



THE LAW SOCIETY  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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19 March 2014

The Hon. Greg Smith SC MP  
Attorney General  
Department of Attorney General and Justice  
DX 1227 SYDNEY

By email: [office@smith.minister.nsw.gov.au](mailto:office@smith.minister.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Attorney General,

### **NSW Courts Services Call Centre**

I write to you on behalf of the Litigation Law and Practice and Criminal Law Committees (“the Committees”) of the Law Society of New South Wales. Concerns have been raised by members of these Committees and other solicitors regarding the functioning of the Courts Services Call Centre.

The Committees understand that the establishment of the Courts Services Call Centre aims to provide a single point of telephone contact for the legal profession and members of the public who have court-related enquiries by redirecting enquiries away from individual court registries in order to improve efficiency. However it has been the experience of solicitors that, rather than improve efficiency and waiting times, these changes have had the reverse effect.

Prior to the establishment of the Courts Services Call Centre solicitors were able to telephone court registries direct and speak with staff who were readily able to access the actual court file to consult in detail. Now Call Centre staff do not have access to the relevant court papers but instead rely on the JusticeLink case management system. As a result staff only have access to a summary of some documents. JusticeLink is sometimes inaccurate or does not capture the information sought. The Call Centre staff may then need to email the relevant court staff member to obtain the required information and this process will often take some days.

A solicitor is able to email the relevant court directly but this will not provide the immediate response sometimes necessary. Solicitors have found that the only avenue available now to obtain urgent accurate information is to personally attend registries. It will be appreciated that the need for personal attendance will greatly increase the time spent on a matter and therefore the cost of litigation to clients.

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There has also been feedback that practitioners often have to wait a lengthy period in a telephone queue before speaking to Courts Services staff. The Committees understand that the Centre takes all calls at first instance before transferring many calls to staff operating in a service area not covered by the Centre.

The inability of practitioners to access courts directly also creates problems when solicitors experience unanticipated delay in attending a court, particularly suburban courts. Previously a solicitor could contact the court and request a note be placed on the court file in order that the presiding judicial officer could be informed the solicitor or barrister was en-route to the court. The current situation is that the Call Centre will now take the message and advise that an email will be sent to the court. There is no certainty that the email approach results in a timely notation being placed on the court file.

Finally, the Committees point out that Courts Services staff sometimes refuse to give out basic information, such as what offences a client is charged with. While it is appreciated there may be privacy issues with providing this information via telephone, it makes it difficult for legal practitioners, particularly when acting for vulnerable clients who have misplaced their court papers.

The Committees suggest that urgent consideration be given to setting up a separate telephone line for legal practitioners to contact the various courts directly, which would not be available to the general public. A similar system has been used by State Debt Recovery Office ("SDRO") for several years in the form of the "advocacy hotline". This allows legal practitioners (and others, such as community workers, who act on behalf of clients) to communicate with SDRO staff via a direct telephone line. The Committees are of the view that this arrangement has operated successfully for a number of years.

If your officials have any questions in relation to this letter, they should contact Leonora Wilson, Policy Lawyer on (02) 9926 0323 or [leonora.wilson@lawsociety.com.au](mailto:leonora.wilson@lawsociety.com.au).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ros Everett".

Ros Everett  
**President**