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COMMENT

Court technology can help domestic abuse victims

Digitising the injunction process will help applicants and reduce costs in these difficult times, Mark Groves writes

Mark Groves

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Nowhere is the severity of the testing times we are experiencing more evident than in the violent homes of domestic abuse victims during the coronavirus restrictions.

One of the simplest ways for victims to protect themselves from domestic abuse — and so begin the journey of taking back control and rebuilding their lives — is in a small piece of paper: a protective injunction.

These are granted by the family courts with or without the help of a solicitor. Victims present applications in person and, in most cases, the judge will grant an order.

It has been heartening to see that the president of the family division of the High

Court has issued a directive to judges to take new applications electronically. This reform is now filtering through to the courts.

However, one important area has been overlooked. When an order is granted it is drafted and printed by the court staff and, in most courts, it still has to be collected by a process server in person.

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The process server is asked personally to collect the order from the court and then to serve it physically on the domestic abuse perpetrator.

Courts already have the technology to avoid this unnecessary visit by a process server and, in our current need to reduce social contact to prevent the spread of Covid-19, it makes sense to instigate the electronic sending of orders.

Courts already print orders, so it is a logical next step to switch to sending them electronically.

There are many good reasons for delaying no further. First, electronic dispatch of orders would take cost out of the system – an extremely important consideration when court services are working with reduced funding.

Second, it would cut down the amount of time spent by court staff on administration, freeing them to for other tasks and helping to reduce court waiting times.

Third, it would enable victims to be protected faster because orders would be served quicker. And last, it would help the environment by reducing the use of fossil fuels.

Traditionally, the justice system has always been slow to move, but in our current emergency we have seen major global corporations completely change their working practices in a matter of hours.

It is high time for HM Courts and Tribunals Service to break from its self-imposed restraint and move into the fast lane.

Mark Groves is the chief executive of the National Centre for Domestic Violence