

# Can access to justice be helped by eBay?



It has recently been suggested in Northern Ireland (NI) at the highest political level that the time is right for a radical new system of Justice that would see many court cases settled online on 'eBay'. This is unfortunately not as outlandish as we (lawyers that is) might think.

The present government and especially with Minister Gove, could easily have their 'heads' turned. Indeed, the local proposal in NI is coming from the DUP, one of the two big parties in Stormont who hold much-valued seats in the House of Commons. It is thought appropriate, that in our austere times, DIY divorces, child maintenance disputes and (even) compensation claims are just some of the cases that could be dealt with at the click of a button by online judges and internet hearings. What with the dramatic increase in the numbers of personal litigants for the reasons we are all too familiar with, the proposal is aimed at assisting those very same people who are been forced to represent themselves in the civil courts due to the reductions in legal aid expenditure.

Currently in NI, legal aid is still widely available for pursuing and defending civil claims, compared with the changes that in England & Wales that have long since bedded in. Many will see the proposal as a way of trying to subtly navigate a way round the existing stand-off between the legal profession and other stakeholders of similar views such as trade unions and Justice Minister David Ford who is demanding huge cuts to the legal aid budget. The so called cyber justice system has been proposed by chairman of Stormont's Justice Committee, Alastair Ross who said that the squeeze on justice budgets means that "innovative solutions are not just desirable, but are essential if we are to produce a more cost-effective and efficient justice system".

One thing that is fast becoming the new norm especially with the younger generation, is the everyday usage of online interaction, particularly the various agencies of government now preferring that mode of communication and engagement. Mr Ross believes that NI is small and flexible enough to try new pilots and lead the way. Let's hope he's wrong. One only has to look at the hard data of DIY wills to see the additional work created for lawyers when things are not done properly in the first place.