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Who are we?

We are an Executive Agency of the Scottish Executive Justice Department. Our main function is to support the judges and sheriffs in the Supreme and Sheriff Courts in Scotland. We provide staff who are trained to carry out the administrative, technical and organisational services necessary for the smooth running of the courts, while giving an efficient and courteous service to court users. We also provide and maintain court buildings.

The Charter

The Charter is intended for all who use the services of a court, for whatever reason. For example, you might be:

- a party in a civil case
- a juror
- a victim of crime
- a witness giving evidence
- an accused person in a criminal case
- a member of public observing proceedings
- a solicitor

If you are coming to court you may be worried about what to expect. We want to reduce any anxiety by setting out in this Charter the quality of service that you can expect from us.

The Charter also suggests ways in which you can help us help you and tells you what you can do if things go wrong.

We are committed to achieving the standards set out in this Charter. We set these standards after talking to people who have used the courts. We want to raise these standards:

- through regular review;
- consulting those who use the courts; and
- by working in partnership with other agencies in the Scottish justice system.

Our service will be fair, regardless of your race, ethnic origin, age, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or any disability. All court users will be treated in the same professional manner.

Judicial Decisions

The main job of the courts is to resolve disputes and try criminal cases. Independent judges are essential to ensure fairness.

That independence and the decisions made by judges and sheriffs are not affected by this Charter, which deals only with the administration of the courts. This is why we cannot look into claims that judicial decisions were wrong or unfair, or that someone did not handle your case properly.

You may have the right to appeal against the decision if you are unhappy with the outcome of your case. If you want to do this, you should get legal advice immediately.

If you come to a court

When you come to court you will find the following.

- Public offices that are generally open from 9.30am to 1pm and from 2pm to 4pm (3.45pm on Fridays), although you may wish to check times with your local sheriff court.
- Clearly marked reception or information points.
- Clear signs to help you get around.
- Lists of cases to be heard displayed clearly on noticeboards (some electronic).
- Clean, adequate and comfortable accommodation.
- Recent reading material in witness rooms.
- Public telephone(s).
- Sufficient, clean toilets.
- In all but the smallest courts, refreshment facilities for all or part of the day and toys for children.
- Disabled access, where possible, to the main public areas of every courthouse.
- Induction loops and sound-enhancement systems in most courtrooms, to help people with hearing difficulties.
- Guidance leaflets covering a range of court-related procedures. A number of these are now available in various minority languages, braille, on audiotape and in large print.

If you come to a public counter

If you come to a public counter or enquiry point, we will do the following.

- Provide polite and helpful staff who will treat you with courtesy and respect.
- Ensure that a trained member of staff assists you promptly.
- Ensure that public office staff wear name badges, unless this would put their safety at risk.
- Respect your privacy, and if you prefer, talk with you out of the hearing of others.
- Attend to you within 10 minutes of your pre-arranged appointment.

If you write to a court

If you write to us, we will do the following.

- Write to you or phone you within 10 working days.
- Explain things helpfully in plain English, avoiding technical and legal jargon.
- Tell you who is writing and how to contact that person.

If you phone a court

You can phone us from 9am to 1pm and from 2pm to 5pm. When you phone, we will do the following.

- Try to answer your call within 30 seconds.
- Tell you the name of the court office and who is speaking.
- Give a clear and helpful answer.

If the person you need to speak to is not available, we will suggest a suitable time to call back, or ask that person to return your call.

Answering your questions

Court users have the right to be given clear information about where to go, who to see and what to expect, and to have their questions answered. If you receive a letter or citation from the Sheriff Clerk's Office or the Supreme Courts, asking you to attend court (for example, to act as a juror) you will also receive a leaflet about the court you are to attend. Among other information, it will give you directions on how to get there.

Court staff can give you information about procedures and general matters but they cannot give you legal advice.

Waiting time

We try to arrange all hearings as quickly as possible. In civil cases, the target is 12 weeks from the allowance of proof. For summary criminal cases, we aim to arrange trials within 12 weeks if the accused person pleads not guilty. If the accused person is kept in custody pending trial, the hearing will be a lot sooner.

Witnesses

Coming to court to give evidence can be worrying. We aim to reduce your anxieties by providing comfortable accommodation and facilities, and information when you need it. When timetabling trials or civil hearings, we aim take into account the commitments of witnesses, if we know them.

We aim to provide separate waiting areas for prosecution and defence witnesses in criminal cases. If this is not possible, we will arrange for you to wait apart from the other side's witnesses, if this is what you want.

If you attend court as a witness in a criminal case:

- We will inform you of the progress of your case at least once every two hours.
- We will explain if the court is delayed for any reason.
- When you are no longer required to give evidence, we will ensure that you are allowed to leave as soon as possible and given an explanation of what has happened.

Helping us to help you

You can help us ensure that things run smoothly by doing the following.

- Tell the court in advance if you have any special needs.
- Read information sent to you carefully and follow any instructions given.
- Bring all necessary documents with you - if you are not sure about what to bring, contact the court beforehand.
- Give us appropriate information so that we can deal with your enquiry quickly; for example, case reference numbers.
- Arrive in good time for appointments and hearings.
- Do not smoke in non-smoking areas.
- Co-operate with any security checks. These are for your own safety.
- Treat court staff, other court users and court buildings with respect.

Listening to you

We want to make sure we meet these Charter standards and welcome any comments and suggestions for improving our service.

We will:

- where possible, act on your complaints and suggestions
- carry out customer surveys
- review these Charter standards on a regular basis.

Suggestion boxes are situated in every court building and, if you wish, the sheriff clerk or office manager will make arrangements to speak to you.

If you want to write to us with suggestions and comments on our services, please address your letter to:

The Chief Executive
Scottish Court Service
Hayweight House
23 Lauriston Street
Edinburgh
ED3 9DQ

Complaints procedure

We want to put things right if they go wrong and we will always treat genuine complaints seriously and impartially. Please tell us if you want to complain about the administration of the court, the conduct of the

staff or the facilities at court. We will try to sort out your problem there and then.

If you are not happy, you can speak to a senior member of staff or you can make your complaint in writing. The name and address of the official to whom you should address your complaint is shown on notices in the public areas of the court. Please ask for a copy of our booklet "How to make a complaint".

If you write to us with a complaint:

- We will acknowledge receipt of your letter within two working days.
- A senior member of the management team will send you a personal written response within 10 working days if the complaint refers solely to the actions of court staff. If others have to be consulted, you will normally receive a full reply within 20 working days.
- If we cannot give you a full reply at the outset, we will tell you why and say when you will get a full reply.

If your complaint is upheld, you can expect an apology and an assurance that we will use any lessons learnt from the complaint to improve the standard of service we provide in the future.

Openness

Court users and the local community have the right to know how things are run. We will:

- make our Annual Business Plan and Annual Report and Accounts available on request and on our website, and
- participate in local Open Day events.

Finding out more

Information leaflets are available to give guidance on specific court procedures. They are displayed in reception areas, public offices and waiting rooms. Most are available on our website. Please ask at any of our public offices if you do not see what you need.

We are registered with the Typetalk service provided by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People and British Telecom. Typetalk helps people who are deaf or hard of hearing to have telephone access to court offices.

All courts have an ansaphone service that provides information to potential jurors. This gives information that aims to minimise any unnecessary attendance at court.

If you need more information, please contact:

- your local Sheriff Clerk's Office or the appropriate department within the Supreme Courts
- Operations and Policy Unit,
Scottish Court Service
23 Lauriston Street
Edinburgh
EH3 9DQ
- phone: 0131 229 9200
- fax: 0131 221 6890, or
- email: enquiries@scotcourts.gov.uk.

Find out more about the work we do by visiting our website:

www.scotcourts.gov.uk

You can also find out more about your government at:

www.ukonline.gov.uk.

This booklet is available in large print, braille, audiotape and a number of minority languages.