

# Modernising the Courts and Tribunals in Northern Ireland



# Contents

Foreword 3

Our Vision 5



# Foreword

An efficient and effective courts and tribunals system is essential in any modern society. It allows people to assert their rights if they have been infringed; to be reassured that allegations of crime will be pursued fairly and openly; and to seek the support of the justice system at key points throughout their lives, should the need arise. We are committed to delivering a high standard of justice within Northern Ireland.

We recognise and respect the different roles that we each have in the justice system: the independent judiciary; Ministerial responsibility for bringing forward policy and legislation; and the Courts and Tribunals Service delivering administration. Nonetheless, we have a shared commitment.

The justice system in Northern Ireland has experience of delivering large-scale projects with the launch of the first integrated Court Operations System in the UK, the roll out of Causeway, an integrated criminal justice data-sharing hub and the opening of Laganside Court Complex. With more constrained public finances in recent times, the focus has been on driving efficiency savings in our business.

With so much change in the last decade, particularly around technology, we must again innovate. The rationale for modernising the justice system now is compelling. Various high level reviews identify aspects of the system that must change to ensure our services deliver what people expect. People's expectations about how to access services has changed considerably. Court users expect the delivery of justice to move with the times and not be bound by tradition and processes heavily reliant on paper. There is also scope to improve how the justice system supports all vulnerable people coming into contact with the courts and tribunals.

**Naomi Long,**  
Minister of Justice



**Sir Declan Morgan,**  
Lord Chief Justice



**Anthony Harbinson,**  
Director of NICTS



Equally much of the court and tribunal estate is no longer fit for purpose. Many of the buildings are old and some, even with investment, would not meet the standards that people have a right to expect. The current estate lacks the flexibility and technological capacity required of a modern justice system.

We will work collectively to deliver fundamental change across our justice system; to embrace technology appropriately and use it to transform the way in which citizens access court and tribunal services; to ensure that court and tribunal buildings are fit for purpose and can support physical, virtual and hybrid services; to modernise and upgrade the justice system so that it works for everyone - for judges and legal professionals, witnesses, litigants, defendants, vulnerable victims of crime and the staff who will provide the necessary administrative support.

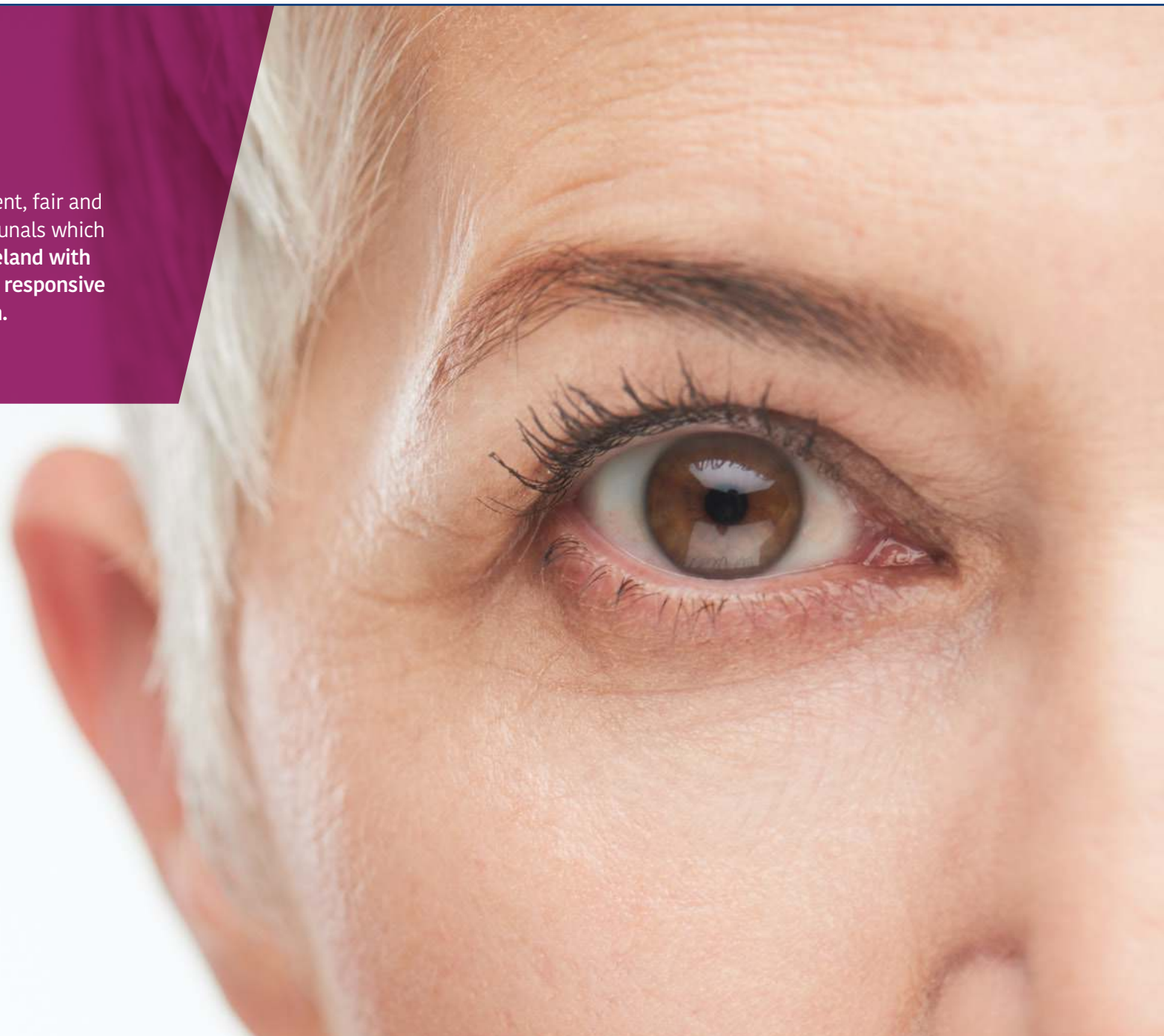
This will be a long-term programme of work. We will build on the solid foundations, which have already been put in place as we have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and, in partnership with key stakeholders, we will seek to make incremental changes against agreed priorities. We will ensure that our vision is regularly refreshed and renewed.

In developing this programme of work we have the benefit of a number of independent reviews including the Access to Justice Reviews; Reviews of Civil and Family Justice; and the Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences. This modernisation programme will support the implementation of agreed priority recommendations from these reviews.



## Our Vision

Our vision is to deliver independent, fair and effective, modern courts and tribunals which **serve the people of Northern Ireland with an innovative, collaborative and responsive administration of justice system.**



Together through this Modernisation Programme, we will deliver court and tribunal services that work for everyone; that increase the effectiveness of the justice system and increase and improve access to online court and tribunal services. Success will mean better access to justice services, better outcomes for citizens through a more proportionate system, better use of technology and faster end-to-end completion of cases. Our services will be consistent, straightforward to use, transparent and inspire public confidence.

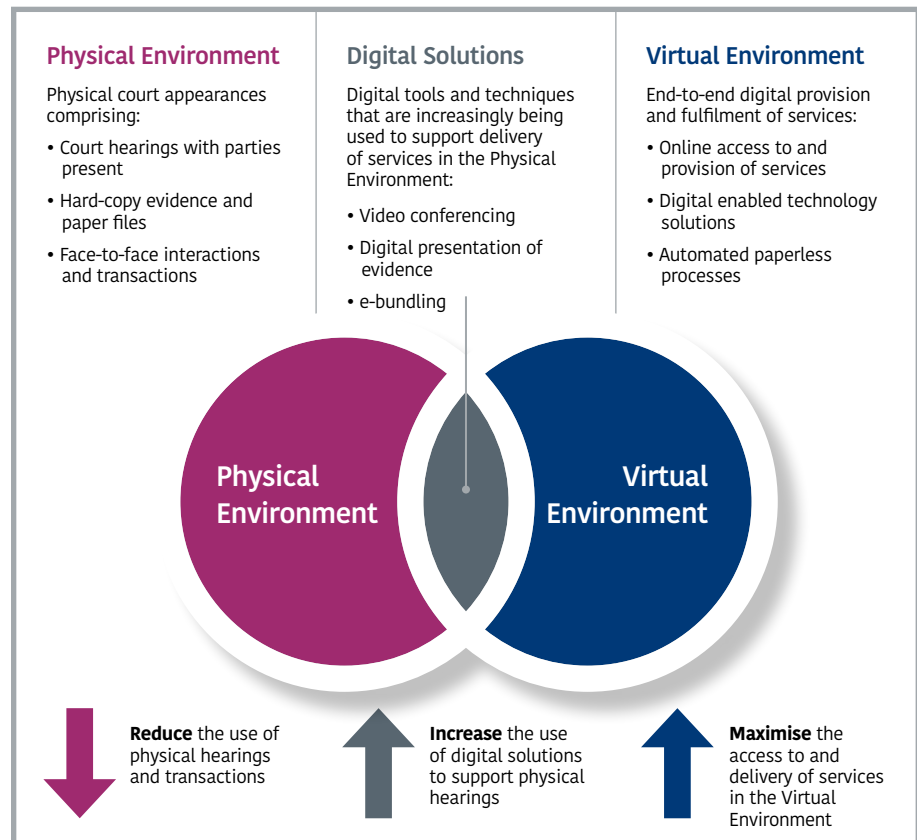
Our future Courts and Tribunals will be built around modern technology, streamlined processes, enhanced management information and buildings which are fit for purpose. The justice system will be more proportionate to the issues being addressed to save citizens time and reduce the impact on their lives. Cases of low value or less complexity will be dealt with quickly, and parties will have options to resolve disputes out of court wherever possible.

Embracing digital ways of working will enable the justice system to reimagine how it delivers its services. There will always be a need for services to be delivered in a courtroom before a judge with all the relevant parties in attendance. But increasingly, where appropriate, we will use digital technologies, solutions and ways of working to deliver and fulfil services without the need for physical attendance. Facilities to initiate and manage proceedings online will be made available for all business types. Integrated digital case management systems will replace inefficient paper filing and improve efficiency throughout the system.

We will build on existing practices to enable judiciary, legal representatives, parties and witnesses to participate in hearings remotely by telephone and video conferencing. Judges will be enabled to manage the progress of cases online on the basis of papers submitted to them

electronically, where appropriate, rather than in the courtroom or hearing room, which will allow parties to work flexibly and help focus time in court more efficiently.

We will develop a Digital Strategy setting out how our services will be delivered in the future, moving from cases mainly being heard in a physical environment to hybrid and virtual environments, enabled by digital solutions and new ways of working.



Court and tribunal services will be more citizen focused using simple, everyday language and providing assisted and accessible digital services. Children, victims of crime and vulnerable individuals will be supported by clear and effective processes.

We will ensure that our objectives remain focussed on delivering clearly defined benefits to court and tribunal users. The success of the modernisation programme will be measured in terms of how people are better off as a result of the changes. We will ensure that our objectives are regularly reviewed to confirm their alignment with tangible headline benefits.

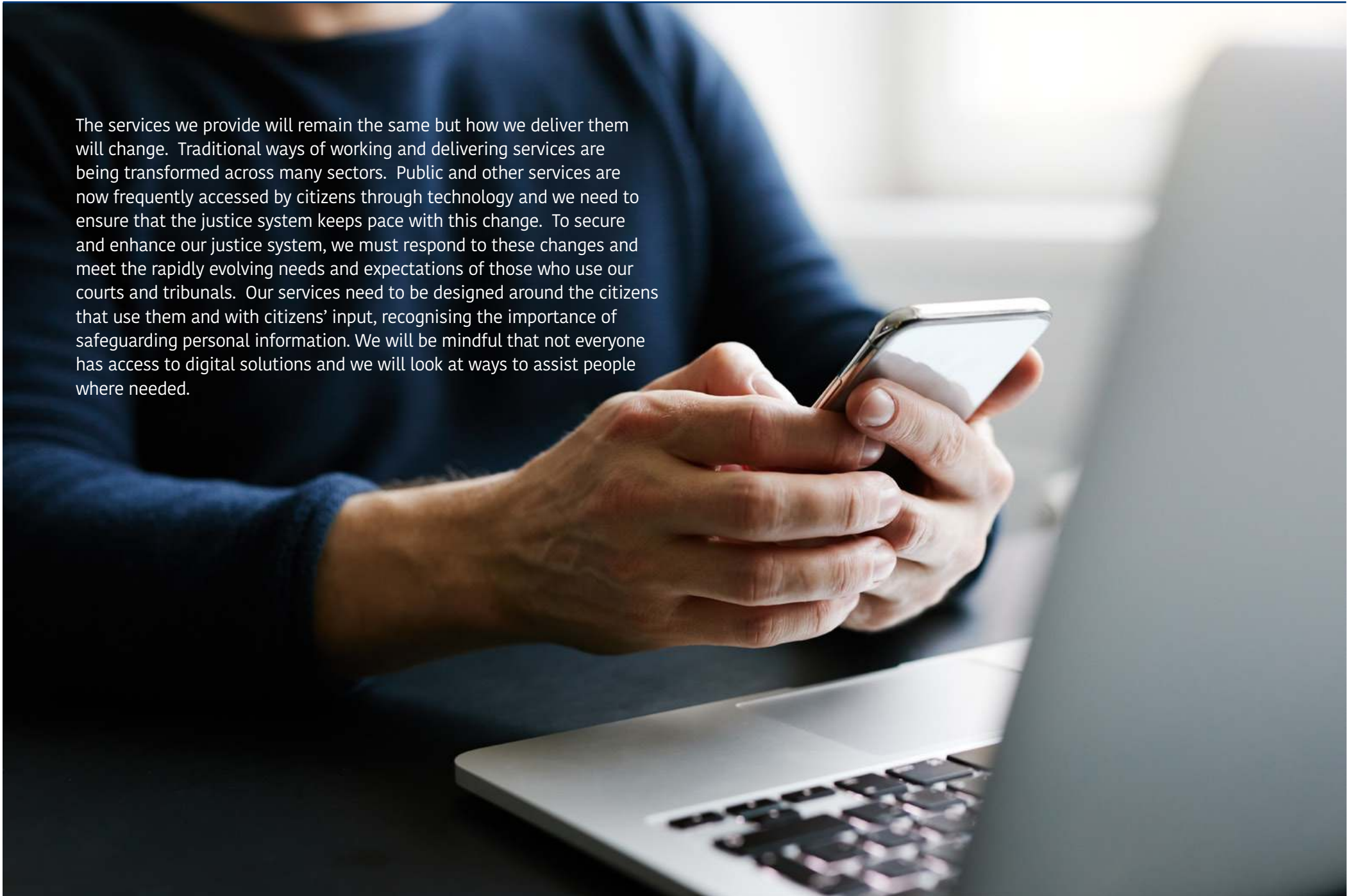
**The overarching objectives are to:**

- redesign and optimise service delivery models and processes to provide more effective services;
- improve access to justice through further adoption of digital and other online service delivery channels;
- deliver a reconfigured and modernised physical court and tribunal estate to support new ways of working;
- achieve a sustainable financial operating environment for court and tribunal services, the justice system and the wider public sector; and
- support staff, judiciary and key stakeholders to work in a changing environment.

**It is both ambitious and exciting.**



The services we provide will remain the same but how we deliver them will change. Traditional ways of working and delivering services are being transformed across many sectors. Public and other services are now frequently accessed by citizens through technology and we need to ensure that the justice system keeps pace with this change. To secure and enhance our justice system, we must respond to these changes and meet the rapidly evolving needs and expectations of those who use our courts and tribunals. Our services need to be designed around the citizens that use them and with citizens' input, recognising the importance of safeguarding personal information. We will be mindful that not everyone has access to digital solutions and we will look at ways to assist people where needed.





## We want to improve the time it takes for cases to be dealt with by our courts and tribunals

- We will implement digital case management and e-bundling solutions that will progress the move to paperless or paper-lite hearings that will benefit court and tribunal users across all tiers and business types.
- We will implement technology to allow evidence to be shared and displayed digitally in the courtroom.
- We will explore options to better manage high volume, low-level business to create increased capacity for the judiciary to focus on more complex or sensitive cases.
- We will explore the development of initiatives such as an online guilty plea portal to allow certain types of cases to be dealt with more quickly and more effectively for citizen, the prosecution and the court.
- We will focus on enhancing support for the judiciary and providing high quality and timely case management data.



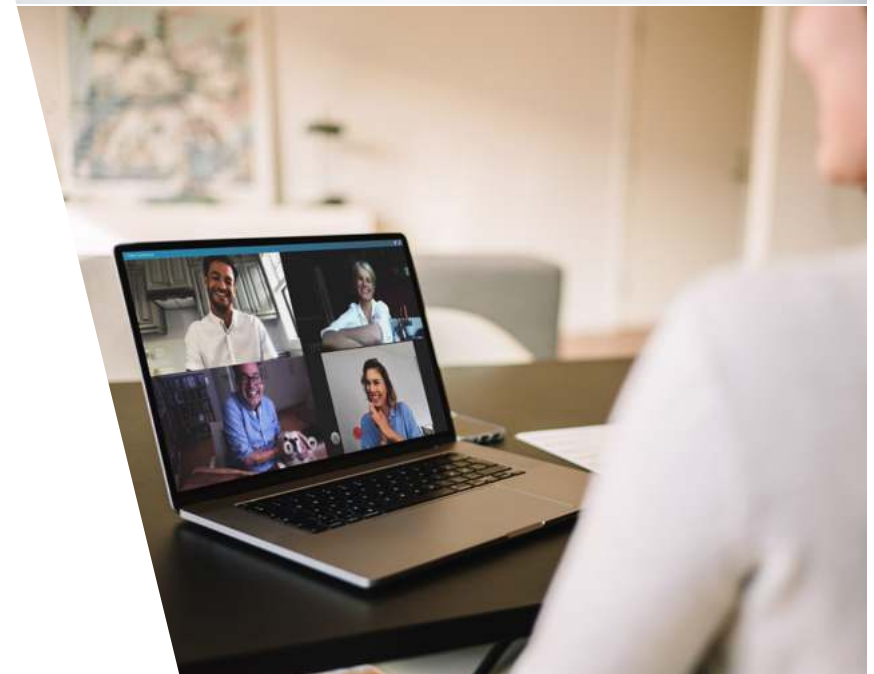
Where appropriate, we want to avoid cases coming to a court or tribunal unless they need to

- We will explore and implement alternative and online dispute resolution services to deal more efficiently with civil disputes, focussing initially on lower value cases.
- We will explore and implement the use of mediation services in appropriate cases, with the consent of all parties, to achieve better and faster outcomes.
- We will explore extending diversionary options available for low-level criminal proceedings and work with partners to implement prosecutorial fines.



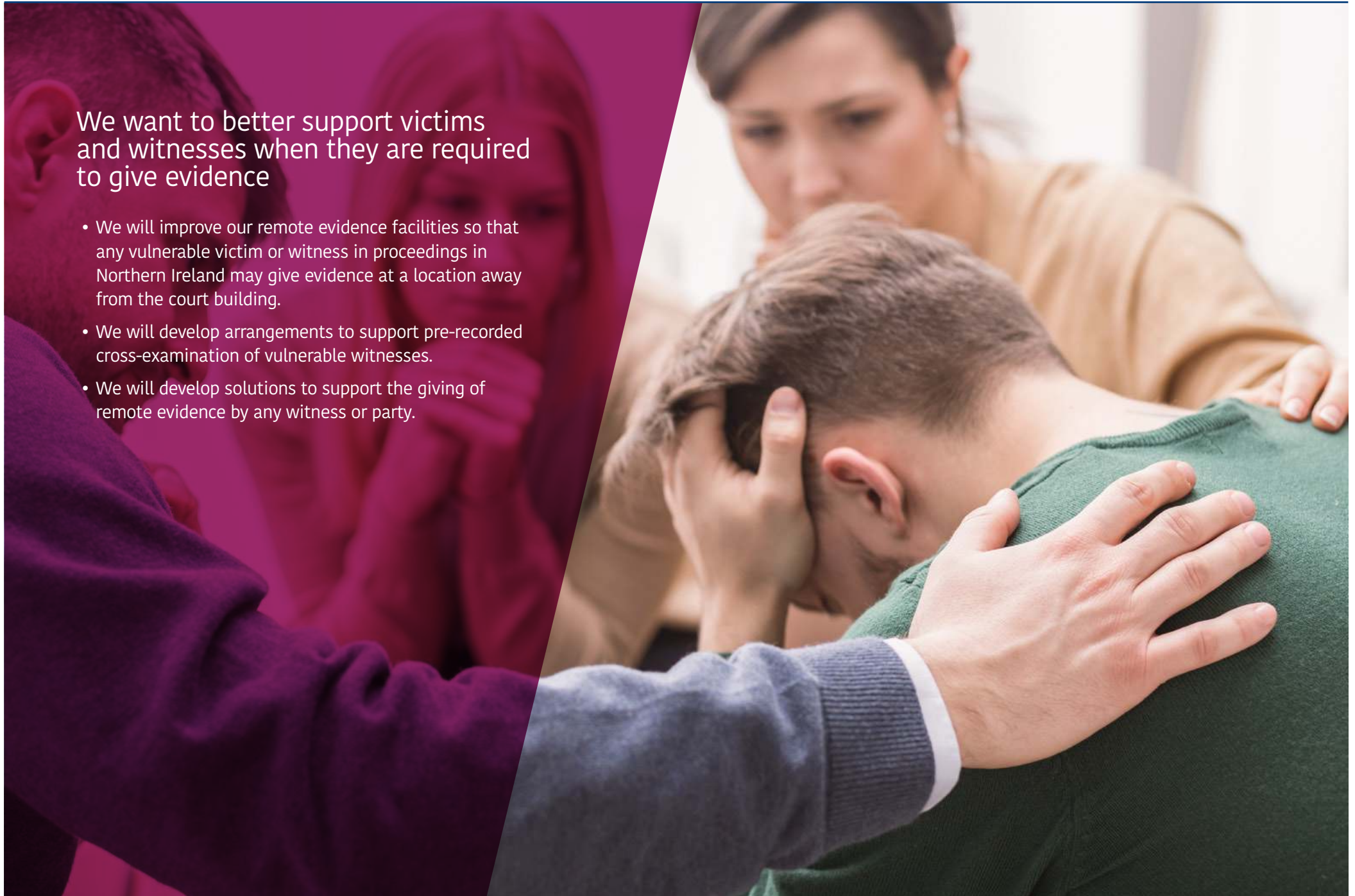
## Where appropriate we want to avoid citizens coming to a court or tribunal unless they need to

- Many citizens attending court or tribunal buildings, other than for hearings, are doing so to pay fines, fees, lodge claims / applications or to make enquiries. Most, if not all, of these services can be delivered more responsively through online solutions. We will provide existing services online to deliver modern, user-friendly access and minimise the need to attend court for these purposes.
- We will ensure it is possible for citizens or their legal representatives to initiate, progress and to easily track any type of proceedings online. We are testing functionality with an exemplar project in relation to probate with a view to applying learning to other new / redesigned online services.
- By making greater use of technology and administrative support for judicial case management, we will seek to ensure that parties only attend court, whether physically or virtually, when needed.



## We want to better support victims and witnesses when they are required to give evidence

- We will improve our remote evidence facilities so that any vulnerable victim or witness in proceedings in Northern Ireland may give evidence at a location away from the court building.
- We will develop arrangements to support pre-recorded cross-examination of vulnerable witnesses.
- We will develop solutions to support the giving of remote evidence by any witness or party.



## We want to provide a consistent standard of accommodation, facilities and support services to those people using our courts and tribunals

- We will develop an Estate Strategy and a Strategic Asset Management Plan, to inform how best to target investment to deliver a more consistent standard of accommodation, facilities and services for all court and tribunal users.
- We will take forward a priority project to deliver a major capital project to provide modern, flexible court and tribunal accommodation for the North-West.
- We will explore the incorporation of on-site services to provide more holistic support to citizens using courts and tribunals. This should include partners who directly support ongoing proceedings (e.g. Probation, Court Children Officers, witness support etc.) and might also include broader advisory support (e.g. addiction support, mental health, housing; benefits etc.).



## Problem solving justice

- We will continue to build on problem solving court initiatives which seek to address offenders' behaviour and prevent future crimes. In addition to continuing the Substance Misuse Court Pilot and developing a new Mental Health Court pilot, we will consider how such initiatives can be mainstreamed across the justice system.
- We will continue to explore potential applications for problem solving initiatives across family proceedings.

Many of these changes will involve public consultation and full engagement with citizens.

## Conclusion

At their heart, these reforms are about better meeting the needs of everyone who uses our courts and tribunals: citizens and businesses; witnesses; victims; defendants; the legal professions; the judiciary and staff. We recognise that if we are to deliver change on a level that genuinely benefits all users, we must work in close collaboration with partners and stakeholders in co-designing our services.

If you would like more information on the NICTS Modernisation Programme or to contribute ideas please contact the Modernisation Team at: [Modernisation@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:Modernisation@courtsni.gov.uk)

