



Northern Ireland

Courts and
Tribunals Service

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Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy



serving the community through the administration of justice

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of justice

Contents

1. Introduction	4
.....	
2. Delivery of the 2009/10 Action Plan	6
.....	
Improving the Customer Experience	6
.....	
E-Enabled Services	8
.....	
Efficient Services	10
.....	
3. What we want to do next – 2010/11 Action Plan	14
.....	
Improving the Customer Experience	14
.....	
E-Enabled Services	15
.....	
Efficient Services	16
.....	
Delivering the Plan	16
.....	
Annex A	
Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy Action Plan 2010/2011	17
.....	
Annex B	
Tribunals Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy and Action Plan 2010/11	19
.....	

1. Introduction

1.1 The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (“NICTS”)^[1] is committed to delivering quality services to court and tribunal users. In providing these services, we recognise the importance of being customer-focused and putting the customer at the heart of what we do.

1.2 In supporting our corporate aim of:

“Serving the community through the administration of justice”

we published our Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy which set out our vision of how we planned to develop our business until 2011 to deliver quality, customer-focused services.

1.3 We recognise that court users interact with the justice system in many different ways. Each customer requires access to information and services that meet their needs. In transforming our services we are committed to engaging and working effectively with others to ensure that our services meet their expectations and needs. Our key stakeholders include the judiciary, legal profession, criminal justice organisations, other government agencies, those who work in the voluntary and community sectors and individual citizens.



Dungannon Courthouse

[1] Following the devolution of justice on 12 April, the Northern Ireland Court Service (NICtS) has been rebranded as the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS).



Coroners' Courtroom, Mays Chambers

1.4 Through our Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy, we are committed to building on the extensive change programme delivered in the preceding three years in order to further improve our business processes and services. We will continue to modernise service delivery channels and streamline business processes by building on our existing Integrated Court Operations System ("ICOS") application and ICT infrastructure. We will also ensure that resources such as our staff, buildings and funding are targeted at delivering improved outcomes for customers.

1.5 Our Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy is based around three key themes –

- Improving the customer experience;
- E-enabled services; and
- Efficient Services.

1.6 As part of our Strategy we published a 2009/10 Action Plan which detailed specific projects in support of each of the key themes. The following section explains what we did during 2009/10 to deliver against our action plan.

2. Delivery of the 2009/10 Action Plan

Improving the Customer Experience

Performance standards

2.1 The NICTS is committed to providing quality customer-focused services. We have published performance standards to inform customers what they can expect when they use our services and facilities.

2.2 During 2009/10 **we reviewed our performance standards** to ensure that they remain relevant and challenging and that they continue to improve the service we provide to our customers. We consulted widely with our stakeholders and benchmarked against best practice in other jurisdictions. We continue to monitor our performance against these standards and take corrective action where necessary. Quarterly monitoring reports are displayed at each court venue.

2.3 We also **carried out a customer survey** to measure customer satisfaction with our service. The results of this survey were published on our internet site and at local court venues. The key findings included–

- 83% of respondents were satisfied with the overall court facilities in the court venue.
- Respondents were highly satisfied with the helpfulness, courtesy, knowledge and fairness of court staff, with at least a 90% satisfaction level in each case.
- 91% of those surveyed were satisfied with the overall service provided by the Northern Ireland Court Service; and
- 92% of those surveyed stated that they had enough information before coming to court.

2.4 During 2009/10, **we completed customer journey mapping for our Probate Office customers and Youth Court defendants**. Customer journey mapping is the process of tracking the experiences that customers have when they use a service. We believe that this process will provide us with a greater insight into our customers' needs.

2.5 For probate customers, a journey mapping exercise was undertaken between September and December 2009 in Belfast and Londonderry. The response from customers was very positive with excellent comments received about the information available and service provided. At the same time, the exercise has identified potential service improvements which will be taken forward.

2.6 The first phase of the Youth Court journey mapping was carried out in December 2009 with young people held in custody at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. In order to widen the scope of this exercise, workshops were carried out in March 2010 with youth defendants who did not receive custodial sentences. The results of this research will be shared with criminal justice partners and action plans developed.

Accommodation and Courthouse facilities

2.7 In partnership with the other criminal justice agencies we developed a Victim and Witness strategy. The “Bridging the Gap” Victim and Witness Strategy was launched in 2007, it is a 5 year multi-agency victims and witnesses initiative developed by all of the criminal justice agencies in partnership with Victim Support NI and NSPCC with agreed annual action plans.

2.8 The action plan for 2009/10 contained two actions for NICTS. Following the successful pilot of a **remote witness link** between the NSPCC and Londonderry Courthouse, we extended this facility to Laganside Courts and the Old Townhall Building in September 2009. **Guidance on dealing with young victims and witnesses** has also been developed and circulated.

Information Services

2.9 Accurate, comprehensive and timely information is important to our customers. Their perception of, and confidence in, the justice system is affected by how well they feel they have been kept informed about the progress of their case.

2.10 During 2009/10 **we upgraded our internet site** to improve the services it delivers to our customers. In addition we continued a programme to review site content to ensure it provides information and services in the way that customers want them. Central to this was working towards accessibility compliance, enabling us to deliver information and services on-line to all customers.

2.11 We also recognise that there is a growing need to ensure that we cater for those customers whose first language is not English. Last year a working group **reviewed the arrangements for the provision of interpretation services** for court and tribunal proceedings and developed a comprehensive policy on the engagement, payment and accreditation for both foreign language and sign language interpretation. We are currently carrying out a public consultation on the draft policy.

Accreditation and inspection

2.12 NICTS is committed to external assessment and review in order to ensure that our services are of an objectively high standard and meet public service quality standards. We are committed to maintaining recognised quality service accreditation in all our courts through the new **National Standard for Customer Service Excellence** (formerly known as Charter Mark) and through the European Foundation for Quality Management and ISO9001:2000.



Court staff receiving Customer Service Excellence certificates

2.13 During 2009/10, we successfully maintained our accreditation. Achievement of accredited standards recognises our commitment to continuous improvement and consistent provision of quality services in all of our front line service areas. We demonstrate to external assessors that we have a genuine understanding of the needs of our customers and our local communities and that our service delivery is tailored to meet their needs.

2.14 We work collaboratively with **Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (“CJINI”)** whose role is to inspect criminal justice organisations. During 2009/10, we facilitated a CJINI inspection of the management of jurors by the Court Service. The report was published in March 2010 and an action plan is being developed to implement the report’s recommendations.

E-Enabled Services

2.15 Our ICOS ICT programme provides a single integrated court operations system to support the administration of justice in the civil, family and criminal courts.

2.16 Our investment in ICOS has already transformed the way in which we work and has improved access to justice by allowing our customers to engage with us in a variety of new and innovative ways. However, delivering quality services must be a process of continuous improvement and through our Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy we have provided new opportunities to realise benefits from our investment in technology.

Causeway Programme

2.17 Building on ICOS, we have been working with colleagues in other criminal justice organisations to develop and implement the Causeway ICT Programme which provides for electronic information sharing.

2.18 Causeway Data Sharing Mechanism 1 entered live service on 30th November 2009 and places the courts at the centre of the Causeway solution. Case details are automatically transferred to ICOS through Causeway. Similarly, when court results are entered on ICOS, information is shared through Causeway to relevant criminal justice organisations such as the Prison Service and the Police Service.



Staff using the ICOS system

Establishing electronic interfaces with public sector partners

2.19 In the same way that Causeway will achieve benefits through data sharing with criminal justice organisations, we have explored opportunities to **extend the range of ICOS interfaces** with other organisations and agencies to support suitable high volume business processes. During 2009/10, we developed new ICOS interfaces with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and Television Licensing which will shortly enter live service.

Additional On-Line Services

2.20 In response to customer demand, we have continued to explore opportunities to extend the range of on-line services which we currently offer. During 2009/10 we introduced the following new services –

- **Court Lists On-Line**, which enables the legal profession and members of the public to view court lists for all court tiers across Northern Ireland seven days in advance of the hearing date;
- **Fine Payments On-Line**, which enables on-line payment of court imposed fines and court registered fixed penalties issued by other authorities; and
- **Juror Notices On-Line**, which will improve the service we provide to potential jurors by enabling juror notices to be completed electronically.

Efficient Services

Court Hearing Centres

2.21 Providing increased access to justice by using new technology provides greater convenience for our customers and reduces the need to go to a courthouse to access counter services. Services which previously were only available at a local court office can now be accessed by telephone, internet, or through centralised customer service centres.

2.22 Our survey showed that low numbers of customers transacting business in person at some court venues on days when there was no court sitting. The courthouses at Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane became Hearing Centres in September 2009, allowing us to relocate staff on non-court days in order to make better use of our resources.



Staff at Laganside Courts

Implementing the outcomes of the Fine Default Consultation

2.23 During 2009/10, we introduced a number of initiatives flowing from the consultation exercise on fine default. Following a successful six month pilot, **we extended the Fine Collection Scheme** to all court divisions. This scheme encourages prompt payment of fines through direct contact with defendants and thereby reduces the enforcement burden on the PSNI and Prison Service.

2.24 Initial results are encouraging with Fines Officer intervention generating £1.03 million in payments (24% of total payments) and a 31% reduction in the number of fine warrants issued to PSNI for enforcement.

2.25 We have worked with colleagues in other criminal justice organisations to establish a six month **pilot to evaluate the use of Supervised Activity Orders (SAOs) for fine default**. SAOs will be used as an alternative to committal to prison where a defendant defaults on the payment of a fine. The pilot will be implemented in 2010/11.

2.26 In addition, we have developed an **ICOS Fine Payment History** which provides a complete fine payment history for each defendant appearing before a court. The solution will inform the sentencing process by providing the judiciary with information about fines outstanding and previously paid by a defendant.



Court locations throughout Northern Ireland

Review of Court Boundaries

2.27 Historically, the boundaries for county courts and magistrates courts in Northern Ireland have been based on local government districts. The Review of Public Administration has proposed a major restructuring of local government from 26 to 11 districts.

2.28 We established a Working Group to consider the options for redesigning court boundaries in Northern Ireland. The Group considered two main options –

- Option 1 – a conventional realignment of court boundaries to take account of the new local government districts; and
- Option 2 – a fundamental redesign which would remove the current statutory boundaries to establish a single territorial jurisdiction for county courts and magistrates' courts in Northern Ireland.

2.29 We consider that there are strong arguments in favour of Option 2. Under the current court boundaries model there are limitations on our ability to manage the distribution of court business to ensure the most efficient use of judicial time and court resources. While recognising the need to maintain local access to justice, we consider that the additional flexibility which would be afforded by the single jurisdiction model would facilitate the more effective disposal of court business for the benefit of court users.

2.30 The proposals for a single territorial jurisdiction were published for public consultation in March 2010 and decisions on the way forward will be taken following the conclusion of the consultation exercise.

CourtsNI Contact Centre

2.31 As part of our 2009/10 Action Plan we proposed to pilot a CourtsNI Contact Centre as a central point to triage and deal with all routine requests for information or respond to queries by telephone or e mail. This project was deferred following consideration of new Government guidance on contact centres. We also want to revisit the projected benefits of a CourtsNI Contact Centre following an evaluation of our Case Tracking On-Line and Fine Payments On-Line services.

Additional projects

2.32 In addition to the projects included in the 2009/10 Action Plan, we enhanced and extended our video conferencing facilities at Laganside Courts. By significantly increasing the number of video conference sessions that can be run simultaneously, we are now able to use these facilities for bail hearings and sentencing hearings. We have also provided new video conferencing facilities in the Old Townhall Building which can be used to accommodate witnesses at inquests.

3. What we want to do next – 2010/11 Action Plan

3.1 The NICTS is committed to continuous improvement and this section outlines our key business modernisation and customer service priorities for 2010/11. The 2010/11 Action Plan is set out at Annex A to this paper.

Improving the Customer Experience

Tribunals Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy

3.2 Following the devolution of justice on 12th April, the Court Service has been rebranded as the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (“NICTS”) and during 2010/11 will assume responsibility for the administration of all Northern Ireland departmental tribunals.

3.3 Previously, the majority of tribunals were sponsored by the department whose decisions or policies they are reviewing. This has given rise to concerns in respect of their independence. In addition, tribunals have, until recently, operated separately from each other and there was no opportunity for consistency of approach or sharing services to deliver efficiencies.

3.4 Tribunals provide access to justice for thousands of people each year, many of whom are among the most disadvantaged in our community. Establishing a unified Courts and Tribunals Service will allow us to reform our tribunal system to provide a more accessible, independent and modern service for our customers.

3.5 We recognise that Tribunal services are currently at a different starting point to the courts and that they have specific needs to address. However, we are keen that courts and tribunals services are of the same standard regardless of where or how these services are accessed. With this in mind we have developed a **Tribunals Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy and Action Plan (Annex B)**. This details key areas such as business processing, accessibility and customer engagement including customer standards, information available, facilities provided and, perhaps most importantly, how they are treated by our staff.

3.6 We will also work with our ICT partner to review the existing tribunal ICT services with a view to delivering a roadmap for future service provision.

Court Office Performance Standards

3.7 In addition to continuing to monitor and report on our **court office performance standards**, we will revise our current standards in order to make them more challenging, focussing on the needs of key customer groups.

3.8 As part of our external validation, we shall carry out a **mystery shopper exercise** to supplement customer feedback and provide independent monitoring and we will maintain our **Customer Service Excellence** Standard for each of our court offices.

E-Enabled Services

3.9 NICTS is currently undertaking the procurement of a new ICT Service. The procurement exercise and transition to the new service places constraints on our ability to develop new e-enabled services during 2010/11.

3.10 Our key priority during 2010/11 will be the introduction of **Case Tracking On-Line**. This service will provide legal practitioners, government departments and other organisations with secure access to information regarding criminal, civil and family cases in which they are involved. The information available will include case summary, participants, orders sought, applications, appeals, key events, court results, court appearances, legal aid information, service details, and court fee information.

3.11 Following internal review and external consultation, this new service has been enhanced to include a number of additional services, including –

- access to case tracking for the Guardian Ad Litem Agency;
- court orders and court documentation will be viewable on-line;
- prepaid accounts can be managed on-line, which includes viewing account statements and topping up balances on-line;
- the introduction of a flagging system which enables cases to be flagged and monitored by different people within an organisation; and
- an e-mail query facility from Case Tracking On-Line to court offices.

3.12 The information available through Case Tracking On-Line accounts for 55% of approximately 950k court office telephone queries annually. We would expect to see a significant reduction in the number of queries received by court offices and anticipate efficiency savings of £165k per annum.

3.13 The introduction of this service is of strategic importance and will provide a cost effective alternative to an Electronic Filing and Document Management system. It will be capable of being further developed in a modular and incremental way in order to integrate scanning services and create a complete electronic case file.

Efficient Services

Fine Default Reform

3.14 We are conscious of concerns regarding the cost and effectiveness of current fine enforcement arrangements and will support the implementation of the recommendations from the CJINI Enforcement inspection report and outcomes of the Fine Default consultation, which include –

- roll-out of new Supervised Activity Order arrangements;
- new legislation to allow fines to be deducted from welfare benefits; and
- a scoping exercise on proposals for a civilian based enforcement scheme.

Business Performance Review

3.15 Over the last four years we have transformed the way in which court offices process business and provide services to customers. Much of this change has been driven through the successful implementation of our ICOS ICT business platform, on-line services, electronic interfaces and most recently Causeway DSM1.

3.16 The time is now right to conduct a review of our business, to evaluate overall effectiveness of business delivery and identify opportunities for further efficiencies and improvements. The results of this review will be used to inform future strategy action plans.

Delivering the Plan

4.1 The 2010/11 Action Plan for the Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy seeks to build on our achievements to date. We shall ensure that each project is based on a sound business case which clearly identifies the costs and benefits involved. Each project will be subject to rigorous governance arrangements to ensure that project deliverables are realised.

4.2 The delivery of the 2010/11 Action Plan will be overseen by our Business Modernisation Board. The Head of Tribunal Reform will report to the Board on the delivery of the Tribunals Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy Action Plan. This document will be published on our website www.courtsni.gov.uk. Progress against our action plan will be reported in our Annual Report.

Annex A

Business Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy Action Plan 2010/2011

We will improve our customers' experience by:

- Implementing the Tribunals Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy Action Plan;
- Reviewing our published court and tribunals performance standards and monitoring our performance against these;
- Carrying out a 'mystery shopper' exercise to supplement customer feedback;
- Piloting initiatives to reduce waiting times at court for victims and witnesses;
- Carrying out a review of our Victim and Witness Policy;
- Completing a journey mapping exercise for victims of domestic violence and developing a partnership protocol with Women's Aid;
- Implementing our policy on the provision of in-court interpretation services;
- Maintaining our Customer Service Excellence standard;
- Implementing agreed CJINI recommendations arising from the Management of Jurors and Enforcement inspections.

We will extend our E-enabled Business by:

- Implementing our 'Case Tracking On-Line' service;
- Integrating ICOS with the EJO line of business application to streamline business processes;
- Developing 'Notice of Intent On-Line' and 'Enforcement Applications On-Line' for EJO;
- Introducing additional payment facilities for EJO enforced judgments;
- Introducing a 'Matrimonial Forms On-Line' solution;
- Piloting the use of secure e-mail for court and tribunal users;
- Developing the Causeway Programme to deliver improved business processing and sharing of information including the exchange of hate crime notifications;
- Carrying out a Tribunals ICT feasibility study.

We will provide more Efficient Services by:

- Implementing recommendations from the CJINI Enforcement inspection and the outcomes of the Fine Default consultation;
- Publishing new court boundaries proposals and enabling legislation;
- Establishing a pilot to assess the effectiveness of introducing a Small Claims Mediation Service;
- Conducting a business performance review.

Annex B

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service

Tribunals Modernisation and Customer Service Strategy and Action Plan 2010/11

Context and Introduction

CONTEXT

Tribunals provide access to justice for thousands of people each year many of whom are among the most disadvantaged in our community. We are reforming our tribunal system to provide a more accessible, independent and modern service. We are at the beginning of the reform process and we want to listen and understand those who use our services in order to deliver a reformed service which meets their needs. This is undoubtedly a challenge in this time of financial constraint we are all facing.

Tribunals – what are they?

The role of a tribunal is typically to determine an appeal against a decision of a Government Department. The number of tribunals illustrates the range of issues across which tribunals are engaged in decision making and include decisions on entitlement to social security benefits, children's special education needs, rate determinations, values of land and buildings. The Industrial Tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunal typically hear and determine disputes between employers and employees including unfair dismissal and discrimination.

Tribunals by their nature are intended to allow a citizen to directly participate in their appeal. We therefore recognise the importance of providing timely and useful information to appellants coming before a tribunal. The tribunal unlike a court is a panel of usually 3 members who bring their expertise to determining the decision. We are consequently conscious of the importance of facilitating training for tribunal judicial office-holders. (However, it is important to note that like the court judiciary, tribunal panel members are independent judicial office-holders.)

The majority of tribunals are administered by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service ("the NICTS") some on behalf of other departments.

INTRODUCTION

The NICTS currently has responsibility for 14 tribunals including those which are administered on behalf of other Departments. Detailed information on each of the tribunals has been included in Part A of Appendix A.

The NICTS plans to assume full responsibility for administration of all tribunals including those set out in Part B of Appendix A. Consequently the period during which this Strategy and its Action Plan is live is a period of significant change for the NICTS and the tribunals we administer (the timetable for change is set out in Part C of Appendix A). It is a challenge for us to ensure that our services to our users are not impacted by this changing environment but indeed the opportunity is taken to improve those services.

Our aim is at the end of this first transitional year to incorporate the Tribunals Strategy and Plan into that for the Courts and Tribunals Service to be issued in 2011.

The NICTS also administers, on behalf of the Lord Chancellor, UK wide tribunals which sit in Northern Ireland including the tax tribunals and asylum and immigration tribunals.

Our objective is that the NICTS will administer all tribunals sitting in Northern Ireland irrespective of whether the tribunal is part of the NI administration or not. This provides a member of the public access to a tribunal irrespective of its jurisdiction.

The NICTS is committed to delivering quality services. While we recognise that there will always be limitations to what we can do, there is considerable value in using the needs of those who use our services as the starting point for designing, delivering and evaluating our service.

The Strategy

This Modernisation Strategy outlines how we will establish the level of service we are presently providing and by listening to our users seek to identify new and better ways of delivering services in the future.

The delivery of this Modernisation Strategy will be overseen by an internal Board (Business Modernisation Board) chaired by the Director of NICTS.

The Strategy details the standards users can expect when they use our services; including

- information made available to them;
- facilities provided and, perhaps most importantly,
- how they are treated by our staff.

Action Plan

Our Modernisation Strategy builds on best practice and outlines how we improve access to better services. The Action Plan has been developed for the strategy period, approved by our Business Modernisation Board and communicated to users, tribunal members and staff.

Our Approach to Service Improvement

The NICTS Corporate Plan for the 2008-2011 period identifies our Corporate aim:

“serving the Community through the Administration of Justice”

This is supported by the following strategic aims:

- Delivering responsive customer services;
- Improving access to justice;
- Promoting confidence in the justice system; and
- Supporting an independent judiciary.

It is clear that underpinning all of the above is improving our services for the benefit of customers.

There are many projects and work streams associated with the delivery of these strategic aims. The Modernisation Strategy aims to bring together relevant and associated work in respect of improving our services under a number of headings

- Business Delivery
- Accommodation and Facilities
- Accessibility
- Professionalism and Empowerment of our Staff

The Strategy also sets out how we plan to take account of our customers views so that they are at the centre of how we improve our services.

The Service is formally committed 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

The NICTS 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. This commitment has been communicated to staff, tribunals, other Departments and user groups.

Strategy Purpose

The purpose of this strategy is to:

- Explain how we will deliver our customer service commitment in the 2010/11;
- Detail the standard of service and facilities which users can expect wherever and however they access our services; and
- Communicate our Action Plan for the 2010/11 period and explain how this will be monitored and inform the 2011 NICTS Strategy and Action Plan.

Strategy Scope

This strategy covers all elements of the work of the tribunals administration that affect the tribunal users' experience, these include:

Delivering our Business in a timely and efficient manner.

We developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders performance standards for those tribunals we administer for the first time in 2009/10 and these were published in our Annual Plan. We want to build on this work; review those standards; put in place standards for tribunals we will assume responsibility for during the Strategy period. We recognise the needs of our users to have information in respect of the appeal process and are working with our judicial colleagues to provide standards and information in respect of the whole process.

We will seek opportunities to improve and modernise our business processes to make them more efficient and user focused. We will also work in partnership with relevant agencies to minimise waiting times and avoidable delays.

There is a significant degree of disparity between our existing tribunals ICT services. Some tribunals have developed bespoke Line of Business applications while others have only basic systems. The situation is not dissimilar to the fragmented landscape of the

courts prior to the development of an integrated ICT line of business system (called ICOS Integrated Court Operations System). We will consider the benefits of an integrated ICT platform for all of our tribunals.

Accommodation and Facilities which meet the needs of the full range of tribunal users.

Our users can expect to find a consistently high standard at all tribunal venues and Customer Information Centre. 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. The facilities which we are aspiring to provide include:

- Universal access to reception areas/information points;
- Hearing rooms that have adequate and fit-for-purpose seating, adequate lighting and heating;
- Waiting areas that provide adequate and comfortable seating arrangements;
- Consultation facilities that provide privacy and comfort, including desks and seating;
- Toilet facilities within public areas that accommodate universal access;
- Access to refreshment facilities for all users.

We are committed to delivering improvements in accommodation and facilities within the life of this Strategy.

Accessibility

We recognise that tribunal users have different needs and expectations and that we must provide services that meet these diverse needs. This will include improving our accessibility and ensuring that quality of service is maintained whether users choose telephone, text phone, e-mail, via the internet, or using the traditional methods of post or across the counter.

We also recognise that accessibility of information in a timely and user-friendly manner, including the resolution of routine queries, is important to our users. Tribunal information is available via our website, by e-mail, information leaflets and at each tribunal office.

Professionalism and Empowerment of Staff through the development of skills and knowledge.

The NICTS recognises and values the contribution of our staff in providing a high quality service for all users. 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 the learning solutions in the Corporate Learning Plan, the Performance Management System, and in adherence to Investor in People principles. Tribunal staff are also participating in the NICTS pilot of the “Courts and Tribunals Skills” NVQ training programme.

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

Listening to our Users

For the purpose of this strategy we have defined our users in the widest sense; they typically include the general public, victims and witnesses, appellants / applicants, respondents, various professional bodies, statutory and non-statutory organisations and agencies including voluntary sector bodies providing advice to tribunal appellants.

We will seek the views of our users through a survey that is scheduled to take place during 2010/11. This survey will be informed by the pilot survey that was carried out in 2009.

We will use the extensive consultation forums that have already been established in the NICTS to inform our decision making, policies, procedures and service delivery. These include:

- Customer Service Board (an internal Board which includes senior managers from courts and tribunals)
- Service Improvement Team (teams which include operational staff at local level)
- Section 75 Equality Consultation Groups (groups established to equality screen policies and legislation in accordance with s. 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998)
- User Groups/Forums

Customer Complaints, Comments and Suggestions

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 will be appointed at each tribunal venue.

Inter-Departmental Working Groups and Service Providers

We will work with the statutory and non-statutory organisations involved in the tribunals system to develop shared objectives and joined-up services, reduce delay and learn from good practice in other areas. We will meet regularly with first time decision making Departments, the voluntary sector and representatives from Victim Support. We shall

continue to work with the statutory and non-statutory organisations who deliver services in tribunals to ensure protocols are observed and access to facilities and information are maintained.

Accreditation and Inspection

The NICTS is committed to external assessment and review to ensure that our services are of a high standard and meet public service quality standards.

We are committed to achieving the Customer Service Excellence Standard, as a benchmark for customer service excellence and continuous improvement for our tribunal venues. We aim to submit a formal application for accreditation against the Customer Service Excellence Standard by 2013.

Service Standards

The NICTS has adopted Customer Service General Standards and we will also develop standards for key tribunal customers to inform them about what they can expect when they use our services and facilities. In developing these we will consult with key stakeholders to ensure that the standards are an accurate reflection of user needs. When developed, performance against these standards will be monitored quarterly and results displayed at each tribunal office.

Corporate Governance and Strategy Management

The successful delivery of this strategy will be dependent on all staff at all levels within the tribunals working together to deliver the Action Plan and consistently and continuously delivering quality services in all user contacts.

As noted above the delivery of this strategy and the associated Action Plan will be overseen by an internal Board chaired by the Director (Business Modernisation Board).

What We Have Already Achieved

During the last year we have delivered a number of service improvements with one of the most significant being the establishment of the Tribunals Hearing Centre (the “Hearing Centre”). The Hearing Centre is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland and is conveniently located in Belfast City Centre on the third floor of Bedford House. This “one stop shop” was opened on the 1st September 2009 and provides a single point of contact for members of the public using tribunals administered by the Court Service. The Hearing Centre also offers much improved facilities for users, staff, judiciary, and panel members.

As part of this project portable Digital Audio Recording (DAR) equipment was installed in the Hearing Centre. This technology offers superior quality sound recording and provides a more efficient system for storage and retrieval.

The Hearing Centre has two hearing rooms, one formal and one informal in layout. The latter has been specifically designed with a flexible layout to service all tribunals who avail of this hearing room. There is a retiring room available for the use of tribunal panel members. The formal hearing room and one of the consultation rooms is DDA compliant.

Some of the other service improvements that we have achieved in the last year include –

Business Delivery

- Establishment of performance standards for tribunals we assumed responsibility for during the year;
- Reviewing and remodelling existing performance standards to ensure consistency and the provision of management information for their monitoring;
- Review of Criminal Injuries Compensation Appeal Panel for Northern Ireland (CICAPNI) processes and consultation of draft revised processes which promote greater independence from the Compensation Agency and a more efficient service;
- Review of the operational arrangements within the Mental Health Review Tribunal;
- Remodelling of the listing processes in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal with the agreement of the President ;
- Review of the processes in the Care Tribunal to ensure that these take into account the new extended jurisdiction;
- Undertaken investigative work on IT provision within tribunals including the safe and efficient transfer of information between Tribunal Office Holders;
- Pilot of telephone hearings in Traffic Penalty Tribunal

Accommodation and Facilities

- Development of an Estates Strategy which considers the long term needs of tribunal business;
- Establishment of the Tribunals Hearing Centre;
- Modifications were made to rooms in CICAPNI to ensure they are more sound proof.

Accessibility

- Updating of tribunal leaflets and publications;
- There is a dedicated section on the NICTS intranet and internet both of which provide information on each tribunal and contact information for the same.

Professionalism and empowerment of staff

- Ongoing programme of work shadowing is taking place to ensure that there is adequate resilience within our resources.
- Participation by a number of tribunal staff in the NICTS pilot of the “Courts and Tribunals Skills” NVQ training programme.

Listening to our Users

- Consultation with the Tribunal Presidents Group on a number of items including:
- Collection of management information on tribunal performance and introduction of end to end targets
- Service improvements within tribunals
- Established Management Information Working Group to ensure consistency of approach in setting and monitoring performance targets;
- Established Tribunals Project team which commenced work on a gap analysis of tribunal standards against CSE and began work to identify our customers
- Meet quarterly with the tribunal sponsoring Departments;
- Completion of a pilot customer survey. This survey will be used to inform the full survey which is to be carried out;

Customer Complaints, Comments and Suggestions

- A Complaints Handling Procedure is in place for all tribunals;
- A system is in place to monitor all complaints received;
- Information on how to make a complaint is included in our leaflets.

Inter-Departmental Working Groups

- Used the Interdepartmental Tribunal Reform Working Group to help in the initial stages of the Tribunal Reform Programme;
- Interaction within the wider community through the Time to Read Programme on which there are two members of tribunal staff;
- Engagement with DETI to ensure that the Health and Safety tribunal in place to hear appeals expected from April 2010;
- Engagement with DSD to ensure that the Charities Tribunal in place for April 2010.

Service Standards

- Development of one Service Level Agreement and one point of contact for all UK wide tribunals (administered by Tribunals Service an Agency of the Ministry of Justice) currently sitting in Northern Ireland;
- Service Level Agreements are in place between the Court Service and the tribunal sponsoring Departments
- Extension of general Customer Service Standards to include tribunals;

Tribunals Modernisation Strategy Action Plan 2010/11

Processing of Business

- Pilot of new listing Protocol commenced in CICAPNI
- Establish two new tribunals (Charity and Health and Safety) with appropriate standards;
- Monitor and keep under review existing performance standards;
- With our strategic IT partner to carry out a complete review of the existing tribunal IT services with a view to delivering a roadmap for future service provision;
- Working with Judicial Studies Board for Northern Ireland to implement new governance structures for tribunal judicial training
- Appraisal of Traffic Penalty Tribunal telephone hearing

Accommodation and Facilities

- Consult and agree protocol in respect of tribunal usage of court buildings for hearings;
- Agree protocol in respect of UK wide tribunals sitting in NI with Tribunals Service

Accessibility

- Update tribunal leaflets to include the availability of text phone services;
- Ensure that each tribunals leaflets are available at all tribunal venues;
- Review and prepare a way forward on the streamlining of tribunal internet pages to ensure that they are accessible to users and provide information and services in the way that users want. In line with this we will review and enhance existing information in relation to tribunals on NI Direct.
- Deliver IT solution for communication with tribunal judicial office-holders.

Professionalism and Empowerment of Staff

- Train staff in the NICTS Complaints Handling Procedures and use of the new complaints recording system;
- Ensure staff participate in the “Courts and Tribunals Skills” NVQ training programme;

Listening to our Users

- Complete survey to establish the current baseline for public confidence and users service within the existing and phase one tribunals;
- Provide input into the NICTS communications strategy in respect of tribunals;
- Establish Tribunal User Groups for existing and phase one tribunals and ensure that these groups meet on a regular basis and minute each meeting;

Customer Complaints, Comments and Suggestions

- Appoint Customer Service Officer and Disability Officers at each tribunal venue and ensure that each officer has completed the relevant job description;
- Put Comments and Suggestions cards at each tribunal office;

Accreditation and Inspection

- Complete our detailed gap analysis against the CSE Standard and use this information to help inform, and revise where necessary, our annual action plans;

Service Standards

- Develop standards for our key customers to inform them about what they can expect when they avail of our services;
- Produce a tribunals newsletter on a quarterly basis, for existing and phase one tribunals, and ensure that copies are available at each tribunal office;

Inter-Departmental Working Groups

- Engagement with DOE to support policy development and implementation of High Hedges Bill.

DELIVERING THE PLAN

1. This 2010/11 Action Plan for the Tribunals Modernisation Strategy seeks to build on achievements to date and represents a challenging reform programme reflecting the needs of the ever increasingly diverse community we serve.
2. The delivery of the various projects set out in the 2010/11 Action Plan will be subject to the availability of financial resources and value for money considerations. We shall ensure that each project is based on a sound business case which clearly identifies the costs and benefits involved. Each project will be subject to rigorous governance arrangements to ensure that deliverables are achieved.
3. Integral to the delivery and success of this Action Plan is the capacity of our staff, effective partnership with our ICT provider and constructive engagement with our key stakeholders and users.
4. The delivery of the 2010/11 Action Plan will be overseen by Business Modernisation Board. This document will be published on our website www.courtsni.gov.uk. Progress against the Action Plan will be reported in our Annual Report.

Appendix A

Part A

Criminal Injuries Compensation Appeals Panel Northern Ireland (CICAPNI)

The Criminal Injuries Compensation (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 came into effect on 1 May 2002 and introduced the Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2002 (the Scheme). It also made provision for the establishment of the CICAPNI, which acts totally independently of the Compensation Agency.

The purpose of the Appeals Panel is to support the victims of violent crime by determining promptly, impartially, fairly and independently in accordance with the Scheme(s), appeals against review decisions made by the Compensation Agency.

CICAPNI is currently situated in the Corn Exchange building in Belfast and is staffed by four Court Service staff and four staff on secondment from the NIO.

Office of Social Security/Child Support Commissioners and Pensions Appeal Tribunals (OSSC and PAT)

The Social Security Commissioners and Child Support Commissioners are specialised members of the judiciary appointed to hear and determine appeals on points of law from Appeal Tribunals under the Social Security and Child Support legislation.

The Social Security Commission deals with appeals for 30 different DHSS benefits. Usually the cases handled are appeals against the decisions made by the Appeals Tribunal. The Pensions Appeal Tribunal deals with appeals on the schemes that provide compensation for injuries in the Armed Forces.

OSSC and PAT are currently situated in the Tribunals Hearing Centre in Bedford House in Belfast and are staffed by seven Court Service staff including a Lawyer.

Northern Ireland Traffic Penalty Tribunal (TPT)

The TPT hears appeals against Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued by or behalf of the Roads Service. Penalty Charge Notices are issued against a person contravening a parking restriction. An Adjudicator, who is a qualified solicitor/barrister with at least five years' legal experience, sits to consider the issues relevant to each appeal and will then give a decision based on all the available facts. The decision of the Adjudicator is binding on both the person who is appealing and on the Roads Service.

The TPT is currently situated in the Tribunals Hearing Centre in Bedford House in Belfast and is staffed by one Court Service staff.

Northern Ireland Valuation Tribunal (NIVT)

The NIVT hears appeals by home owners against their domestic rates which, for the first time in 2007, were based on the capital value of their property. The Tribunal also hears rate relief appeals, for example: when a review of a property with disabled facilities is disputed by the owner; when a student or young person disputes a review of entitlement to exemption; or when a lone pensioner disputes a review of entitlement to rebate.

The NIVT is currently situated in the Tribunals Hearing Centre in Bedford House in Belfast and is staffed by one Court Service staff.

Charities Tribunal

The Charities Tribunal was established on 01 April 2010 and hears appeals from decisions made by the Charity Commission in respect of the registration of an organisation as a charity.

Health and Safety Tribunal

The Health and Safety Tribunal was established on 01 April 2010 and adjudicates on appeals relating to the issue of, condition applied to, or revocations of asbestos or petroleum-spirit licences.

Lands Tribunal

The Lands Tribunal for Northern Ireland is a DFP tribunal and is an independent body which determines a wide range of questions relating to valuation of land, the discharge or variation of restrictive land obligations and disputed compensation on compulsory acquisition of land or the injury caused to land by, for instance, the making of roads.

Care Tribunal

The Care Tribunal is a DHSSPS tribunal and hears appeals against decisions prohibiting or restricting the employment of individuals teaching or working with children or working with vulnerable adults or decisions concerning the registration of social workers. The Tribunal also hears appeals against decisions relating to the regulation of residential care homes, nursing homes, children's homes, nursing agencies and independent health care providers and later other care services.

Mental Health Review Tribunal (MHRT)

The MHRT is a DHSSPS tribunal and is an independent judicial body, set up under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (the Order), which reviews the cases of patients who are compulsorily detained or are subject to guardianship under the Order.

The Tribunal's function is to provide mentally disordered patients with a safeguard against unjustified detention in hospital or control under guardianship by means of a review of their cases from both the medical and non-medical points of view.

Tribunal under Schedule 11 of the HSS (NI) order 1972 (Schedule 11)

The Schedule 11 tribunal is a DHSSPS tribunal and to date this tribunal has never sat and currently has no staff allocated to its administration.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST)

The SENDIST is a DE tribunal and considers parents' appeals against the decisions of Education and Library Boards about children's special educational needs, where the parents cannot reach agreement with the Board. It also deals with claims of disability discrimination in relation to children at school.

The Appeal Tribunal

The Appeals Service & Presidents Office

The Appeal Tribunal is an independent decision making body responsible for hearing appeals against Social Security Benefit decisions made by decision makers in the Social Security Agency, Inland Revenue, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the Land and Property Services of the Department for Finance and Personnel and decisions on Child Maintenance made by decision makers in Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division of the Department for Social Development. The Appeals Service provides administrative support to the Appeal Tribunal. The President's Office provides administrative support to the President of Tribunals to carry out his statutory functions.

Rent Assessment Panel

The Rent Assessment Panel is an independent body funded by the Department of Social Development. Its function is to determine appropriate rents for properties in the private renting sector that are:

- Controlled under the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978;
- Registered with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- Subject to appeal by either the landlord or tenant.

The decision maker is the Rent Officer in DSD Housing; he/she determines the appropriate rent for a property and notifies parties of the outcome. The work of the Panel involves the physical inspection of properties whose rents are subject to appeal and often the committee will also be required to conduct a public hearing before its determination of an appropriate rent.

Part B

Industrial Tribunal and Fair Employment Tribunal (ITFET)

The ITFET are independent judicial bodies set up to hear and resolve certain matters of dispute in the employment field.

The Industrial Tribunal determines disputes between employers and employees, prospective employers and employees and former employers and employees in relation to approximately 80 individual employment rights and related employment issues including unfair dismissal, discrimination on grounds of age, family status, fixed term work, gender (including sex, pregnancy and maternity leave), gender reassignment, marital status, part-time working, race and sexual orientation, equal pay, redundancy, breach of contract and unlawful deduction of wages. The Fair Employment Tribunal hears and determines complaints of discrimination on the grounds of religious belief and/or political opinion.

Planning Appeals Commission and Water Appeals Commission (PACWAC)

The Commission receives financial and administrative support from OFMDFM its “sponsor” department. Although OFMDFM exercise some functions which may involve it appearing before the Commission, the Commission is wholly independent in terms of decision making and the operation of the appeals and inquiry/hearing process. PACWAC are located in Park House in Belfast.

Part C

The following table shows a timetable of when the Court Service took/ will take responsibility for the tribunals in Northern Ireland and includes details of the location of the tribunal and who the sponsoring Department is.

Existing Tribunals:

Tribunal	Location	Department
Office of Social Security/Child Support Commissioners (OSSC)	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	
Pensions Appeal Tribunal (PAT)	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	
Northern Ireland Traffic Penalty Tribunal (TPT)	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DRD
Northern Ireland Valuation Tribunal (NIVT)	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DFP
Criminal Injuries Compensation Appeals Panel Northern Ireland (CICAPNI)	Corn Exchange	DOJ
Charities Tribunal	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DSD
Health and Safety Tribunals	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DETNI

Phase One Tribunals:

The administration of these tribunals transferred to the Court Service on 01 September 2009 and includes the following tribunals:

Tribunal	Location	Department
Lands Tribunal	Royal Courts of Justice	DFP
Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST)	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DE
Care Tribunal	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DHSSPS
Mental Health Review Tribunal (MHRT)	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DHSSPS
Tribunal under Schedule 11 of the HSS (NI) order 1972 (Schedule 11)	Tribunals Hearing Centre, Bedford House	DHSSPS

Phase Two Tribunals:

The administration of these tribunals transferred to the Court Service on 01 April 2010 and includes the following tribunals:

Tribunal	Location	Department
The Appeal Tribunal	Cleaver House, Belfast	DSD
	Dublin Road, Omagh	
Rent Assessment Panel (RAP)	Cleaver House	

Phase Three Tribunals:

The administration of these tribunals will transfer to the Court Service post devolution of justice and includes the following tribunals:

Tribunal	Location	Department
Industrial and Fair Employment Tribunals (ITFET)	Killymeal House	DEL
Reserve Forces Reinstatement Committee and Reserve Forces Appeals Tribunal	Killymeal House	DEL
Planning Appeals Commission and Water Appeals Commission (PACWAC)	Park House	OFMDFM

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