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Further to my appearance before the Committee on 27 June in relation to the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, I agreed to provide further information in relation to the clustering of domestic abuse cases and, in particular the role of civil cases within decisions relating to clustering. This was in response to questioning from John Finnie MSP.

As I highlighted during my evidence, the sheriff principal of a sheriffdom is responsible for ensuring the efficient disposal of business in the sheriff courts of the sheriffdom. Any detailed questions on how court business is dealt with are of course for the judiciary rather than for the Scottish Government.

It may be helpful for the Committee to know that we have been advised that civil cases are not considered as part of the clustering of criminal cases at present. We understand there are a number of practical reasons for this. You'll be aware that the standard of proof in civil cases is different from that in criminal cases. There is of course also no role for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service in civil cases.

More fundamentally, civil cases tend to involve a wide variety of matters, not just those related to domestic abuse matters. For example, an action for divorce could include ancillary craves seeking a civil protection order (such as an interdict) to protect against domestic abuse; a residence or contact order in relation to any children; and financial provision following the divorce. Some points of an action of this nature might seem potentially suitable for a specialist domestic abuse court or clustering, but others (e.g. the granting of the divorce and arrangements in relation to financial provision) might well not be.

I would highlight to the Committee that there are powers in the Courts Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 in relation to judicial specialisation. For example, section 34 of that Act empowers the Lord President to determine categories of sheriff court case that he considers suited to being dealt with by specialists. However, you will appreciate that decisions in relation to specialisation are a matter for the Lord President rather than for the Scottish Government.

Separate from the scheduling of civil cases, you will be aware of the Equally Safe Strategy, the Scottish Government's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls. The delivery plans for Equally Safe have just been through a consultation period which concluded on 30 June. Responses are being analysed and we expect to publish a report in autumn this year.

In the draft delivery plan, the focus very much was on developing a victim-centered approach to the justice system through a coordinated approach within both the civil and criminal justice systems. Equally Safe partners explored the support available for victims and their experiences when going through the system particularly in relation to civil law and contact cases. We will be publishing the final delivery plans for Equally Safe by the end of the year and will be working with the third sector and other statutory organisations to ensure that we have a viable working plan which can make a real difference for victims.

I hope this is helpful.

MICHAEL MATHESON