

In light of the responses and following further consideration, the decision was made not to take forward that proposal. Instead it was decided to produce the General Pre-Action Protocol as a default protocol where other pre-action protocols are not applicable. Once agreed, this could be used as a template against which to review and, if appropriate, rationalise and clarify existing pre-action protocols.

This latter intention arises as there was a general recognition by respondents that the various pre-action protocols are in some cases out-dated and contain unnecessary information. Accordingly, the CJC plans to hold a forum of relevant stakeholders during the course of this consultation exercise. The forum will be an opportunity both to discuss the content of this consultation paper and the scope for rationalisation of the subject-specific pre-action protocols.

The Proposals

The idea of a General Pre-Action Protocol is not new. In October 2001, the then Lord Chancellor's Department issued a consultation paper on a General Pre-action Protocol to be used in all cases where no specific pre-action protocol existed. That consultation concluded that the pre-action protocol would be too general in its application and would be likely to lead to unnecessary delay and confusion. It was subsequently decided to build on the existing provisions within the CPR by extending the requirements of pre-action protocols to all other disputes. Rather than extending the scope of existing pre-action protocols, this was achieved by expanding the Practice Direction on Protocols to describe in greater detail the pre-action conduct expected of parties generally (**see annexe A**).

Overview

Most practitioners are already familiar with the principles and requirements contained in the Practice Direction on Protocols. But we consider that these requirements, given their importance and wide scope, could be set out more

clearly and accessibly for the benefit, in particular, of unrepresented potential litigants. It is not intended to change the requirements significantly or increase the burden on practitioners and businesses that already follow them as part of their routine pre-litigation work.

The current Practice Direction is in effect a default pre-action protocol for those other cases that fall outside the scope of the existing pre-action protocols. However, at the moment the format in which the Practice Direction is presented does not offer it the same sort of prominence or profile as the subject specific pre-action protocols. The result is that people who are less familiar with Civil Procedure Rules, for example certain categories of litigants in person, are less likely to be aware of the behaviour expected of them before issuing court proceedings as set out in this Practice Direction.

We therefore propose to revise the Practice Direction on Protocols and create a new General Pre-Action Protocol applicable in all disputes not subject to one of the other pre-action protocols. The Practice Direction will be shorter than now, and focus on the court's powers to impose sanctions for non-compliance and other general information relevant to all disputes. The General Pre-Action protocol will set out the requirements on parties to a dispute and the steps they are expected to follow before issuing proceedings. The proposed General Pre-Action Protocol does not generally depart in substance from the requirements contained in the current Practice Direction, but it does seek to flesh out the existing requirements with additional detail and to simplify and clarify the language used. This structure is intended to provide a more easily accessible and clearer framework for parties when trying to resolve disputes. Drafts of the proposed Practice Direction and General Pre-Action Protocol are at **annexes B & C**. These drafts have been prepared by CPR lawyers at the Ministry of Justice on the basis of earlier drafts provided by the CJC's Pre-Action Protocol Committee.

We also propose that the Practice Direction, which is currently free-standing, should in future supplement Part 3 of the CPR. This will more clearly integrate it into the corpus of the CPR, making it more visible to users.

Aligning it with the courts case management powers under Part 3 of the Rules should serve to highlight the court's powers to use sanctions for non-compliance with pre-action protocols

Question: Do you agree with the proposed new structure of a shorter Practice Direction highlighting the court's case management powers and a General Pre-Action Protocol setting out the requirements on parties to a dispute? Please give reasons for your view.

Question: Are there particular classes of cases or types of circumstances where the General Pre-Action Protocol should not apply? If so please specify.

Language

As stated above, we have taken the opportunity to simplify the language used throughout both the redrafted Practice Direction and the proposed General Pre-Action Protocol. These have been drafted with litigants in person closely in mind. In particular, we have wherever possible avoided reliance on legal terminology, such as disclosure, limitation or contributory negligence, and either paraphrased or defined these in plain English. We have also avoided references to 'issuing proceedings' or similar in favour of 'starting a court claim'. We have used the word 'dispute' rather than 'claim' to refer to case at the pre-action stage. Subject to that, we have sought to draft in a way that is consistent with the approach taken in the CPR itself. For example, we have avoided the word 'should' in relation to requirements, in favour of the words 'must' (when referring to the parties) and 'will' (when referring to the court). Although the meaning is the same, we think this will also help give litigants in person a clearer flavour of what is expected.

Question: Do you have any comments on the language used and the drafting of the revised Practice Direction and General Pre-Action Protocol? If so, please specify.

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)

A central aim of the pre-action protocol regime is to encourage parties to make every effort to resolve their dispute without the need for court proceedings. The General Pre-Action Protocol as with other pre-action protocols emphasises the importance for the parties making every effort to resolve their dispute prior to starting a claim.

The ADR section is broadly the same as that in the other pre-action protocols. The main change is the deletion of the sentence: "*It is expressly recognised that no party can or should be forced to mediate or enter into any form of ADR*". Whilst it is accepted that mediation is a voluntary process, the presence of this sentence appears to contradict the general encouragement for parties to mediate (or use other forms of ADR) that runs through the rest of the General Pre-Action Protocol.

We have added arbitration to the list of ADR options. Arbitration schemes are available, in particular, for many different types of consumer dispute to which this protocol will apply. We have also sought to clarify the description of early neutral evaluation.

Finally, we have made explicit that parties are expected to make continual efforts to settle, both before a claim is started and during proceedings, and added a paragraph exhorting parties to take stock and reconsider settlement after completing the pre-action exchanges.

Question: Do you agree with the approach taken to ADR in the General Pre-Action Protocol?

Steps to take before starting a court claim

These follow the approach taken in the current Practice Direction on Protocols, although the stages and required contents of letters and responses are set out in rather more detail.

Due to the broad scope of application of the proposed General Pre-Action Protocol, we have not sought to specify in the Protocol the time for responding to a letter before claim. Most of the subject-specific pre-action protocols specify a normal period for response and a long-stop period.

Instead, the protocol provides for the letter before claim to specify a period for the full response (to run from the date of the letter before claim) and for the acknowledgement to specify a different (longer) period if required. We have not provided for a further process by which the claimant can agree or dispute the longer period. Rather, it is left to the court to decide whether the proposed periods were reasonable if and when proceedings are issued. The Protocol gives non-binding guidance about the sorts of period that might normally be considered reasonable in simple, standard and specialist cases.

Question: Do you agree with the required steps set out in the General Pre-Action Protocol, and in particular the approach taken to time limits. Please give reasons for your view.

Question: Would it be helpful to include a 'model' letter (non-mandatory) before claim (for a standard consumer claim) as an annex to the General Pre-Action Protocol?

Debt claim requirement

We have included one additional substantive requirement in the General Pre-Action Protocol. This is a requirement for business claimants against the unrepresented individuals provide the following information:

- details of how the money owed can be paid;
- details of who the defendant should contact to discuss repayment options (e.g. installments or deferment);
- information about sources of free debt advice.

The Protocol does not require this information to be provided as part of the letter before claim because in many cases it may already have been provided as part of the creditor's debt collection routine.

The inclusion of this requirement reflects one of the outcomes of HMCS's consultation on [The Debt Claims Process \(CP22/07\)](#). That consultation considered options for encouraging debtors to engage with their creditors at an early stage, rather than (as some do) ignore demands until court proceedings are issued, thereby adding to their debt.

A full analysis of the outcome of that consultation will be published in March. One finding emerging from the consultation is that there is no case for introducing a formal pre-action notice issued by the court or the creditor. However, 76% of respondents agreed that the provision of the information outlined above was useful and should be required by the pre-action regime.

Question: Do you agree that the General Pre-Action Protocol should include the additional requirements in simple debt claims?

Experts

The revised Practice Direction and the General Pre-Action Protocol both include basic guidance referring to the rules about experts are encouraging parties to keep the use and cost of experts to a minimum.

The General Pre-Action Protocol goes to state that, where an expert is required, the parties should consider whether a single joint expert or an agreed expert should be appointed. Both these terms, which are often confused, are defined in plain English.

Finally, the Protocol adopts the procedure for appointing an agreed expert used in the Personal Injury Pre-Action Protocol.

Question: Do you agree with the approach taken to experts in the General Pre-Action Protocol? Please give reasons for your view.

Limitation

The revised Practice Direction maintains the current provision in the existing pre-action protocols. Where it is not possible to comply with the pre-action protocol due to the imminent expiry of a statutory time limit, a claim should be started and an application made for the proceedings to be stayed so that the pre-action protocol can be complied with.

The General Pre-Action Protocol goes further than the provisions in the revised Practice direction. Where the dispute is approaching a statutory time limit the parties are encouraged to agree to a reasonable period of time within which the defendant will not raise the statutory defence of 'time bar' whilst the parties continue to try and resolve their dispute. This avoids the needs to start a court claim and make an application for a stay of proceedings.

Although a subtle point the parties are not actually agreeing to extend a statutory time limit (although that is the practical effect). Rather the parties are agreeing that the defendant will not raise the statutory defence of 'time bar' for a fixed period of time beyond the expiry of a limitation date

Question: Do you agree that, where limitation is an issue, parties should be encouraged to agree not to take the 'time bar' defence?

Questionnaire

We would welcome responses to the following questions set out in this consultation paper: -

- 1. Question: Do you agree with the proposed new structure of a shorter Practice Direction highlighting the court's case management powers and a General Pre-Action Protocol setting out the requirements on parties to a dispute? Please give reasons for your view.**

2. **Question: Are there particular classes of cases or types of circumstances where the General Pre-Action Protocol should not apply? If so please specify.**
3. **Question: Do you have any comments on the language used and the drafting of the revised Practice Direction and General Pre-Action Protocol? If so, please specify.**
4. **Question: Do you agree with the approach taken to ADR in the General Pre-Action Protocol?**
5. **Do you agree with the required steps set out in the General Pre-Action Protocol, and in particular the approach taken to time limits. Please give reasons for your view.**
6. **Question: Would it be helpful to include a 'model' letter (non-mandatory) before claim (for a standard consumer claim) as an annex to the General Pre-Action Protocol?**
7. **Question: Do you agree that the General Pre-Action Protocol should include the additional requirements in simple debt claims?**
8. **Question: Do you agree with the approach taken to experts in the General Pre-Action Protocol? Please give reasons for your view.**
9. **Question: Do you agree that, where limitation is an issue, parties should be encouraged to agree not to take the 'time bar' defence?**

How to respond

Please send your response by 19th May 2008 to:

Ms Kitty Doherty

Civil Justice Council

Room E214

Royal Courts of Justice

Strand London WC2A 2LL

Telephone: 020 7947 6585 Fax: 070 7947 7475

Email: <mailto:Kitty.Doherty@judiciary.gsi.gov.uk>