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Date : 16/05/05

Mr David Wraith
Court Manager
Brighton County Court
William Street
BRIGHTON BN2
By hand: 17 May 2005

Dear Mr Wraith

Provision For Hearing-Impaired People in Sussex Courts

Thank you for agreeing to see me last week (I think it was on 12 May 2005) to discuss the provision of induction loops or other technology for hearing-impaired people in the courts under your management.

You may recall that you handed me over to Mrs James and she and I visited Court No. 1. I wear two hearing aids with 'T' settings which enable me to tune in to any induction loop circuit that is operating. After entering court No. 1., where a trial was in process I established that the induction loop circuit in that court was not switched on. I have it from Mrs James that there is an induction loop circuit in that court but the sad fact is that it was not working for whatever reason. Mrs James was a little upset as she believed that the induction loop circuit was working but when I asked her how she knew this she told me that it worked for her husband some six weeks before. She told me that her husband was deaf. She agreed with me that a person with normal hearing would not be able to tell if an induction loop circuit is working unless that person used a simulator. It seems that your courts do not have a simulator which is a shame as they only cost about £35 and are essential if a person is to test an induction loop.

She told me that only Court No. 1 had an induction loop installed and that Court No. 2, which backed onto No. 1., did not have such a loop. She explained that this was because induction loops in one court can interfere with the neighbouring court. This is true and I believe such interference did occur in Eastbourne County Court. However I suggested to her that if Court No. 2 had an infra-red system then there would be no cross-interference. I am not sure if she accepted this. I believe she told me that there were no portable induction loops held in your courts and that if these were asked for they had to be delivered from Maidstone.

You will not be surprised to learn that I consider that both the courts in William Street should have either induction loops or infra-red equipment installed *in situ*. I also think that there should be some portable induction loops held in your courts pending the installation of these permanent systems.

Mrs James and I then tested the induction loop apparatus at the Courts enquiry desk. You will be pleased to know that this worked perfectly which is an improvement on former years. I then went round the corner to the Family Proceedings Court in Edward Street. I went there unannounced and told Mr Sutton whom I have known for some years, why I was there. He was very cooperative and showed me the induction loop system at the enquiry desk. You will be pleased to know that this worked well although there was an annoying hum while it worked. I suggested to Mr Sutton that the next time a technician came he should seek to have this removed. Mr Sutton also confirmed that there were no portable induction loops held in that court.

I think Mr Sutton said there are six courts in that building and that one of them has an installed induction loop. We were not able to test that loop as there was a closed hearing taking place then. I'm sure that he would have taken me to that court if that had not been the case.

You will guess what my observations on that building are! It is quite sad that the situation is as it is because I had an undertaking from the Court Service before the building was refurbished that the needs of hearing-impaired people would be addressed. This did not happen. I discussed the matter a few years ago with the appropriate people in the Court Service and also with the person who did an access audit for that building before it was refurbished. My understanding is that the fact that that refurbishment was a PFI project was a major factor in the shortcomings.

You may be interested to know that in March I went with Mrs Gill Cockerill of the Court Service and Mr Kevin Robinson of the contractors XY (I forget the exact initials) Harris to the courts in Lewes, Chichester, and Hove. I was given every cooperation in those courts. The undisputed facts were that there were no induction loops in any of those courts although there were induction loops at the three enquiry desks. I was able to show everyone in those courts that those induction loops in those courts did not work. Mrs Cockerill and Mr Robinson were a bit saddened by that.

In Chichester I was not able to meet Mr Betts, the manager, although I was shown around by Paul whose surname I do not know. I was pleased to notice that "DDA work" was in train there including a wheelchair lift to the jury-box so that wheelchair-bound jurors could sit with their peers. Paul was very eager for his court to be adapted to meet the needs of people with hearing problems and regretted that this was not so yet.

At Hove Crown Court, I met Mrs Priest who explained that there were no induction loops in her court except for the one at the enquiry desk which did not work. She explained that her budget did not run to that. I believe that the Magistrates' Court is also in that court house. I think that court house comes under the management of Mr Manning, the Court Manager at Lewes.

I had visited Lewes Crown Court in February 2005 and I met Mr Manning then. He is very eager to make Lewes Crown Court fully accessible to all disabled people and he was pleased that I was talking to him about that subject. He is aware that there are no facilities for hearing-impaired people at the Lewes Court. I do not know where the County Court and Magistrates' Court are in Lewes and so I have no information about them. Mr Manning told me that there was a portable induction loop in the building but he could not let me use it because it was being used by someone else at the time! During my visit to Lewes Court with Mrs Cockerill and Mr Robinson I was pleased to note that adjustments are being made to meet the DDA requirements for physically-disabled people. I know there are difficulties there as the building is "listed".

I might have made some errors in this account of the courts mentioned. I am sending a copy of this letter by email to Mr Manning and also to Mr Betts/Paul and perhaps also to Mrs Cockerill. I propose also to send a copy to the RNID.

I am quite sure that we all want to move forward and make all the courts in the UK accessible to all people with disabilities. It is a question of nagging and putting pressure on the powers that be. You may be aware that a new Disability Act was given the Royal Assent just before Parliament was dissolved a few weeks ago. Perhaps the most important section is one which requires public bodies to take a "pro-active" role in ensuring that buildings are accessible and not just to react to requests. It would be interesting to learn whether the Court Service is informing all its staff in the UK about this act.

I hope this letter enables the courts in Sussex to move forward.

Yours sincerely

Colin B Bennett