

## **Introduction**

One Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Court Service's Strategic Plan, covering the period 2024-2027. We are making this brief submission in the context of the Modernisation Strategy and your previous Court Service's Strategic Plan. We are confining this submission to our area of expertise which is family law and connected areas.

One Family has been working with families engaging in the family law system for over 50 years. During this time, we consistently see parents and children struggle and feel let down by the current system. Family law queries comprise around one fifth of calls to our *askonefamily* helpline and we work supporting fathers, mothers, children and step-parents to develop sustainable arrangements for their separated families.

## **About One Family**

One Family is Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting, and separating. We were established in 1972 as Cherish and provide specialist parenting, therapeutic and family support services around Ireland. One in six families in Ireland are a one-parent family, with 85% of families headed by a mother, and 15% by a father.<sup>1</sup> Children are at the core of our work, and we seek to improve their lives by empowering, supporting and up-skilling their parents. We campaign against child poverty, for reform of the family justice system and for the State to recognise and cherish all families equally, regardless of their marital status. More information on One Family can be found at [www.onefamily.ie](http://www.onefamily.ie).

**1.** The strategic objectives in the outgoing plan are still appropriate and relevant in our view for the next four years. We refer to Goal 1 of the existing strategy: "*We will adopt new collaborative ways of working, taking a user-centric approach, to provide improved and enhanced service delivery.*"

### **Recommendations:**

In particular, we recommend that this goal be reviewed and reprioritised as the most important goal to focus on going forward.

It would be helpful to have an overview of the evaluation of the last Strategy related to its successes and achievements.

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<sup>1</sup> CS0 2023

**2.** We welcome the robust approach taken to the development and introduction of new online information for family law users, as well as the consultation with One Family and other relevant stakeholders.

**Recommendation:**

We want to see this approach continue.

**3.** We welcome collaborative actions taken to date such as the pilot in Limerick Family Law Courts but believe that future ones would benefit from robust process evaluation to maximise learning.

**Recommendation:**

The Court Service could consider a standardise approach to design, evaluation, monitoring and dissemination of pilot project or other innovative initiatives.

**4.** The Court Service plays a pivotal role in the successful implementation of the Family Justice Strategy and the planned Family Courts Bill. It is vital that the experience and responsibilities of the Court Service are appropriately reflected in these major instruments of change.

**Recommendation:**

Provide appropriate and adequate resourcing to the Court Service to be able to implement any and all necessary changes.

**5.** We would like to challenge the Court Service to take a stronger approach to centring your experience of the needs and experiences of court users in your communications with Government departments, particularly in the development of major reform strategies and legislation.

The Court Service has unique knowledge and experience of what happens in courts, but this is not translated into case studies or data that can be readily shared with other stakeholders.

**Recommendation:**

It may be helpful to commission research into the lived experience of families who use the family law courts as a basis to improvements or changes in your own practices, policies, workforce development etc, but also to inform other statutory and civil society stakeholders.

**6.** There are no statutory bodies responsible for the necessary development of out of court solutions and ancillary services to courts including reports to court.

**Recommendation:**

We believe the Court Service could play a role, if resourced, to provide oversight or structure to much-needed reforms to resource court users to get the best possible experiences to resolve their family conflicts or issues.

**7.** Regarding Goal 6 of the existing Strategy, "*Accountability and Leadership | We will put in place robust governance structures to ensure effective accountability and leadership for our modernisation and reform agenda.*"

**Recommendations:**

Whilst previous actions around a digital first approach, estate modernisation are crucial and should be maintained, it is important to look at the cultural changes required for success across the breadth of the organisation.

It may be worth considering a goal around evidence base to reflect the range of data capture and analysis required by the Court Service and looked for by other organisations. Whilst this is a complex issue, there may be more immediate actions that could be taken and a clear policy to the capture of use of evidence would be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

We welcome the opportunity to feed into the development of the Court Service's Strategic Plan covering the period 2024-2027. One Family holds a significant level of expertise based on the lived experience of separated parents who find themselves within the current Family Law system. One Family is committed to that partnership and are willing and able to participate in any further ongoing policy, research and operational discussions and engage constructively with any decision-making forum.

We feel it is imperative that we continue to work together with your Department and the Minister, to ensure that we develop and build a system that centres the needs of court users, both parents and their children.

**Ends.**