

JUDICIAL FAMILY WORKING GROUP
Early Resolution Court Pilot

In the Family Care Centre of Northern Ireland
County Court (Laganside Courts)

An information sheet for the parties on the Early Resolution Court Pilot.

1. What is the Early Resolution Court Pilot?

The Early Resolution Court Pilot is a new way of helping families and has been set up to help resolve issues in dispute which can benefit from having a Court Children's Officer (CCO) at the court to help the parties reach an agreement. The main aim of the pilot is to improve outcomes for children by reducing delay.

2. Who decides if my case is selected for the Pilot?

Your legal representative will advise you if your case could benefit from the Pilot and will then ask you for your consent. Parties should be realistic, willing and capable of finding a resolution on the day of the court. (The case will only be included in the Pilot if both parties give their consent).

The judge will then make the decision on whether your case will be included in the Pilot with input from your legal representatives.

3. What is an Early Resolution Hearing?

In a family court case, there are different types of hearing. They have different purposes. The purpose of the 'Early Resolution Hearing' will be to understand the issues in a case where an agreement cannot be reached. You will be asked to attend court with your solicitor and/or barrister. A CCO will also be at the court to speak to you and help everyone to try and come to an agreement.

Early Resolution Hearings will take place in the Family Care Centre (County Court) in Laganside Courts Complex in Belfast.

4. What is involved in an Early Resolution Hearing?

The judge leads the hearing and manages the process, it is similar to other types of hearings. On the day of the Early Resolution Hearing:

- A meeting will take place with all legal representatives involved in the case together with the CCO and the judge to discuss the particular issues. The parties will not be present at this meeting. (It is not unusual for legal representatives to discuss issues in cases between themselves, or with a judge, in the absence of the parties).
- After this meeting, the parties will then be asked by the court to participate in a discussion about those particular issues with a view to reaching an agreement on that day.

5. What happens if an agreement is reached in my case?

If an agreement is reached during the Early Resolution Hearing, your solicitor/barrister will advise you of next steps. Generally, if an agreement is reached and this is made, the Judge will make an order of the court and a copy of this will be sent to your solicitor.

6. What happens if an agreement is *not* reached in my case?

If an agreement cannot be reached at the Early Resolution Hearing, your case will be put back into the normal court list for listing.

7. Pilot Evaluation

The Pilot will be under ongoing review with a 6 month check-in and 12 month formal review to make sure everything is working well. We welcome feedback about your experience during the Pilot. You can contact the Pilot team by email at: LCJOREform@courtsni.gov.uk.