

## Courts Service Board Meeting Minutes

### Minutes of the meeting of the Courts Service Board 26<sup>th</sup> September 2024

#### Present:

- The Hon. Ms. Justice Elizabeth Dunne, Chairperson of Courts Service Board
- The Hon. Mr. Justice David Barniville, Board Member
- The Hon. Mr. Justice Seamus Woulfe, Board Member.
- The Hon. Ms. Justice Tara Burns, Board Member
- The Hon. Mr. Justice Tony O'Connor, Board Member
- The Hon. Ms. Justice Patricia Ryan, Board Member
- His Honour Judge Keenan Johnson, Board Member
- His Honour Judge Paul Kelly, Board Member
- Ms. Angela Denning, Board Member
- Mr. Stuart Gilhooly, Board Member
- Mr. Noel Beecher, Board Member
- Ms. Rachel Woods, Board Member
- Ms. Sarah Benson, Board Member
- Mr. Derek Bunyan, Board Member
- Mr. Sean Guerin, Board Member

#### Apologies

- Judge Alan Mitchell, Board Member
- Mr. Owen Reidy, Board Member

#### Also in attendance

- The Hon Ms. Justice Caroline Costello, Observer
- Ms. Annika Stephan, Data Protection
- Ms. Emer D'Arcy, Head of Strategy and Reform
- Mr. Tom Ward, Head of Operations
- Mr Owen Harrison, Head of Digital and Data
- Mr. John Cleere, Head of Corporate Services
- Ms Maura Howe, Head of Communications
- Ms Nina Brennan, Principal Registrar, High Court
- Ms. Denise Cole, Human Resources,
- Ms. Lisa Scott, Secretary to the Board
- Ms. Helen Thornton, Secretariate
- Ms. Rachel Murphy, Secretariate

A Quorum was reached.

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### 1. Minutes of the meeting 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024

The minutes were approved.

#### Meeting actions and Decisions

Action No.	Report	Action	Update/Status	Responsibility	Due date
CSB 29/2024	47/2024	Ms Denning outlined that she would direct the Head of C&D to discuss the terms of reference with President Kelly and Judge Alan Mitchell.	For action	Ms Angela Denning (CEO) /Ms Nina Brennan	As soon as possible
CSB 30/2024	48/2024	Board to be informed by Building Committee when the report is submitted to Galway County Council	For action	Chairperson of Building Committee	When the report is submitted
CSB 31/2024	49/2024	Disability Review- Biannual updates will be provided- first update on actions will be provided to the Board in the Q1 CEO report in 2025.	For Action	Ms Angela Denning CEO	Q1 2025
CSB 32/2024	51/2024	Ms Scott provided an update in relation to official complaints and undertook to circulate information in relation to complaints which was not included in the presentation circulated.	For Action	Secretary	As soon as possible
CSB 33/2024	51/2024	Report on unanswered calls will be provided to the	For Action	Secretary	Q1 2024

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		Board in the new year			
CSB 34/2024	53/2024	Publication of information on the Modernisation Programme on the website and the judicial knowledge hub.	For Action	Ms Darcy and Ms Howe	As soon as possible
CSB 35/2024	54/2024	Ms Howe to provide an update in relation to internal communications for December meeting (following discussion of the results with each of the engagement groups)	For Action	Ms Maura Howe	December Board meeting
CSB 36/2024	54/2024	In relation to Healthy Places to Work, Ms Cole is to consider how best to elevate awareness and communications about Spectrum Life and the available supports	For Action	Ms Denise Cole	Update to be provided at January meeting
CSB 37/2024	54/2024	Mr Harrison to provide information on E-Codex	For Action	Mr Owen Harrison	As soon as possible
<b>Meeting Decisions</b>					
CSB D09/2024	A working group to examine Child Care is to be established and chaired by the Head of Circuit and District Operations.				
CSB D10/2024	The Terms of Reference of the Family Law Court Development Committee were signed off by the Board.				

## 2. Matters arising

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No matters arising.

The Chair welcomed two new Board members- Mr Sean Guerin, Chair of the Bar Council, and Ms Justice Caroline Costello who attended this as an observer, pending her forthcoming appointment as President of the Court of Appeal.

### 3. Committee Updates

#### Family Law Court Development Committee

##### - Options Paper in relation to Child Care (Report CSB 47/2024)

Ms. Angela Denning presented the report as circulated, for decision, highlighting the following:

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 2024, the Courts Service Board requested that the Family Law Court Development Committee consider the inclusion of Child Care in its Terms of Reference (Action CSB 17/2024). The request was made in the context of a discussion on the Family Courts Bill 2022 and the development of the Dublin Family Courts building, which will house the Dublin Family and Child care courts.

It was noted that if Child Care is to come within the Committee Terms of Reference, then the ramifications of that decision would need to be considered. It was noted that the Committee may need to appoint members with expertise in that area (e.g. persons working in TUSLA).

It was suggested that the Board may wish to consider setting up another Committee specifically to deal with this area. Other Board members indicated that given the crossover between Family Law and Child Care consideration should be given to including Child Care within the remit of the Committee.

The Chairperson requested that Ms Benson take this back to the Committee to consider and this item is to be placed on the agenda for the next Board meeting. (Action CSB 17/2024)

It was agreed that this options paper would be prepared for the consideration by the Board.

Ms Denning presented the four options (and the advantages and disadvantages of each option as set out in the Report) as follows:

*Option 1- The Terms of Reference of the Family Law Court Development Committee be amended to include Child care.*

*Option 2- The Courts Service Board establishes a new Committee to deal with Child care*

*Option 3- The Courts Service Board establishes a sub-Committee of the Family Law Court Development Committee to deal with Child care*

*Option 4- Do nothing (at Board level)*

Ms Denning outlined that option 4 includes the decision to set up a working group, chaired by the Head of Circuit and District Operations, to deal specifically with Child Care. The Head of Circuit and District

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Operations would be a member of both the working group and the Family Law Court Development Committee. The working group could prepare an issues paper for the attention of the Board if significant issues arose. It was noted that the involvement of the Judiciary in the group would be important, and they should be permanent members of the group.

It was noted by Board members that Option 3 presents significant challenges. There was a discussion regarding the fact that the establishment of a committee to deal with a specific area of operations is quite unusual. It was noted that the Family Law Court Development Committee is the only such Committee of the Board.

The view of the Board was that Option 4 is the preferred option of the Board and a working group is to be established by the Head of Circuit and District Operations. (Decision CSB 9/2024) Ms Denning outlined that she would direct the Head of C&D to discuss the terms of reference with President Kelly and Judge Alan Mitchell. (Action CSB 29/2024).

In view of the decision, the Terms of Reference of the Family Law Court Development Committee were signed off by the Board. (Decision CSB 10/2024).

### - **Audit and Risk Committee Report – Oral Update**

Mr. Noel Beecher gave an oral update.

Four meetings have been held to date in 2024, one of which was the joint meeting with the Finance Committee.

The C&AG year-end report was reviewed. A meeting was held with the C&AG, and the C&AG were very complimentary of the work of the Courts Service. An update on the risk register has been delivered at each Board meeting by Mr John Cleere. Audit reports have been presented to the Committee. It was outlined that Owen Harrison also presented on Cybersecurity.

The report on the effectiveness of the internal audit function was presented to the Committee. No major issues were highlighted. Mr Beecher highlighted the discussions about the governance documents that apply to the Courts Service. These include the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, the Corporate Governance Standard for the Civil Service and the Oversight Agreement with the Department of Justice. Mr Beecher outlined the role of the Board and the Chief Executive in relation to the Report to the Minister on compliance with the Code of Practice. Mr Beecher outlined that a members-only meeting would be held on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2024 to discuss the applicability of the Code of Practice to the Courts Service.

Ms Denning outlined that she has discussed the matter with the Department of Justice. The Department have agreed that the Oversight agreement and the Performance Delivery agreement would be reviewed to clarify the wording of those documents.

Mr Beecher outlined that a further report will be provided to the Board after the next Committee meeting.

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### - Building Committee Report (Report CSB 48/2024)

The Hon. Mrs. Justice Tara Burns presented the report as circulated and discussed issues raised at the Committee meetings held on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2024 and 13<sup>th</sup> June 2024. Ms Justice Burns outlined that Galway courthouse has been a key focus of the Committee since April 2024. The various options that were discussed at the Committee in relation to Galway were outlined.

The development of a court usage report was discussed. It has not yet been finalised but it was noted that it will be a valuable tool for both the executive and the judiciary. Ms Justice Burns outlined that this report is presently before the Data Governance Group. Ms Denning outlined the significant work that is taking place in relation to Data retention, which will also free up space in courthouses.

The situation with regard to the proposed disposal of Manorhamilton courthouse and the enquires from Leitrim County Council were also discussed.

A query arose in relation to the submission of the report by the Courts Service to Galway County Council. Ms Justice Burns discussed the appointment of a new County manager and the consequent delays in submitting the report. Ms Justice Burns outlined the options considered in relation to repurposing the building. It was agreed that the Board would be informed when the report is submitted (Action CSB30/2024).

It was requested that Portlaoise Courthouse be placed on the Building Committee agenda. Ms Justice Burns confirmed that this is presently before the Building Committee. Ms Denning outlined that Portlaoise is not included in the present iteration of the National Development Plan.

There was also a discussion in relation to the space available in the Childrens Court building in Smithfield. Ms Denning outlined some of the issues with that building.

There was a short discussion in relation to the availability of Bar Council buildings in Smithfield which have been used as courtrooms in the past. Ms Denning outlined that there has been a visit to the building. No decisions can be made until after the Budget on 1<sup>st</sup> October.

### - Finance Committee – appointment of Chair of Committee

The Chairperson nominated President Barniville as Chair of the Finance Committee. The role of Chairperson of the Committee became vacant upon the retirement of President George Birmingham in July.

#### **4. Internal Audit Report - Review of the Courts Service's Compliance with Designated Sections of the Disability Act 2005 (Report CSB 49.2024)**

Ms. Angela Denning presented the report as circulated highlighting the following:

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A review of the Courts Service's compliance with the applicable provisions of the Disability Act 2005 was requested by the Chief Executive Officer, following queries by Board members as to the Service's compliance therewith.

Ms Denning highlighted that the Disability Act 2005 places a statutory obligation on public service providers to support access to services and facilities for people with disabilities and also to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities. In particular, the Courts Service is required to ensure that as far as is practicable:

- public buildings used by the Service are accessible to persons with disabilities and in the case of heritage buildings, that persons with disabilities can access them with ease and dignity.
- that the provision of services to persons without or with disabilities is integrated and that assistance is provided where requested to persons with disabilities seeking to access its services:
- all communications provided to persons with disabilities should be in a manner/format which they can easily access or understand.

The Disability Act also requires the Courts Service to appoint an Access Officer(s) to support persons with disabilities seeking to avail of services provided. The Service is also required to publish its complaints procedures for persons seeking to make a complaint under the Disability Act and appoint independent inquiry officers to investigate complaints made under the Act.

Ms Denning highlighted that the Service must take all reasonable measures to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities. In this regard, 3% of the Service's workforce should constitute people with disabilities, with the requirement increasing to 6% by 2025. Ms Denning outlined that the Service is required to report annually to the National Disability Authority (NDA) on its compliance with this obligation. The review also noted that while different Directorates have operational responsibility for ensuring compliance with the sections of the Disability Act 2005 relevant to their business functions, no one Directorate has overall responsibility for monitoring and reporting on compliance with the provisions of the Act.

Ms Denning highlighted the requirements under section 25 and 29 and the assessment of accessibility of court buildings. Many buildings are not independently accessible but some of these are heritage buildings. Very few buildings are universally accessible i.e. persons with physical disabilities can access all of the public rooms in the buildings without assistance. In terms of the website, the report highlights that adequate pre-visit information is not available. Some fire evacuation plans did not include a section on evacuation of disabled court users.

In relation to accessibility of services and information, Ms Denning highlighted the commitment of the Service to Plain English information, and the ongoing work with the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA). All Senior Management Team members have taken the training. Accessibility is a key

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consideration in the development and design of new ICT systems, but the report finds this should be documented.

Ms Denning outlined that the Access Officer is presently Ms Denise Cole, Head of Human Resources. In relation to the number of staff with disabilities, while no specific recruitment has been undertaken, 7% of staff in the Courts Service have self-declared as having a disability. It was noted that approximately 260 requests to the access officer were received last year.

Ms Denning outlined that there is a draft policy on Assistance Animals with the Courts Service Inclusion group for finalisation and it will then be before the Senior Management Team for sign-off in coming weeks. The report also highlights the need for training of staff in relation to the use of the loop system.

Ms Denning highlighted that a major issue remains accessibility of buildings and the recommendations will be called out in the next Courts Service submission to the National Development Plan.

The report makes thirteen recommendations and responsibility for each recommendation has been assigned. Ms Denning said that Ms Maura Howe, Head of Communications, is the person responsible for the monitoring and rollout of the recommendations. Updates will be provided to the Senior Management Team. Biannual updates on implementation of the recommendations will be provided to the Board as part of the CEO Report going forward.

The complexity of court forms was discussed. Ms Denning outlined that work is being done as part of the modernisation plan to simplify court forms. This is being piloted in District Court in Dublin and Cork in relation to Family Law. The District and Circuit Court Rules Committee have been engaged.

A query was raised in relation to Irish Sign Language interpretation. Ms. Denning outlined the work that had been done in the last year in relation to the provision of services for a member of the Bar.

There was a discussion about accessibility in terms of the website and the need for alternative arrangements/workarounds such a remote appointments or attendance is required where buildings are inaccessible. Particular accessibility challenges in certain courthouses were discussed.

It was noted that the Access Officer's role is not described. The issue in relation to evacuation plans was highlighted as a key concern of Board members. Ms Denning undertook to bring these matters to the attention of the Head of Communications, and the need for timelines was requested.

The next update will be provided to the Board in the Q1 CEO report in 2025. (Action CSB 31/2024).

### **5. New legislation impacting the Courts Service (oral update)**

Ms Denning provided an update in relation to forthcoming and recently commenced legislation including Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023; the Family Courts Bill, developments in Road Traffic legislation and Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act 2024. The challenges of implementing the new road traffic legislation in the absence of additional judges was highlighted.

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Ms Denning outlined the constructive engagement with Department of Justice in relation to forthcoming legislation which will assist the Courts Service in the planning and implementation of new legislation.

In relation to the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act Ms Denning outlined that representations have been made to the Department in relation to the timeline for the review of persons who are Wards of Court. The survey of lay committees was noted.

There was a short discussion in relation to applications for restraining orders under the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023, the applicable fee and the training provided to staff.

### 6. Bi-annual updates

- **PQs, Representations and Protected Disclosures (report CSB 51/2024)**

Pursuant to Action CSB 20/22, the Board requested a periodic update on the number of Parliamentary Questions to the Courts Service and a summary of the topics raised. Ms. Lisa Scott presented the Report as circulated and provided an overview of the parliamentary questions, queries from Oireachtas members, formal complaints and an overview of the operation of the protected disclosures policy. Ms Scott noted that while the total number of parliamentary questions has reduced, the number of representations from Oireachtas members has increased. It was noted that work is being done in the Office of the CEO to improve data available in relation to these. Ms Scott provided an update in relation to official complaints and undertook to circulate information in relation to complaints which was not included in the presentation circulated. (Action CSB 32/2024)

A query arose in relation to unanswered calls to court offices. Ms Denning outlined that a report can be provided. The report on unanswered calls will be provided to the Board in the new year (Action CSB 33/2024)

- **Data Protection – (Report CSB 52/2024)**

Ms. Annika Stephan, presented the Report (per Action CSB 19/24) as circulated highlighting the following:

In relation to Freedom of Information requests, 134 requests have been received to date in 2024. It appears that the requests will surpass those received in 2023. Ms Stephens outlined process for internal review. It was outlined that very few requests for internal review are received, the process of appeal to the Information Commissioner was outlined. A breakdown of applications by applicant and by directorate was provided. Examples of requests received were provided by Ms Stephan.

In relation to Data Protection, Ms Stephan provided an update in relation to the increasing number of subject access requests and outlined the type of requests received. A large number relate to CCTV requests. An update in relation to data protection breaches was provided. Leading causes of data breaches were outlined. An update was given in relation to the “ROPA”- Register of Processing Activities, which is a requirement under GDPR. This exercise last took place in 2019. This is a key deliverable for the Unit in 2024.

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### 7. Healthy Places to Work Update (Report CSB 50.2024)

This item was presented as part of Ms Denise Cole's Senior Management Team update (below at item 9).

### 8. Modernisation Programme Update (and Strategy and Reform Directorate Update) (report CSB 53/2024)

Ms. Emer Darcy provided a progress report on the Modernisation Programme and update on the work of the Strategy and Reform Directorate. Ms Darcy highlighted that the Courts Service is currently in the "Transform" phase of the programme. Ms Darcy highlighted the progress made in relation to the implementation of the recommendations under the Review of the Administration of Civil Justice (as known as the "Kelly review"). In relation to Family Law, the work on simplifying Court forms was highlighted. There has been a reduction of the number of forms from 40 to 9 during the pilots and positive feedback has been received from the judiciary, staff and the court users. Ms Darcy acknowledged the award of the Civil Service "Excellence in Innovation" Award for the simplification of family law information.

In relation to Criminal Law, the work on data transfer was discussed. There are various groups looking at different aspects of this work. It was noted that this work is primarily led by the Department of Justice. The work on post-trial information and thank you cards for jurors was highlighted. Pre-trial information videos have also been developed.

Ms Darcy outlined the significant work in relation to customer service and noted that further work done in relation to this will be dependent on the budget.

In terms of Learning and Development, significant work has been done on a curriculum for court staff. This is in response to a risk highlighted on the Corporate Risk Register. A new induction programme has been launched. A discussion took place in relation to training of Court staff and the turnover of court staff.

A query arose in relation to the publication of information on the Modernisation Programme on the website and the judicial knowledge hub. Ms Darcy and Ms Howe undertook to examine this (Action 34/2024).

Ms Darcy provided an update in relation to the Strategy and Reform directorate. She highlighted that the work in relation of the Legislation and Rules Unit, and the proactive engagement of the Unit with Departments in relation to new legislation.

### 9. SMT Strategic update paper (report CSB 54/2024)

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Members of the SMT presented the respective areas of the report as circulated and in doing so provided updates on key highlights, emerging challenges and future goals for each Directorate.

**In relation to Superior Court Operations**, Mr. Tom Ward highlighted the rollout of UCMS in the High Court as a key achievement in the Directorate over the last year. In relation to the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act (ADMC Act), Mr Ward highlighted the communication and engagement between the Wards of Court and General Solicitors Office and committees in wardship. In relation to applications for discharge under the ADCM Act, Mr Ward outlined the significant work in the Wards of Court office to support this. Sixty-two wards have been discharged to date, with 110 applications pending. The High Court has received made 935 orders under its inherent jurisdiction since the commencement of the Act.

In relation to Probate, Mr Ward outlined the immediate challenges are the ongoing delays in processing applications and provided an update on the development of e- Probate. Mr Ward said that waiting times have improved but they need to be reduced further.

Recruitment, selection and retention of staff was highlighted as a key challenge in the directorate. The training of new staff is a significant challenge in the High Court in particular.

In terms of future goals, embedding UCMS (the unified case management system) across the Superior Court jurisdictions was highlighted, as well as the proposed introduction of e-filing. The creation of one Civil Office for Dublin, encompassing Superior Courts and Circuit and District Courts Court offices is also to be considered.

In relation to challenges, Mr Ward outlined that the challenge of the 3-year deadline in relation to the discharge of persons from wardship under the ADCM Act was highlighted.

**In relation to Circuit and District Operations**, Mr Ward outlined the challenges of supporting the implementation of the ADCM Act in the Circuit Courts, including provision of information to applicants and training for staff.

On the Criminal side, Mr Ward outlined that an application has been developed for responses to jury summons and very positive feedback has been received. There has been engagement with the local authorities in relation to the register of electors. The progress made in relation to reducing the arrears in District Court summonses was highlighted. This backlog was a direct result of the restrictions during Covid-19 restrictions.

Mr Ward highlighted that the District and Circuit courts are experiencing the same challenges as Superior Courts in terms of retention and training of staff. Webinars have taken place in relation to new pieces of legislation.

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In relation to the Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act 2014, Mr Ward outlined that there were two cases stated in the last year. One of these cases has resulted in the pause of the issuing of enforcement notices. The other case stated is pending.

In relation new legislation, Mr Ward outlined the challenges this presents for the directorate. In relation to other challenges, a new customer service model will be developed as electronic offerings improve and the requirement for additional data will be pivotal.

## ICT, Digital and Data Update

Mr. Owen Harrison presented the report as circulate highlighting:

- The ICT “Customer Assessment” performed and significant improvements were noted. The results will feed into the next ICT strategy.
- Video Courtroom Expansion- 160 courtrooms are now enabled. Usage will be monitored and reported.
- Wi-Fi Project- W-iFi has been rolled out across the estate, save for the CCJ.
- Digital Dictation Project- Mr Harrison noted that a contract has just been signed and it will be rolled out in the coming weeks.
- Recording and Publication of Supreme Court Video- Testing is underway in this regard.
- Security- dedicated cybersecurity team is in place. Mature posture.
- Business Continuity / Disaster Recovery- it was noted that ICT have fully rebuilt primary and secondary infrastructure.
- Network 2.0 – A major upgrade is in planning. Network-based security features will be in place.
- DAR Modernisation – This is presently in planning- physical security will be an element of this. Soundsystem vendor supports will be reviewed and centralised.
- Sound System Modernisation – This is also in planning. Analysis of audio quality will be undertaken and an upgrade will take place.
- Print Service Model Upgrade
- Remote Courts- Pexip has been used to date. Microsoft teams is being explored. It was noted that there is currently some instability which has delayed this.
- Auto-transcription services – this has been scoped but it is a complex issue. At the moment, this is only at eighty per cent accuracy.
- Unified Case Management System (UCMS) is being rolled across the jurisdictions, beginning with civil and family. There are major benefits for staff, but also parties and the judiciary once the portals are active. Mr Harrison noted that Easter 2026 is the estimated launch date for UCMS crime. Significant work has taken place with the Department of Justice and the streamlining of processes e.g. legal aid.

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- Courts.ie website revamp project- An assessment has taken place and significant work is required in terms of searchability, accessibility and search engine optimisation. A group is being established by Mr Harrison and Ms Howe, Head of Communications, to review this in 2024.
- A Data Maturity Assessment has taken place and there has been a significant expansion of data available in terms of reports available.  
Data Retention Project has been initiated over the summer vacation period in 2024.
- Data Sharing (Criminal Justice Operational Hub)- Mr Harrison noted that court list data is being sent to Oberstown. The provision of court outcomes is also underway.
- Data in Action- training is available for staff in terms of utilisation of dashboards. Training will also be available to the judiciary.

A query was raised in relation to the Criminal Justice operational hub and data. Mr Harrison outlined that one of the issues is the lack of a common identifier across the criminal justice system.

A discussion took place in relation to the taking of evidence and service of documents under EU regulations and the use of E-CODEX. Mr Harrison to provide a note to the Board in relation to this project. (Action 37/2024)

A query took place in relation to oversight and audit. The role of internal audit was outlined.

In relation to evidence display, a query arose in relation to the ability of barristers and practitioners to easily display evidence. Mr Harrison outlined that solutions are under consideration. There was a discussion in relation to the development of a practitioners' portal for crime and it was confirmed that this is within scope of UCMS crime.

## Corporate Service Directorate

Mr. John Cleere presented the report as circulated.

In relation to Court Funds, the office manages €2.5bn in Court Funds annually. In relation to ADMC, Mr Cleere outline the efforts made in advance of the discharge of persons from wardship in this regard.

In terms of Financial Management it was noted that the Appropriation Accounts 2023 & C&AG Audit – Account submitted on time, working to achieve an unqualified audit. The work on estimates 2025 is complete and was previously considered by Finance Committee & Board. The continuous engagement between Finance and the Department of Justice and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform was noted.

In relation to Estates, Mr Cleere acknowledged the challenge of significant underfunding. The framework of Guiding Principles was finalized by the Building Committee and presented to the Board earlier in 2024. An update was given in relation to the position in Galway. An update was provided in relation to the scoping exercise for facilities management and planned preventative maintenance.

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In relation to sustainability, Mr Cleere noted that significant projects are underway including the Boiler replacement projects in Phoenix House, Listowel and Belmullet and the lighting upgrade project. The pathfinder project in Ennis and Sligo was also discussed.

Mr Cleere noted that updates on the Dublin Family Courts PPP have previously been outlined to the Board.

In relation to Business Continuity Planning (BCP) plans are in place and testing is underway.

In terms of emerging challenges, the requirement for a supplementary estimate was highlighted. The profile of the estate is a considerable challenge. The ambitions under the National Development Plan were highlighted but the lack of funding is a serious issue. If there is a new Government, there will be a new NDP. Challenges under the Climate Action plan, sustainability reporting and green public procurement were also outlined.

In relation to risk, Mr Cleere highlighted the key risks on the Corporate Risk Register.

In relation to sustainability, there was a request for comparison between the Courts Service and other national leads across the Public Service. Ms Denning outlined that this may not be available. Mr Cleere is to discuss this with Ms Una Murphy, Head of Sustainability (Action xx/2024)

### Communications and Media Unit

Ms. Maura Howe reflected on the development of the Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy 2021 – 2025 and reflected on progress under the Strategy. Two Strategic Communications Goals were highlighted:

- a) A user-centric approach- delivering through collaboration and easy to understand, consistent and relevant content.
- b) An effective and efficient approach – whereby our communications enable effective engagement, and we measure the outputs, outcomes and impact of our work.

Ms Howe outlined that the strategy aims to transform Courts Service Communications across 4 key areas.

1. Internal Communications e.g. style guides
2. External Communications e.g. social media growth and public awareness, events and engagement with schools, civic society forums. Work has been undertaken to evaluate communications.
3. Media
4. Change and reform Communications.

In relation to future challenges, Ms Howe outlined the Unit will use stakeholder feedback to inform development of next communications and stakeholder engagement strategy. She acknowledged the need

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for grow public awareness and understanding of the role of the Courts Service and the modernisation of the Court system. In relation to accessibility, the use of Plain English and the tailored plain language course was discussed. The website upgrade will be necessary to improve accessibility for users.

In terms of internal communications, a query arose in relation to communication channels between the judiciary, Board and the executive. Ms Howe outlined that a review had taken place in relation to this, that the results would be discussed with each of the engagement groups and an update will be provided for the December meeting (Action 35/2024). It was requested that the publication of updates on the Knowledge Hub/website could be considered.

## **Human Resources and Healthy Place to Work Update**

Ms. Denise Cole presented the report as circulated highlighting the primary challenge of funding on the payroll and the impact of this on recruitment. It was noted that the average FTE for YTD for 2024 is 1,266 versus 1,243 for 2023. The other significant challenge is retaining people in a post pandemic changed working world with full employment. Ms Cole highlighted the growth of FTE vs Judicial Numbers and JPWG; the length of service per grade reflecting a buoyant labour market (53% of staff are in grade 3 years or less); the age profile of staff; the challenges of requiring staff to work on site which is not as flexible as other areas of the civil and public service.

In relation to Healthy Places to Work, Ms Cole outlined the work under the People and Organisation Strategy in terms of the Healthy Place to work project, and the Development and Implementation of Courts Service Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan.

A discussion took place in relation to the challenges faced by staff at public counters. Ms Cole outlined the provision of Spectrum Life App and the provision of counselling through the App. The Civil Service Employee Assistance Service may also be availed of by staff. Information is provided to staff by a designated officer in Human Resources who has a planned programme of work. In response to a query raised by a Board member, Ms Cole is to consider how best to elevate awareness and communications about Spectrum Life and the available supports (Action CSB 36/2024)

## **10. AOB**

Ms Denning requested the permission of the Board to write to Mr Ciaran O'Connor, OPW State Architect, on behalf of the Board on the occasion of his retirement.

There was a discussion about the format and agenda of the September board meetings, Ms Scott invited Board members to provide her with feedback.

There was a brief discussion about the mode of Board meetings (physical or virtual) meetings going forward. This is for further consideration by the Chair.

Next meeting 4<sup>th</sup> November 2024