

Court Service Communication Strategy 2003-2006



A Communication Strategy for the Northern Ireland Court Service

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Introduction

1. This Communication Strategy comes from the recognition that the organisational change the Court Service is about to embark upon will significantly increase the need for an effective communication/information function. Only with effective communication processes (internal and external) in position will the conditions be created to allow for positive change management to take place.

The Need

2. The Criminal Justice Review (CJR) report, in its totality, announced a series of recommendations concerned with the modernising of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. In order that the associated reform programme is implemented as smoothly as possible it is imperative that the Court Service's communication strategy, and associated work programme, has recognised the fundamental role of the central communication/information function.
3. The CJR report placed significant responsibility on the Court Service in the arena of public education and information, and community involvement. While acknowledging the achievements of the Court Service to date, the report advised of the need to continue with, and build on, existing activities. The CJR recommendations that relate to this strategy are replicated at **Annex A**.



4. The Court Service also has significant communication responsibilities with regard to the reform programme for Legal Aid. At the forefront of this programme is communicating the establishment of the Legal Services Commission. The organisation is also responsible for advertising judicial appointments pending the establishment of the Judicial Appointments Commission. It also has responsibility with regard to the communication of the establishment of the Judicial Appointments Commission
5. The Court Service's E-business strategy will significantly change the way in which court business will be transacted over the next 5 years. To ensure optimal usage of electronic services it is imperative that court users and staff are fully aware of the change. The corporate communication function can significantly influence the achievement of the Service Delivery Agreement target of a 50% reduction in the amount of paper flow by 2004 (this will primarily be achieved through the development of the use of e-mail and the Intranet site).

Theme

6. The strategy will reflect the themes adopted by the CJR Review of public understanding and accountability and community involvement. The Court Service's Statement of Ethics, (being developed in response to CJR report), will also be reflected.
7. The strategy will also reflect the organisation's commitment to the Freedom of Information Act 2002 (FOI), which came into being to provide greater openness, transparency and public accountability of public authorities.



Purpose

- 8 The purpose of the strategy is:
- To support the operation of court business through improved accessibility to, and availability of information;
 - To fulfil the Court Service's responsibilities under the CJR report with regard to public understanding and education, and community outreach;
 - To support the implementation of the recommendations of the Civil Justice Review Report; and
 - To improve the use of internal communications channels.

Objectives

- 9 The objectives of the strategy are:
- To support organisational development and change by developing and promoting the use of effective communication channels;
 - To ensure that Court Service customers, staff and the general public have full and ready access to information as appropriate;
 - To ensure that the Court Service maintains a positive image with the local administration, other government departments, the Judiciary and legal profession, the public and the media; and
 - To set and maintain the corporate communication standards based on best practice and identified quality standards e.g. Plain English Campaign, EFQM (Steps to Excellence).

Baseline Measurement

10. In establishing a baseline, against which the strategy's development and effectiveness will be measured, a review of existing communications methods will be carried out. The Court Service is obligated to carry out this review under its Equality Scheme. The review will involve an information audit of the range and type of information already provided.

11. A range of other methods will also be used, as appropriate. These include:
 - Community Attitude Surveys;
 - Staff Attitude Surveys;
 - Customer Surveys; and
 - Customer Complaints.

Quality Standards

12. A range of quality standards will be adopted as appropriate for each of the communications channels in use. These include:
 - Crystal Mark Award for all corporate documentation (Plain English Campaign); and
 - Awards for Intranet/Internet sites (e.g. W3C and Bobby proof, and government standards for UK websites)

13. In support of the drive for quality improvements the Information Centre will seek to be recognised as a Centre of Excellence. In this process the Centre will also be seeking Charter Mark accreditation .

Corporate Identity

14. The strategy provides the opportunity to consider the issue of corporate identity. One of the primary reasons for the opening of the Information Centre was to bring a visible presence to the organisation's corporate identity.
15. A pilot corporate identity will be developed for the Information Centre. This will be synonymous with the themes of: Integrity, Openness, Professionalism, Fairness and Accountability.

Customer Base

16. The customer base has been identified as (in no specific order):

- General public
- Ministers, MP's, MLA's and other public representatives
- Court Service managers and staff
- Judiciary
- Court users
- Jurors
- Local communities in which the Court Service serves
- Legal professions
- Voluntary organisations/non-governmental departments
- Other justice agencies
- Media
- Groups with specific communication needs e.g. ethnic minorities, individuals with learning difficulties



Accessibility of Information

17. The strategy recognises that each customer group will have specific and different communication needs, and it will seek to make improvements in the delivery of timely, accurate and appropriate communication.
18. The strategy will ensure the readily accessibility to information in a range of formats. In so doing it recognises the continued need and place for hard copy documentation as well as electronic. It will be responsive to any developments in respect of the organisation's obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Communication Channels

19. The strategy will set standards in terms of look/feel, timeliness and coordination, across the following communications channels:

External

- Direct Mail (e.g. jury notices)
- Corporate Documentation - Corporate Plan, Annual Report, Service Delivery Agreement, Publication Scheme (under FOI)
- Public Consultation Exercises
- Internet Site
- Consumer Attitude Survey
- Outreach Programme
- Job advertisements
- Information Centre
- Press Desk function (including media training)*
- Data Protection/FOI requests

Internal

- Office Notices
- Open Court
- Conferences
- Staff Attitude Survey
- Intranet
- Library Services

Media Interest

20. The need to move from a re-active to a pro-active approach in the handling of media interest in Court Service matters has been identified. Accordingly a group of key managers will receive appropriate media training during 2003. This function will be developed in line with the corporate communication messages (external) coming to the fore during the life of this document.



Strategy Content

21. Annual work programmes will be developed for each year of the life of this strategy, the first year commencing 1 April 2003 (Year 1). This will coincide with the introduction of the new Corporate Plan 2003- 2006. The strategy will be formally implemented in January 2003. This 3 month lead-in period will be used to establish the baseline measurements and other activities necessary for taking forward the first of the annual work programmes.
22. The annual work programmes will be designed to take forward each of the 4 objectives set for the strategy. In Year 1, activity will focus on delivery of the recommendations of the CJR report (see **Annex A**). It will also focus on improving internal communications.
23. The development of the Internet and Intranet sites will be a key feature of the strategy in Year 1. The Court Service website will become a central communication channel with delivery in early 2003 and will facilitate increasing use of e-business.
24. Public Consultation Exercise will be carried out to facilitate core business & policy development.
25. The promotion of the new Information Centre, the primary site for all communications, will also be key to this strategy's success. To facilitate this a communication plan will be developed to take forward the use of this facility.
26. A heightened PR portfolio will be developed for the organisation making use of opportunities which support the core objectives of the strategy.
27. Jurors have been identified as a key group of people who can significantly impact the achievement of the strategy's objectives. A new Juror's information video has recently been developed. Using this as a catalyst for improved service further consideration will be given to the process particularly

when developing the website (this work will also link to the ICOS project which is also considering the jury system). .

Developing the Strategy

28. The strategy will be tested through the policy screening process and thereafter subject to a consultation exercise targeted at key groups who may have specific communication/information needs. This exercise will establish links with the court users groups. Close consultation will also be maintained with the Service Improvement Team.
29. In response to the CJR recommendations (**Annex A**) the Court Service committed to having this strategy in place by April 2003. The strategy will be formally implemented in January 2003, subject only to improvement as a result of the consultation exercise.
30. The development of this strategy will continue to be informed by the central work being taken forward by the Public Information Working Group, and the NI Consumer Strategy Group.
 - The Public Information Working Group is a sub-group of the Criminal Justice Board set up to take forward a public education and information strategy for the criminal justice system. All the criminal justice agencies are represented on this group.
 - The NI Consumer Strategy Group is chaired by the Department of Investment Trade and Industry and has been put in place to consider consumer matters across the various public bodies involved in the delivery of consumer services.

Budget

31. A full set of costings will be developed for the corporate communications function. Budgets will be finalised in line with budget allocation bids for the next financial year.

Monitoring and Evaluation

32. Working from the established baseline (see paragraph 10) the progress and development of the strategy will be regularly reviewed. This process will include the submission of quarterly business review reports to the Management Board. This process will be based on the measurements set out in Annex B.



CRIMINAL JUSTICE REVIEW IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Recommendations related to Public Information and Outreach Activities (Court Service Lead Responsibility)

Community Involvement

Recommendation 113

We strongly endorse the view that efforts should be made to make the system more responsive to community concerns and to encourage lay involvement in an informal capacity. We make recommendations elsewhere about opening up courts to the public and we believe that the judiciary could make a significant contribution to this. Participating in various types of discussion for a, facilitating Court visits and seeking out the views of the public on the way in which the system works should significantly reduce the likelihood of their being 'out of touch' and should enhance confidence generally.

Court Service Response

As part of its news Communications Strategy the Northern Ireland Court Service will be undertaking a series of outreach with the general public and with schools to raise awareness of the NI Court system.

Public Education Strategy

Recommendation 125

The courts' administration system should contribute to and be fully involved in the co-ordinated strategy of public education and information about criminal justice system.

Court Service Response

The Court Service is a member of the Public Information Working Group which has been set up to take forward the strategy of public education and information about the

criminal justice system. The Court Service's new communications strategy will be informed by the work being taken forward by the wider group.

Recommendation 126

We endorse the current efforts of the Northern Ireland Court Service to provide information to the public and recommend that this work is developed further.

Court Service Response

This is being taken forward in the context of the Court Service Communication Strategy.

Dissemination of Information

Recommendation 127

Information points in courthouse reception areas should include a range of leaflets explaining what goes on in courts, whilst Internet and video might be used to disseminate information.

Court Service Response

This is being taken forward in the Court Service IT and Communication strategies. Progress has been made with the provision of a Public Information Kiosk, Court Listing Display Screens and Talking Sign in Laganside Courts, which provide information about the courts system in Northern Ireland.

Court Visits

Recommendation 128

Visits to courts should continue to be encouraged as a way of increasing community awareness and understanding.

Court Service Response

This will be taken forward in the outreach of the Court Service's Communication Strategy.

Measurement and Evaluation Annex B

Monitoring and Evaluation

A range of performance measurements will be developed to measure the strategy's effectiveness and development. Set out below is a range of the type of performance measurements that will be set for the monitoring and evaluation of the strategy and associated annual work programmes. This list is not exhaustive but is for illustrative purposes only.

Objective 1

To support organisational development and change by developing and promoting the use of effective communication channels;

Measurements

- Use of the Information Service by other Court Service staff and managers.
- Staff attitude survey 2003
- Development of the Internet site facilities; and their usage
- Development of the Intranet site facilities; and their usage
- Staff Telephone Surveys (internal)
- Number of requests for advice for local managers in respect of local communication issues
- Evaluation of local and corporate communication plans

Objective 2

To ensure that Court Service customers, staff and the general public have full and ready access to information as appropriate;

Measurements

- Timely production and distribution of corporate documentation (internal and external).

- Number of enquiries/ requests for information
- Stocks and annual usage of corporate information literature e.g. Court Charter leaflets
- Intranet and Internet usage
- Effectiveness of the Office Notice system
- Feedback from the team briefing process
- Information Service enquiries both public and media.

Objective 3 *

To ensure that the Court Service maintains a positive image with the local administration, other government departments, the Judiciary and legal professions, the public and the media; and

- Recording and monitoring of complaints and commendations.
- Feedback and surveying Court User Groups.
- Consumer surveys
- Requests for advice on good practice models
- Assessing responses to Public Consultation exercises.
- Assessing impact within peer networks.

* note in the first instance work will concentrate on developing networks and contacts from which to gather information.

Objective 4

To set and maintain the corporate communication standards based on best practice and identified quality standards e.g. Plain English Campaign, EFQM (Steps to Excellence).

- Achieve Crystal Mark from the Plain English Campaign for applicable documentation
- Achieve appropriate accreditation for the Internet and Intranet sites
- Obtaining National Standard for the Information Centre
- Adopt the EFQM Steps to Excellence Model.

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