



An tSeirbhís Chúirteanna
Courts Service

Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024

Stakeholder Participation

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1. Introduction

The Long-Term Strategic Vision sets out a number of different phases, the formative phases include the Transition Phase which is due to be initiated from 2021 onwards. The Strategic Vision document is attached.

The Courts Service is currently preparing the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 – 2024. The Courts Service is keen to engage with our partners across the justice ecosystem and Court user representatives who contributed to the Long-Term Strategic Vision, to now inform the development of the Courts Service Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 – 2024, spanning the first three years of the Strategic Vision.

This document is aimed at facilitating stakeholder participation in developing the Corporate Strategic Plan by providing a background to the work of the Courts Service, and an outline of the themes to be incorporated into the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024 and seeks feedback on each of the themes.

Participants are asked to contribute to this process by reviewing our approach and responding to the questions posed below and submitting to Pauline Redmond, Change Programme Office at paulineredmond@courts.ie by Wednesday 4 November 2020 at 5pm. If you have any questions please contact us at paulineredmond@courts.ie

i. Context - Courts Service operating environment

The Courts Service is a statutory independent state agency, established by the Courts Service Act 1998, to support the third branch of Government - the courts and the judiciary. It is a frontline, service focused organisation, providing services in civil, criminal and family courts. The Courts Service has responsibility for the management and administration of the courts, through its offices in the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal, High Courts, Circuit Courts and District Courts, together with the support directorates established as part of the management structure for the Service. There are approximately 1,100 staff working in a geographically dispersed office network, supporting 168 judges and 24,000 court sittings annually across all jurisdictions. It has an annual budget of circa €138m and manages court funds of €1.9bn.

The Courts Service delivers a wide range of processes and activities; engages with a broad ecosystem of stakeholders; whilst ensuring compliance with legislative requirements.

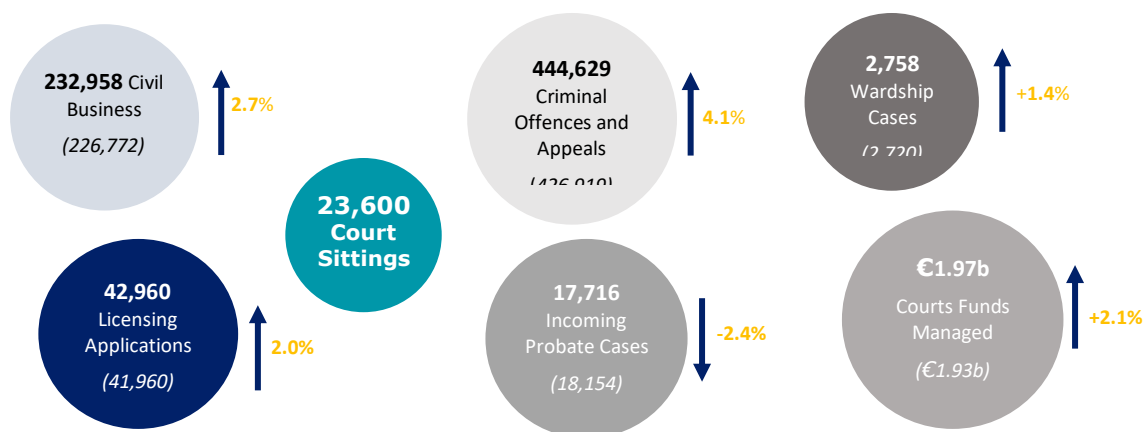


Figure 1 provides a snapshot of key activities and the growth in volume between 2018 and 2019.

2. Consultative Process

The Courts Service consultative process began in earnest in late 2018 with the Department of Expenditure and Reform's Organisation Capability Review, and lessons sought from international peers. The outcome of that exercise was the Courts Service Board and Senior Management Team recommendation for the development of a Long-Term Strategy to 2030. The ambition for this Long-Term Strategy aimed at providing the time and investment to support system-wide reform, driving behavioural and organisational change, and delivering ambitious outcomes. The Courts Service engaged in extensive consultation with all stakeholders to develop the Long Term Strategy and at the heart of this ambitious vision is a modern, transparent and accessible court system that is quicker, easier to access and more efficient.

This Strategic Vision for the organisation has regard to the current reform environment within the Irish public sector and our stated objectives and ambitions are aligned with the principles of "Our Public Sector 2020" and the "Civil Service Renewal Plan". The Courts Service staff, the Judiciary, our partners in justice and all court users are unified in working towards the delivery of a future court system that continuously seeks to improve Access to Justice in a modern, digital Ireland.



To deliver on the Long-Term Strategic Vision, in January 2020, the Courts Service, CEO, Angela Denning announced the establishment of a **Courts Service Modernisation Programme** to begin the work of translating the Strategic Vision into practical measures to modernise how we deliver our services and how we work every day. The programme follows the implementation approach outlined in the Long-Term Strategic Vision comprising four delivery phases to ensure planned outcomes are being achieved.

The Courts Service is obliged under legislation to develop Corporate Strategic Plans on a three year basis. The current Corporate Strategy expires this year and the Courts Service currently are developing the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 – 2024. This plan will need to support the establishment and initiation of the Modernisation Programme which is aimed at achieving various stages of the Long-Term Strategic Vision. The main focus for the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024 has to be the delivery of the Transition Phase of the Long-Term Strategic Vision and preparation for the 'Transform' Phase.

Collaborative working

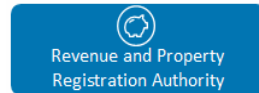
The Courts Service advocates for, and works collaboratively with other key stakeholders to support changes and reforms that will contribute to an effective and efficient Courts system. With the working knowledge of the interdependencies across these distinct elements, the Courts Service is uniquely placed to facilitate and develop partnerships to support necessary reforms.

Moving forward, the Court Service interprets its statutory responsibilities as an enabling and supportive role, at the heart of a collaborative effort across many parties to deliver a step-change in the performance of the courts system in Ireland.

To ensure that this collaborative approach supports all our work we are seeking to engage with our partners in justice and court users in the development of the Courts Service Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024.



*An tSeirbhís Chúirteanna
Courts Service*



3. Corporate Strategic Plan 2021- 2024

a. Courts Service vision and values

The Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024 draws on the Courts Service Mandate, as prescribed in legislation, the Courts Service Vision, our Values and Strategic Objectives:

Our Vision <i>“Delivering excellent services to court users; working in partnership with the judiciary and others, to enable a world class courts system”</i>	
Courts Service Mandate <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Manage the courts• Provide support services to Judges• Provide information on the Court system to the public• Provide, manage and maintain Court buildings• Provide facilities for users of the courts.	Our Value Propositions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fair, neutral and unbiased access to justice• Efficient and effective service provision for all users and all citizens• Courts Service is underpinned by experienced and professional staff• Courts service provides plain language and user-friendly information and service
Our Strategic Objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just; supporting the judiciary• User-centric with a focus on accessibility<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simplified services and processes• Timely administration of justice• Integrated with our justice partners<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborative working• Efficient; providing value for money	

With these guiding principles and objectives, the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024 is being developed to support the Transition Phase as detailed in the Long-Term Strategic Vision (attached). Following the extensive engagement with our key partners in justice and Court user groups on the Long-Term Strategic Vision we are looking to consult with you in regard the themes and approach for Corporate Strategic Plan 2021- 2024, currently in development.

To best reflect the Transition Phase and the governance standards we are expected to uphold, the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 – 2024 is being developed based on six different themes. The themes are detailed below.

b. Corporate Strategic Plan - Key themes and Consultation responses

In supporting the development of the Courts Service Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024 you are asked, based on the attached Long-Term Strategic Vision – 2030 to review of the six themes, outlined below, that will shape the basis of the Strategic Plan. As part of this consultation process, we would ask you to consider overall whether there is anything further we need to add or anything we are missing.

1 : Taking a user-centric approach

Brief description:

Speaking to two of the Courts Service's strategic objectives this theme aims at ensuring we adapt new collaborative ways of working, taking a user-centric approach to provide more effective and efficient processes for all, this means putting in place the structures and resources as well as developing internal skills and understanding so as to ensure the user is placed at the centre of all projects under the Modernisation Programme.

Through informed policies and strategies greater emphasis will be placed on collaborating with and continuing to engage Court users with measurable outcomes. Under the Corporate Strategic plan the Courts Service will, in the next three years, aim to develop a user research and service design function, a communications and stakeholder engagement strategic plan and provide different mechanisms for formal feedback, as well as improved processes for reporting and sharing data, to support decision making and improved ways of working. Under this plan the Courts Service also aims to implement the organisation's Innovation Strategy currently being finalised.

2 : Supporting the Judiciary

Brief description:

The Courts Service is mandated to support the Judiciary, under the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 - 2024 we will seek to continue this work with an emphasis on improving the service to the Judiciary by providing enhanced access to resources and information. By improving the service we would hope Judges would be able to focus and concentrate on their Judicial work, which we will seek to profile as best-in-class in the future

We will therefore focus on putting the right structures, processes, policies and resources in place to deliver the support services to the Judiciary. This will involve reviewing and restructuring the Judicial Research and Library Services, improving the Judicial search functionality and supporting the Rules Committee to drive legislative reform to enable digitisation, standardisation and simplification of Court procedures.

3 : Digital First

Brief description:

The Courts Service is keen to introduce digital solutions and platforms where appropriate, in an effort to manage hearing and case information better, and to improve the operation of the Courts. We believe that digital, where appropriate, will offer greater efficiencies for staff, Judiciary and Court users as well as being more efficient in the longer term for public money. This theme is particularly important as it speaks directly to our interpretation of our statutory mandate of supporting a courts system that is fit-for-purpose for a modern and digital Ireland.

Under this Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024 we are looking at scoping out the ICT requirements and needs of a modern and digital Courts Service. In order to achieve this we will develop an ICT Strategy, reduce the reliance on outdated applications and paper-based systems and build on the lessons learnt and digital evolution experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. We will look to other

Departments, Agencies and Bodies to partner with and drive efficiencies as well as looking to best-in-class across other jurisdictions worldwide.

4 : Looking at better ways of working

Brief description:

This theme ensures that we focus on developing the skills, capability and supports that our staff need to deliver on the ten year vision. Moving from paper-based processes to more efficient and effective digital solutions will free up staff to do more compelling and engaging work. The Courts Service needs to ensure staff are supported from the outset, that they have the skills and know-how to affect this change and are involved in designing these new digital processes. As well as developing the skills to transition to new more interesting and rewarding ways of working and collaborating with court users. We need to work with staff to map out their journey through the Transition and Transformation Phases.

Under the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021-2024 this will involve the development of a People and Organisation Strategy, an agreed Workforce plan, implementation of an agreed Learning and Development plan and career development programme. Building skills and providing the supports to the Change Programme Office to support the Modernisation Programme will involve an ongoing skills capability review process, recruitment drive and ICT supports.

Change will be a feature of the next ten years, the past eight months alone has seen considerable change and Courts Service staff have reacted to the pandemic with innovative thinking. We need to support staff in the face of such continued change to be resilient, open to continued learning, development and innovation by equipping them with the right skills and tools.

5 : Provide a modern and improved estate and facilities

Brief description:

The facilities infrastructure across the estates of the Courts enables the Courts Service to deliver its service and physically provide Access to Justice for all members of the public. There has been wide recognition by Court Users and our partners in justice that the estates need to be updated and improved for a modern and digital Ireland. The Department of Justice recognised this need with the recent introduction of new legislation with regard Family Law which supports the modernisation of our facilities.

Under the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021- 2024 we need to ready the estates and ensure a collaborative approach to user-led change, this will involve developing an Estates Strategy, laying the foundations for a Planned Preventative Maintenance regime, development of user-centric designs for the Family Law Court building, planning for procurement and financing of the various projects including new property/ site purchases. The estates also have ambitious energy saving plans to be put in place over the next three years. Finally the main focus for estates and facilities over the past six months has been re-configuring courts and adding protective measures, as per Government public health guidance in relation to Covid-19; this will continue to be important for the first 6 – 12 months of the Corporate Strategic plan.

6 : Governance and Leadership

Brief description:

The Courts Service wants to ensure that the Long-Term Strategic planning is accountable, delivered by effective management, in a structured way. Alongside being agile in our approach we also want to ensure that our value propositions of delivering services in a fair, impartial and professional way are met. Accountability and enabling a leadership approach will allow the Courts Service to achieve best-in-practice outcomes.

For the Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 -2024 this will involve implementing a Governance Framework, business continuity plans for all offices, an ICT service design authority to oversee the implementation of the ICT strategy, as well as developing outcome and benefit frameworks for our modernisation projects.

Insights – your views and recommendations

Question 1: Do you think there is something we should be considering under the themes outlined above which is not mentioned?

Answer:

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.

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. 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 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.

Question 2: Do you have any suggestions for the upcoming three year Corporate Strategic Plan and the start of the Long-Term Strategic Vision ?

Answer:

Provide a modern and improved estate and facilities

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7 : Further Information

If you would like to provide any additional comments please include here:

We are happy to collaborate on further details of the implementation of this plan, and would value the opportunity to provide feedback on implemented stages by having IWLA members providing beta testing and feedback.

8: Submission

Thank you for taking the time to provide these responses, we appreciate your feedback and input. Please submit this document paulineredmond@courts.ie by Wednesday 4 November 2020 at 5pm.