

People's experiences and views of the justice system

Policy brief

Dr Anna Tsalapatani, Dr Janice Tripney,
Dr Mark Newman, Carol Vigurs, and Dr Karen Nokes July 2026



This policy brief summarises the key findings relating to public user views and experiences of civil, family, and administrative justice, and interventions to improve those experiences, published between 2010 and 2025.

Context

Recent years have seen escalating concerns around the state of the justice system in the UK given the impact of cost-cutting measures, increasing backlogs, and changes from recent legislative reforms. At the same time, we have seen an exponential increase in the number of publications that consider the views and experiences of public users that engage with the justice system. There is therefore a need to evaluate this growing body of research. This study begins to meet this need.

Research evidence

This report explores user views and experiences of the justice system by applying a two-stage mapping and systematic review methodology to the existing empirical research (both qualitative and quantitative) from the UK on this topic. The methodology's first stage involved mapping the primary research published between 1995 and 2025 across all courts and tribunals; the second stage narrowed the focus to synthesise the research on views and experiences of users within civil, administrative, and family justice, and interventions in this area, published since 2010. This policy brief presents the findings from this second stage.

Key findings

The research highlighted a range of policy-relevant findings. These include:

- Users have key information, assistance, and emotional support needs that are not being met. This includes being unable to identify reputable and authoritative sources of information, advice, and support to help them understand and navigate court and tribunal processes. Users often need 'bundled' support that offers all three types of assistance. Equally the research highlights that improvements can be made, such as to vastly simplify forms and documents, and to provide better communication around the progress of the case and what is expected of parties at each stage of the legal process.
- There have been significant negative impacts from the withdrawal of investment in the justice system including the flow-on effects from the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) – which has severely limited access to legal aid – and wider austerity measures, including the scaling back of local authority funding. Even those that are eligible struggle to gain access due to the difficulty of evidencing their eligibility, or they find it difficult to find a solicitor which undertakes legal aid work. There is also the clear impact of funding cuts to the charity sector, which provides information and support, and the negative flow-on consequences from underfunded and often inappropriate localised decision-making that requires greater tribunal engagement to rectify.
- Users arrive at courts and tribunals not knowing what to expect or having misplaced expectations. This can create additional anxiety, have a negative effect on participation

(they may not understand what is required of them or what is being said), and can leave users feeling silenced and marginalised. Having legal representation doesn't necessarily negate this.

- Some professional users, including certain judges, are going to significant lengths to help enable understanding and participation. This includes explaining procedures, adapting their communication style, giving guidance, and adopting a more inquisitorial approach. This improves how users experience the process and serves as a levelling function, especially in hearings where only one party has representation.
- There is a need for improvements in systems for making users aware of, identifying cases of need of, and implementing reasonable adjustments and special measures. Many users aren't aware that these are available or how to ask for them, and the systems are not developed enough for enable users to request them in a timely way. This can lead to inequalities, especially as some users are better placed to request assistance than others. This is an area where legal representation makes a difference.
- Engagement with courts and tribunals can create and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Those engaging with courts and tribunals often do so in order to resolve what is in many cases a drawn-out concern, which may be one of a 'cluster' of problems they are experiencing. The additional burden and range of costs of engaging in the process can exacerbate vulnerabilities or create more. These 'situational' vulnerabilities can create barriers to participation.
- There is a need for an increased number of high-quality intervention studies including outcome evaluations, to investigate what works and at what scale. The current range of intervention studies are small in number and largely consist of process evaluations.

Policy recommendations

There are a range of policy recommendations that emerge from these findings. See the main report for a full list, including recommendations for research and reporting. Those relevant to policies for the justice system itself include:

- **Improve information provision**
 - Develop extensive high quality plain language resources to help users navigate the system and set expectations. These need to be made available from a recognised central authoritative source.
 - Simplify forms and documents used in communication to assist understanding. Avoid the use of legal jargon where possible, and where it is not possible, provide clear definitions.
 - Provide multi-format resources to meet different user communication needs and make these readily available in sources where users are likely to encounter them, such as notices of hearing.
 - Have a clearly identifiable point of reference for case information for users, such as an online portal where users can gain information regarding the progress of their case and the various steps involved.

- **Revisit the provision and eligibility of legal aid and how it is resourced**
 - Expand eligibility requirements of legal aid, recognising that there can be increasingly costly flow-on implications when users don't have access to suitable support and assistance in a timely way.
 - Provide better resourcing for legal aid, to increase the number of legal representatives willing to accept legal aid, and additional resources for users who needs additional assistance (such as those with learning difficulties).
 - Develop an up-to-date portal of available legal aid representatives and their details for easy access by users.

- **Explore the use of less adversarial approaches in the Family Court**
 - Investigate the ways in which judges are managing their courtrooms in more inquisitorial ways to help lay users participate, in order to document best practice and to develop guidance and training.

- **Develop systems to raise awareness and availability of reasonable adjustments and special measures for public users**
 - Develop systems that communicate their availability to all users and encourage users to declare these needs early in the process, while explicitly informing them that making these requests will not be detrimental to their case.
 - Invest in facilities that enable these adjustments and measures to be implemented.
 - Develop training and guidance for professional staff that helps them understand, identify, and adjust for certain vulnerabilities and conditions.

- **Develop robust evaluations to appraise the process and outcomes of justice system interventions**
 - Increase awareness and training around what constitutes an evaluation, the various forms of evaluations, and ways to conduct them.
 - Foster a strong evaluative culture where all new justice system initiatives include plans for a suitable high-quality evaluation, including allowing greater access for researchers.

- **Adopt human-centred design approaches to work on re-engineering justice systems to better meet the needs of public users**
 - Deploy human-centred research and design methodologies to re-engineer systems to meet the needs of users instead of focusing on fitting public users into existing systems.

Key reference

Tsalapatani A., Tripney J., Newman M., Vigurs C., and Nokes K. (2026) *People's Experiences and Views of the Justice System: Public Right to Justice – Evidence Review Three*. Nuffield Foundation: London <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/peoples-experiences-and-views-of-the-justice-system>

Contact details

Contact: Dr Anna Tsalapatani, University College London, a.tsalapatani@ucl.ac.uk

This report was commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation as part of its [Public right to justice](#) programme. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation or of University College London. Visit [nuffieldfoundation.org](https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org)

This report was commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation as part of its [Public right to justice](#) programme. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the Foundation. The report forms part of a series of evidence reviews and briefing papers critically examining different dimensions of the justice system and access to justice in England and Wales. The programme aims to develop an interconnected body of research, providing policymakers, practitioners and the public with a better understanding of how the justice system operates, where it falls short, and how it could better meet the needs of those it serves.

As an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being, the Foundation funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives. It is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute, and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

Find out more at: nuffieldfoundation.org

Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org

LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation