a product called CaseLines. A cloud based digital court room is set up for each matter; this holds the E-bundle which parties and the judges have secure access to.
5. The bundle in the digital court room can be prepared and annotated electronically in a way that mimics current manual processes and is then used in the physical court room in a shared space to view the documentation. There are additional features such as a video conference facility that enables parties invited to the case to connect remotely by video link in a fashion similar to Skype, particularly useful for expert and witness appearances given that no special facility (save for internet access) or attendance at another court is required.

The pilot scheme at Guildford court

6. Surrey was chosen for the pilot scheme as there is only one OPL partner providing bundles to the Guildford and Staines courts, hence allowing for concentration of OPL resource to focus on just Surrey matters.
7. The digital court pilot scheme ran in Guildford during February and March for matters heard by HHJ Raeside, extending to HHJ Nathan at the beginning of April. Both judges were impressed by the software and found it easy to navigate. They have both reported significant efficiencies in hearing preparation and during hearings now that paper bundles are not required to refer to pages and that the software automatically directs parties and witnesses to a particular page. After their first digital hearing neither judge

required any further paper bundles in their hearings. Their court rooms have been entirely electronic since their first hearings and they expect now that advocates in their matters also work in the digital fashion.

8. From mid-April the Surrey project moved from pilot stage to implementation phase for all the Surrey judiciary sitting at both Guildford and Staines Courts. The implementation was on a judge by judge basis and by the beginning of June all Surrey family cases had migrated to the digital court.

Plans for Sussex courts

9. As the bundles are provided by three OPL partners this adds complexity to the implementation given that the system will be new to 3 sets of OPL colleagues. Using the learnings from the Surrey pilot and noting that it is an additional strain to the local authority colleagues to run both the new and manual system of bundling as well as not being able to truly realise the savings until the system is fully implemented a different approach has been taken for the Sussex courts. Instead of rolling out on a judge by judge basis a pilot will run initially for 2 Judges followed by a 'big bang' implementation to all judges.
10. An OPL transition to digital court launch event was held on 7 June 2018 at Hove Town Hall for Sussex solicitors firms and chambers as well as judges. With over 70 attendees it is clear of the level of interest and enthusiasm for the new ways of working.
11. A comprehensive OPL training plan to ensure that all legal and support colleagues are fully versed in the system is in place during June and July.
12. The two pilot judges will go live from w/c 18 June. We will then operate for a month with just these judges using the electronic system. This will allow for the judges to give feedback and for the OPL and court admin staff to learn the systems. On the condition that the pilot proves successful the remaining judges will go live from 23 July 2018. The judges' training will take place in the week prior.

Benefits

13. By implementing digital court OPL and key stakeholders will realise efficiency savings by significantly reducing and eliminating the following;
 - resource / people saving;
 - mileage expenses for staff and Judiciary;
 - paper costs;

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- printing costs;
 - photocopying costs;
 - postage costs;
 - archiving / storage costs;
 - transporting costs;
 - Less email traffic between staff;
 - A more efficient and effective joint working and sharing of best practices between OPL, HMCTS and other stakeholders;
 - A secure method of electronically exchanging bundles thereby reducing the risk of data loss;
 - A secure method of electronically extracting information thereby reducing the risk of data loss;
 - The potential to improve the timeliness Family work and a reduction in time delay as a result of instantaneous exchange of data;
 - Improved communication between all relevant Stakeholders; and
 - The ability to send/ receive bundles in excess of the set MB acceptance allowances.

14. Through the pilot, a conservative saving of £68 per hearing has been calculated. This includes the paper, printing, stationery, postage, transport and admin staff savings. Assuming 168 issued cases for the full year with 4 hearings for each, this equates to an annual saving of £46k for SCC alone. There are substantial further savings not accounted for in this such as any OPL solicitor and advocacy efficiency savings or the potential larger savings made possible by the use of the CaseLines video link facility, the reduction of DX bills, and the storage and destruction of hard copy bundles.

15. The indicated net savings from a full roll-out across OPL are likely to be significant – in excess of £200,000 p.a.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

16. The implementation in Surrey has been a huge success with only a few minor teething issues. The transition of the Surrey family courts to the digital solution is extremely prestigious and reflects well on OPL. OPL were contacted by The Law Gazette and will soon be promoting OPL's success.

17. July will be a busy month training OPL staff, court staff, judges, other solicitors and advocates and supporting a month long pilot period before all the judges go live on w/c 23 July.

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Appendices: None

Sources/background papers: None
