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1. Good morning, everyone, it really is a huge pleasure to be here and whilst you might be the Glastonbury of civil justice, I'm delighted to see it's not quite as muddy here. Could I start today by taking a moment to thank you, Master of the Rolls, for your leadership.
2. Our theme today is 'access to justice – working together'. As someone who has advocated so passionately, so consistently, for a truly open, truly digital justice system, may say that I think you are the embodiment of that principle. Your energy, your commitment is unrivalled and unquestionable.
3. This was clear to me when I first met Sir Geoffrey a couple of weeks ago. I must admit I turned to my private secretary and said: "I need more Geoffrey in my life". To which the answer was: "Minister, I am sure that can be arranged!" So, I genuinely look forward to working with you as we strive to live up to your vision and your ambition.
4. Let me also pass on apologies from my colleague the Lord Chancellor, who I know is really disappointed not to be here with you today. As Geoffrey has said, we are debating the Second Reading of the Assisted Dying Bill in Parliament this morning and so I hope you will forgive me, too, for not being able to stay for questions or the rest of the conference because I do need to return to the House straight afterwards.
5. We do, however, have a raft of officials from the Ministry of Justice here in the room, so please make the most of them. It's a real honour for me to be here in the Lord Chancellor's place, and to have an opportunity to set out some of this Government's thinking on civil justice.
6. Civil justice is crucial. It's the part of the justice system which has the most contact with the public, even though there are far fewer TV dramas about it! Although, I must say as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Swindon South, I'm sure a TV drama set in Swindon County Court would give Kavanagh QC a good run for its money...
7. I also want to start by saying what an absolute honour and a privilege it was to be appointed the Minister for Courts and Legal Services when the Government was elected in July. It has been a whirlwind five months, to say the least.
8. You will all know too well about the capacity crisis we inherited in our prisons. We were forced to take quick action to prevent the system from collapsing. We had to act as the alternative didn't bear thinking about: Police unable to make arrests, courts stopped from holding trials. It would have led to a total breakdown of law and order in our country.
9. And while the emergency releases that took place recently in our prisons have alleviated some pressure, it is only a matter of time before our prisons fill up again. So that's why, there is a huge amount of longer-term work being done – on the Sentencing Review and the 10-Year Prison Capacity Strategy – so that no Government is ever again forced to take the same action that we did. It wasn't something we wanted to do – it was necessary to ensure that the system could continue to keep the public safe.
10. And if that wasn't challenging enough, we of course had to deal with the violent disorder across the country at the start of August. A swift and significant response from the justice system was needed – and we delivered. All that work has necessarily taken up a lot of our bandwidth in these early few months of being in office.

11. That is not to say that civil justice is the poor relation of criminal justice, as people so often seem to believe - more that there was a very acute problem that needed urgent input. I know the Lord Chancellor is as determined as I am to make sure we have a civil justice system that works for all who rely upon it.
12. Now, let me be honest that my background is not in the law. It's not something that I ever worked in before the Prime Minister asked me to take on this job. But anyone who knows me will tell you that when I'm in on something, I'm all in – and will give my everything to make it a success.
13. And let me say that I'm incredibly grateful to all the stakeholders, many in this room – who have been so generous with their time...You've listened to me, patiently, to many, many questions that I've had, and you've been very candid about the issues and challenges in our justice system.
14. And I want to take a moment to thank everyone who works together in support of the civil justice system. It's not lost on me that this year we are marking the 25th Anniversary of the Civil Procedure Rules Committee – and I would like to celebrate that milestone and acknowledge the very important work that that Committee does.
15. Let me also put on record my gratitude to the Civil Justice Council. As a Government, we must be led by evidence, and I can't emphasise enough how much we value your expertise, advice and guidance, particularly from your working groups.
16. So, if I may take a moment to say a few thank yous. Firstly, to the Litigation Funding Working Group, expertly chaired by Mr Justice Simon Picken, and Dr John Sorabji, for its recent interim report. As Geoffrey mentioned, we also believe that third-party litigation funding plays a critical role in enabling access to justice, and as a government, we want to make sure it is fair for all.
17. I know there are some who would like us to simply pick up where the previous Government left off in legislating in response to the PACCAR judgment, but we are clear that we want to consider this issue carefully and holistically.
18. I'm pleased that the CJC is carrying out a review of litigation funding, which I know will be incredibly valuable - and I'd encourage anyone interested to engage with its consultation, which is now live.
19. I also wanted to thank the CJC's Enforcement Working Group, skilfully chaired by Her Honour Judge Walden-Smith, and welcome their call for evidence on court users' experiences of enforcement. It's vital that the court-based enforcement system strikes a balance between providing effective enforcement methods, while ensuring that people in debt are treated fairly. I look forward to the group's recommendations, and I know that today's panel session will generate useful discussions about how things could be improved.
20. And let me also thank the Solicitors Act Working Group, chaired by Mr Justice Adam Johnson, for their important work in this area, too.
21. So, as I have said, I am not a lawyer. I do have two decades of experience working at the interface of politics and public service... From being Deputy Leader of Lewisham Council to Deputy Mayor for Transport in London – with two stints as a Member of Parliament as well. Some might call me a glutton for punishment ...

22. What strikes me as different about the job I am doing now though is the sheer enormity and significance of the decisions taken on an hourly basis in our courts and tribunals system. Decisions which can be life changing. Decisions which can have massive impact on our economy and society. And that's why I know it's so critical that our civil justice system remains one of the best and most accessible in the world.
23. When I was formerly an MP in South East London, I found out very quickly how often constituents would turn up at my office with a legal problem... They came with a carrier bag full of paperwork, and a heart full of hope that I'd be able to help. And I remember the countless times I'd have to say: "You need to get legal advice, I'm not a lawyer." 14 years on – and now an MP for my hometown of Swindon – I'm sad to say that it's the same story.
24. Many of the people who come to my advice surgeries have civil justice issues. At its heart, our civil justice system is there for two fundamental reasons: it enables ordinary citizens to uphold the legal rights we cherish dearly and provides a forum for resolving private disputes. Around one third of adults experience at least one civil, administrative, or family problem over the course of 18 months.
25. So, whether it's the family facing eviction... The business, seeking to recoup a debt... Or the employee, seeking compensation for a personal injury at work... The civil justice system is where they must turn to seek a resolution. There were 1.7 million County Court claims in 2023... Around 5 million civil cases in the Magistrates Court and over 11,000 in the High Court. Behind every single one there is a person or business, trying to resolve a dispute, enforce their rights, or move on with their lives. So, I'm very clear, and this Government is very clear that civil justice in no way plays 'second fiddle'.
26. It is a fundamental pillar of the rule of law, and a healthy, functioning democracy. And, aside from the considerable impact it has on the everyday lives of our citizens... A fair and efficient justice system is also critical to the economic success of this country... It's essential for growth – which is, of course, one of this Government's driving missions.
27. Whether a small family-run enterprise or a multinational corporation, businesses need certainty to operate, invest, and grow. They need to know that contracts will be honoured, and disputes resolved impartially. This trust in the system is the bedrock of commerce. And it is this confidence that attracts investment and enables our economy to flourish.
28. More than that, studies have shown that an efficient civil justice system, where disputes are resolved quickly... Where people spend less time tied up in legal knots... Frees up businesses, allowing them to get back to doing what they do best. This is, of course, doing business – and becoming more prosperous – which in turn boosts our economy.
29. Don't take my word for it. The inability to resolve disputes costs the economy a massive £11.6 billion a year, according to the Federation of Small Businesses. Now, someone asked me the other day, if I could achieve one thing as Minister, what would it be. It's a big question, but in truth, I didn't have to think about it for too long. The answer is simple - when I leave this job, I'd like to do so having helped make it cheaper, easier and more straightforward for normal people... Your average person on the street... The small business owner... To access justice. And in doing so, to realise the *full* potential of our civil justice system as a powerful engine for economic growth and social progress.

30. What does this mean in practice? Now, I know you'll want to hear some concrete policy announcements – and those will come in time. But today what I want to do is tell you about our thinking and give you a sense of the direction of travel. The *first* principle of our vision for the civil justice system will *always* be access to justice for all. How much money you have in your bank account should not determine your ability to enforce your legal rights. But I won't pretend that today's challenges are easy.
31. Civil legal aid remains under immense pressure. The tail of LASPO is long. Advice services are oversubscribed and are struggling to meet rising demand. And yet, as we all know, the legal aid system is the very cornerstone of our justice system. Ensuring it is sustainable, effective and efficient, and enables people to address their legal problems quickly and as early as possible, is absolutely critical.
32. I see it as one of my fundamental responsibilities to nurse the legal aid sector back to health... I've looked at the evidence collected in the Review of Civil Legal Aid, and I am under no illusions about the challenges the sector is facing. We will improve the experience of users and providers – if we fail to do this, we won't be doing our job properly.
33. As an important first step, we have today announced a consultation in January on uplifts to legal aid fees for housing and debt work, and for immigration and asylum work – the areas of most acute pressure. We'll continue to consider other areas of civil legal aid including as part of Phase 2 of the Spending Review.
34. The second principle for the civil justice system, is that we need to look at justice more broadly. Whether in court.... Out of court... or with the use of digital tools.... We want a system that allows people to get the right support to resolve their legal issue fairly, at the right time – ideally as early as possible – in a way that works for them. We want a system that people can understand. Because if we're honest, we don't have one at the moment.
35. Just two weeks ago, I sat in my advice surgery with a grandmother who came in to talk to me about her 14-year-old granddaughter – I'll call her Kim. Kim hasn't been in a classroom for 4 years because no school in Swindon could meet her educational needs. Her grandmother came to ask me whether I could help get Kim's case at the special educational needs tribunal heard more quickly. She'd been given a date of October next year. I asked her if she had applied for an expedited hearing.
36. She looked at me blankly. I said, "don't worry, I'll Google it for you and tell you what you need to do." So, I sat in my advice surgery and typed into my phone "how do I get an expedited hearing at the special educational needs tribunal". I'm the Minister of State. I knew precisely the question I needed to type into Google.
37. The responses I got back were absolutely useless. I understood the process. I knew what question to ask. None of it helped. It was all still a mystery. If I can't work it out – a woman with two degrees and a big office in Petty France, how on earth do we expect other people to navigate the system? That's why there is always a queue outside of the Citizens Advice Bureau in Swindon. And that's why we need to do all that we can to encourage good quality early legal advice and support, and alternative dispute resolution. I know I don't have to sell the benefits to you...
38. Helping people to define their legal problem, and stopping that problem from escalating into costly, drawn-out legal battles that are stressful for all involved. And, of course, beyond

the immense value to individuals – people like Kim and her grandmother – it can have immense value to businesses. Dispute resolution in itself generates that all-important growth I talked about earlier.

39. Arbitration is worth £2.5bn a year to our economy in fees alone - around 80% of the world's maritime arbitration cases are conducted in London. And London's status as the world's leading hub for international arbitration is, quite rightly, a source of great pride.
40. I want to explore how we can move forward with even more options for early dispute resolution and legal support.... That could include expanding mediation in certain disputes... Take the recent change to ensure all small claims for money in the County Courts are referred to mediation before they can proceed to a hearing... This is helping many parties settle their disputes quicker, with less stress – so we're now looking at what the policy should be for higher value claims too.
41. Let me also take a moment to commend the Civil Justice Council, particularly Professor Higgins, for his excellent work on Pre-Action Protocols, which are a crucial part of encouraging earlier dispute resolution and streamlining the process if cases *do* proceed to court.
42. We want to explore the development of more pre-action services, similar to the Official Injury Claim portal, which has seen nearly 900,000 low value road traffic accident cases registered in 3 years since its launch. Though the default shouldn't be for the Government to develop these pre-action services – we're very keen to work with you, and the private sector, to drive forward initiatives.
43. The *third* principle is that the future is digital – and justice is no exception. We want to encourage greater use of digital justice.... Because the average person wants... and expects... to be able to access legal services online, in the way we all access other services – such as banking and shopping.
44. Digital dispute resolution is of course far swifter and cheaper for those involved, but it benefits the wider justice system too – easing pressure on our courts. While digital justice is clearly the direction of travel, we also need to make sure that in our push for reform, we aren't leaving people behind.
45. Digital exclusion does remain an issue for many people, often the most vulnerable in our society. And, in encouraging those who *can* resolve their legal issues online to do so, we must make sure the system works for those who can't, those who still rely on that critical face to face support and advice. I'm well aware of the considerable challenges in the court system. And despite the efforts of many in this room today, performance remains a challenge - with small claims taking around 51 weeks to reach trial, and higher value claims around 79 weeks.
46. So, our *fourth* principle has to be improving efficiency across the system. Digital services are already playing their part here. For Online Civil Money Claims, the time taken from the issue of a claim to a Standard Directions Order being issued is nine weeks - compared to 30 weeks for non-reform claims. In Damages Claims, the time taken from issue of a claim to an SDO being drawn is 13 weeks compared to 37 weeks for non-reform cases. That's making a real difference to the people and businesses using these services, and in turn, to our economy.

47. And, while most civil claims in the county court don't require a trial, for those that do, HMCTS is improving efficiency with measures like the 'virtual region', with video-enabled hearings in London and the Southeast. So, digital justice is no longer a distant future to be aspired to. We now have a solid basis to make that future a reality today, not least through the Online Procedure Rule Committee, which launched last year.
48. And thank you, again, to the Master of the Rolls for your work driving this forward. Along with colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, we are also working on a new end-to-end digital service for resolving possession claims in the county courts in England and Wales, which will benefit tenants, landlords and mortgage providers...
49. And the lawtech sector continues to innovate, developing digital tools for businesses and consumers, including harnessing cutting-edge AI technology. For the Government's part, we want to explore how we can *further* digitise civil systems. As the Lady Chief Justice said recently – our justice system may be the envy of the world, but that leading status should not, and must not, be taken for granted. Other jurisdictions, like Singapore, are innovating rapidly, and snapping at our heels.
50. So as for our *fifth* principle, we must harness the power of tech, to make sure our courts and legal services are modern, fit for the future, and remain the global gold standard. Our business and property courts handle the biggest and most complex claims in the civil system, worth many millions. Legal services contribute £34 billion to the economy a year... And around 75 percent of the Commercial Court's work is international... That has been the case for at least the last 20 years – helping to create a trade surplus of £5.7 billion.
51. In some international cases, neither party is UK based, which means parties will have made an active decision to litigate here, rather than somewhere else. That says a lot about the quality of our legal services, legal professionals, and our courts. But if we're to preserve our position as a world leader, we cannot rest on our laurels. We must adapt and evolve – as our legal system has done for centuries – to make sure that we remain as good as – and ideally, better (!) – than our competitors.
52. Doing that is a joint endeavour. We will work with the judiciary, the Department for Business and Trade, as well as representative bodies, regulators, and legal experts from right across the sector.... To kickstart a conversation about how we identify the opportunities, mitigate the risks, and strengthen our legal sector both here and abroad...And, crucially, how all that feeds into the industrial strategy that the Government campaigned on – our plan for a bigger and better economy.
53. Let me end where I began: with people. No one wants a legal issue hanging over them indefinitely. People want quick, affordable resolutions, so they can move on with their lives or grow their businesses. For that to happen, we need a high-functioning, modern civil justice system—one that not only upholds rights but also drives economic stability and growth. And our system must continue to evolve to meet the demands of today's world. There is a lot to do, but I believe we can do it.
54. And I really look forward to working with all of you to make this vision a reality. Thank you for listening.