



Irish Women Lawyers' Association

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A professional and social network for women lawyers

For the Attention of:
Pauline Redmond,
Change Programme Office
Strategy and Reform Directorate
Courts Service
Phoenix House,
15-24 Phoenix Street North,
Smithfield,
Dublin 7,
D07 F95Y
Via email to paulineredmond@courts.ie

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Submission by IWLA to the Courts Service of Ireland regarding the Corporate Strategic Plan

A Chairde

We have now had an opportunity to consider and discuss the Corporate Strategic Plan (the "**Plan**") and compile our responses for the submission.

Our suggestions largely fall under both the '**Digital First**' and the '**Looking at Better Ways of Working**' aspects mentioned in the Plan and are as follows:

Booking Appointment System

Due to the ongoing effects of COVID-19, the courts service in the Four Courts has introduced an appointments system with respect to filing and lodging hard copy documents in the court offices. This is in order to adhere to capacity restrictions within the courts complex. Currently, appointments are booked by emailing or telephoning the relevant office. While this is a welcome development, the IWLA submits that this should be expanded upon under the Digital Services and User Centric Approach headings of the Long-Term Strategic Vision. This is particularly the case where a vaccine for COVID-19 may yet be another year away and the appointment system will need to remain in place for the foreseeable future for the filing of hard copy documents and papers.

An online platform for uploading and amending court booklets for review/comment. This would mainly benefit junior lawyers and could help members with children, as it could make the process more efficient and reduce the amount of time spent in the office/Court. This could contain some kind of comments/actions section. If the registrar/office has comments that need actioning by the applicant, it could be communicated that way and then the applicant can complete the requested action (e.g. re-filing or submission of additional papers). This would also reduce the environmental impact of the courts system.



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Virtual call overs and staggered lists where appropriate in order to reduce waiting around times in Court. Covid has provided opportunity to explore where this works best, as it may not be appropriate for all lists.

In particular, the IWLA submits that a dedicated online system for booking appointments with the corresponding office should be developed. This might take the form of an add-on to the courts service website where it can be easily located and easily navigable. This system could have the following features:

1. Ability to select the relevant court office;
2. Ability to select the relevant date and time for the appointment slot;
3. Where appointment slots are at capacity, these should be marked as unavailable so that it will be visually apparent to the applicant when the soonest open slot is available;
4. When an appointment is successfully booked, an automatically generated email is sent to the applicant confirming the time slot. This might necessitate asking the user to submit their email address for this purpose.
5. A dedicated online system would be both beneficial both from the perspective of court users and the courts service itself. It would be an effective way to streamline appointment requests, and also relieve the burden from the courts service by providing an automated way of doing this. It would also provide more certainty to practitioners trying to book appointments, as the ability to check the capacity of the courts office will assist with more efficient case management.

As referenced elsewhere in our submission, we are mindful of digital exclusion and making submissions burdensome for those who cannot easily access technology. Therefore we suggest that users may be directed to use the booking appointment system in the first instance, but that telephone support would remain open to users who are unable to access or use it due to technological constraints.

Provide a modern and improved estate and facilities:

The strategic vision of the courts also cites Better Facilities as one of the key areas of reform. In our submission, the IWLA would particularly like to draw attention to the importance of making the Courts complexes accessible both in respect of legal practitioners and members of the public (and indeed courts staff).

In particular with respect to the Four Courts, the design of the entrances, security points, and courts interior are not accessible for persons with physical disabilities e.g. wheelchair users. Part of the modernising of facilities should be a keen awareness of the need for redesign that will enable persons with physical disabilities to freely access the necessary parts of the courts complex. To that end, the IWLA would welcome certain modernising technology to be implemented in courts structure, such as more widespread installation of automatic doors. Additionally, while we note that many courts have taken the steps to introduce wheelchair ramps, this should become the norm for all courts complexes.



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Additionally, dedicated car parking spaces should be made available where possible for persons with disabilities.

The IWLA would also welcome an expansion of the accessibility <https://www.courts.ie/accessibility> page on the courts website. While promising steps have been taken in recent years, the IWLA submits that it would be in line with the User Centric Approach going forward to have more information readily available on this page. For example, it may be useful to include a list of specific items that the Disability Liaison Officer can assist with and to have a heading suggesting or facilitating pre-court visits for those who wish to avail of same.

User Centric Approach

While we are advocating for technological development, we are mindful of digital exclusion. A report published by Accenture in July 2020 states that at least 25% of Irish people are excluded from an increasingly digitised society due to socio-economic reasons and further reports that people with low digital skills are being left behind (Accenture, 'Bridging the Gap: Ireland's Digital Divide', 2020). This report highlights the EU Commission's annual Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) which measures and tracks digital performance amongst EU member states. In 2020, Ireland ranked 18th of the 28 EU states with only 53 percent of the population described as having 'basic digital skills', below the EU average. The significance of this is that an unintended consequence of creating easier access to services can be the reinforcement or increase of social inequality.

The Corporate Strategic Plan specifically outlines an objective to provide services that are designed around the needs of court users. The 'User Centric Approach' should include reference to the need for Courts system to avoid inadvertently becoming less accessible to those who cannot easily access and use technology.

A 'User-Centric Approach' to the Courts Service should work to provide equal service to all sectors of society, and the Accenture report highlights that those with lower digital skills are often older citizens or those with lower levels of education. In order to bridge this gap while continuing to work towards a 'Digital First' approach to the Courts Service, we would suggest that maintaining strong alternative support systems, such as telephone support, should remain central to the Corporate Strategic Plan.

Provide a modern and improved estate and facilities

With respect to the infrastructure of the Courts, greater emphasis must be placed on improving accessibility both for legal practitioners and members of the public. This should be particularly



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considered in the design and layout of entrances and security points. Installation of more automatic doors might be one point of improvement in this regard.

EU Court Systems

As a general point, the Plan references the reputational issue with this jurisdiction lagging behind on technology and e-filing. In light of this, the importance of creating robust e-services should be emphasised in the Plan. This ties in with our existing suggestions regarding digital systems and modernisation.

We would be happy to discuss this further, or look into any aspect further.

Please do let us know if you have any queries.

Mise le Meas,

Rosemarie Hayden

ROSEMARIE HAYDEN
HON. SECRETARY
IRISH WOMEN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION