

Press release: Video hearing pilot launched

The first hearings will take place this spring, and will enable people to have their tax appeal heard through a video hearing. This will save them the time and money spent travelling to court and waiting for their hearing – which can mean taking an entire day off work. It will also make it easier for people with health problems that can make it harder to attend a physical court building.

By testing and evaluating the pilot, HMCTS will explore how video hearings might be used to improve access to justice and help cases progress faster.

Video technology is already used in criminal courts to allow some victims and witnesses to give evidence without having to come face to face with the accused – examples include a 97 year old victim of an aggravated burglary, and a witness to a gang murder who was not comfortable giving evidence in court. This pilot is taking this concept a step further – with all attendees, including the judge, participating in the hearing via video technology. Making use of technology to hold video hearings for technical parts of cases that mainly involve legal professionals and judges could save court time and help cases to progress faster. Technology is used in a variety of ways in courts and the various ways in which video links are used in proceedings are kept under regular internal review by HMCTS.

Justice Minister Lucy Frazer, said:

We are spending £1 billion on transforming and modernising the justice system. Video hearings have the potential to improve access to justice and speed up cases.

This pilot will provide important information – together with an increasing body of evidence from other countries – to drive innovation to make the wider system quicker, smarter, and much more user-friendly.

HMCTS are writing to potential participants this week to invite them to take part in the pilot. The video hearings will take place over the internet, with each participant logging in from a location of their choice, using a webcam and, for the purposes of the pilot, the judge located in the court room.

HMCTS are working closely with the judiciary to ensure the majesty of a physical courtroom will be upheld. The choice to use this new type of hearing would always be made by the Judge in the case. It will be possible for private online conversations to be had before the hearing, and the format and process of the hearing will be the same as in a usual court room.

The move is part of the Government's £1 billion investment to modernise the

court service, making it swifter, simpler, and easier to access for everyone. HMCTS is exploring how justice can best be served in the digital age.

Other examples of the Government's court reforms which are making access to justice easier for everyone include:

- Launching the first divorce application services online at four sites – making the process easier to understand for divorce applicants and helping to progress applications.
- A new paperless system, in operation at Lavender Hill Magistrates' Court, which means thousands of offenders caught dodging fares or using fraudulent tickets can now be punished more swiftly and effectively.
- A new service which allows people to submit their tax appeals online – drastically cutting the number of applications being returned as incomplete or inaccurate.

News story: Future railways: £3.6 million invested in rail improvements

Busy London train station at rush hour.

£3.6 million funding has been offered to 10 projects that will transform rail passenger travel.

The projects will develop and demonstrate technologies that will improve the passenger experience on UK railways. These include:

- a design for train carriages that will increase peak hours seat numbers
- a carriage design that can quickly switch from carrying passengers to carrying goods
- beacons that guide visually-impaired passengers through the station and to their seat
- technology enabling disabled passengers to seek real-time assistance with their journey
- an augmented reality application that highlights a journey's landmarks

The technologies will be showcased through real-life demonstrators, enabling passengers to experience and feedback on the innovations.

Supporting innovation in rail

Rail Minister Jo Johnson said:

We are investing in the biggest rail modernisation programme since

Victorian times, introducing the changes that passengers want to see – more frequent services and quicker, more comfortable journeys.

While we have introduced real-time platform information, taken big strides on safety and improved how we manage our railways to accommodate more services on existing tracks, the pace of change can sometimes be slower than we would like to see.

[The] funding is part of a wider programme of activities to speed up the delivery of new ideas and high-value innovations, which can have a big impact on passengers' journeys.

Improving travel

The funding was offered through a First of a Kind competition run by Innovate UK, part of the Department for Transport's (DfT) scheme to improve the passenger experience on rail.

Ian Meikle, Director of Infrastructure Systems at Innovate UK, said:

The UK railway is carrying more and more passengers, and they rightly demand improvements to their journeys. What we are announcing today are tangible innovations, which each in their own way will make train travel better.

Press release: Government on track to hit target of 2,500 new prison officers ahead of schedule

Almost 2,000 prison officers have been recruited since the launch of a campaign to bring in 2,500 additional officers by the end of this year, new figures released by Justice Secretary David Gauke have revealed today (15 February 2018).

And a further 1,582 new recruits have been offered roles and are booked onto Prison Officer Training (POELT) courses, meaning the Government is on target to recruit the 2,500 officers nine months ahead of schedule.

Figures released today show there was a net increase of 1,970 officers from October 2016 to December last year, up from 17,955 to 19,925. The boost in staffing numbers will help deliver our new Offender Management in Custody

model which will provide prisoners with a keyworker to support them in custody.

The recruitment efforts form part of a wider drive to ensure that all prisons are fully staffed so that they can deliver safe and decent regimes. Prison officer recruitment will continue over the coming months and new recruits, alongside existing staff, are being given improved Suicide and Self Harm (SASH) prevention training, with 14,300 staff members having now received it.

Justice Secretary David Gauke said:

I want to commend our hard-working prison officers who do a vital job in protecting the public every day, often in very challenging, difficult and dangerous circumstances. These figures show we are on target to recruit 2,500 additional prison officers.

I am determined to tackle the issues in our prisons head on and I am committed to getting the basics right so we can focus on making them safe and decent places to support rehabilitation. Staffing is the golden thread that links the solutions we need to put in place to drive improvement, so I am delighted our recruitment efforts are working.

Today's announcement shows that the government's nationwide drive to recruit the best talent from around the country into the prison service – regardless of age or background – is working.

Governors are being given greater flexibility over their local recruitment and encouraged to engage with new schemes and initiatives to attract the best and most committed talent.

By having more staff on the ground, staff will be better supported to do the job they came into the prison service to do, and spend more time reforming offenders.

Notes to editors

Since publication of the White Paper:

- we are making a substantial investment in marketing and targeted recruitment to generate even more interest in these valuable roles
- we have increased our POELT training capacity by more than 75% for this year and next

Starting pay for a National based Prison officer ranges from £20,751 to £23,052 for a 37 to 41 hour week and this increases to a maximum range of £23,122 to £25,685 for the same hours.

Press release: Oxford mobile phone dealer handed 12 year disqualification

William Robert Howard (45) director of the now liquidated Expeditors Limited has entered into an undertaking that prevents him from acting as a director for 12 years.

The mobile phone business was incorporated in 2004 and a petition was made to wind up Expeditors Limited in June 2017 by HM Revenue & Customs regarding an unpaid VAT bill of £22,545.40.

The Insolvency Service then conducted an investigation, which focused on the mobile phone company's participation in a form of VAT fraud known as Missing Trader Intra Community fraud (MITC).

Commonly known as 'carousel' fraud, MITC fraud sees large consignments of high-value electrical or small items invoiced rapidly and repeatedly around trading chains. On paper the goods look like they are being moved repeatedly from customer to customer but the goods are only moved as they enter or exit the UK.

In the case of Expeditors Limited, William Howard used the scheme to offset VAT and reclaim close to £350,000 in its 2005 to 2006 VAT return.

Examples of MITC conducted by William Howard were indicated by the rapid succession of same-day trades within the UK but goods weren't delivered and remained on a shared freight forwarder, there were common uses of the same offshore bank, as well as payments being arranged with third parties who were neither suppliers nor customers.

Additionally, all the traders banked with the First Curacao International Bank which was shut down by the Netherlands Antilles authorities in September 2006 in order to prevent money laundering.

William Howard's disqualification started on 5 February 2018 and means that he cannot promote, manage, or be a director of a limited company until 2030.

Anthony Hannon, Official Receiver in the Public Interest Unit of the Insolvency Service, said:

This type of VAT fraud is very serious and a high priority for HMRC and the Insolvency Service.

MTIC fraud has caused loss to the public purse and has cost the tax payer substantial sums in fraudulent VAT claims. The Insolvency Service is committed to making directors accountable for their actions.

Expeditors Limited (CRO No. 05266310) was incorporated on 21 October 2004. It traded from premises in Oxford.

The petition to wind up the company was presented by HM Revenue & Customs in respect of unpaid VAT of £22,545.40. The winding up order against Expeditors Limited was made on 26 June 2017.

Mr Howard was born in November 1972.

A disqualification order has the effect that without specific permission of a court, a person with a disqualification cannot:

- act as a director of a company
- take part, directly or indirectly, in the promotion, formation or management of a company or limited liability partnership
- be a receiver of a company's property

Disqualification undertakings are the administrative equivalent of a disqualification order but do not involve court proceedings.

Persons subject to a disqualification order are bound by a [range of other restrictions](#).

The Insolvency Service, an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), administers the insolvency regime, and aims to deliver and promote a range of investigation and enforcement activities both civil and criminal in nature, to support fair and open markets. We do this by effectively enforcing the statutory company and insolvency regimes, maintaining public confidence in those regimes and reducing the harm caused to victims of fraudulent activity and to the business community, including dealing with the disqualification of directors in corporate failures.

BEIS' mission is to build a dynamic and competitive UK economy that works for all, in particular by creating the conditions for business success and promoting an open global economy. The Criminal Investigations and Prosecutions team contributes to this aim by taking action to deter fraud and to regulate the market. They investigate and prosecute a range of offences, primarily relating to personal or company insolvencies.

The agency also authorises and regulates the insolvency profession, assesses and pays statutory entitlement to redundancy payments when an employer cannot or will not pay employees, provides banking and investment services for bankruptcy and liquidation estate funds and advises ministers and other government departments on insolvency law and practice.

Further information about the work of the Insolvency Service, and how to

complain about financial misconduct, is [available](#).

Media enquiries for this press release – 020 7674 6910 or 020 7596 6187

You can also follow the Insolvency Service on:

News story: UK steps up commitment to a modernised NATO

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson met counterparts at a meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Brussels. Crown copyright.

Mr Williamson signalled that the UK will meet its commitments, including an uplift of around one hundred personnel in our contribution to NATO's modernised Command Structure – the precise numbers will be determined through further work between now and the Summit. This will help to ensure that NATO can meet the security challenges of today and tomorrow.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

NATO is the cornerstone of our defence but we live in an uncertain world, with the confrontation and conflict we face shifting and evolving. NATO must modernise at the same pace, so we can respond better and faster to deter those that threaten our safety and way of life.

NATO will today discuss a range of issues including burden sharing, cooperation with the European Union, and efforts to modernise the Alliance. A key element of modernising NATO will be the adaptation of the Alliance's Command Structure. Defence Ministers will decide whether to implement a design which includes proposals for a new Command for the Atlantic and a Command to improve the movement of military forces across Europe.

The proposed Command Structure, which has been influenced by senior British staff, represents a key aspect of the UK's priority to modernise and strengthen NATO so it remains able to command and control its missions and operations wherever they are required.

Over the two-day Ministerial, Defence leaders will discuss efforts to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence posture. Britain's Armed Forces have taken a leading role in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence, providing the Framework battlegroup in Estonia and a providing a company to the US-led enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Poland. The Defence Secretary welcomed the arrival of Danish forces in Estonia and the announcement that

France will return in 2019 to support the UK-led force. NATO's role in the fight against terrorism was also discussed with the Defence Secretary welcoming the progress that has been made.

NATO remains the cornerstone of UK defence and, as one of the largest contributors, is one of only a few NATO countries pledging at least 2% of their GDP to defence.