



An tSeirbhís Chúirteanna
Courts Service

Opening Statement of Angela Denning, CEO of Courts Service

28th September 2021 – Courts and Courthouses

I thank the Chairman for the invitation to appear before the Committee.

The Courts Service is responsible for the management and administration of the Courts in Ireland. The Service has a unique role supporting the third branch of Government and I report to a Board, chaired by the Chief Justice, who are responsible for the determination of policy and for oversight of the implementation of that policy by me and my management team.

The Courts Service was established 21 years ago. At that time we inherited over 240 court venues, many of which had fallen into serious disrepair.

The functions of the Courts Service Board include designation of court venues. The Service's Building Committee, which is a sub-committee of the Board, have responsibilities for the preparation and development of capital building and maintenance programmes and for establishing priorities in relation to the implementation of those programmes.

Our estate currently comprises 103 courthouse venues with 251 courtrooms. Since establishment, the Courts Service has invested over half a billion euro in 70 brand new or refurbished courthouses. Maintenance of court premises is generally provided by the OPW on a reactive basis but funded by the Courts Service.

Regular and planned maintenance of courthouse buildings on the scale necessary to keep the buildings in a good state of repair has not always been possible when limited funding was available. A condition survey of 60 venues was undertaken in 2019 and 2020. The survey found that 83% of the buildings inspected are protected structures with an average age of 162 years since they were built. These findings set some context for our challenge. While we always have ambitions to provide enhanced services there is a limit to what can be achieved with the available resources and what constitutes value for money to the exchequer.

For instance, many of our District Court venues are used only once or twice a month, because the court business in the District does not require more sittings than are provided at present. The location of courthouses are in the main legacy decisions

associated with historic factors. While these venues are extremely valuable to their locality, having these court buildings sitting idle for most of the year is not a good use of public resources.

In counties outside of Dublin, there is generally no issue with the sufficiency of courtrooms. In Dublin, in the short term, courtroom capacity will be a challenge which we expect will be alleviated by the development of a new dedicated family law centre at Hammond Lane.

There is work to be done in some of our older building stock to facilitate access to services for physically disabled people. The question to be considered in retro-fitting these venues is whether the usage of the building justifies the investment. Increased use of technology and remote courts during the pandemic has eased some of the challenges associated with travel to court buildings for vulnerable users, including those with physical disabilities. It is Courts Service policy and practice that all newly constructed and refurbished buildings are fully accessible, provide vulnerable witness suites and dedicated victim support rooms including heritage buildings which otherwise may be exempt in some respects.

The Courts Service values the historic significance of the many heritage buildings it occupies nationwide. Where facilities need to be improved, it has always been the preference to refurbish and extend an existing heritage courthouse so that it can continue in court usage into the future. However, due to either site or building constraints, it is not always possible to provide the full range of facilities on an existing site. In such cases, it is Courts Service policy to hand over the building to the local authority for alternative community use.

One of the 5 “Pillars” of reform under our Modernisation Programme is the provision of a “Modern Estate and Facilities” with a rationalised estate, concentrating court sittings in fewer venues, the development of specialist centres and investment in modern facilities to support court users. It is our ambition to reduce the requirement to attend at court offices and courthouses through the use of improved digital services designed to best serve users. An Estate Strategy will be developed underpinned by data including demographics, case load, distances between courthouses and travel times.

Future decisions about courthouses will be influenced by the National Planning Framework and spatial strategy/policy and by policy on Climate and Environment. We know that given the age of our estate it will be a significant challenge to meet environmental targets. We have established a dedicated Sustainability Unit which has recently been expanded to face the challenge ahead.

Our Estate Strategy will also be guided both by the Family Court Bill which aims to provide regional dedicated family courts and by our experience during the pandemic.

For the past 18 months our aim was and is to protect the health and wellbeing of employees, judges and court users while continuing to provide access to justice. We succeeded in providing a safe environment through the use of a robust Covid-19 safety management programme while adapting quickly and maximising the numbers of cases we could progress within public health guidelines.

Physical distancing requirements in particular had a dramatic effect on our operating environment. The Courts Service has provided in-person and remote facilities throughout the pandemic, with a particular focus on prioritising urgent business and those who are vulnerable, such as victims of domestic abuse.

We dramatically increased the use of videolink to prisons. This has had significant benefits across the justice system as has the introduction of remote courts. To meet the challenges of the future and demand for new means of providing access to justice, we have commenced a €2.2m investment in the installation of video technology to provide 103 video enabled courtrooms in total by year end.

Throughout the pandemic, as part of our strategy to manage footfall in court buildings while ensuring that justice shall be administered in public, media outlets have been facilitated both with priority access to the courtroom and through the provision of links to observe remote courts without needing to leave their offices. They have been the eyes and ears of the public in our courts.

Lastly, Juries are always a priority group in the courts system and we have prioritised their accommodation before and during the pandemic. We have put arrangements in place, sometimes using suitable external venues to ensure that, to date, jurors have been kept safe, and told us they felt safe, while providing this invaluable service to the state.

In summary, the aim of the Courts Service in the coming years is to provide just, user-centric, simplified and timely access to justice. We intend to do this by maintaining the innovation and agility we have demonstrated over the past eighteen months, by collaborating with users and by keeping the needs and requirements of litigants at the centre of everything we do.