

Efficiency Impact Assessment

Introduction

The Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal (“SDT”)/Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal Administration Limited (“SDTAL”) aims to balance high standards of service and the timely determination of proceedings with its objective to remain as efficient and cost-effective as possible.

This document describes the steps which have been/will be taken to improve efficiency and/or reduce costs where possible.

CaseLines

The CaseLines system (which enables parties to upload evidence documents directly into a cloud-based evidence management and presentation platform) was implemented on 1 November 2018. Between then and 1 April 2019 CaseLines was utilised on a small number of cases before being rolled out to the majority of new cases and a substantial number of existing cases over a phased implementation period.

It is intended that 75% of all cases will use CaseLines by the end of 2020, following a gradual roll out, with anticipated savings for the Tribunal in the region of £8,000 per year, as well as reduced costs for other parties (including the SRA, Lay Applicants and Respondents). When combined with a new Case Management System (see below) CaseLines will provide a digital platform for the continuous improvement of case management processes.

CaseLines costs depend on the number of uploaded pages of documentation per year. The 2020 budget application is based on an assumed 134,500 pages of case related documentation (c. 75% of 149 cases @ an average of 1200 pages per case) compared to 100,000 in 2019.

The phased rollout of CaseLines has identified the need for increased internet capacity in order for CaseLines to be used to maximum effect, especially where it is used simultaneously in multiple courts. An increase in internet speed has been negotiated as part of wider mid-term changes to our BT contract, at no additional cost, and the impact of this increase will be monitored. However, it is anticipated that, to achieve maximum benefit from CaseLines, further improvements to the IT/internet infrastructure will be required, including the potential need to install an additional internet line. Provision has therefore been made for this in the 2020 budget.

Case Management System (CMS)

The Tribunal's CMS is an essential element of efficient case management. It has been identified that the SDT's current system requires replacement as it will shortly become unsupported and, ultimately, obsolete. It is critical that during 2020 the SDT identifies, procures and implements a new case management system. Without this, the SDT will not be able to achieve the desired return on technology investment to date e.g. case management process re-engineering, improved reporting capability and operational forecasting, CaseLines integration etc.

During 2019 the SDT undertook significant exploration of the market and had initial demonstrations from a number of providers. However the work of the SDT is somewhat niche and the systems seen to date require significant customisation to meet the SDT's needs. In light of this the SDT has engaged external consultancy expertise to help procure and implement a fit for purpose and cost-effective solution which meets the SDT's needs.

Website

In 2019 work was undertaken to alter the way in which the SDT's Judgments are published on its website, given concerns as to whether the way results appeared in searches on search engines such as "Google" were compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation.

£10,000 provision is included in the 2020 budget to develop functionality of our website including to facilitate service quality feedback and evaluation initiatives and gather data to help us identify ways to improve user experience and promote equal access for all service users.

The Microsoft SharePoint subscription for staff intranet provision has been terminated, with an annual saving of c. £5.5k, and existing website capability will be used (at no additional cost) instead.

Staffing and Administrative Costs

Following changes in the staffing team, including the appointment of an additional full-time deputy clerk in response to an increase in the number, length and complexity of cases, staffing levels are now at the required level to meet business needs and service the number of cases estimated by the SRA.

In 2019 staff were awarded a below-inflation cost of living increase. Some staff salaries were adjusted to take account of changed responsibilities and the impact of new technology on jobs (e.g. the provision of CaseLines support from within the Case Management team and the addition of HR admin responsibilities to the Office Services Assistant role). The ratio of pay between the CEO and median salary was c. 1:1.5.

Benefits remain largely unchanged, other than a minor improvement to pension contribution rates during the first 3 months of employment (offset by a reduction in administrative effort).

The level of remuneration for Board Members' attendance at Board meetings has remained at the same level as has the President's Honorarium.

Listing of Hearings and Court Utilisation

To maximise capacity, where hearing days are vacated e.g. due to adjournments or Agreed Outcome applications, where appropriate and with the agreement of the parties those days are being backfilled by bringing other cases forward.

Given there is now a full complement of clerks the SDT has started, from Autumn 2019, listing more hearing days in a month than it anticipates being effective. The SDT will only list as many cases as it has Members, clerks and Courtrooms for, but will list approximately one third more hearing days per month than it is anticipated will actually take place. Analysis of days listed and days effective since January 2019 has shown that between 50% and 65% of sitting days originally listed in a month are effective.

Each case is reviewed by a member of the clerking team at various key stages. The use of clerks' courts as an initial step where there has been non-compliance with the SDT's directions continues. During 2019 a number of listings were extended when it became evident that the original time estimate was insufficient. Adjusting the listing in this way avoided those hearings being vacated.

Out of date recording equipment in the Courtrooms has been upgraded to improve the reliability and quality of the recordings. Recordings are now provided to parties electronically rather than on CD. Due to the reduced administration time of producing the copy recordings and the administration time and costs involved in proceeding payments the SDT no longer charges for the provision of recordings.

Digitisation of Judgments

The SDT retains copies of Tribunal Judgments (available to members of the public) for an unlimited period of time. Currently judgments going back to c. 1900 are stored on the SDT's website and/or in bound volumes and/or in the SDT's hosted IT system. The cost of staff time to retrieve and provide paper judgments is estimated at up to £15-18 per judgment, depending on length.

It is proposed during 2020 to embark on a project to digitise hard copy Judgments to improve access to records for service users, ensure Judgment records are retained securely for posterity and reduce retrieval and, in the longer term, storage costs.

Budget provision for this has been made based on an indicative quote of c. £30,000 (although further quotes will be obtained before proceeding).

Finance

The 2018 statutory accounts were produced in-house (rather than by external accountants as in previous years), thereby reducing costs and capitalising on investment in in-house expertise.

Following the expiry of the current contract for External Audit arrangements, the SDT has negotiated a competitive 3 year fixed-price deal for 2020-22 to audit the accounts.

Supplier Management

The SDT continues to manage supplier arrangements to reduce and/or fix costs where possible and in line with contract terms and notice provisions. This includes:

- Fixing electricity costs on an annual basis at a competitive level
- Installing mains-supplied water coolers at a reduced cost
- Renegotiating our BT contract mid-term, to fix overall costs at a reduced level until 2022
- Changing our printer/photocopier profile
- Reducing the amount and cost of online legal knowledge-resource better to reflect actual historic usage, at the end of the current contract.

Member Recruitment

Following a number of resignations/retirements and having called off the "reserve" list of Members from the 2015 recruitment process, it will be necessary during 2020 to recruit a

number of additional Solicitor and Lay Members, to ensure that there are sufficient Members available to sit on the listed hearings.

It is intended that the cost of this will be significantly less than the previous recruitment round (in 2014/15). This will be achieved by streamlining advertising costs and adopting more flexible selection panel processes where possible, to reduce attendance costs. The SDT will liaise with other bodies to benefit from their experience of large-scale recruitment initiatives.

Training

Budgeted training costs are just under 0.9% of overall budget. External provision is combined with in-house and online delivery where possible to minimise costs

The 2020 budget for training includes:

- Staff training linked to delivery of business objectives.
- Induction for new Members following recruitment in 2020.
- Mandatory training (including health and safety, data protection etc.)

Members' Expenses

The SDT has set up a corporate Trainline account in order to reduce the number and cost of on-the-day bookings. Access to hotel discounts via corporate deals is also being explored.

SDT/SDTAL

September 2019