

**OPENING STATEMENT**

I thank the Chairman for the invitation to appear before the committee in my capacity as Accounting Officer for the Courts Service, Vote 22, and I look forward to discussing any aspect of the Vote with you and the members of the committee.

I am pleased to report that a clean audit report has been provided by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) on the 2013 Appropriation Account. Overall the Vote was managed successfully and within budget at year end. A surrender balance of €515,170 was recorded on the Vote.

The Courts Service is responsible for the management and administration of the courts. As you are aware the administration of justice is a matter for the judiciary and, in accordance with the constitutional independence of the judiciary and the provisions of the Courts Service Act, is outside the scope of the functions of the Courts Service. You will appreciate therefore that in my discussions with you to-day I am precluded from commenting on any matter relating to the exercise by a judge of his or her judicial functions or on any matter relating to the exercise of quasi-judicial functions by an officer of the court. I am also, of course, precluded from commenting on matters of Government policy.

Since establishment, the Courts Service has worked to ensure that the courts operate effectively and efficiently, that the use of available resources is optimised; that value for money is achieved and the best possible service is provided to court users.

Since the Vote was last considered by the Committee in 2010 the Courts Service has seen very severe reductions in funding and staff numbers. In this regard the Courts Service has worked tirelessly to introduce a broad

range of challenges and reforms to bring about savings for the Exchequer while maintaining access to justice and services for the public. The Service has diligently cut expenditure and, through proactive management, increased court fees resulting in a significant contribution to the Government recovery programme. The net cost to the Exchequer of operating the Courts reduced by €41m. or 41% since 2008 from €99m. to €57.8m. During this period day to day running costs as represented by non pay current expenditure decreased by €19.3m or 44%; there was an 18% reduction in Pay and a 73% reduction in Capital. Court fee income in 2008 was €39m whereas the fee income target for 2014 is €48.5m - an increase of 19%. Indeed the fee income for 2014 is forecasted to exceed the target.

The Courts Service fully accepts and supports the Government's ongoing requirement for savings to be achieved and reforms introduced in the delivery of public services. In this regard the Courts Service has in place robust financial control measures across the organisation to ensure that expenditure is kept to an absolute minimum, is incurred only where it is absolutely necessary and unavoidable and that value for money is achieved.

Over the past six years the Courts Service has been to the fore in the introduction of a range of transformational changes which have delivered very significant savings. Indeed given the severity of the funding and staffing reductions in the Courts Service which saw a 16% reduction in staff numbers, double the Civil Service average and significantly greater than the public service average of 10%, it would not have been possible to maintain services without introducing a range of efficiency and productivity measures across all aspects of Court Service structures, administration and operation while maintaining access to justice.

The modernisation programme has included significant structural and administrative reform with the completion of the combined court office project; the rationalisation of stand alone offices and the regional management structure. We have also carried out a review and rationalisation of court venues which through the hearing of cases in larger venues has freed up judicial and staff time.

We have also worked to introduce a substantial programme of legislative and process reform to enable improved operation of the courts and efficiency in deployment of court resources.

The implementation of our ICT Programme has resulted in the optimisation of courtroom and court support technology including the roll out of DAR to all court jurisdictions and venues, extended use of video link and video conferencing which has resulted in significant cross justice sector efficiencies and the development of case management systems for the debt claims on line project, the new Insolvency Service, the Court of Appeal and Supreme Court and ICT support for the new Fines legislation.

There has also been increased staff flexibility in a number of areas such as DAR logging by court registrars, increased in house ICT and legal support, all of which have yielded significant savings.

The increased productivity arising from these measures has enabled the Service to support a 7% increase in the number of judges (not including the judges of the Court of Appeal) and an estimated increase of 10% in court sitting days in recent years despite reduced staffing and funding. It has also allowed us to initiate an ambitious PPP Programme which will

see the refurbishment of 7 courthouses around the country over the next few years.

However the austerity of recent years has had consequences: –

- investment is required in ICT which, if made, has the potential bring about a transformation in the way the courts operate and achieve significant further savings. In the context of reduced resources and growing workloads, technology offers the best solution to enhancing customer service and delivering improved value for money
- Investment is also required to undertake a number of smaller courthouse capital refurbishment projects and urgent maintenance on courthouses. These works have continued to be deferred due to lack of funding and are now urgently required if the fabric of these buildings is not to be totally compromised and the future of these historic structures is to be safeguarded.
- The prioritisation of court sittings and front line services has resulted in the stripping of back office and support functions which in itself carries operational risks
- The Service has now reached a tipping point in relation to staff numbers and additional staff are required if the Service is to continue to support court sittings as required by the Presidents of the Courts; maintain court services in offices around the country and support government initiatives such as the implementation of the new fines legislation, the new arrangements for the hearing of childcare cases, the new Legal Costs Adjudication regime to be provided for under the Legal Services Bill and the restructuring of the Family Law courts. Just as with the Court of Appeal which

was successfully established on 28<sup>th</sup> October, the successful implementation of these initiatives will require provision of the necessary funding and staffing.

Our priority has always been and will continue to be the provision of front line core court services to support the judiciary and court users. This can only be achieved through the ongoing review of the organisation and the delivery of services and the continued implementation of our change modernisation programme.

The Courts Service Strategic Plan 2014 – 2017 sets out the key priorities for the Courts Service over the next three years. Over the lifetime of the Plan we propose to build on the progress already made in the review and reform of our structures and service delivery to bring about improved services and value for money. We will focus on maximising the use of technology; developing our staff to ensure that they have the necessary legal, technical and management skills and place particular emphasis on the ongoing standardisation and rationalisation of processes and procedures to enable us to achieve significant economies and efficiencies in the delivery of services.

The Courts Service will work to ensure that we continue to improve services to court users, make the courts as accessible as possible and achieve real value for money in the provision of these services.

**THANK YOU**