Opening Statement

Courts Service appearance before the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

30 September 2025

I thank the Cathaoirleach and members of the Committee for the invitation to appear today. I am accompanied today by Owen Harrison Chief Information Officer of the Courts Service. I look forward to discussing the Courts Service's written submission in relation to the *General Scheme of the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025* with you and the members of the Committee.

The Courts Service is responsible for the management and administration of the courts since 1999. 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. Separately, the Judicial Council is an independent body that was established in December 2019 and oversees the education and training of the judiciary. Therefore, I am precluded from commenting on any matter relating to the exercise by a judge of his or her judicial functions or matters relating to the training of judges. This includes discussion of individual court cases. I am also, of course, precluded from commenting on matters of Government policy.

The Courts Service is mid-way through a ten-year Modernisation Programme which seeks to improve access to justice in a modern, digital Ireland. This long-term vision of the Courts Service of the future is an ambitious vision of a modern, transparent and accessible courts system that is quicker, easier to access and more efficient. The Board are committed in its Strategic Plan 2024-2027 to supporting several reform programmes with a view to leading transformational change across the justice sector including our Modernisation Programme, the implementation of the Kelly Review of the Administration of Civil Justice, the recommendations of the Judicial Planning Working Group and the Family and Criminal Justice Strategies in addition to the delivery of increased day-to-day operations.

The Service was broadly consulted particularly on Parts 2 and 4 of the Scheme for this legislation and in the usual way has an opportunity to provide feedback to the sponsoring Department on the published scheme. Our high-level head by head submission does not include views on technical drafting issues which will be dealt with by way of direct contact with the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

In terms of the provisions applicable to the Courts Service this legislation is broadly welcomed as it includes many enabling provisions which will support our modernisation programme, underpin further digitisation, improve accessibility and organisational resilience. Most legal provisions relating to courts have their origins in a time when we only ever envisaged the use of pen and paper. In recent years the justice sector has adopted new technologies, and we need the underpinning legislation to provide for a digital world so that participants in the criminal justice system can maximise the benefits of investment. For example, prison officers are required to wait in court buildings up and down the country for my staff to prepare warrants after court. In recent years we have developed the capability to receive charge sheets generated from the Garda PULSE system automatically reducing errors and duplication of workload. However, the hard copy sheet currently must still be printed down and presented to Court.

This legislation will facilitate criminal courts to electronically generate, receive and transmit documents including applications, orders, reports, filings and written submissions and will support implementation of the recommendations of an interagency working group on video conferencing and the Criminal Justice Strategic Committee Subgroup on Strategic Collaboration.

As already evidenced by the video technology options available in courtrooms, we have seen significant savings and efficiencies for the Irish Prison Services, expert witnesses and the other third parties. Not to mind the benefits which victim representative organisations and advocacy groups have documented about their users experiencing easier access, reduced levels of anxiety and stress thanks to video enabled technology. Therefore, provisions which will enable the reduction of unnecessary travel to and from courthouses have the potential to improve access and save time, money and stress for court users and the State. The Courts Service

has invested in a modern digital platform for use across all jurisdictions and in all case types. As technology available to the courts and justice sector agencies continuously improves, provisions in this legislation will afford judges the discretion to decide that any given criminal proceedings are suitable to proceed either fully or partly remotely thereby enabling the full use of the available technology, providing flexibility to the participants in cases and value for money for the taxpayer. As with matters held in person, it will always remain the role of the Judge to ensure that the accused retains all of the protections and fair procedures to which they are entitled.

I am happy to take any questions members of the Committee have.