

Press Release

For Release: Immediately

The Administrative Justice Council hosts a Webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on the administrative justice system

On Wednesday 29th April, the Administrative Justice Council hosted a webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on the administrative justice system. The administrative justice system, often referred to as the 'Cinderella' of the justice system, covers all government decisions, including complaints and appeals on immigration and asylum, social security, housing, education, health care, planning, and tax.

Speakers gave an overview of how their sector had been impacted by the pandemic, and the measures in place to enable continued access to justice. Sir Ernest Ryder, Senior President of Tribunals, spoke about the impact of the virus on tribunal hearings which were operating at a reduced capacity under a telephone and video conference system. Rob Behrens, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, updated participants on the challenges of delivering a complaints service under the current constraints, whilst members of the advice sector highlighted the increased need for their role in supporting people through this critical time. It was emphasised that now, more than ever, advice is needed to help people who have been hard hit, as a result of the virus, in areas such as social security, housing, unemployment and indebtedness.

The Administrative Justice Council (AJC) also launched its first report 'Digitisation and Assessing justice in the Community'. The report is in response to the Courts and Tribunals Reform Programme, 'Transforming Our Justice System,' and highlights the impact of digitisation both on front-line advice services and the people they serve. The report, which was drafted prior to COVID-19, focuses on social security appeals and points to those who may be digitally challenged and 'left behind' as tribunals move to a digital justice system. It was highlighted that requests for digital assistance will increase and with the accelerated pace of digitisation, providers of advice and legal support will need to respond and adapt to meet a growing demand for digital assistance. The evidence found in this report is that many organisations were already struggling to meet demand for requests. It makes a number of recommendations to the Government and can be found at: <https://ajc-justice.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Digitisation.pdf>

Speaking of the report, Sir Ernest Ryder, Chair of the AJC said:

"We now find ourselves in unprecedented times where the use of technology has become essential and central to our users' lives. The report represents an introduction to the work that will be needed to ensure that frontline services are able to support individuals who are unable to access justice digitally. It poses an invitation to those involved in Reform to collaborate in the future and help improve access to justice to those who need it the most."

The webinar was recorded and will feature on the AJC website at: www.ajc-justice.co.uk.

Notes to Editors:

1. The Administrative Justice Council is an oversight body for the administrative justice system in the UK. Chaired by Sir Ernest Ryder, Senior President of Tribunals, membership is made up from the judiciary, ombudsman, academics, organisations representing 'users' and civil

servants. It was set up in March 2018 and the secretariat is provided by JUSTICE, a law reform and human rights organisation.

2. Panellists at the webinar included: Dr. Naomi Creutzfeldt, Westminster University; Sir Ernest Ryder, Senior President of Tribunals, Rob Behrens, Parliamentary and Health Ombudsman; Lindsey Poole, Director of Advice Services Alliance; Diane Sechi, Senior Pro Bono Lawyer, Simmons & Simmons and Luc Altmann, Deputy Director of Insight at HMCTS.
3. Advice Services Alliance published a report on the impact of COVID-19 on the advice sector which was presented at the webinar and can be found here: <https://ajc-justice.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ASA-Report-COVID-19-.pdf>
4. Diane Sechi, Senior Pro Bono Lawyer at Simmons & Simmons and member of the AJC drafted the report 'Digitisation and Accessing Justice in the Community' on behalf of the AJC. The report can be found here: <https://ajc-justice.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Digitisation.pdf>
5. The Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice and the Senior President of Tribunals, September 2016 'Transforming our Justice System: summary of reforms and consultation.' available at: https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/transforming-our-courts-and-tribunals/supporting_documents/consultationpaper.pdf
6. A recording of the Webinar will be on the AJC website at: www.ajc-justice.co.uk.
7. Please direct all enquiries to Heidi Bancroft, Secretary to the AJC, on 0207 762 6434 or hbancroft@justice.org.uk