Friday 18 July 2025

Meeting Opening: Welcome and Apologies

The Chair formally opened the meeting, welcomed members, observers and guest speakers, and thanked departing members and Secretariat colleagues for their service to the Council. The minutes from the previous meeting were referred for minor revision and approval out of committee.

Updates on Council's Current Work

Costs Working Group

Council received an update on the review of Guideline Hourly Rates. The Working Group is considering whether a higher rate should be introduced for complex litigation and whether Guideline Hourly Rates should be established for counsel. Members heard that evidence gathering was under way, including engagement with the judiciary and the legal professions, with an interim report and consultation planned for 2026.

Solicitors Act

The Working Group is continuing to develop proposals for reform of Part III of the Solicitors Act 1974. Council heard that the report and consultation will focus more clearly on the policy objectives of reform and the range of possible future regulatory models. A revised consultation document is expected to be considered by Council ahead of publication.

Availability of Judgments

Council discussed ongoing work examining gaps in the public availability of court judgments. The project will consider what judgments are currently available, where gaps remain and how access might be improved. Further work will be undertaken on the evidence and data required to support the project.

Litigation Funding

Council noted the publication of its final report on litigation funding in June and the positive response it had received. The Working Group is continuing to engage with the Ministry of Justice on the practical implications of the report's recommendations.

Enforcement

Council received an update following publication of its report on enforcement in April. Members discussed the response to the report, current consultation activity and the relationship between enforcement reform and other areas of the Council's work. Council agreed to respond to the relevant consultation.

Use of AI in the Preparation of Court Documents

Council heard that the Working Group had agreed to retain a focused scope examining the use of artificial intelligence in the preparation of court documents. The group intends to consult on its proposals and will return to Council if it considers that the scope should be expanded.

Civil Work in the Magistrates' Courts

Council received an update on the new project examining civil work undertaken in the magistrates' courts. The first stage will gather evidence to improve understanding of the scale and nature of this work. This will inform a later consultation on any issues identified and whether administrative, procedural or jurisdictional changes may be appropriate.

Futures and Data Groups

Council noted continuing work on digital inclusion and future user-focused research. Members also reaffirmed the importance of improving the civil justice data landscape and ensuring that data supports the Council's future work.

Access to Justice in Greater Manchester

Regional Pro Bono Collaboration

Council heard from a guest speaker about the work of the Greater Manchester Pro Bono Committee. The presentation covered regional collaboration between advice organisations, universities, the legal profession and the judiciary, as well as work to map provision, encourage volunteering and improve routes to support for people who are unable to afford representation.

Greater Manchester and Public Service Reform

The Mayor of Greater Manchester addressed Council on devolution, public service reform and the region's approach to supporting residents. Discussion considered housing, debt, access to advice, early dispute resolution and how civil justice support might form part of more integrated local services. Council and the Mayor agreed that there would be value in continuing the discussion about what effective access to civil justice should look like within Greater Manchester's developing public service model.

Updates on Other Work

HMCTS

Council received an update on civil court performance, claim volumes, mediation, possession proceedings and digital services. Members discussed the continued development of Online Civil Money Claims and damages services, the planned digital possession service and the importance of understanding variations in timeliness and performance across court centres.

Ministry of Justice

Council heard an update on current policy developments, including civil legal aid, personal injury, housing, fixed recoverable costs and the outcome of the Spending Review. Members also discussed areas where current reforms intersect with the Council's work.

Legal Aid

A written update on legal aid was circulated to Council, with members invited to raise any questions outside the meeting.

Civil Procedure Rule Committee

Council discussed a consultation on service by electronic means and agreed that the Council should respond. Members noted the practical issues involved in expanding electronic service while ensuring that arrangements remain fair and workable for different court users.

National Forum

Council reviewed the purpose and format of the National Forum following the decision not to hold the event in 2025. Members supported retaining an in-person event, with networking recognised as an important part of the Forum. Discussion favoured a more focused programme, strong keynote contributions and a diverse range of subjects and participants. The Forum will return in 2026, with consideration given to holding it outside London.

Council Reports and Future Meetings

Council discussed follow-up work arising from an earlier report on dispute resolution hearings in small claims and noted work being undertaken on the transfer of cases between county courts. Members also considered possible subjects for discussion at the October meeting.