



An tSeirbhís Chúirteanna
Courts Service

The Courts Service

Communications and stakeholder engagement strategy

2021 – 2025

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Introduction

The Courts Service every year processes approximately 445,000 criminal matters, 233,000 civil matters, 120,000 jury summons and 20,150 domestic applications through the Courts. From the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to April 2021 the Courts Service provided 16,350 video-links and 4,400 remote court hearings, approximately.

A statutorily independent state agency, the Courts Service, was established under the Courts Service Act 1998, and is a frontline service-focused organisation supporting the third branch of Government - the Courts and the Judiciary. We are responsible for the administration and management of the Courts in Ireland and are mandated to:

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

We are 1,100 staff working across a nationwide network of offices and court venues, providing services in civil, criminal and family law to court users daily. These offices, supported by directorates established as part of our management structure, work with the judiciary to administer the work of each jurisdiction across the Supreme Courts, Court of Appeal, High Court, Circuit Court and District Court.

Starting a conversation

The Courts Service has been dedicated to providing information on the courts system to court users since its establishment. An informed public is better placed to make use of the services available and to access a justice system that supports their needs. However, over the years the technology function supporting the work of the Courts Service has faced ongoing capacity challenges, reducing the ability to drive digital progression which has been reflected in how we provide and share information on the Courts system. Our Strategic Vision 2030 sets-out at a top level how we plan to improve the delivery of all our services over the next ten years.



This Vision is being realised through an ambitious Modernisation Programme. A key part of the Modernisation Programme includes having open conversations with our stakeholders internally and externally, each step of the way, as we try to improve our services for everyone's benefit - Courts Service colleagues, the Judiciary, court users and our justice partners, as well as the tax payer.

We therefore need a communications and stakeholder engagement strategy that reflects the user-centric focus of the Modernisation Programme and sets-out how we plan to effectively share easy to understand information and engage with all stakeholders to best meet their needs into the future. In taking this user-centric approach, the Modernisation Programme seeks to place the user at the centre of our Reform Programmes and our modernisation projects, which will require engagement and /or collaboration with users at each stage. In order to design services with users in mind, we need to bring users on the modernisation journey with us, setting expectations and preparing for the inevitable change. This strategy, therefore, also needs to address how we support change and projects requiring changes in behaviour and practices.

In all our communications we aim to provide information that is accurate and impartial, the Courts Service never engages in dialogue that could be perceived as political. Dedication to the provision of accurate and unbiased information remains a constant priority for the Courts Service. This four-year strategy is aimed at improving our stakeholder engagement with all users across internal and external communications including our approach to change and reform, as well as public awareness and engagement with the media. This strategy sets out how we plan to engage and empower colleagues to engage with external users, and how we will evaluate the approach. Over the lifetime of this strategy we plan to become more results driven, output, outcome and impact orientated in how we evaluate and measure our communication plans and activities.

With the aim of improving our communications and stakeholder engagement, our two strategic goals outlined in this document are to ensure our approach to communications is a) user focused and b) effective and efficient. Equally both goals reflect the approach of our Modernisation Programme and of the wider reform agenda across the justice sector and 'Our Public Service 2020 and 'Civil Service Renewal Plan'.



1. Strategic goals

The Courts Service is a large organisation working across all areas of law and court jurisdictions in pressurised and busy environments, making a co-ordinated approach to communications sometimes challenging. Regardless of the jurisdiction or time constraints the main priority is always the provision of accurate and unbiased information and this will remain unchanged. Following that, our two goals under this strategy aim to support those creating information, to place our stakeholders at the centre of our communications and to ensure our approach is effective and efficient.

- 1.1 **User-centric approach** to achieve more user-focused communications through:
- I. **Collaboration:** we will listen to our stakeholders to learn and understand their preferences and needs. We will work with stakeholders to improve the way we communicate through targeted and general channels, as per Chapter 3.
 - II. **Easy to understand content:** we will aim to make our information and communications easy to understand for all court users. Initially, adopting a plain language approach to new content and update, and over time, existing content. We will also develop accessible content, complying with ‘easy to read’ standards.
 - III. **Consistency:** we will aim to ensure that our approach to communications and stakeholder engagement is adopted consistently across the organisation through the introduction of templates, tools, processes and guides.
 - IV. **Relevancy:** we will communicate when we have something relevant to share and when reassurance is needed. We will seek to provide timely updates as soon as we have something to communicate. We will be honest about the type of behaviour we are trying to encourage, through our communications, with stakeholders be it awareness, understanding, engagement or action.

By the nature of our organisation there is certain information that we simply cannot share or comment on, for example we never comment on individual cases. We seek to provide information to aid understanding, we do not engage to feed cyber trolls or robots looking to dial-up unhelpful engagement online. Complaints will be handled through the formal customer service channel, available at: <https://www.courts.ie/customer-service>.

- 1.2 **Effective and efficient communications:** we will develop communications that will resonate with stakeholders, through channels that will allow effective engagement. We want to ensure that our communications are goal, output, outcome and impact focused so that they deliver real value for everyone involved.



2. Our Stakeholders

Our stakeholders span all areas of the law – civil, criminal and family as well as across all courts from the District to the Supreme Court and those who support the courts, both internal and external to the organisation. In other words, we have a diverse and dynamic range of people and organisations with whom we need to engage.

The Judiciary and the Courts Service work together on a daily basis. The Chief Justice is the Chairperson of the Courts Service Board and the Presidents of each Jurisdiction along with Judicial nominees are also members of the Courts Service Board. Individual judges contribute on a number of committees, working groups and Judicial engagement groups. The unique nature of the relationship between the Judiciary and the Courts Service, bound up in the Courts Service mandate, is outside of the scope of this strategy.

The internal communications section of this strategy addresses our approach to our internal stakeholders. We have mapped our external stakeholders against seven categories, described here:

External stakeholder categories			
This list is not exhaustive but provides indicative examples of our stakeholders.			
Category		This group includes:	Examples of representative organisations include:
1.	Public court and court office users and members of the public.	Defendants, litigants in person, victims, witnesses, jurors, members of the public, post-primary school students etc.	Victims Support, Women’s and Men’s Aid, Advocacy groups etc. Post Primary Level education sector, visitor groups
2.	Legal practitioners	Barristers and solicitors.	Bar Council, Law Society, specialist representative associations
3.	Government	Ministers, elected representatives, special advisors, fellow civil and public servants, committee clerks	Department of Justice, DPER and Department of Finance, Justice Select Committee, Public Accounts Committee, Department of Education, Citizens



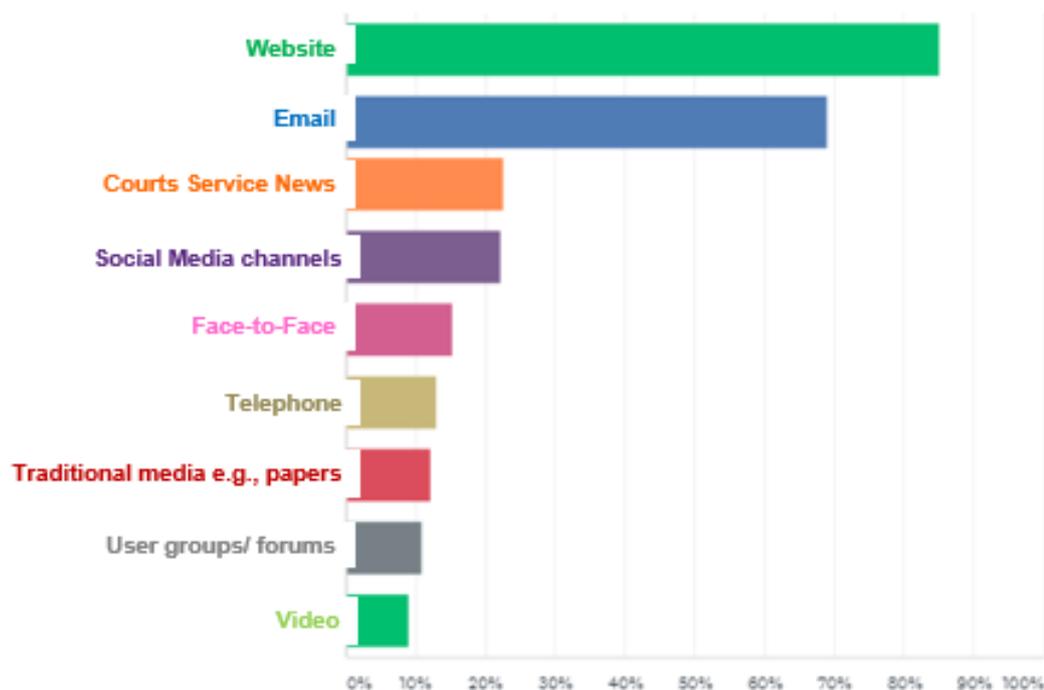
			Information Services. Department of Social Protection, Revenue, Citizen Information Services, local authorities etc.
4.	Justice partners	Those involved in the criminal, civil and family justice systems.	An Garda Síochána, Irish Prison Service, Office of the Attorney General, Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Legal Aid Board etc.
5.	Influencers and legal sector experts	Academics, charities, think tanks.	Universities in Ireland and abroad, library and research organisations, ESRI etc.
6.	Suppliers	Facilities contractors, security contractors, tech suppliers.	Contract services and consultancy practices etc.
7.	Media	Court, crime and legal journalists as well as the full range of journalists across traditional and social media	NUJ, Press Council, College Faculties, BAI

To support the development of this strategy we issued two surveys to external and internal stakeholders to expressly ask them how they like to receive and share information with the Courts Service. We received good representation across each of the categories above, with over 568 responses to the external communications survey. This is the start of a conversation that we hope to build on over the duration of this strategy.

3. Channels

We have a wide range of channels which we use to engage with our stakeholders to differing effect. We have asked our external stakeholders (March 2021) which channels they prefer to access and share information with the Courts Service. The responses confirmed that the website, email, Courts Service News and social media channels are the most preferred channels for receiving information as detailed below. The frequency of visitors to the website was also noteworthy, with 80% confirming that they accessed the website either daily or weekly. Equally the newsfeed on the website was the most popular medium to access news with 79% choosing it above any other media.

Preferred channels for receiving/accessing information from the Courts Service



Our current approach to the channels at our disposal can be described in terms of four categories:

Channel type	Current position	Aim
1. Owned media – channels which the Courts Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Courts.ie is our most engaged with platform. It hosts a wide range of information drawing in the legal diary, court Notices, Judicial Practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the duration of this strategy we aim to make our recently redeveloped website more user-friendly and accessible.



own/ control	<p>Directions and Orders as well as information and news updates about the Courts and online services. There are approximately 3.17 million visitors every year.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the past 12 months we have engaged more on social media including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube channels. • We issue 3-4 Court Service News publications each year with a following of 2,985 internal and external subscribers. • There are several digital applications providing online services to court users however we do not have any digital applications offering information or for solely communications purposes. • The Courts Service organises various several events for internal and external stakeholders e.g. commemorations and international visitors etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We aim to engage more effectively on our social media channels and will publish our social media policy this year. <i>*See below.</i> • We will explore how to provide more frequent/ tailored communications to stakeholders. • We will explore the feasibility of digital applications particularly options which can be trialled in an agile manner such as chat bots etc. • We will seek to increase our engagement with stakeholders through events – in-person, online or a hybrid of both.
2. Earned media/ platforms – coverage/ presence across different channels which we don't pay for or control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The courts receive media coverage daily. Our media relations advisor supports media access to court information and hearings. The cohort of media who cover the Courts are interested in news from the Courts Service and cover newsworthy updates/ Notices from the Courts Service. • Working with our partners across the justice sector and wider Government we share and provide information to support third party content such as CitizensInformation.ie, the Law Society and Bar Council platforms and publications. • We tag our partners in justice and Government across our social media communications and they do likewise. • We leverage our working relationships to secure speaking opportunities at 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We aim to improve our coverage and presence across the various earned channels through working more collaboratively with our stakeholders to share relevant content. • We will continue to work closely with our media relations advisor to provide information to the media.



	different events across our stakeholder groups.	
3. Bought media – coverage/ presence that we pay for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Courts Service tends to pay for advertising to run recruitment campaigns and when required to publish notices or consultations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To extend the reach and engage with different stakeholders, as well as publicise public awareness messages under the Modernisation Programme bought media will be considered, but will be finance dependent.
4. Research and consultation platforms/ channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Courts Service has a good network of user groups with whom there has been regular engagement. On the formal research, consultation and surveying front the use of different platforms has been ad hoc and project specific. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We aim to continue to -engage with the user groups and leverage this network to organise opportunities for feedback. Under the Modernisation Programme, particularly across the Reform Programmes we will support the engagement and use of more formal research platforms etc.

***Social Media**

The Courts Service uses multiple social media channels to inform and communicate information relevant to our wide range of stakeholders as per the seven categories listed in Chapter 2. With our public service remit, it is important that we provide information to support the wide range of court users from members of the public with limited knowledge of the legal system, to expert legal professionals frequently in court.

Although relatively new to social media, from the interactions to date and in consideration of our wide range of audiences, we have identified specific approaches for our differing social media platforms:

- LinkedIn is identified as a route to communicate primarily with professionals, graduates and jobseekers by demonstrating the inner workings of the courts and Courts Service.



- Facebook is identified as a platform for outreach and education for people with fewer direct interactions with the courts, such as jurors.
- Twitter serves as a source of our latest news and information, offering direct updates from our busy website. Currently the following is mainly legal professionals, with some interest from media and, to a lesser extent, the public.
- YouTube hosts our Courts Service You Tube channel to provide video output content to our website and all social media platforms.

In terms of engagement, we will use social media to point people to relevant resources, but it isn't intended as a channel for dealing with court business. We will not engage in commentary, unless we feel it necessary to correct misinformation and will not engage with trolling at any level. Complaints can be addressed through the comment, compliments and complaints channel available at: <https://www.courts.ie/customer-service>.

During the lifetime of this strategy, we intend to broaden the use of our channels as direct links to all our stakeholders, with an aim to 'demystify' the Courts and offer a user-friendly, more effective and efficient route to the information people need.

4. Internal Communications

A user-centric approach starts with our internal colleagues and listening to them to understand how we can best support their needs. This section of the strategy has been developed based on feedback received from an anonymous internal communications survey, issued during the month of March 2021.

4.1 User-centric approach

Goal	User-centric communications
Actions at a Glance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve co-ordination of internal communications and use of alternative channels to reduce email.• Trial a Communications Officer programme to establish a communications network across the organisation to improve the flow of information.• Introduce communications tools which support the production of more visually appealing and easier to understand content.• Launch and promote the use of a new Courts Service Style Guide, with plain language guidelines plus templates and icons, consistently across the organisation.• Upgrade our communications tools to allow for more direct targeting of specific cohorts of the organisation to reliance on whole-of-organisation emails

- I. **Collaboration:** Email is a powerful tool but those producing internal communications can rely on it too much, leading to its overuse. We will collaborate with those who are responsible for issuing internal communications to
- seek to improve the co-ordination of internal communications, with a view to reducing volumes of email
 - agree to using different channels, preferred by colleagues, to avoid always defaulting to email
 - create a communications network through a Communications Officer programme. The Communications Officers will be based in the Communications and Media unit, CMU (formerly known as the Information and Media Relations Unit). The programme will initially be rolled-out to a number of offices across the organisation, allowing for a two-way flow of information. The aim is to create a network that reaches out across the organisation sharing information directly and organically.

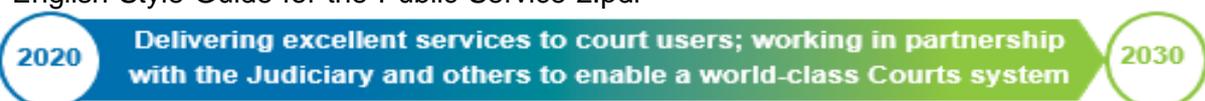
- II. **Easy to understand content:** Information, presented in bite-sized formats, using graphics and illustrations, can aid understanding and is user-friendly. We will upgrade existing communication tools and share them with those issuing internal communications to allow for more dynamic and visually appealing content. We will launch and promote the use of a Courts Service style guide incorporating plain language guidelines to make information easier to understand.
- III. **Consistency:** through our communications with both internal and external stakeholders we want to ensure a consistent approach. Therefore, to empower colleagues across the organisation and to strengthen the existing Courts Service brand we will be launching a Courts Service Style Guide with this strategy, as mentioned above. The Guide will include Courts Service branded templates for notices, presentation decks, reports, memos and email signatures for use consistently internally and externally. The Guide will incorporate plain language guidelines reflecting the best practice approach across the Public Service¹. The style guide will also contain a resource of icons to be used when colleagues wish to use graphics to signal meaning consistently across all communications. For illustrative purposes, example icons:



- IV. **Relevancy:** In time-pressured, busy environments, the relevance of information is particularly important. Over reliance on whole-of-organisation email communications always runs the risk of the information being irrelevant to a percentage of the recipients. We will therefore explore current communications tools to improve how we better tailor the information to more specific cohorts of the organisation and how we target information for more relevant communication. By improving the intranet, we aim to provide a platform that will pull internal users to a source from where they can choose the information relevant to them.

4.2 Effective and efficient communications

¹ Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and NALA (2019) *Plain English Style Guide for the Public Service*, Available from: <https://www.ops2020.gov.ie/app/uploads/2019/09/Plain-English-Style-Guide-for-the-Public-Service-2.pdf>



Goal	Support the improvement of effective and efficient internal communications
Action at a Glance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use multiple channels for communicating with colleagues. • Upgrade our communications tools for those creating internal information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. to produce more visually appealing and dynamic content b. including measurement methods to track engagement. • Upgrade the intranet and support regular updating of content.

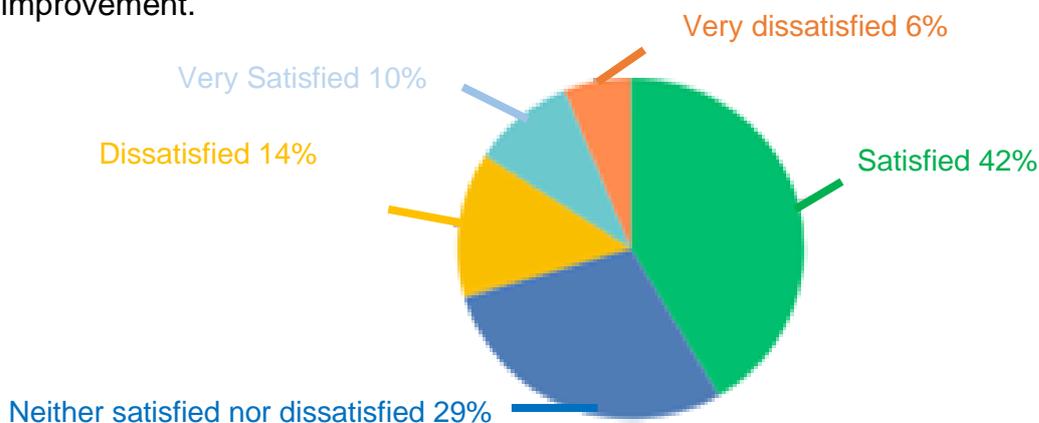
By improved use of the multiple channels and tools at our disposal we can enhance our communications through effective formats such as pulse surveys, video content and interactive graphics to better engage colleagues. Such tools will allow us to more easily gather feedback and track engagement levels, to help us constantly improve.

The intranet can be a powerful tool for effective internal engagement, and it has long been acknowledged that the Courts Service platform needs to be improved. By upgrading the platform to include features such as the newsfeed from the website and/ or our twitter feed, which we know are popular with internal audiences, we can provide an alternative engaging platform to email. However, we recognise that this will take a commitment to ensuring information is kept-up-to-date and we envisage a role here for the Communications Officer Programme to support teams in keeping intranet content up to date. Another alternative to email could be an internal Courts Service APP. One of our current communication tools offers the option of an internal APP, the feasibility of which we plan to explore further during the lifetime of this strategy.

Finally, we will work with others across the organisation responsible for internal communications to support adoption of these two strategic goals when developing and issuing communications.

5. External Communications

As detailed in Chapter 2 above the Courts Service has a wide range of external stakeholders across eight different categories. With approximately 568 respondents to the recent Courts Service external communications survey, held from 15 – 29 March 2021, there was good representation across the various categories. Overall satisfaction rates with Courts Service information received or accessed by external users were good, with 52% reporting they were either satisfied or very satisfied. However, 29% of respondents chose neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, which indicates an opportunity for improvement.



Based on the qualitative feedback in the comments section it is evident that the majority of issues for the 20% reporting to be unsatisfied or very unsatisfied are mainly customer service related. Improvements to customer service, a key part of the Modernisation Programme, have already commenced with the introduction of a new Customer Charter². However, much work is still required and all related feedback from this survey has been shared with the relevant team.

It is also clear from the survey that courts.ie is the most popular channel for accessing information on the Courts Service, with 85% opting for the website as their preferred choice for receiving information and 70% choosing the website as the preferred channel to receive information on the Modernisation Programme. From a range of different media sources, the Newsfeed on the website was the most popular medium for accessing information, with 79% accessing the Newsfeed. Traffic to the site is frequent with 80% accessing it on a daily or weekly basis. Overall, 55% of respondents found the

² The Courts Service Customer Charter 2020 - 2022, Available from: [CS Charter](#)

website satisfactory or very satisfactory. However anecdotally from the comments there is much evidence to suggest that further improvements can be achieved.

Based on the survey feedback, we outline here how we plan to achieve our dual goals to improve how we communicate and engage with stakeholders for the benefit of our external users under the duration of this strategy.

5.1 User-centric approach

Goal	User-centric communications
Actions at a Glance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with external stakeholders to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Directly engage with their users to inform the development of our information and specifically improvements to courts.ie ○ Agree a regular supply of information to their channels. • Implement website accessibility research project. • Expand the Courts Service Style Guide and plain language work to include an ‘easy to read’ pilot signage project. • Initiate a project to explore how we can improve the user journey on courts.ie. • Ensure a more consistent approach on social media and the website. • Develop a key speaker programme for mobilisation across the organisation including national and international events over the lifetime of this strategy. • Improve, through digital solutions, how we deliver public awareness initiatives. • Organise an internal committee for commemorative activities.

I. **Collaboration:** We will continue to improve the way we collaborate with our external stakeholders to a) reach wider audiences with our content and b) to learn directly from users how to improve the content and quality of the information we provide. Our stakeholders provide excellent court related information through reliable platforms with strong visitor numbers. We often provide information to these external platforms however, as mentioned in the survey feedback, there is an opportunity for the Courts Service to provide more content.

We also recognise that there is an opportunity to partner with stakeholders who work directly with different types of court users, including members of the public and vulnerable court users, to improve our information so that it accessible to all. As mentioned under 2. below we will be embarking on an accessibility project and will



be looking to collaborate with stakeholders across the justice system as well as further afield.

We recognise the call through the external survey feedback for improvements to search functionality on some of the applications on the website. Until the legacy systems on which these applications run are modernised, improvements are limited. However, in the meantime the survey has prompted suggestions for improvements to search on the website from key stakeholders, from whom we will take up on their offer of their assistance, such as librarians and researchers.

From a content and volume perspective courts.ie is a highly prolific website endeavouring to meet the multiple needs of its visitors. We therefore need to ensure we collaborate with a range of stakeholders who will support the improvement of content and accessibility for all users.

- II. **Easy to understand content:** As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Courts Service is launching a Courts Service Style Guide incorporating plain language and ‘write clearly’ guidelines as advised by the National Disability Authority (NDA) for new content³. Additionally, the Courts Service during the first year of this strategy will embark on an accessibility research project. We will explore, with a view to implementing, improvements to our website content in accordance with the National Disability Authority’s guidelines and Customer Communications toolkit for the public service including Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1⁴.

Expanding on the style guide, and as part of the Modernisation Programme, the Courts Service will look to pilot ‘easy to read’ signage for use in court buildings to improve the experience for all court users. We will engage with users of varying needs and abilities to inform this work as detailed in section 1 above.

³ National Disability Authority and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, *Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service – A Universal Design Approach*, Available here: [Toolkit](#) Last accessed 8 April 2021

⁴ Campbell A. (Nomensa), Cooper M. (W3C), Kirkpatrick A. (Adobe), O’Connor J. (Interaccess), 2018, *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1*, Available here: <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG/>. Last accessed 9 April 2021

- III. **Consistency:** Over time, widespread adoption of the Courts Service Style Guide and templates across the organisation will support a more consistent approach and standard to the development of all communications.

On average there are 3.17million visits to the website annually, from a diverse range of stakeholders with vastly varied needs. 52% of respondents to the external communications survey reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the website, therefore leaving room for improvement. Significant feedback relates to difficulties in navigating the website and finding relevant information. During the first half of this strategy, in tandem with the accessibility research mentioned above, we will explore how to improve user journeys through the website.

36% of respondents to the external communications survey found the Courts Service social media communications to be satisfactory or very satisfactory. Relatively new to social media, there is an opportunity here to deliver a more consistent approach across all Courts Service owned channels – the website and social media platforms. The social media approach is explained in more detail in the chapter 3 on Channels.

- IV. **Relevancy:** The Courts Service has much in common with our key stakeholders across the justice sector and wider government, with similar challenges and goals. We have much to learn from and share with one another. We will seek to increase engagement with our colleagues by attending different events, speaking opportunities and presentations. During the lifetime of this strategy, we will mobilise key speakers across the organisation to participate in offline and online events. Where relevant we will make the presentations available through courts.ie and social media, as suggested by the external communications survey feedback.

Public Awareness

Public awareness is one of the most effective ways of making the Courts relevant to members of the public in advance of ever having to come to Court. Courts can seem less intimidating, if members of the public have had some exposure to the environment prior to attending. The Courts Service has welcomed domestic and international visitors for many years increasing the profile of the Courts to wider audiences.



The Courts Service delivers several popular education and outreach initiatives. Our School Visit Programme attracts approximately 1,500 students per year mainly to the Criminal Courts of Justice in Dublin; where a tour of the court building is provided and they attend a mock trial in a courtroom. *Let's Look at the Law* is an online resource that can be used in conjunction or independently to the school visits through courts.ie. We recognise that there is an opportunity to open the experience to potentially more schools through digital solutions. The *Let's Look at the Law* module needs to be updated to reflect a modern court environment. In upgrading the module, we will look into incorporating a remote/ virtual court experience, with a view to increasing our engagement with schools nationwide.

Throughout the country, many courthouses are used for public events and many have featured in State Commemorations. Heritage and historical events also provide an opportunity to introduce the courts to a diverse range of engaged stakeholders. The Courts Service is involved in the wider justice sector commemorations to mark the centenary of the occupation of the Four Courts and the destruction of the Public Records Building in the Four Courts.

To commemorate the historic events of 1922, including the occupation of the Four Courts and the explosion of the Irish Public Record Office we will use digital options to make the events relevant for more members of the public. The Courts Service has become a 'Participating Institution' on the *Beyond 2022: Ireland's Virtual Record Treasury* research project. This all-island and international collaborative project seeks to re-imagine and re-create, through virtual reality, the national treasure and the archival collections that were lost. We are keen to collaborate with all stakeholders across the country to expand the relevance of the Courts to visitors who might otherwise not be exposed to them through these commemorations.

5.2 Effective and efficient communications

Goal	Develop effective and efficient external communications.
Actions at a Glance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications and stakeholder engagement will be supported by plans which are goal and purpose focused including inputs, outcomes and impact. • Promote the use of public sector guidelines on public consultation development.



As outlined in 1-3 above we have plans to provide a more effective and efficient website experience for our users. In Chapter 8 we set out how we will develop communications and stakeholder plans that are goal and purpose driven, focused on inputs/outputs, to deliver effective outcomes and make the required impact.

To ensure that we communicate and engage stakeholders effectively and efficiently the Courts Service will follow the *Public Consultation Principles & Guidance* as set-out by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform⁵. Following this guidance, we recognise that effective consultation should support public bodies in making informed decisions on matters of policy, to improve the delivery of public services, and to improve accountability. We will follow the consultation guidance to ensure:

- A. consultations with the public are genuine, meaningful, timely, balanced, and issued with the objective of leading to better outcomes and greater understanding
- B. consultations should be targeted at and easily accessible to those with a clear interest in the policy/ service delivery/ area of improvement in question.
- C. systematic efforts are made to ensure that interested and affected parties can take part in open consultations at all stages of the process on significant policy, services and legislative matters: be that development, implementation, evaluation or review stages.

We will also consider best international practice in relation to public consultation, including the use of remote and virtual consultation.

⁵ Ireland. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, (2019), *Consultation Principles & Guidance*. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/5579/140119163201-9e43dea3f4b14d56a705960cb9354c8b.pdf> Last accessed 8 April 2021

6. Media

The Courts Service has for the past 20 years operated a centralised Media Relations Service operating as the contact point for media queries regarding policy, plans, and the activities of the Superior Courts and other Dublin based court hearings. This dedicated Media Relations Service, providing an organised ease of access to information on court related matters, was part of the establishment of a dedicated administrative support structure - the Courts Service.

Outside of Dublin, each local office answers direct queries relating to court cases, with policy related matters sent to our central Media Relations Service. This media relations work includes hourly and daily liaison with the media on activities across all the Courts, and the Courts Service. As well as hosting seminars on reporting matters which are court based - such as contempt, defamation, social media usage, defining bone fides of court reporters.

Areas for improvement are always a point of discussion with our media-based contacts and colleagues, with whom we obviously work closely. Overall, the responses from the media to the external communications survey were positive about the Media Relations Service being provided. In applying the two main goals of this strategy to ensure our communications are more **a) user-centric and b) effective and efficient** we will explore further our electronic delivery of judgments, explore the effectiveness of chat rooms for timely updates, implement our social media policy and improve the flow of information to assist regional delivery of communications and information.

Communications continue at a one to one level, along with media organisations and representative bodies.

Goal	Continue to offer a quality Media Relations Service relevant for a digital age.
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore the possibility of electronic delivery of judgements.• Explore the introduction of chat bots/ digital solution to provide timely updates.• Implement approach recommended social media policy• Through the Communications Officer programme explore the opportunity to improve communications regionally.



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



7. Change and reform communications

We recognise that a unique approach is needed for communicating change, particularly when combining short term change with longer term reform and involving digital transformational projects. Under the Modernisation Programme our aim is to bring stakeholders on the change journey, which will require different types of behaviours at different stages. Some will need to simply be aware of the change, some may need to understand and/ or engage with the change, while others may be called to take action – for some all will apply. Taking a user-centric approach to modernisation involves placing the user at the centre of our communications.

7.1 User-centric approach

Goal	User-centric communications
Actions at a Glance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver stakeholder engagement workshops to those involved in the Modernisation Programme to introduce the communications four stage process and tools to empower them to confidently bring stakeholders on that communication journey. • Promote the Courts Service Style Guide, templates and plain language guidelines for use among all those working on the Modernisation Programme. • The Modernisation Programme communications team will support the development of easy to understand communications plan and materials.

I. **Collaborative:** We have developed a specific communications and stakeholder plan for the Modernisation Programme which involves working closely with Project Managers and the Heads of Reform Programmes to ensure a flow of information across internal and external stakeholders. Integral to the plan is our communications and behavioural process for change and reform projects, which involves planning how we will bring our stakeholders on the journey through four important stages; awareness, understanding, engagement and action. Working collaboratively with stakeholders, this process will ensure that they progress through the relevant stages at the right time, so that they are prepared and ready for change and in a position to act or adapt their practices/ behaviour when the time comes.

II. **Easy to understand content:** As mentioned previously we will be launching a Courts Service Style Guide incorporating plain language and ‘write clearly’ guidelines as part



of this strategy. This approach will be incorporated into all change and reform communications. We will also explore how best to communicate the terminology and concepts associated with the change, so that language doesn't become a barrier to the change.

- III. **Consistency:** To ensure consistency across our change and reform communications we have introduced the four stage process, mentioned above, through workshops to the Senior Management Team, the Change Programme Office, (who are supporting the delivery of the Modernisation Programme) including the project managers and the Reform Programme teams. We will expand these workshops to other teams across the business as the Modernisation Programme scales up over the next number of years. Based on feedback from the workshops, we will continue improving our toolkit which supports these workshops and comprises a stakeholder engagement canvas, a stakeholder mapping template and a stakeholder matrix.

Our goal is that these tools will ensure those implementing change and modernisation projects take a consistent approach. The canvas is a tool which places the project's purpose/value proposition at the centre, mapping to the various stakeholders and to relevant channels. Positioning the purpose at the centre of the tool, supports the development of clear messaging and is an excellent starting point to plot the respective stakeholder change journeys. The matrix tool maps out each stakeholder journey through the four stages of awareness, understanding, engagement and action to encourage the necessary behaviours required for effective change. The matrix allows each team to map milestones for each stakeholder group, specific to their project, whilst ensuring a consistent approach to all stakeholders on all projects.

- IV. **Relevancy:** The majority of our internal colleagues are interested in information on the Modernisation Programme, in particular information explaining how the change is going to happen, the plans and models involved and updates on the progress of projects and the Reform Programmes across Civil, Family and Criminal Law and Organisational Reform. Through the stakeholder and channel mapping described above we will ensure information is shared with internal and external stakeholders when it is relevant, to best prepare them for the change and reform to come.

7.2 Efficient and effective communications

Goal	Ensure that Modernisation Programme communications are effective and efficient
Actions at a Glance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follow the internal communications approach of using improved tools to allow for more co-ordinated, targeted, measured and a higher quality of information.• Share information through multiple channels relevant to the stakeholders including courts.ie, which provides a strong footfall of stakeholders.• Ensure that a feedback loop from all stakeholders is part of the process.

We will apply the actions mentioned in chapter 4 for effective internal communications to the Modernisation Programme internal communications also.

96% of respondents to our external communications survey indicated that they want to receive information on the Modernisation Programme through various channels. To support change and reform communications, we will develop briefing notes, articles and presentations for the Senior Management Team and Heads of Reform, to ensure consistent messaging across all stakeholders. We will also tailor the content of our internal bulletins for sharing with external audiences through relevant stakeholder platforms, the Courts.ie newsfeed, and on social media.

As we progress with our communications and stakeholder engagement four stage process to change and reform as mentioned above, we will ensure that feedback is received from all stakeholders. We will use this feedback to constantly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our change communications.

8. Evaluation and Measurement

We are at the start of our conversation with internal and external stakeholders. We are relatively new to this space, but we hope to build on the recent surveys to expand into more qualitative and quantitative feedback and research. Regular engagement through methods such as user groups, further surveys and focus groups, will help to measure and continuously improve our communications.

To evaluate and measure our progress through this four-year plan we are looking to the Barcelona Principles 3.0⁶, broadly adopted as best practice by the communications industry, to guide us. Over the duration of this strategy we will start measuring our communications by:

- I. Setting Measurable Goals and revisiting them throughout the communications campaign/ journey to reflect on progress.
- II. Identifying Outputs, Outcomes and potential Impact using tools, tracking methods, KPIs, and benchmarks etc
- III. Ensuring our communication measurement and evaluation are rooted in integrity and transparency to drive learning and insights.
 - We will ensure integrity, honesty, openness and ethical practices continues to be at the core of our messaging and channels. This includes upholding data privacy regulations such as GDPR, and data ethics.
 - Our measurement practices will be transparent, valid, and replicable.
 - We will use measurement and evaluation to drive insights and learning. We will also focus on insights that can inform strategic thinking and evidence-based decisions.
 - We will learn from both success and failure.

We will produce a progress report on this strategy at the halfway stage. The report will track the goals and actions as set-out herein and how stakeholder feedback has impacted. We will take the opportunity to reflect on lessons learnt and identify any relevant adaptations needed to the strategy.

⁶ Levine B (2020), *Barcelona Principles 3.0*, AMEC, International Association to the measurement and evaluation of communications. Available from <https://amecorg.com/2020/07/barcelona-principles-3-0/>

Appendix 1 - Summary of Key Actions

In summary to achieve our two main goals under this strategy of applying we will undertake:

Actions (Inputs and Outputs)	Timeline	Outcomes	Impact
1. Create a working group comprising those responsible for internal communications and agree <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. to co-ordinate communications b. consistent approach to the creation of engaging content and of tracking and evaluating communications c. to the two main goals detailed in this strategy d. to adopting the Style Guide, including plain language guidelines, colour palette and templates consistently through all communications. 	2021	Internal communications are more consistent, effective, efficient, relevant and easier to understand. Reduction in the volumes of email.	Internal stakeholders feel better informed and are more aware of updates across the organisation.
2. Upgrade our internal communications tools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. to produce more visually appealing and dynamic content b. to allow for direct targeting and tailoring of information for specific segments of the organisation c. including measurement methods to track engagement and improve. 	2021	Internal communications are easier to understand, are constantly improved and targeted, resulting in less reliance on whole-of-organisation emails.	Improved levels of internal engagement, with colleagues empowered to better engage with their stakeholders.
3. Launch and promote the Courts Service Style Guide complete with plain language guidelines and templates to support and empower everyone across the organisation who develop communication materials.	2021	Internal communications are easier to understand and have a consistent look and feel.	Stakeholders can easily and more quickly identify Courts Service communications.
4. Trial a Communications Officer programme to establish a communications network across the information to improve the flow of information.	2021	Communications network established across the organisation	Improved flow of information across all stakeholders.
5. Upgrade CS Connect platform and support regular updating of content.	2021-2022	A go to resource for internal communications established	



6. Use multiple channels for communicating with colleagues.	Ongoing	Increase in the frequency of the messages	
7. Collaborate with external stakeholders to: a. directly engage with their users to inform the development of our information and specifically improvements to courts.ie b. agree a regular supply of information to their channels.	Ongoing	Improved content and user journeys for our stakeholders	Better engagement with stakeholders leading to improved stakeholder experience.
8. Initiate website accessibility research and implementation project.	2021 - 2022	Improved quality of our information for all stakeholders	Increased engagement with a wider range of stakeholders.
9. Initiate a research project to improve the user journey on courts.ie with a view to implementation in 2022.	2021- 2022	Courts.ie is easier to navigate	
10. Develop a social media policy for the organisation and ensure a more consistent approach on social media and the website	2021	More effective and efficient use of our information	
11. As an extension of the Style Guide Project, pilot and evaluate an 'easy to read' signage project.	2021- 2022	Stakeholders are more comfortable navigating the courts estate	Court experience less daunting for stakeholders.
12. Communications and stakeholder engagement will be supported by plans which are goal and purpose orientated with a focus on inputs, outcomes and impact. Tools to support this approach will be shared across the organisation.	Ongoing	Stakeholders have a better understanding of why and how we're communicating with them.	Better engagement leading to improved stakeholder experience.
13. Share and promote the use of public sector guidelines for the development of public consultations.	Ongoing	Improved engagement of stakeholders through consultation	Stakeholder feedback making a difference and leading to improved experience
14. Initiate a key speaker programme for mobilisation across the organisation including national and international events over the lifetime of this strategy.	2021- 2022	Expanded reach and profile across a wider range of stakeholders	Improved understanding of our services
15. Improve, through digital solutions, how we deliver public awareness	2021 -	Increased number of stakeholders	Improved stakeholder



initiatives.	2023	engaging	experience of the Courts
16. Organise internal committee to implement commemorative activities for 2020	2021 – 2022		
17. Empower and support teams across the organisation through workshops to use the tools to ensure communication plans for modernisation projects a) are goal and purpose focused b) include stakeholder mapping across the four-stage communications process of awareness, understanding, engagement, and action c) incorporate a feedback loop from stakeholders.	Ongoing	Stakeholders are brought through the change journey effectively and efficiently. Constant improvement of our communications tools, channels and processes.	Stakeholders are better prepared for change and in a position to embrace the change, leading to improved experiences.
18. Share Modernisation Programme information through multiple channels relevant to the stakeholders, including internal channels such as the Communications Officer network and through managers to teams.	Ongoing	Better quality of information reaching wider range of stakeholders	Better stakeholder experience of our services.
19. We will follow the guidelines detailed in this strategy in how we measure and monitor communications, and will commit to a progress report on this strategy in 2023.	2021 – 2023	Deeper and more critical understanding of the benefits of communications activities.	Ongoing improved quality of engagement with stakeholders and their overall experience of the Courts Service.

