

Serving the
community
through the
administration
of justice



Northern Ireland Court Service Customer Service Strategy

June 2005



The Court Service is committed to listening and responding to the needs of our customers.

If you have any comments on any aspect of this strategy or any customer service issues we would like to hear from you. Contact the Information Centre at:

Northern Ireland Court Service

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Introduction

The Northern Ireland Court Service (the Court Service) has been delivering services to a wide range of customers for more than 25 years. We are committed to delivering quality services which court users and the public expect from a modern public service.

Customer Service Strategy

This Customer Service Strategy outlines how services will be delivered and how developments in information technology and communications will enable new and better ways of delivering services in the future.

The delivery of this Customer Service Strategy will be overseen by the Customer Service Board which reports to our departmental Management Board. A definitive customer service commitment has been agreed:

“The Northern Ireland Court Service is committed to providing an efficient, accessible, and quality service for all customers by listening and responding to their needs”

Over the next three years the Customer Service Board will ensure that we demonstrate achievement against this statement.

This strategy details the standards customers can expect when they use our services; including the information available, facilities provided and, perhaps most importantly, how they are treated by our staff. It also explains how we shall ensure we meet those standards and how customers will be involved in developing new services.

Action Plan

Our Customer Service Strategy builds on best practice and outlines how court users will be given access to better services. An annual Action Plan will be developed for each year of the strategy, approved by our Management Board and communicated to court users, judiciary and staff. The Action Plan for 2005/06 can be seen at Annex A; progress against the Action Plan will be reported in our Annual Report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G Keatley', with a large, sweeping underline stroke.

George Keatley

Chair of NI Court Service Customer Service Board

Approach to Customer Service

1. The Court Service Corporate Plan for the 2005-2008 period identifies the following strategic aims,
 - Modernising the courts;
 - Improving access to justice; and
 - Building confidence in the justice system.

2. There are many projects and workstreams associated with the delivery of these strategic aims. The Customer Service Strategy aims to bring together relevant and associated work into a cohesive plan which not only details what will be done but also how it will be done and how customer service will improve as a result.

3. In 2003 we formally committed our service to the following organisational values -
 - Integrity;
 - Openness;
 - Professionalism;
 - Accountability; and
 - Fairness.

We will continue to aspire to these values for this strategy period and beyond.

Customer Service Commitment

4. ***“The Northern Ireland Court Service is committed to providing an efficient, accessible, and quality service for all customers by listening and responding to their needs”.***

Our customer service commitment is a tangible statement about our intentions and objectives for customer service. Feedback was obtained from Court User Groups and staff before this commitment was endorsed by the Customer Service Board and Management Board. It has been communicated to all staff and will be prominently displayed in court venues and on our website.

Strategy Purpose

5. The purpose of the strategy is to:
 - explain how we will deliver against our customer service commitment in the 2005/08 period;
 - detail the standards of service and facilities which customers can expect wherever and however they access our services; and
 - communicate our Action Plan for the 2005/06 period and explain how this will be monitored and inform the 2006/07 Action Plan.

Strategy Scope

6. This strategy covers all elements of the work of the Court Service that affect the court users' experience, these include:

Processing of Business: -

in a timely and efficient manner.

Details of targets for civil, criminal, and family business are published in our annual Business Plan. We will also work in partnership with relevant agencies to minimise waiting times and avoidable delay.

Accommodation and Facilities: -

which meet the needs of the full range of court users.

Customers can expect to find a consistently high standard at all court

venues, the Information Centre, the Enforcement of Judgments Office, and the Court Funds Office. All of our venues will provide a comfortable, clean and secure environment for all users that will also meet the specific needs of victims, children and persons with disabilities. A comprehensive range of facilities is largely available at each principal Court Office with a corresponding provision, depending on business type, at satellite venues within geographical divisions. The facilities which we are aspiring to provide include:

- Universal access to reception areas/information points;
- Courtrooms that have adequate and fit-for-purpose seating areas, effective lighting, heating, in-court sound and loop systems;
- Public waiting areas that provide adequate and comfortable seating arrangements;
- Private waiting areas with adequate and comfortable seating arrangements for users with specific needs such as children and victims;
- Consultation facilities that provide privacy and comfort, including desks and seating;
- Juror facilities incorporating secure assembly areas, retiring rooms, access to private toilet areas and refreshment facilities;
- Universal access for jury members and witnesses in at least one main courthouse within each geographical location;
- Toilet facilities within public areas that accommodate universal access;
- Refreshment facilities for all customers via vending or canteen services;
- At court venues with on site car parking, parking will be made available for users with restricted mobility; and
- Cell areas that are clean, safe and secure and which offer sufficient comfort, heating, lighting and toilet facilities for all users.

An ongoing programme of work is necessary to ensure that each venue achieves these minimum standards. The Court Service is committed to delivering these standards within the life of this Strategy. In addition, minimum standard of facilities will be addressed in the current review of the Accommodation Strategy 2004 – 2010.

Provision of services: -

at court venues, Enforcement of Judgments Office, Court Funds Office, the Information Centre including the development of new services such as centralised business processing and payment processing, on-line and telephone services.

We recognise that today's court users have different needs and expectations and that we must provide services that meet these diverse needs. This will include extending our access channels and ensuring that quality of service is maintained whether customers choose to access our services by telephone, e-mail, via the internet or in the traditional methods of post or across a counter.

Accessibility of information: -

in a timely and user-friendly manner including the resolution of routine queries via our website, by e-mail, information leaflets and information kiosks.

Professionalism and empowerment of staff: -

through the development of skills and knowledge.

The Court Service recognises and values the contribution of our staff in providing a high quality service for all customers. Ensuring staff demonstrate organisational values, are competent, well motivated and equipped with the right skills and knowledge is an integral element of this strategy.

This commitment is supported by learning solutions in the 2005/2006 Corporate Learning Plan, the Performance Management System, and in adherence to Investor in People principles.

7. We aim to provide a consistent standard of service at all venues which meets the diverse needs of the range of court users while ensuring legislative compliance and demonstrating good customer service practice.

Listening to Customers

8. For the purposes of this strategy we have defined our customers in the widest sense; they typically include the general public, the judiciary, victims and witnesses, defendants, plaintiffs, applicants, respondents, the legal profession, jurors, statutory and non-statutory organisations and agencies.
9. We shall continue to use the extensive consultation methodology that has already been established to inform our decision-making, policies, procedures and service delivery. These include:
 - An annual Customer Survey
 - Service Improvement Team
 - Court User Groups
 - Section 75 Equality Consultation Groups
 - Court Business Committees
 - Administrative User Group

Customer Complaints, Comments, and Suggestions

10. Our Customer complaints process will be used as a means of gathering and monitoring information on service standards and delivery. The information gathered through the complaints process will be supported by information gathered from the network of Customer Service Officers

who are appointed for each court venue, Court Funds Office, Enforcement of Judgments Office, and the Information Centre.

Inter-Departmental Working Groups and Service Providers

11. We shall also continue to work with statutory and non-statutory organisations involved in the justice system to develop shared objectives and joined-up services, reduce delay and learn from good practice in other areas. We are members of the Criminal Justice Board sub groups on Vulnerable Victims and Intimidated Witnesses and the Public Information Working Group and Delay Action Group. We are also participants in the inter-departmental strategy groups on domestic violence and sexual violence which aim to improve services provided to victims and their families. We shall continue to work with statutory and voluntary organisations who deliver services in court to ensure protocols are observed and access to facilities and information are maintained.

Accreditation and Inspection

12. The Court Service is committed to external assessment and review to ensure that our services are of a high standard and meet public service quality standards.
13. We are committed to achieving Charter Mark, as a benchmark for customer service excellence and continuous improvement, for all our court venues, Court Funds Office, and Information Centre. In 2004 eight court venues achieved Charter Mark accreditation and so far a further nine venues and Court Funds Office have been successfully accredited in 2005. All remaining court venues will be applying by March 2006. All successful venues are subject to annual visits from assessors to ensure they are maintaining standards and continuously improving.

14. The Enforcement of Judgments Office is pursuing continuous business improvement through the application of the European Foundation Quality Model.
15. In 2003 we invited HM Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) to undertake a thematic review of customer service in the Court Service. This comprehensive review was undertaken over a 15 month period and included every office which provides direct customer services as well as the corporate services and strategic management which support service delivery. A full report on the inspection process, findings and recommendations will be published and will be available at court locations and on our website. In April 2006 we shall participate in a post inspection review to ensure progress has been maintained.

Service Standards

16. Our service standards were first set out in the Courts Charter which we adopted in 1992.
17. We have also developed standards for key groups of users to inform them about what they can expect when they use our services and facilities. In developing these we consulted with key stakeholders to ensure that the standards are an accurate reflection of users needs. Our current standards are set out at Annex B. These will be monitored quarterly and results displayed at each court venue.

Corporate Governance and Strategy Management

18. This successful delivery of this strategy will be dependent on staff at all levels of the Court Service working together to deliver the Action Plan and consistently and continuously delivering quality services in all customer contacts.

19. The delivery of this strategy and the associated Action Plan will be overseen by the Customer Service Board which will report regularly to the Court Service Management Board. The Customer Service Board is informed by the work of the Service Improvement Team which comprises representatives from each customer facing office and who provide a valuable network and links to local Court User Groups, Charter Mark Project Teams and Customer Service Officers. The Service Improvement Team provides a forum for sharing best practice, discussing issues arising from Court User Groups and new service initiatives.

20. The departmental structure for the corporate governance of the customer service strategy is illustrated at Annex C.



CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY ACTION PLAN 2005/06

Action	Target Date
Processing of business	
Waiting Times Pilot Project	October 2005
Accommodation and facilities	
Publication of minimum facilities standards for each court location	June 2005
Accommodation Strategy Review	March 2006
Provision of services	
On line service for small claims applications	September 2005
Centralisation of small claims processing	May 2005
Commence Pilot project for civil bill processing	June 2005 (Belfast) September 2005 (regional)
Implementation of ICOS criminal and family modules	January 2006
Creation of Payment Centre	January 2006
Re-organisation of business processes in the Royal Courts of Justice to develop and extend the range of services transacted at Front of House	March 2006
Consolidation of High Court business areas and staff resources	May 2005
Development of a systematic programme to identify, re-engineer and streamline back office processes within the Royal Courts of Justice.	March 2006
Give effect to relevant action points arising from inter-agency strategy groups and Action Plans to improve information and services for vulnerable court users e.g. Domestic Violence Strategy, Sexual Violence Strategy and Children & Young Persons Strategy	March 2006
Accessibility of information	
To review and evaluate the effectiveness of information provision already available.	March 2005

Professionalism and empowerment of staff	
Training Programme for all frontline staff	March 2006
Listening to Customers	
Annual Customer Survey	September 2005
Accreditation and inspection	
Charter Mark Accreditation	June 2005
Charter Mark Surveillance Visits	June 2005
Application for EFQM Silver Standard	November 2005
Service Standards	
Development of Service Standards for key customer groups	December 2005

NI Court Service Customer Standards

Legal Profession

- Court lists will be displayed from 9.30am daily;
- An attended information/reception desk will be available from 9.30am daily;
- You will be attended to within 10 minutes at court office counters, and if not, an explanation will be given as to why this was not done;
- Fees and documents sent in by post, (with the exception of Default Decrees), will be processed and the endorsed documents returned to you within 4 working days;
- Default Decrees will be processed and the endorsed documents returned to you within 10 working days;
- Requests for copy court orders will be processed in 4 days. If not, we will provide you with an explanation for the delay.
(The timeframe for the production of High Court orders is in accordance with local business targets)

In addition to the above service standards, you can also expect –

- A designated solicitor and barrister room will be provided in all main court venues, which will be clean, heated, well lit, and comfortable;
- Separate consultation areas will be provided in all main court venues;
- A member of administrative or security staff will be available in court 30 minutes before the court commences to liaise with members of the legal profession regarding court business;
- Staff at the court office will assist with any queries;
- When you telephone the court office, staff will provide you with their name;
- All responses to written correspondence or e-mails will contain your reference details, if supplied, and will provide a contact name for further correspondence;

NI Court Service Customer Standards

Small Claims

- Court lists will be displayed from 9.30am daily;
- An attended information/reception desk will be available from 9.30am daily;
- Small Claims application forms will be posted to you within 2 days of request;
- 90% of Small Claims applications which require a hearing date will be given one within 10 weeks of receiving correctly completed application;
- 95% of Decrees will issue within 4 days of court hearing.

In addition to the above service standards, you can also expect –

Before you come to court

- Each Court Office will have a supply of small claims application forms;
- A response to telephone queries from anyone involved in a Small Claims dispute will be made on the day of enquiry;
- Staff in Court venues will help you by explaining the small claims process. Staff can not provide legal advice; however they will help you complete the relevant forms on request;
- If you ask, anyone involved in a Small Claims dispute can visit the courthouse and view the courtroom before the hearing.

At Court

- An attended information/reception desk will be open from 9.30am daily;
- The main waiting area will be clean, heated, well-lit, and comfortable;
- Court lists will be on display from 9.30am on each court day;
- Clear signs will show you where to go;
- Refreshment facilities will be available in all main court venues;
- You can use consultation rooms, if you need to;
- The hearing will be held in an informal environment.

After Court

- You will be provided with specific contact information including the direct dial telephone number and name of the member of staff who will either answer any query you may have about your case or direct your query to the most appropriate person.

NI Court Service Customer Standards

Witnesses

- You will be able to go into the court building from 9.30am each court day;
- If you need information, or are to meet someone when you arrive at court, you can get help from the reception desk or court office. They will be available in all main court venues from 9.30am each court day.
- Court lists will be on display from 9.30am on each court day. (You should note however that cases are not always called in the order they appear on the list. However if you need any information about the case you are waiting on, please contact a court official who will help you).

We understand that coming to court to give evidence can be worrying. We aim to reduce those worries by providing:

- reception desks, information points and public counters where you can ask for information;
- comfortable waiting areas and refreshment facilities;
- separate waiting rooms in all main court venues for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses;
- an opportunity to visit the courthouse and view facilities before you come to give evidence, (you need to contact the court manager to organise this);
- an information leaflet about the courthouse you are to attend. We will send this to you if you contact us before you are to attend court.

We are not responsible for calling witnesses to court or for paying their expenses; this is the responsibility of whoever asked you to attend – e.g. prosecutors, police, or solicitors. However, the Northern Ireland Court Service is working with other agencies to improve the quality of the information you are provided with before you attend court.

At Court

- Witness waiting areas will be clean, heated, well lit, and comfortable;
- Information on case progression or disposal will be provided to witnesses on request;
- If you need privacy or the use of a consultation room, please ask a member of staff at reception or speak with a court official. Where possible, separate consultation areas will be provided in all main court venues;
- A child witness room will be available in all main court venues;

NI Court Service Customer Standards

Jurors

- You will receive a Jury Summons at least 21 days before your first date of attendance;
- All written requests for excusal from jury service will be considered and replied to within 3 working days. Requests can also be e-mailed to the court office which issued the Jury Summons;
- You can expect to receive payment for expenses 21 days after you have submitted your claim correctly. We aim to process 95% of claims in this timeframe.

In addition to the above service standards, you can also expect –

Calling You For Jury Service

- Additional information will accompany your Jury Summons on;
 - financial allowances,
 - exemption from jury service,
 - general information on the courthouse, which you will be attending.
- You will be able to confirm when your attendance is next required by;
 - phoning the jury information line after 5.00pm each day, or by
 - accessing the NI Court Service website at www.courtsni.gov.uk

When You Come To Court

- You will be directed to the Jury Assembly Area or courtroom;
- A court official will introduce themselves to you and will be available to deal with any queries you have;
- On the first day of service, you will be shown a jury information video and afterwards you can ask a court official any questions you have;
- Court staff will treat you with courtesy and give prompt and accurate information on request;
- Before leaving the court, you will be told how to obtain information of when you will next be required to attend court; If you are unsure, please ask a court official;
- Forms for comments or complaints will be available in the Jury Assembly Area and each of the Jury Retiring Rooms.

During A Trial

If you are serving on a jury:

- You will be met on arrival at court, by a jury keeper and will be accompanied to a jury retiring room;
- Jury retiring rooms will be clean, heated, well-lit and comfortable;
- Refreshment facilities will be available in all jury retiring rooms;
- You will be given lunch which will cater for those with special dietary requirements;
- You will be accompanied when inside the court building;
- You can send a note or ask to speak to the Judge if there is something about the trial you are particularly concerned about. Although you may not discuss any aspect of the case with the Jury keeper, you can ask any general questions or tell them any concerns you might have.
- You will be told by the Judge when you need to come back or you can get this information by contacting the jury information line after 5.00pm each day, or by accessing the NI Court Service website at www.courtsni.gov.uk

NI Court Service Customer Standards Enforcement of Judgments Office

The Enforcement of Judgments Office (EJO) provides a 'One stop shop' for court users and deals with enforcing money judgments of any civil court and other judgments such as those that are connected with the possession of lands, property and goods.

EJO provides the following services in relation to enforcing judgments.

- It provides access to the public register of judgments. This tells the business community and the public if people are suitable for credit;
- It gives creditors information about the assets and liabilities of debtors who judgments for enforcement have been made against in the form of a written report;
- It provides appropriate remedies to recovering debt, property and goods by using a range of enforcement orders;
- Each team within EJO has a Customer Liaison Officer so that a customer will have a named person whom they can contact to enquire about the status of their case;
- EJO also provides 'on-line' case tracking that allows customers to see how their case is progressing at any time, once registered with the Northern Ireland Court Service website;
- The EJO also provide information and assistance within the Northern Ireland Court Service website.

In providing these services we will:

- Issue 90% of all debtors with notices of intention within 3 days of the creditor lodging the appropriate papers and fee. This warns them that if they do not try to clear their debts, or hand over property, land or goods within 10 days, creditors may take enforcement action;
- Process 90% of all applications for enforcement within 12 days of lodgement;
- Process 80% of all Enforcement Orders within 15 Days of a direction being authorised;
- Complete 90% all of Debtor Reports within 42 Days of allocation to an enforcement officer;
- Grant out of hours access to on line case tracking between the hours of 6am until 10pm daily.

NI Court Service Customer Standards Court Funds Office

When you Contact the Court Funds Office

- The office will be open to the public from 9.00am to 5.00pm;
- 90% of telephone calls will be answered within 30 seconds;
- 95% of callers will be seen by a member of staff at the public counter within 5 minutes and if kept longer you will be provided with an explanation;
- We will respect your privacy and discuss any confidential business in private;
- A member of staff will clearly identify themselves;
- A reply will issue to 90% of all written correspondence within 15 working days and will give a contact name and telephone extension;

Lodgements into Court Funds Office

- A Certificate of Funds and an Information leaflet will be issued to you within 5 working days of receipt of your funds;
- 95% of all funds received will be processed within 3 working days.

Investment of funds

- 95% of Gilt and Equity purchase requests will be sent to the stockbroker within 2 working days of receipt of authority to invest.

Payments out of Court

- 95% made within 5 working days of receipt of authority to pay, if a sale of stocks and shares **is not** required; if a sale **is** required this may take up to 15 days.

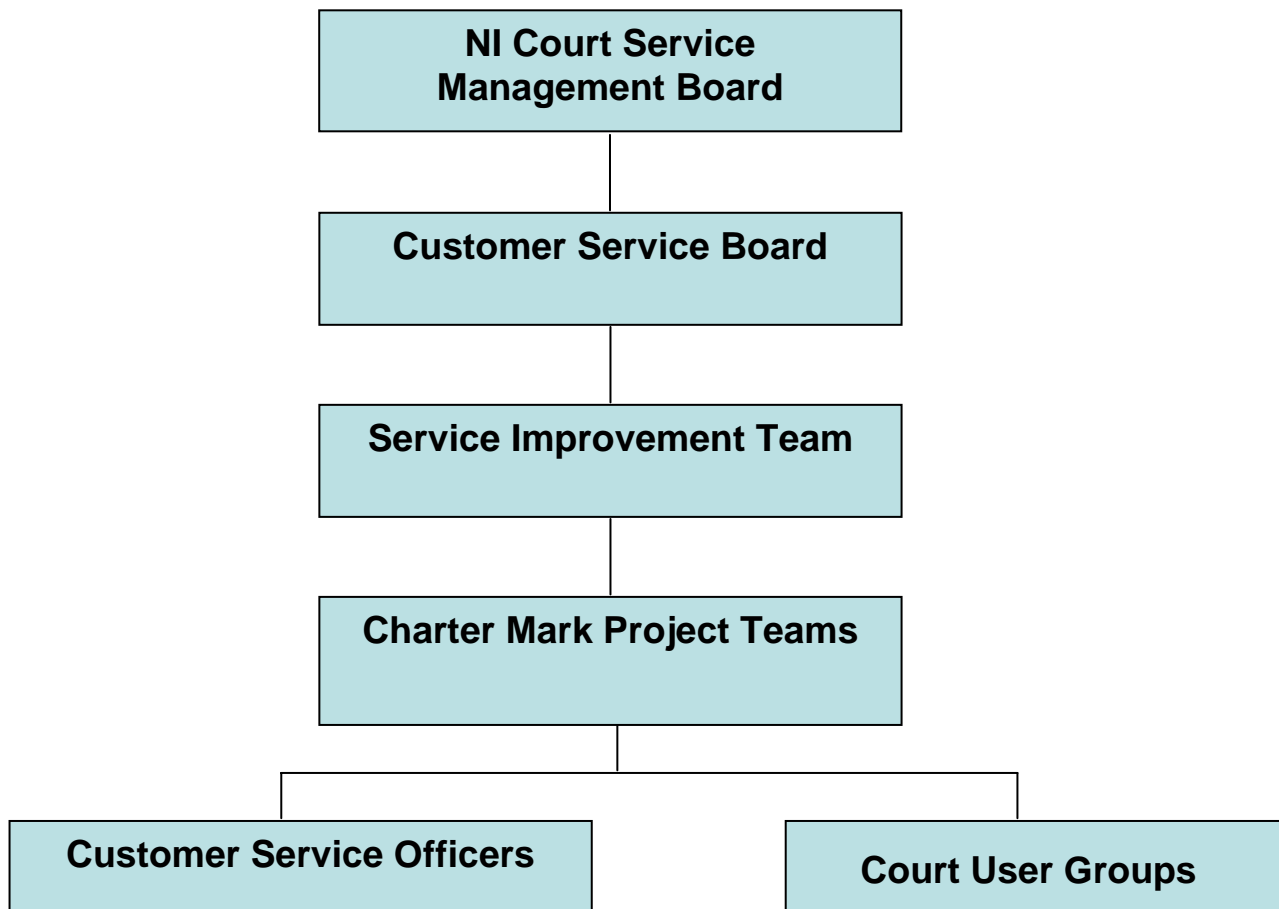
Minor turning 18

- Minor of Age (MOA) forms will be issued by 2nd class post 1 day prior to a minor's 18th birthday.

Provision of Tax Information for Minors and Patients

- We will provide, upon receipt of written request, all necessary information within 28 working days.

CUSTOMER SERVICE CORPORATE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE



This leaflet can be made available in a wide range of alternative formats. Requests for alternative formats should be made to the Information Centre.

Northern Ireland Court Service

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