



An tSeirbhís Chúirteanna
Courts Service

Corporate Strategic Plan 2021 - 2023





Modernisation Programme for the Courts Service

“The thinking, planning and actions of the Courts Service has developed five years in five months, as we embark on this three year Corporate Strategic Plan... now is the time for renaissance and not resistance.”

Frank Clarke, Chief Justice, 2020

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Foreword

It is almost a cliché to say that we live in a fast-changing and increasingly challenging world. Even before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic we, in the Courts Service, had identified the need to plan strategically over the next decade for the implementation of a modern fit-for-purpose and cost-effective Courts system which will contribute towards making access to justice easier.

However, the additional challenges posed by the pandemic have not only added to the need to accelerate the adoption of new ways of operating but have also provided a significant impetus as well as very considerable learning about what is likely to work or not work in the medium term. While it will be necessary to continue to deal with the problem of providing the maximum safe access to Courts for as long as restrictions associated with the pandemic last, our strategy must be focused beyond that time to our Courts system in the post-pandemic era.

There are a number of strands to the development of that new normal. These have, in one way or another, been in planning or consideration for a number of years but we are now at a critical moment where planning will come to an end and implementation will begin. This strategic plan will cover the first phase of the ten-year long term strategic vision which aims to fundamentally transform how the Courts Service delivers services by deploying a greatly increased use of IT. In addition, the committee chaired by former President of the High Court Mr. Justice Peter Kelly has very recently delivered its report on civil justice reform. The implementation of the recommendations of that committee when coupled with the roll-out of the Courts Service modernisation plan should make a very significant contribution towards allowing all court users to access our Courts system in more effective, more user-friendly and ultimately significantly cheaper ways. While not all of the barriers to proper access to justice lie within the control of the Courts Service, these measures will make a major contribution to a significantly more accessible Courts system.

There are other strands to our strategy and the reforms considered necessary to make Ireland a best-in-class provider of access to justice. The Courts Service will work closely with government to ensure the implementation of the new structure for family justice identified in the recent Programme for Government. That structure has been at

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the planning stage for a number of years but it too is now ready for implementation. We will also play a role in assisting Ireland to maximise those opportunities for an increase in international dispute resolution within our shores which may derive from Brexit as a result of which Ireland will become the only fully common law country within the European Union. We will begin to implement measures to ensure that we play our role in ensuring sustainability and carbon reduction.

Courts will necessarily have to continue to respond to changes in the society in which they operate. Twenty-five years ago, few would have predicted the extent to which our lives and society have been radically changed by the rapid advance in IT. People, both in their personal or work lives, are now used to doing much online. Courts need to respond but to do so in a secure way. Procedures which may have served us well in the past need to be reviewed against the type of litigation which now comes before our Courts. Alternative dispute resolution needs to be facilitated to the greatest extent possible so as to keep the resource of the courtroom for those issues which truly need a final Judicial determination.

Keeping our Courts fit-for-purpose will inevitably always be a work in progress. However, this strategic plan shows our Courts at the beginning of a vital implementation stage which will, I hope, demonstrate that we are committed to renaissance rather than resistance.

Frank Clarke

CHIEF JUSTICE

CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF THE COURTS SERVICE

Introduction

This plan outlines the strategic direction, challenges and priorities for the Courts Service in the next three years. In 2020, the Courts Service adopted an ambitious ten-year Modernisation Programme aimed at improving access to justice in a modern, digital Ireland. We have started to work on this programme of court reform, which aims to bring new technology and modern ways of working to the administration of justice. We know we can make access to justice easier and quicker to navigate and that we can better respond to the needs of court users. We aim to design our processes and systems around court users so as to build a more effective Courts system and to generate efficiencies for court users and for the taxpayer.

This important document provides direction for our business plans and how we go about achieving our goals for the next three years. Our recent collaborative experience in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an accelerated pace of change, moving us further into our Modernisation Programme in a shorter time frame than we could have expected. We have participated in a large experiment with technology, altered user channels and adopted remote working through necessity. We will now engage with Judges, court users, staff and our partners across the justice system to maximise the benefits from our collective recent lived experience. We will also design new methods of service delivery that best suit our users and sustain the momentum for change outside of a crisis.

Our commitment to public service values, innovation, resilience and agility shown in recent months by our staff demonstrates that we are well placed to meet the challenges that lie ahead. The lessons learnt from Covid-19 will help us better deliver on our mission to support the Judiciary and provide excellent services to all users of the Courts thereby facilitating access to justice. We will provide strong, visible leadership, build additional capacity and skills in our teams and reorient the organisation to best support delivery of our goals.

Our operating environment is dynamic, and this plan will therefore be complemented by annual corporate business plans. Progress will be reviewed by our Board allowing us to continue to refine and adapt our efforts. Improved management data will be key to holding ourselves to account for our performance against this plan and associated business plans.

“We will provide strong, visible leadership, build additional capacity and skills in our teams and reorient the organisation to best support delivery of our goals.”



We will work collaboratively with all of our partners and stakeholders to meet our commitments to them over the coming three years and in particular collaborate with the Department of Justice to deliver on their strategic priority to improve access to justice and modernise the Courts. As CEO, I am charged with leading the organisation in the next phase of our development so as to deliver on our clear ambition for 2024. This document is the roadmap that will guide us through the next three years of that journey, and the challenges we encounter along the way, which I look forward to with enthusiasm.

Angela Denning

CHIEF EXECUTIVE
THE COURTS SERVICE

1. About the Courts Service

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. As a frontline service-focused organisation, we are responsible for the administration and management of the Courts in Ireland. Under legislation the Courts Service is mandated to:

- Manage the Courts
- Provide support services to the Judiciary
- Provide information on the Courts system to the public
- Provide, manage and maintain Court buildings
- Provide facilities for users of the Courts.

In fulfilling these primary functions over 1,100 staff work across a nationwide network of offices and court venues, to provide services in civil, criminal and family law to court users daily. These offices, supported by directorates established as part of our management structure, working with the Judiciary, facilitate the work of the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal, High Court, Circuit Court and District Court.

The Courts Service plays a vital role in managing a high volume of activity across the broad complex network of interconnected stakeholders that is the Courts system of Ireland. By way of illustration, 445,000 criminal and 233,000 civil matters were before the Courts in 2019. A modern functioning Courts system is the foundation of a stable society. This plan seeks to ensure the Courts Service, and the Courts system that it supports, continue to be highly regarded not just in Ireland but internationally. A mature economy requires a high-performing best-in-class Courts system which currently supports a legal infrastructure generating €2.46 billion annually and contributes €1.6 billion to the Irish Economy.

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Delivering excellent services to court users; working in partnership with the Judiciary and others to enable a world-class Courts system

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The Courts Service at a glance

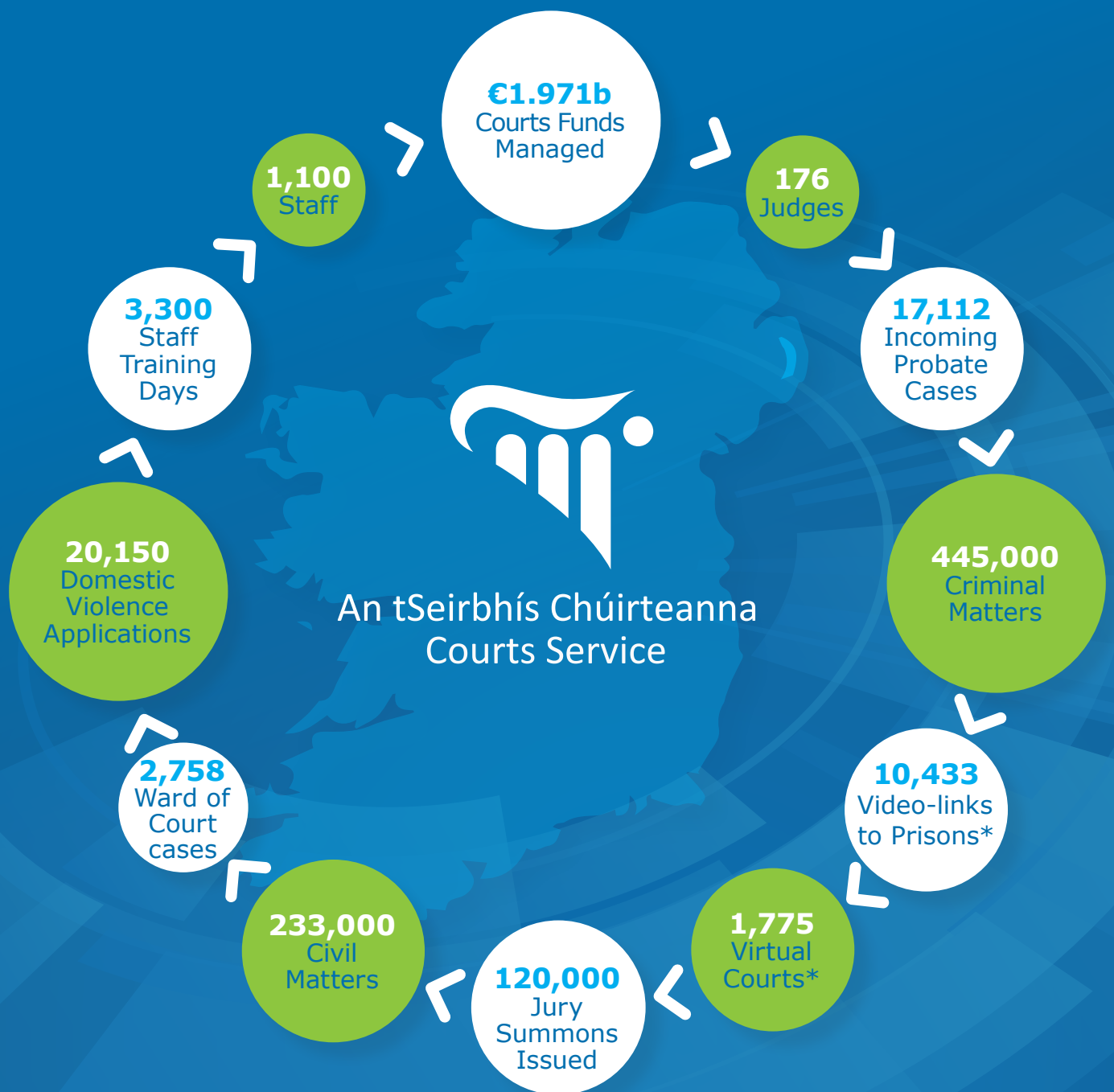


Figure 1: provides a snapshot of Court Service activities for 2019

*Data for the period 13 March – 20 November 2020

1.1. Our Vision

Our vision for the future, based on our mandate, is a collective belief and aspiration towards:

“Delivering excellent services to court users; working in partnership with the Judiciary and others, to enable a world class Courts system.”

Our vision is to put the court user at the centre of everything we do by improving access to justice, reducing delay and cost within the justice system and maximising the use of technology to improve our services.

1.2. Our Values

In delivering on our mandate, the Courts Service aspires to the Public Service values, as set-out in Our Public Service 2020, and strives to meet the expectations and needs of staff, members of the Judiciary, justice partners, court users and members of the public. Every day we work to the Courts Service core values of integrity, respect and service, as detailed below.



2. Supporting Access to Justice in a changing environment

2.1. External environment: trends, challenges and opportunities

In preparing this Corporate Strategic Plan 2021-2023 the Courts Service has considered key external factors and trends in society that may affect us and the potential opportunities and challenges they present.

- **Technological developments:** The race to better connect people has digitally transformed everyday transactions and created significant amounts of data and analytics to improve decision making. Court users and partners in the justice system now expect more efficient and effective digital options in their transactions with Courts. Rapidly evolving technology presents challenges for all organisations attempting to future-proof replacement technology for legacy ICT systems. However, it also presents opportunities to deliver better and more modern services to users.
- **Legislative responsibilities:** The Courts Service recognises the opportunity when prescribing our approach to service design, to take account of our human rights and equality responsibilities. We are also aware of increased regulations in relation to Data Protection, Open Data, the environment and procurement. Continued staff upskilling and training as well as updating governance practices offer the opportunity to support compliance in these areas.
- **Programme for Government:** The Programme for Government, 'Our Shared Future', specifically calls out court reform under the Mission: Building Stronger and Safer Communities. The new Family Courts Bill, a proposed new Planning and Environmental Law Court, reforms to the administration of civil justice, and legislative reforms of the personal insolvency system will change the way the Courts system operates in the future. The Courts Service is aware of plans to increase capacity and capability across the wider justice system which will impact on how our services will be delivered. Another important, recent objective across the legal landscape is the commitment to ensuring that proceedings involving children and the vulnerable are dealt with in a manner which recognises their unique vulnerabilities and needs.

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- Across the rest of the Programme and the wider civil service, the Courts Service recognises challenges and opportunities in common with those called out in our Modernisation Programme under this strategy such as:
 - The continued commitment to public sector reform
 - The drive for digital transformation through the development of a National Digital Strategy
 - A new National Energy Efficiency Action Plan to reduce energy use
 - Our responsibilities under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as per the Government's Public Service Data Strategy 2019 - 2023 and Public Service ICT Strategy
 - The ambition to embed a culture of innovation, as per the Public Service Innovation Strategy
 - The mandate to move the public sector to 20% home and remote working in 2021
 - The introduction of a plain language requirement for all public service communication
 - Na dualgais atá orainn chun tacú leis an gcur chuige 'uile-rialtais' i leith chur chun cinn agus chaomhnú na Gaeilge trí fheabhas a chur ar an méid a úsáidtear an Ghaeilge ar fud na Seirbhíse Cúirteanna.
- **International developments and standards:** As Ireland's closest trading partner, the UK, continues its exit from the EU, Ireland is preparing to become the only native English-speaking common-law jurisdiction in the EU. The Courts Service and the Judiciary recognise the opportunities this presents for practicing law in Ireland, establishing Ireland as the jurisdiction of choice in this regard. Under its mandate, the Courts Service will work with the Judiciary to promote the use of the Irish Courts as a forum in support of Ireland's International Legal Services Strategy.

International scoreboards, such as the European Justice Scoreboard, show Ireland has significant gaps compared to other jurisdictions. Areas of concern include the relative costs associated with the Irish

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legal system and the time taken to reach case conclusion when compared to peer countries.

- **Covid-19:** The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way business and services are delivered in this country, which has had fundamental effects on how the Courts Service operates, in particular the move to trialling remote Courts. This presents an opportunity for us to maximise the positive developments as a result of our response to the pandemic and to bring forward the lessons learnt into our modernisation plans.

2.2 Internal environment: Key Reform Areas, Modernisation Programme & Strategic Partnerships

Over the past two years there has been considerable inward review and assessment of the Courts Service, which commenced with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's Organisational Capability Review and involved comprehensive stakeholder engagement. Some of the challenges and opportunities identified in meeting the needs of a modern and digital Ireland included;

1. Developing strategic capability
2. Engaging in common purpose with justice agencies
3. Enhancing our customer service focus
4. Creating an eCourt environment

Subsequently, a Long-Term Strategic Vision for the organisation was developed which envisages system-wide reform, behavioural and organisational change and ambitious user-centric outcomes. This exciting and ambitious vision for the Courts Service up to 2030 paves the way for a future Courts system that continuously seeks to improve access to justice in a modern, digital Ireland. This strategic vision is aligned with the principles of "Our Public Service 2020", the "Civil Service Renewal Plan" and the Public Service Innovation Strategy.



A Modernisation Programme to deliver the Long-Term Strategic Vision

To deliver on this ambitious vision, the Modernisation Programme was launched in early 2020. The programme aims to fundamentally transform how the Courts Service delivers services and develops a modern, best-in-class Courts system, delivering a more efficient and user-friendly experience for all those who attend, work in and pay for the Courts. This ambitious plan focuses on redesigning services around the user, leveraging digital technology to streamline services and processes, and ultimately delivering a Courts system that enhances Ireland's international reputation.

We have made significant progress in building momentum around the Modernisation Programme and have identified the need to put in place strong foundations to support such transformational change including: securing internal leadership alignment; gaining buy-in and support from key stakeholders and initial investments to strengthen ICT and change capability. Developing the capabilities of our staff and leadership teams to support the organisation through the change and delivery of the Modernisation Programme, whilst maintaining business as usual services, is a key priority.

This Corporate Strategic Plan overlaps with the first three years of the Modernisation Programme and will involve the establishment of four key reform workstreams - Civil Law Reform, Criminal Law Reform, Family Law Reform and Organisational Reform. These key reform areas will be cross-jurisdictional and seek to simplify processes, deliver improved end-to-end customer experience, progress enabling legislation and rule changes, as well as strengthening our key partner relationships.



Collaboration with strategic partners

The Courts Service, in many respects, sits at the heart of the wider Courts system within a complex network of interconnected stakeholders, all with vital contributions to make. The Courts Service recognises that the ambition of enhanced access to justice, system-wide benefits for users, stakeholders and the Exchequer, will require a high level of collaboration across all justice sector and stakeholder organisations.

We recognise that many of our key partners have comparable digital and modernisation ambitions. We are keen to continue collaborating to develop an agreed and cohesive approach to reform and modernisation. During the life-span of this strategic plan the Courts Service will deliver a comprehensive communications and stakeholder engagement strategy building on the collaboration achieved during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This intra-sector collaboration will be essential for long term success in the co-design of new services, maximising adoption of new working practices and the retirement of legacy applications and processes. Enabling legislation, particularly that associated with enhanced digital services, increased investment and improved coordination across the sector, support for which has already been experienced since the Covid-19 pandemic, will continue to be important throughout the life-span of this strategy.



External Stakeholders



3. Our Strategic Goals, Priority Actions and Key Outcomes

Our Strategic Goals, Priority Actions and identified Key Outcomes were developed following consultation with managers, the Board of the Courts Service, our key partners in justice and court users to reflect the Courts Service's Long-Term Strategic Vision and the deliverables set out in the Modernisation Programme.

The Courts Service is dedicated to building on the advancements, collaboration and learning experienced in Covid-19 to best inform the Modernisation Programme in a cohesive way with all stakeholders.

These Strategic Goals, Priority Actions and Key Outcomes will inform our annual corporate business plans, incorporating business-as-usual activities and Key Performance Indicators, to be developed by the various directorates and offices across the organisation.

Goal 1: Take a user-centric approach

Strategic Goal	We will adopt new collaborative ways of working, taking a user-centric approach, to provide improved and enhanced service delivery.
Priority Actions	Establish User Research and Service Design function to partnering with the Judiciary and stakeholders to ensure best outcomes for all court users, with a specific focus on vulnerable users.
	Develop and implement a Communication and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy plan to effectively engage stakeholders.
	Standardise and simplify appropriate court procedures.
	Support legislative initiatives as prioritised in the Programme for Government such as the Family Courts Bill.
Key Outcomes	A Service Delivery Model in place that supporting a user-centric, evidence-based approach to provide equal service to all sectors of society.
	Better understanding of the needs of all service users.
	Culture of collaborative working.
	User-friendly and efficient experience for those who engage with the Courts system.

Goal 2: Support the Judiciary

Strategic Goal	We will work collaboratively with the Judiciary to define and provide the resources needed to effectively carry out their judicial functions.
Priority Actions	Engage with the Judiciary to define requirements, to improve efficiencies and share information and best practice.
	Review and restructure Judicial and Library Research Services, with a focus on improved Judicial research functionality.
	Develop and implement a framework for collaborative working with Judges, the Judicial Council and the Courts Service.
	Work with justice stakeholders to promote Ireland as the leading venue for dispute resolution in the EU.
Key Outcomes	Efficient, effective and suitable support services provided to the Judiciary to enable fulfilment of their judicial functions.
	Reform of court procedures and practices progressed through stronger collaboration.

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Goal 3: Digital First

Strategic Goal	We will adopt a digital first approach
Priority Actions	Develop an ICT and data strategy to define the application, infrastructure and data architecture to support a modern and digitally enabled Courts Service.
	Engage in collaborative digital initiatives with other agencies to drive efficiencies.
Key Outcomes	Digital channels in place reflecting user-centric approach and best practice in online service design.
	Reduced reliance on paper-based processes and outdated technology.
	Improved customer service that is inclusive and provides for digital first solutions, taking account of human and equality rights of all users and ensures that no user is disadvantaged when interacting with the Courts.
	A robust, secure and transparent data ecosystem supporting the functioning of the Courts, effective decision making, and collaboration with justice agencies and government in line with GDPR.

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Goal 4: Better ways of working

Strategic Goal	We will continue to invest in and support our people to create a high-performing organisation, delivering on the modernisation agenda and broader government priorities.
Priority Actions	Develop a people and organisation strategy to create a diverse organisation that supports digitally enabled operations and new ways of working.
	Build on existing Health and Safety Authority 'Work Positive' programmes.
	Implement our three-year Learning and Development strategy, including training to develop awareness of human rights, equality and supporting those who are vulnerable.
	Implement our Innovation Strategy.
	Prevent discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and protect the human rights of staff and of those to whom we provide services and meet our obligations under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014.
Key Outcomes	Learning and development supporting delivery of user-centric services to court users and staff learning for the new skills required to deliver the Modernisation Programme.
	A culture of continuous improvement with flexible working arrangements in place which maximise staff members' contribution to a high-performing organisation.
	Skilled staff with the capability to deliver on the Modernisation Programme, public service and court reform.
	Innovation culture embedded where staff are inspired, empowered and equipped to innovate.

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Goal 5: Provide a modern and improved estate and facilities

Strategic Goal	Provide buildings that are modern, fit-for-purpose, safe and accessible and support the new ways in which we will conduct business.
Priority Actions	Conduct a National Review of Venues and develop an Estates Strategy to align with the future operating model.
	Review condition assessment surveys and develop a strategy to move towards a Planned Preventative Maintenance regime.
	Develop a user-centric approach to the development of the new specialist Family Law Courts at Hammond Lane in Dublin.
	Progress preparatory work on the priority capital projects in National Development Plan 2018 – 2027.
	Develop an Environmental Sustainability vision for the Courts Service, including a strategy to achieve 2030 public sector energy and carbon targets.
Key Outcomes	Enhanced facilities in our buildings for court users.
	Advanced progress on the development of user-informed Family Law Court, supporting objectives of the Programme for Government.
	Biodiversity programme
	Implementing and meeting our public service energy usage targets.
	An emphasis on sustainability is included in our fiscal, enterprise, innovation, and environmental approach and policies.

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Goal 6: Accountability and Leadership

Strategic Goal	We will put in place robust governance structures to ensure effective accountability and leadership for our modernisation and reform agenda.
Priority Actions	Develop and implement a Single Change Governance Framework.
	Ensure the governance framework for the Modernisation Programme is reviewed and monitored regularly.
	Ensure a process to review, adapt, evaluate and test Business Continuity Plans for all offices, including a supporting ICT Disaster Recovery Plan.
	Monitor progress and performance of the actions set out in this strategic plan.
	Monitor and report on the benefits accruing from the Modernisation Programme and reform agenda.
	Establish an Advisory Group to support our Modernisation Programme.
Key Outcomes	A single organisational approach to managing change is embedded.
	Robust business continuity, analysis and risk structures in place.
	Benefits of Modernisation Programme and reform agenda are realised.

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A blue-tinted close-up photograph of a wooden gavel. The gavel's head is positioned at the top, with its handle extending downwards. The gavel rests on a wooden surface that has the word "COURT" carved into it in a serif font. The image is partially obscured by a rounded corner in the top right. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

COURT



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Courts Service