

Report on Court User Survey

**LATVIA
2022-2023**

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Riga

September 2023

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This report has been prepared within the framework of the project "Solutions for better governance of Latvia" with the financial support of the Society Integration Fund from the funds of the Latvian state budget. The association "Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS" is responsible for its content.

Translation to English: Dace Šulmane, Secretariat of the Judicial Council of Latvia

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Description of the methodology

This report covers Court user **surveys in 2022-2023**.

Survey. The development of the Court user Survey, which forms the basis of the report, started in 2019. The questionnaire was developed by the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS in cooperation with experts from the Ministry of Justice, the Prosecutor General's Office and the courts. Attorneys-at-law and other experts from the field of justice were also involved in the process, ensuring that the questionnaires contain relevant questions that reflect the experience and opinion of Court users.

Questionnaire procedure. The Court user Survey was carried out in each judicial district over a period of three months, covering all courts during this period. The administration of the courts had a survey plan and instructions in place setting out the survey procedures.

The Instruction provides:

- The Court user Survey is conducted using Court user Questionnaires and sealed bins prepared by the Court Administration and printed in the courts.
- The questionnaires are placed in courtrooms and other public areas of the courthouse (e.g. in the registry of the relevant court).
- Court staff (e.g. the registrar) inform the parties about the possibility of filling in the questionnaire and leaving it in the box.
- The bins are located inside the court building, in an easily accessible location, such as at the door of the courtroom or at the exit of the court building, according to the size and configuration of the building.
- The court must ensure that the urns are not damaged or opened.
- After the end of the Court user survey period, the urns are returned unopened to the Court Administration.
- The Court Administration, with the participation of at least two members of the Court Administration, compiles the results of the survey and prepares a summary of the survey.

Timetable for the 2022/2023 survey.

- January/February/March - Zemgale judicial district (Bauska, Aizkraukle, Ogre, Jelgava, Dobeles, Tukums, Jēkabpils, Zemgale Regional Court, Aizkraukle Court House of Zemgale Regional Court, Jelgava Court House of Administrative District Court).
- April/May/June - Latgale Judicial District (Latgale Regional Court, Rezekne Court in Ludza, Rezekne Court, Daugavpils Court, Daugavpils Court in Krāslava, Rezekne Court in Balvi, Daugavpils Court in Preiļi, Administrative District Court in Rezekne) and Vidzeme judicial district (Vidzeme Regional Court, Vidzeme District Courts in Cēsis, Alūksne, Valka, Gulbene, Madona, Limbaži, Valmiera, Madona Court of Vidzeme Regional Court, Valmiera Court of Administrative District Court).

- July/August/September - Kurzeme Judicial District (Kurzeme Regional Court, Kurzeme District Courts in Liepaja, Ventspils, Talsi, Saldus, Kuldīga, Liepaja Court House of the Administrative District Court).
- October/November/December - Riga Judicial District (Riga City Pardaugava Court at M. Nometņu Street and Daugavgrīva Street, Latgale Suburbs Court, Vidzeme Suburbs Courts at Abrenes Street and Jēzusbaznīcas Street, Court of Economic Cases).
- January/February/March 2023 - in the Riga Judicial District (Riga District Court in Riga, Sigulda, Jūrmala, Riga Regional Court, Riga Court House of the Administrative District Court, Administrative Regional Court).

The challenge of remote meetings. In 2022, in some courts, the majority of proceedings were conducted remotely online. This meant that court-goers could not physically complete and submit questionnaires. In addition, in some courts, most cases were dealt with by written procedure and therefore no hearings took place at all. These reasons had an impact on the results of the questionnaires and the number of questionnaires received from each court.

The questionnaire was not conducted electronically because in 2020 (from 1 September 2020 to 31 October 2020), in the Zemgale judicial district, an electronic version of the Court user questionnaire was piloted, i.e. Court users had the opportunity to fill in the court performance evaluation questionnaire in the internet environment. The pilot project at that time was not successful and we did not receive enough questionnaires to be able to summarise and draw conclusions. The questionnaires were conducted in the courts of the Zemgale judicial district.

Summarising the results of the questionnaire. Statistical data of the questionnaire were collected by an expert of the Court Administration, comments and data analysis were carried out by researchers of the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS Agnese Frīdenberga and Iveta Kažoka.

Data on respondents and court participation in the survey

During the survey period, 991 completed questionnaires were received from the courts. The majority of courts participated in the survey. No questionnaires were received from the Administrative District Court in Liepāja, Rezekne Court in Ludza, Latgale Regional Court, Rezekne Court in Balvi, Riga City Court in Mazā nometņu Street, Vidzeme Regional Court, Vidzeme District Court in Gulbene, Zemgale Regional Court and Aizkraukle Court House of Zemgale Regional Court.

Table 1: Number of questionnaires received, distribution by judicial district

Courts	Number of questionnaires received
Riga judicial district	507
Zemgale judicial district	174
Kurzeme judicial district	113
Administrative courts	90
Latgale judicial district	51
Vidzeme judicial district	48
Court of Economic Cases	8

Looking at the individual courts, the largest number of questionnaires was received from the Riga District Court in Riga (173 questionnaires). Only 14 courts received a large number of questionnaires (at least 20). Therefore, only these courts are analysed in more detail in this report.

Table 2: Number of questionnaires received by court

Name of court	How many questionnaires?
Riga District Court Riga	171
Riga District Court Jurmala	113
Riga Regional Court	76
Riga District Court Sigulda	62
Riga City Court, Lomonosova street	56
Kurzeme Regional Court	46
Administrative district court Riga	45
Zemgale district court Jelgava	40
Daugavpils court	35
Zemgale district court Ogre	30
Kurzeme district court in Saldus	29
Zemgale district court Aizkraukle	28
Administrative district court Jelgava	24
Zemgale district court Dobeles	24
Zemgale district court Tukums	18
Zemgale district court Bauska	17
Zemgale district court Jēkabpils	17
Administrative Regional Court	16

Kurzeme district court in Kuldīga	16
Kurzeme district court in Liepāja	16
Rīga City Court, Daugavgrīvas Street	13
Rīga City Court, Abrenes Street	11
Vidzeme Regional Court Madona	10
Vidzeme district court in Alūksne	10
Vidzeme district court Valmiera	10
Vidzeme district court Cēsis	9
Rezekne court	8
Court of Economic Cases	8
Daugavpils court in Krāslava	5
Kurzeme district court in Talsi	5
Rīga City Court, Jēzusbazīcas Street	5
Vidzeme District Court in Limbaži	5
Administrative district court Rezekne court house	4
Vidzeme district court Valka	4
Daugavpils court in Preiļi	3
Administrative District Court Valmiera	1
Kurzeme District Court in Ventspils	1

The most frequent reason for the respondent was to attend a court hearing (803 responses). The second most frequent was filing documents at the court registry (82). The remaining respondents either gave a different reason for coming to the court building or did not answer this question.

As shown in Table 3, advocates and representatives were the most frequent respondents.

Table 3: Questionnaire respondents according to their procedural status.

Indicated procedural status	Number of questionnaires
Advocate/representative	276
Did not specify status	257
Claimant	115
Other	100
Defendant	83
Witness	65
Prosecutor	43
Accused	39
Defender	9
Victim	4

Only 37% of all questionnaires received included a specific case number, which allows the identification of the judge involved in a particular case.

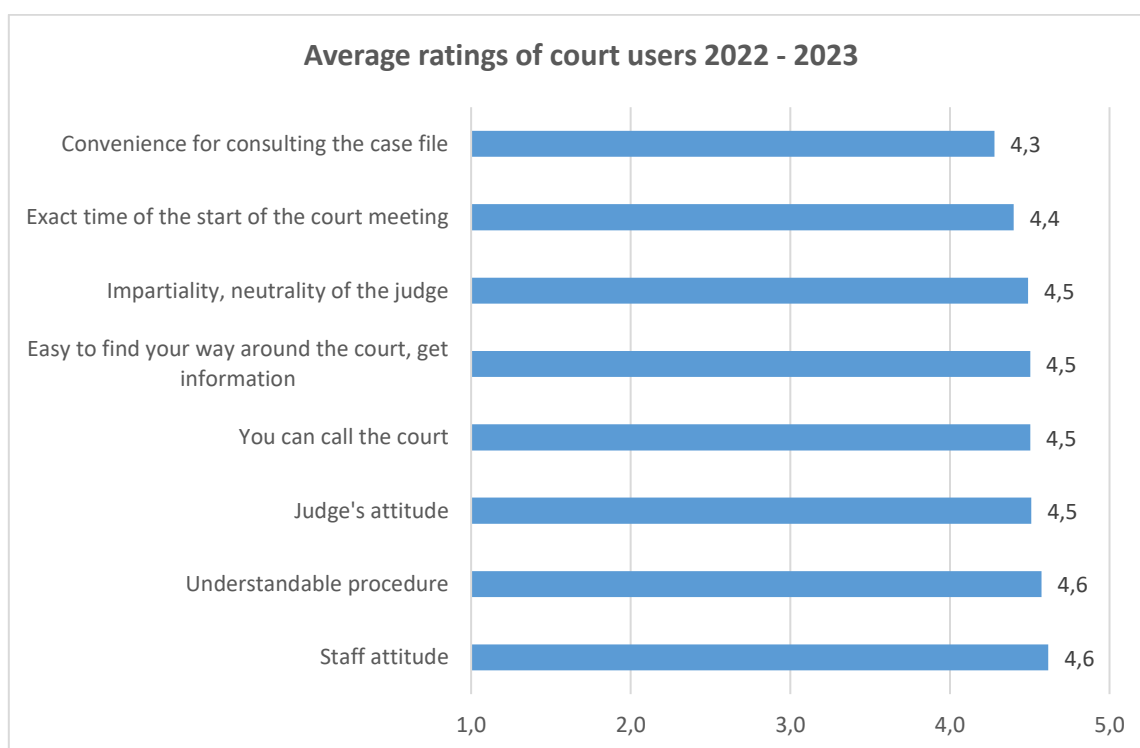
1. Overall ratings of Court users on the work of the courts

The quality of the Court's work was measured on 8 parameters:

- 1) Convenience for consulting the case file,
- 2) Easy to find your way around the court, get information,
- 3) Possibility to call the court,
- 4) Staff attitude,
- 5) Understandable procedure,
- 6) Impartiality, neutrality of the judge,
- 7) Judge's attitude,
- 8) Exact time of the start of the meeting.

On all these parameters, the feedback from Court users is very good. The attitude of court staff has the highest average rating. The punctuality of the court process scored relatively low.

Picture 1. Rating of the interaction with the court and court staff on a 5-point scale (average score in points, all courts).



2. Assessment of your contact with the court and court staff

In the questionnaires, Court users were asked to evaluate the work of the courts according to four evaluation parameters, each of which is described in the subsection below:

- 1) Convenience for consulting the case file,
- 2) Easy to find your way around the court, get information,
- 3) You can call the court,
- 4) Staff attitude

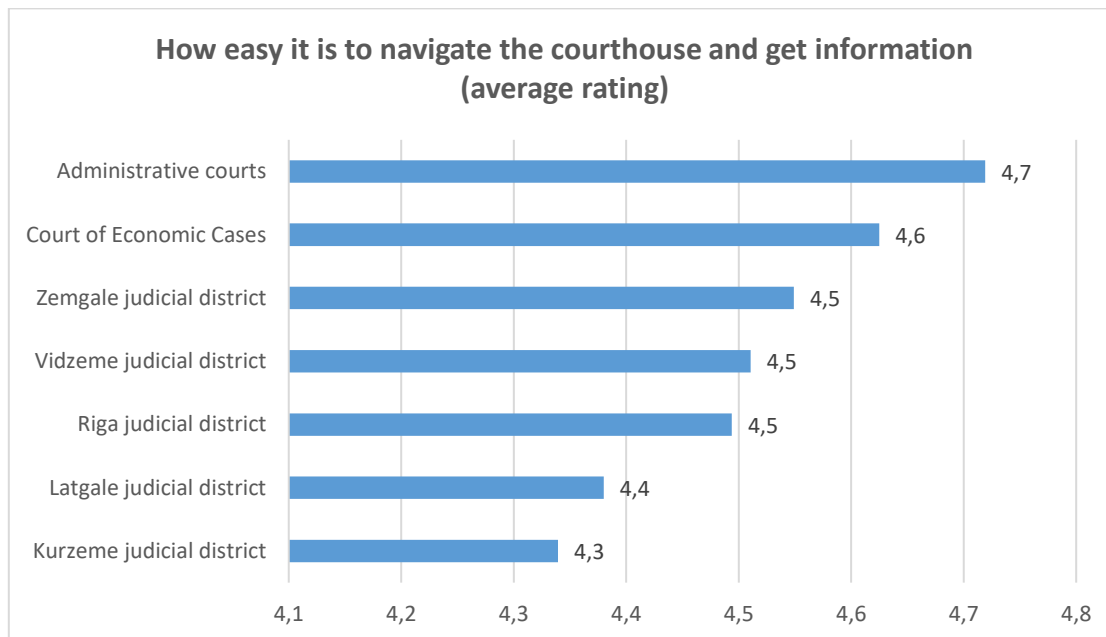
2.1 How easy is it to find your way around the court building and get the information you need?

Visitors to the courts have no problems finding their way around the court buildings and getting the information they need. The overall average score is 4.5 out of 5.

The highest average score was given to Administrative Courts (4.7 out of 5), while the lowest average score was given to Courts of Kurzeme Judicial District (4.3 out of 5).

When summarising the data on those courts from which at least 20 questionnaires were received, the following courts received the highest Court user ratings: the Riga District Court in Sigulda and the Zemgale District Court in Dobele (4.8 out of 5). The Zemgale District Court in Jelgava and the Kurzeme District Court in Saldus (4.1 out of 5).

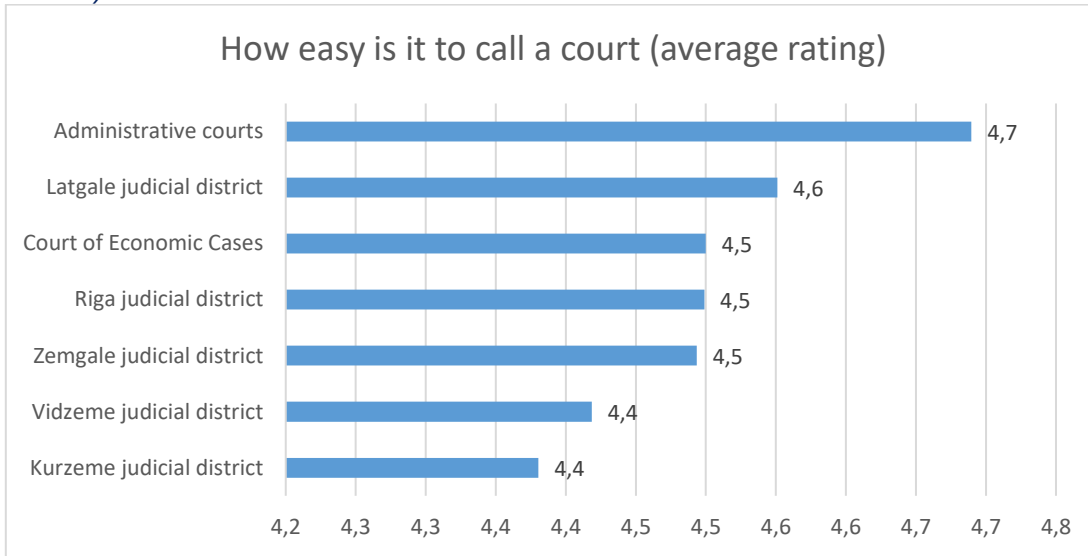
Picture 2. Rating of the ability to find one's way around the court building and get the necessary information on a 5-point scale (average score in points, 14 courts).



2.2 Is it possible to call the court?

The survey data show that problems with calling a court are rare, the overall rating for all courts is 4.5 out of 5. The highest rating was given by respondents for the possibility to call administrative courts, the lowest - for courts of Kurzeme Judicial District and Vidzeme District courts.

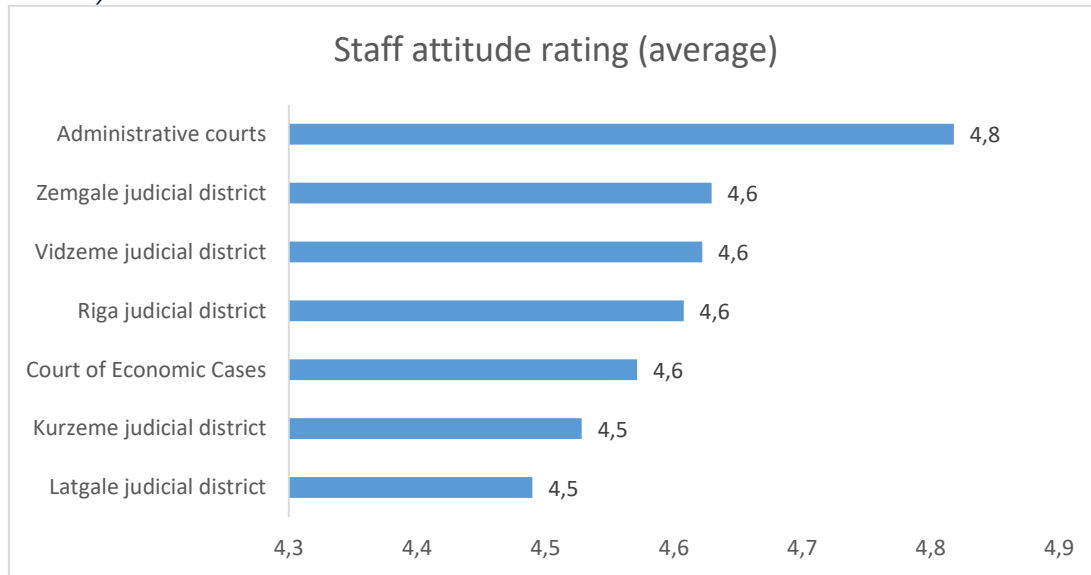
Picture 3: Court calling options on a 5-point scale (average score in points, 14 courts).



2.3 What is the attitude of court staff?

In general, Court users rate the attitude of court staff highly, with an average rating of 4.6 out of 5. The survey data shows that the highest rating for the attitude of court staff was given to the Administrative Court - 4.8 out of 5.

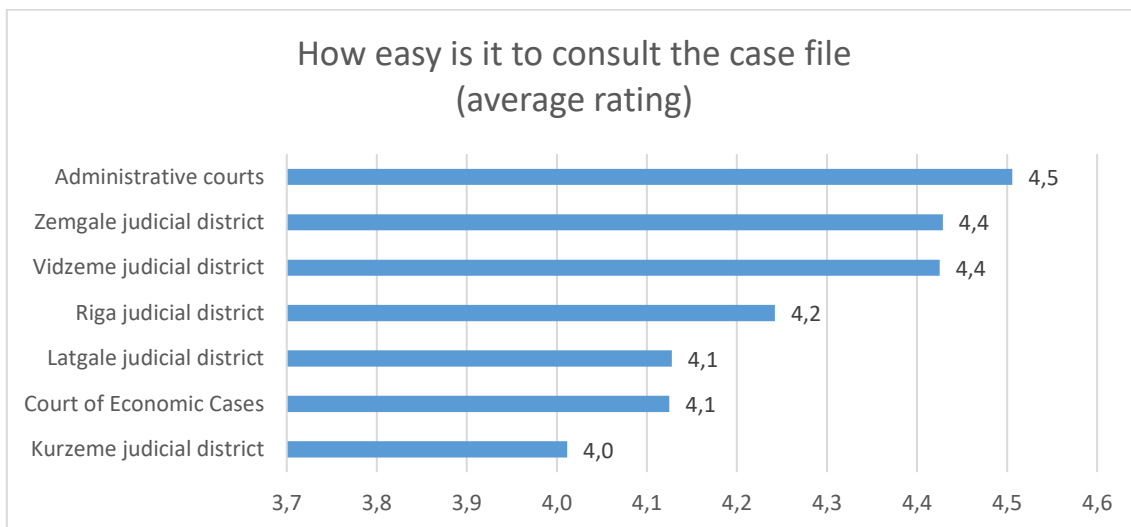
Picture 4: Attitudes of court staff on a 5-point scale (average score in points, 14 courts).



2.4 Convenient access to case files

The survey data show that, in general, access to case files in courts is perceived as convenient. The average score is 4.3 out of 5. The highest scores are given to administrative courts and the Zemgale District Court in Dobeles.

Picture 5: Ease of access to the case file on a 5-point scale (average score in points, 14 courts)



3. Assessment of the quality of a particular judicial process

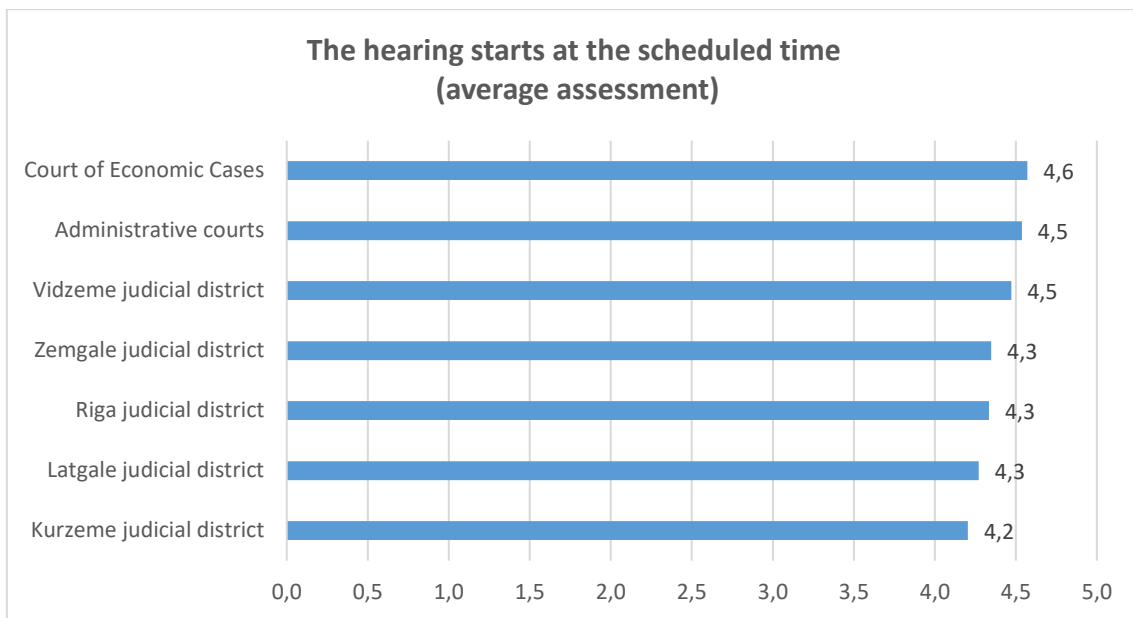
The questionnaires asked Court users to rate the quality of specific court proceedings according to four evaluation parameters:

1. Exact time of the start of the hearing
2. Judge's attitude
3. Impartiality and neutrality of the judge
4. Process procedures and rights are understandable

3.1 Exact time of the start of the hearing

Compared to other parameters of judicial performance evaluation, the exact start time of a hearing is problematic. The average score for all courts is relatively low: 4.3 out of 5. The best score is for the Court of Economic Cases (4.6 out of 5), the lowest for the courts of the Kurzeme judicial district (4.2 out of 5).

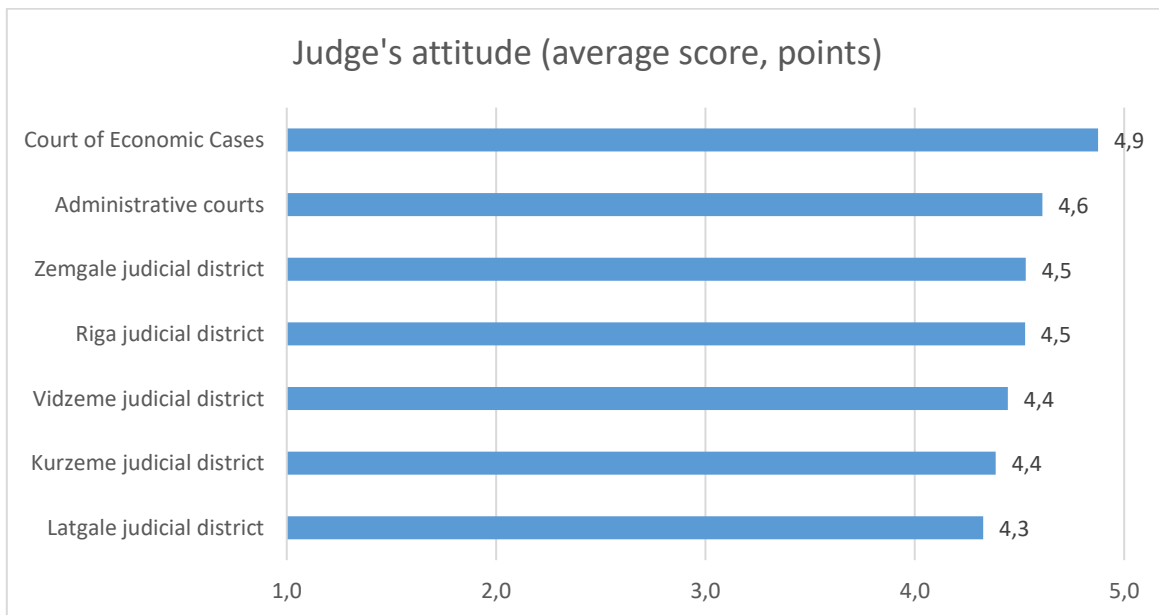
Picture 6. Rating of the on-time start of hearings (average score in points).



3.2 The judge's attitude

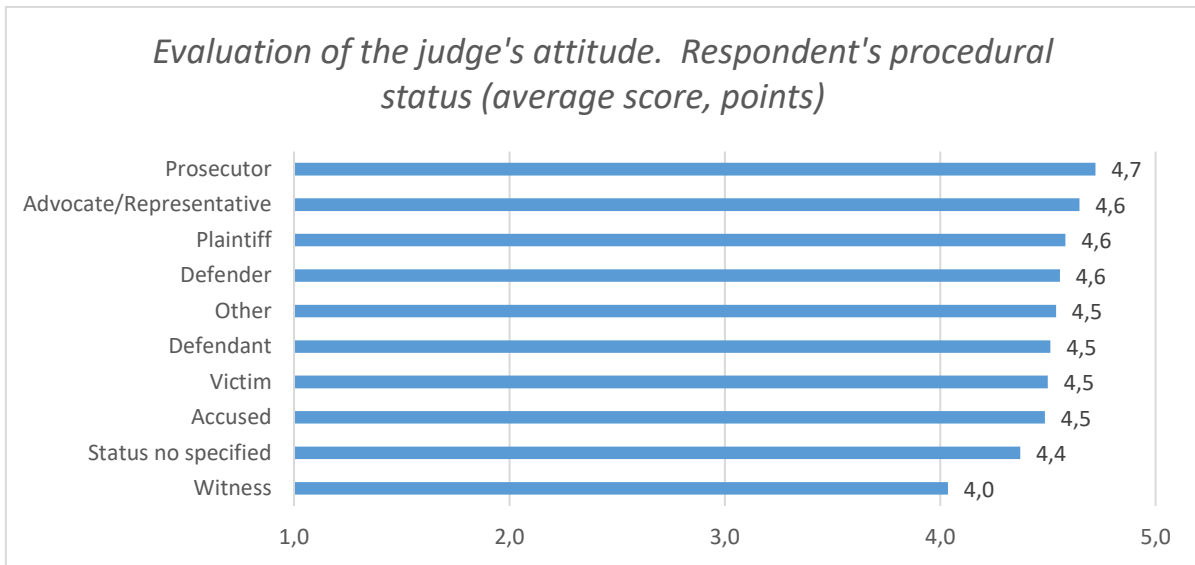
On average, Court users rated the attitude of judges with 4.5 out of 5. The highest rating was given by the court users of the Court of Economic Cases with 4.9 out of 5, the lowest rating was given to the Latgale judicial district judges - 4.3 out of 5.

Picture 7: Judge's attitude (average score in points).



The survey shows that prosecutors rated the attitude of judges highest, while witnesses rated the attitude of judges lowest.

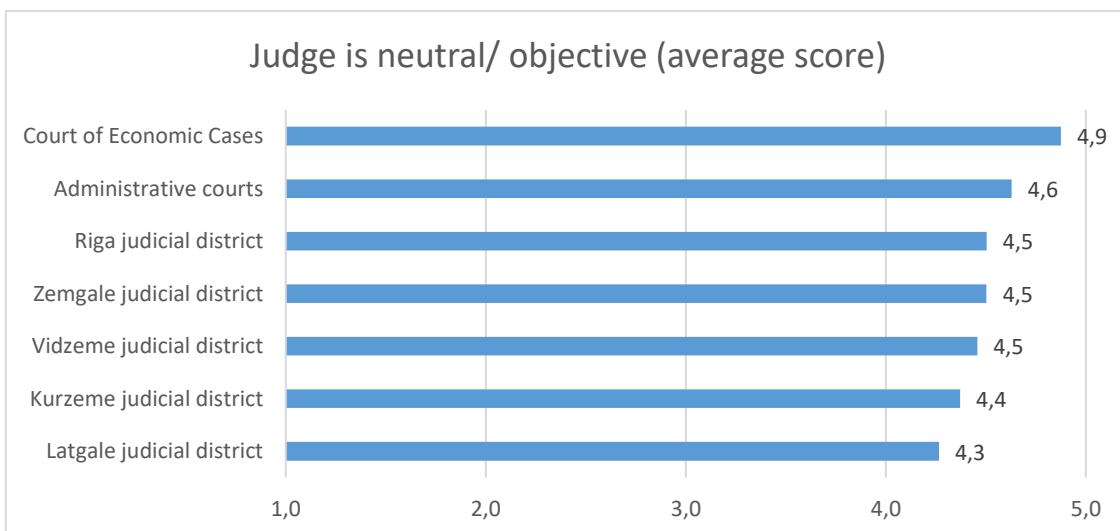
Picture No.8: Evaluation of the judge's attitude depending on the respondent's procedural status (average score, in points).



3.3 Impartiality/neutrality of the judge

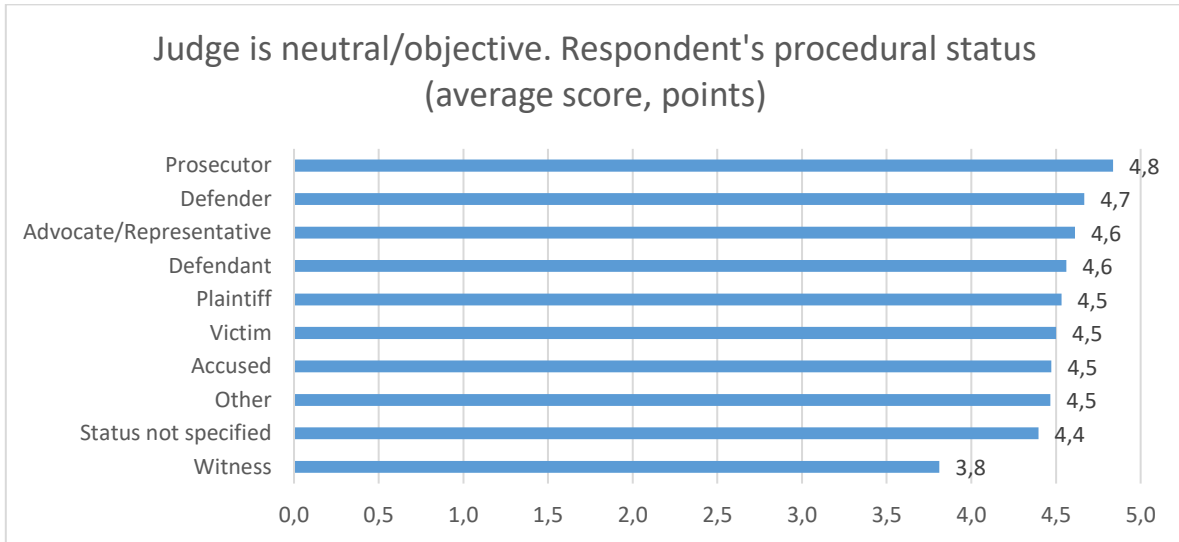
On average, the questionnaire respondents rated the impartiality/neutrality of judges with 4.5 out of 5. The highest rating was given to the Court of Economic Cases with 4.9 out of 5, while the lowest rating was given to the Latgale Judicial District Court (4.3 out of 5).

Picture 9: Judge's impartiality, neutrality (average score in points).



The highest rating, 4.8 out of 5, was given by respondents who indicated their procedural status as prosecutor, the lowest - by witnesses (3.8 out of 5).

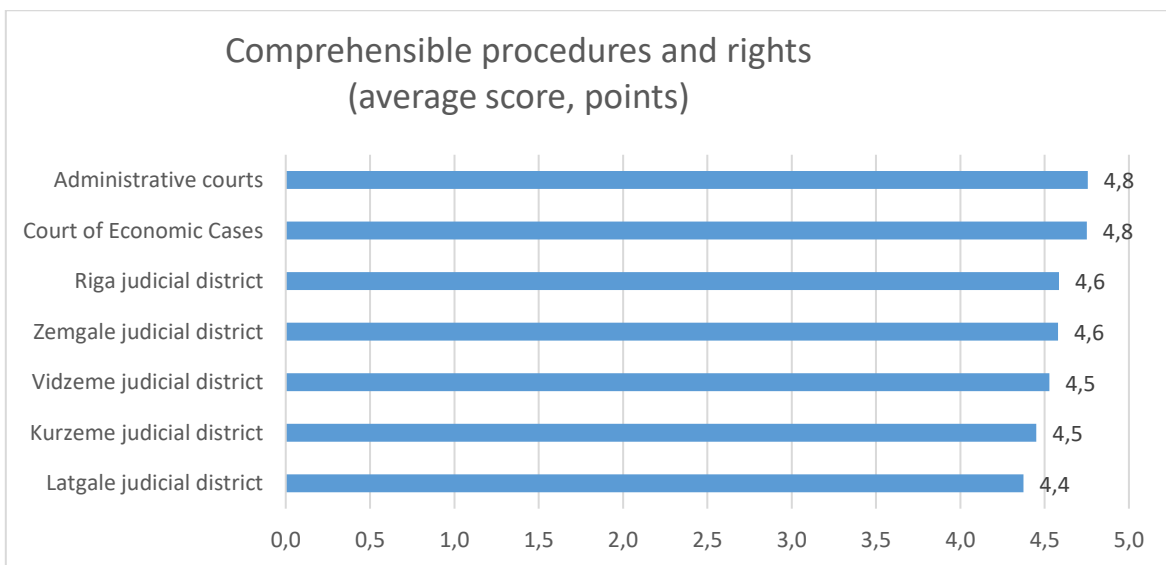
Picture No 10: Judges' impartiality/neutrality depending on the respondent's procedural status (average score, in points).



3.4 Comprehensible procedures and rights

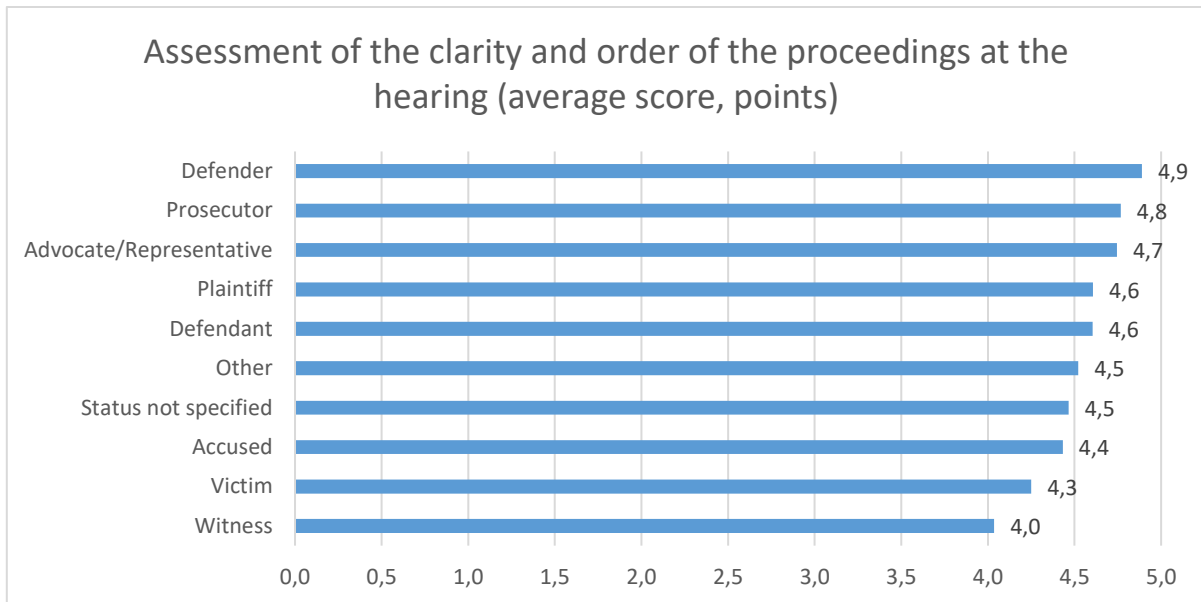
Court users rated the procedural order and the comprehensibility of their rights with 4.6 out of 5. The highest average rating was given to the Administrative Courts - 4.8 out of 5, while the lowest average rating was given to the Latgale Judicial District Courts - 4.4 out of 5.

Picture 11: Comprehensibility of the procedural process (average score in points).



The highest score for this criterion was given by the defenders (4.9 points). The lowest score was given by witnesses - 4.0 out of 5.

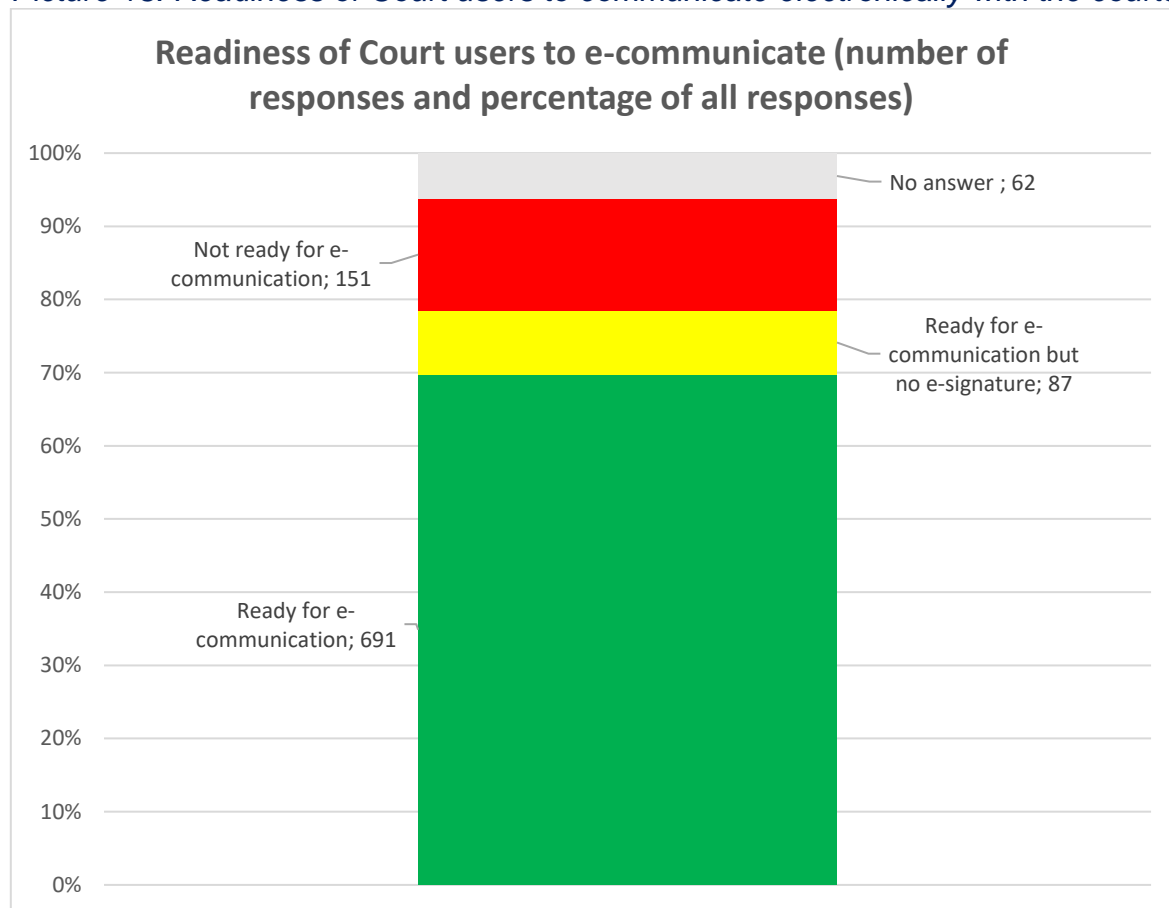
Picture 12. Evaluation of the comprehensibility and order of the court proceedings at the hearing depending on the respondent's procedural status (average score in points).



4. Readiness of respondents to communicate electronically with the court

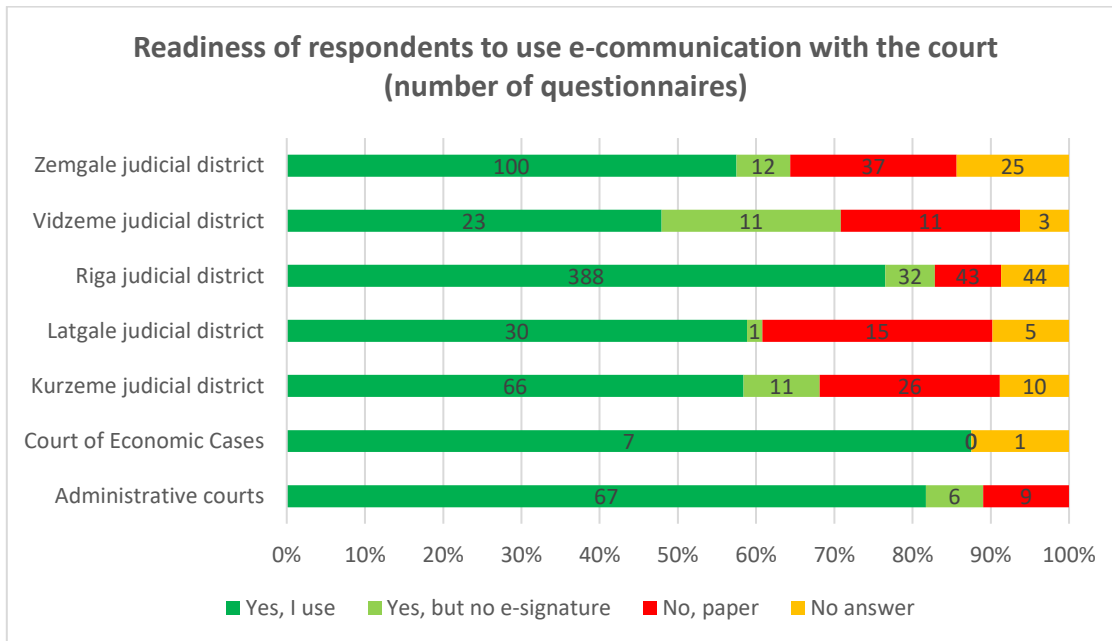
70% of the respondents indicated that they would use the possibility to communicate with the court electronically, 10% indicated that they would prefer to communicate with the court in paper form, 7% indicated that they would communicate with the court electronically, but they do not have an electronic signature.

Picture 13: Readiness of Court users to communicate electronically with the courts.



The lowest readiness to use e-communication is in the Zemgale and Latgale judicial districts, the highest - in the Court of Economic Cases, Riga and Administrative Courts.

Picture 14: Readiness of respondents to use e-communication with courts by judicial district (number of responses).



5. Survey participants' comments on the conduct of the judicial process and their interactions with court staff

The participants had the opportunity to give free written comments on their contact with the court and the court proceedings. A total of 235 comments were received across all judicial districts.

Table 4: Number of comments received by judicial district (number of questionnaires).

Name of judicial district	Total number of questionnaires received	How many questionnaires had comments	How many respondents (%) submitted comments
Riga judicial district	507	110	22%
Zemgale judicial district	174	40	23%
Kurzeme judicial district	113	29	26%
Administrative courts	90	25	28%
Latgale judicial district	51	17	33%
Vidzeme judicial district	48	9	19%
The Court of Economic Cases	8	5	63%
TOTAL	991	235	

Summarising the comments received, it can be concluded that they are very positive and the respondents appreciate the work of judges and the attitude of court staff towards Court users. Negative comments were made in just over 20 questionnaires.

Court users welcomed the course of the trial. For example:

- "The process was conducted in accordance with the applicable procedural framework. The adversarial principle was respected. The Court did not ask the parties unnecessary and redundant questions" (comments of the advocate/representative in the Riga judicial district),
- "High level of professionalism, neutrality and impartiality. Good quality of rulings." (claimant's representative, comment from the respondent in the Riga judicial district).
- In one judicial district, three questionnaires included the name of one judge and his assistant, praising the work of the court composition (respondents of the Latgale judicial district court).

Praise was also paid to the work of court staff, for example, "a very positive attitude on the part of the court staff. The security guard helps and tells you where to find necessary locations. Court staff are helpful. (...)", "very orderly and convenient for visitors. An example for other courts" (comments from respondents of the Vidzeme judicial district court).

Negative comments pointed to **problems with the use of e-files**, such as:

- "I don't like the e-file because it's hard to navigate through the attached documents. Attached documents sometimes open in a different format" (Kurzeme judicial district court respondent)
- "Negative experience with e-files. Documents are either not visible from the lawyer's workstation or are not organised chronologically" (Riga judicial district court respondent, lawyer).

Negative comments also point to the **length of time it takes to process cases**. For example:

- "It was long for objective reasons. I am glad it was completed today." (respondent of the Vidzeme judicial district court).
- "Very (too) long time from filing the claim to the court hearing, taking into account the fact that the case concerns maintenance of a small child and access rights (of the claimant)" (respondent of the court of the Zemgale judicial district).

Some of the negative comments related to the **courtroom equipment**, such as:

- "In summer, air-conditioned courtrooms would be preferable." (respondent of the Latgale judicial district court, lawyer).
- "Courtrooms equipped with videoconferencing facilities are not very comfortable, however, because the position of the screen does not allow a good view of the other participants in the proceedings." (Kurzeme judicial district court respondent).

Key conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

1. Court users generally evaluate the work of the courts very positively, appreciating both the work of the judge and the assistance and support of court staff in the conduct of court proceedings. The highest rating was given for the attitude of the staff and the conduct of proceedings in the courtroom (4.6 out of 5). The relatively lowest rating was for the ease of access to case files (4.3 out of 5).
2. The vast majority of court participants are ready for electronic communication with the court.
3. Although the overall success of the questionnaire survey of Court users was good, the total number of questionnaires received (991) is considered to be low. No questionnaires were received from some courts (9).

Recommendations

On the regularity of the survey

- 1) In order to compare courts more objectively with each other and to monitor changes in the attitudes of Court users, **it is important to make feedback available to every Court user.** In particular, every Court user should be able to fill in the feedback questionnaire at any time, either in person or electronically. It should also be ensured that the questionnaire is administered under similar conditions and in similar circumstances in each court.

On "advertising" the survey to Court users

- 2) **Presidents of courts should ensure that feedback opportunities are widely "advertised" in their courts.** When discussing the results of the survey with court representatives, it was observed that in those courts where court presidents were more interested in Court user surveys, more questionnaires were also received. Therefore, the Court Administration should discuss with all court presidents the conditions of the questionnaire when starting the survey, emphasising that the questionnaires should be easily accessible both in the courtroom and in the court registry.
- 3) **Opportunities for feedback should be specifically announced in the courtroom.** The results of the questionnaire show that the most frequent respondents were those who attended the court proceedings (i.e. the court hearing), which leads to the conclusion that the most effective way to reach Court users is in the courtroom.
- 4) **There must be other ways to find out about the questionnaire.** Court staff (clerks or registrars) should inform Court users about the possibility of filling

in the questionnaire both after the hearing and when they ask for help at the registry. The bins in which the questionnaire is to be placed should be clearly visible and located outside the courtroom or on the way out of the court building (in one court, the questionnaire was even provided by a court building guard who reminded each visitor to fill in the questionnaire). In order to raise awareness of the survey process among Court users, it would also be useful to display explanatory information in the courts, such as a poster stating the purpose of the survey and visualising the survey process. This poster could also include a QR code for the questionnaire, which could be completed electronically.

- 5) **In those courts that often work by written procedure, the evaluation questionnaire should also be available electronically (e.g. by scanning a QR code).** The questions in the electronic questionnaire should be adapted to this environment (e.g. no questions on e-readiness).

About working with survey results:

- 6) **The organisation of the survey and the analysis of the results should be carried out by the staff of the Court Administration.** The survey should be an ongoing method for the Court Administration to collect and analyse data on the work of the courts and the accessibility of the courts to its visitors.
- 7) **The results of the questionnaire should be discussed with the presidents and judges of the courts.** It is important that the presiding judges have access to data and comments on their court. The overall results (by judicial district) should be discussed at the Judicial Council and the General Assembly of Judges.

About the survey questions:

- 8) **The questionnaire should be revised** in the next phase of the Court user survey. For example, asking visitors about the accessibility of the court building for people with disabilities (environmental accessibility) or other important aspects of the court's work. The Judicial Council could be the body to propose new questions.