

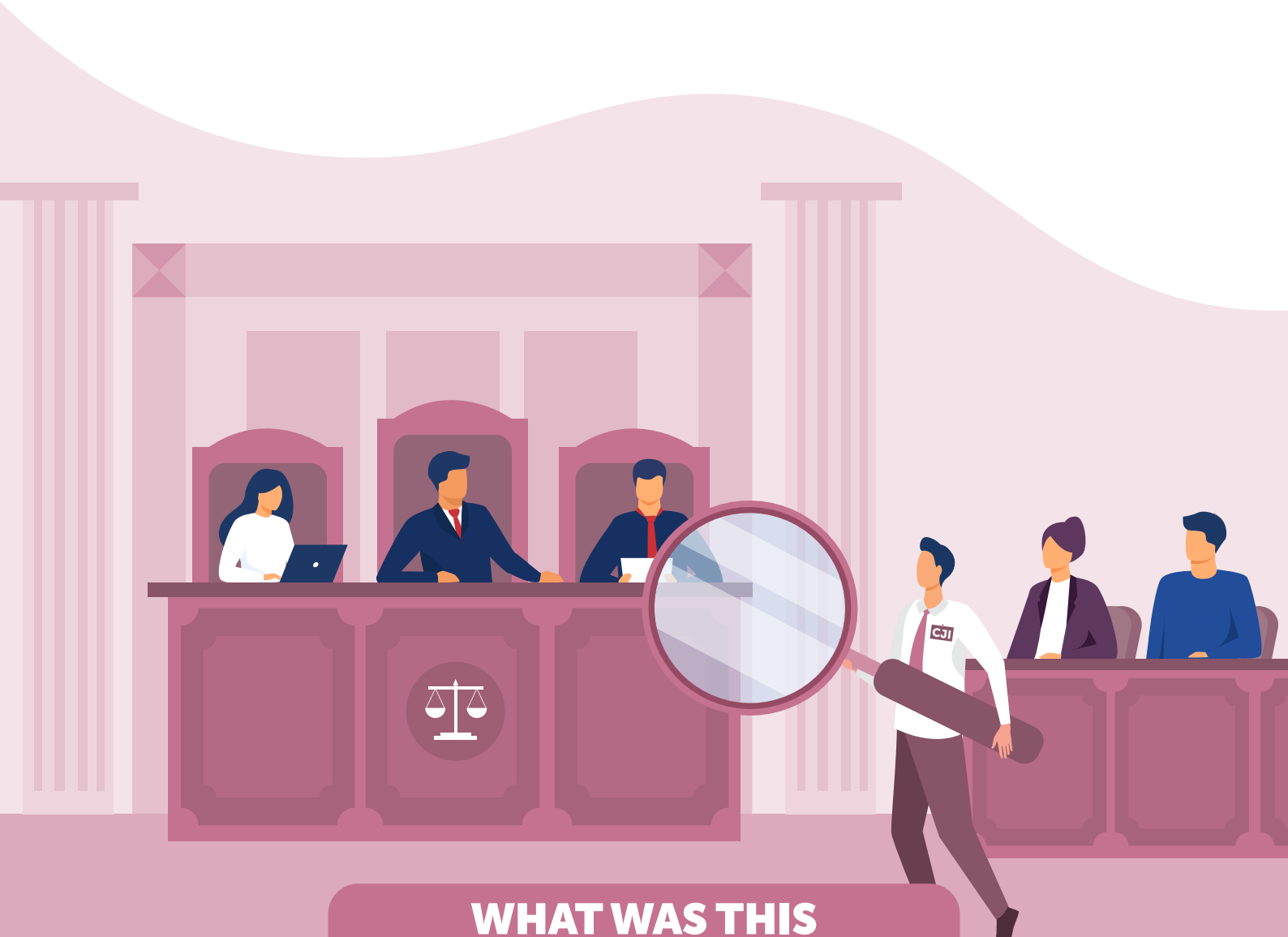


Northern Ireland
Courts and
Tribunals Service

KEY FACTS

AN INSPECTION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CRIMINAL COURT ADMINISTRATION

SEPTEMBER 2024



WHAT WAS THIS INSPECTION ABOUT?

- This inspection examined how effectively the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) provided administration support services for criminal Court business in the Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Courts and supported an independent Judiciary across Northern Ireland.
- Criminal Court administration includes all the processes, systems and services needed before, during and after Court hearings including recording and communicating Court decisions and the provision of facilities and equipment for hearings.
- In 2022-2023 NICTS staff supported over 8,000 criminal Court hearings and the production of 25,147 Criminal Court Orders in Courthouses throughout Northern Ireland.



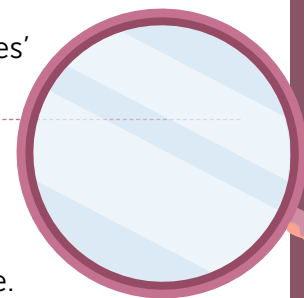
HOW DID WE CARRY OUT THE INSPECTION?

- During fieldwork Inspectors spoke to NICTS staff and carried out a survey to gain their views. They observed Crown and Magistrates' Courts, including the Substance Misuse Court.
- Inspectors also spoke to representatives from the Department of Justice (DoJ), the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS), the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Youth Justice Agency and the Lady Chief Justice's Office.
- Inspectors reviewed paper and electronic criminal Court documents including information held on ICOS (the NICTS information and communications technology system) and other sources of information available to staff like the *Knowledge Bank* to help them in their role and work.



WHAT DID INSPECTORS FIND?

- ✓ In 2023, 25,147 criminal Court Orders were made across Northern Ireland. Of those, over 8% were issued after more than one day (2,040) including 475 that had potential public safety implications.
- ✓ From 2020-2023, under 0.5% of all criminal Court Orders issued each year required amendment but, over the four-year period this equated to 4,810 amendments and 4,563 deletions of criminal Court Orders.
- ✓ The NICTS's ability to recruit staff, especially Court Clerks was taking too long placing pressure on the organisation. In October 2023, 15% of posts were vacant.
- ✓ NICTS management were working with Northern Ireland Civil Service Human Resources to undertake role-specific recruitment competitions to fill Court Clerk and administration staff positions.
- ✓ Despite the staffing pressures 15% more Crown Court cases and 5% more Magistrates' Court cases were processed in 2022-23 than the volume of cases received. NICTS staff also supported all Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Courts across Northern Ireland.
- ✓ The assimilation of Court Clerk best practice guidance and the ongoing work by the Communications Team to promote an inclusive culture for staff were examples of good practice.
- ✓ The NICTS effectively used information technology and digital processes to provide remote and hybrid Court hearings and maintain vital services during the COVID-19 pandemic including the electronic submission of Court applications from defence representatives. The NICTS was responsive to the needs of its criminal justice system partners.





WHAT NEEDS TO BE BETTER?

Inspectors made nine recommendations for improvement including:

At a strategic (leadership) level...

- The NICTS should develop a Workforce Strategy to include an Action Plan and timeframe for Strategy delivery.
- The NICTS needs to review their People Strategy and Delivery Plan to ensure they include all key areas and priority actions to support the workforce in achieving its strategic objectives.



At an operational (on the ground) level...

- The NICTS should develop and deliver a *Knowledge Bank* (the information resource for staff) that is fit for current purpose including staff induction, training and development and supports digital modernisation.
- The NICTS need to work with the Northern Ireland Office to develop an information sharing protocol for non-devolved incumbent legislation and legislative amendments.
- The NICTS should monitor compliance with the confirmation process and the targets contained in the Service Level Agreement with the NIPS to provide assurance and to secure improvement.
- The NICTS need to review the quality assurance process for the service of criminal Court Orders to secure improvement.
- The NICTS should review the existing process for data change requests and develop updated guidance for staff regarding the process. Compliance with this process should be monitored with the necessary data captured to secure improvement.
- The PPS need to review the process for effective use of special measures to assure itself that appropriate applications are made for use of the Remote Evidence Centres in Belfast and Craigavon. Any identified Prosecutor training and information needs should be actioned immediately.
- The DoJ should commence a formal evaluation and benefit realisation of the Remote Evidence Centres in Belfast and Craigavon to inform the roll-out of remote evidence facilities across Northern Ireland.



WHAT DO INSPECTORS WANT TO SEE HAPPEN NOW?

- The NICTS, DoJ and the PPS should implement all the recommendations relevant to them and work together to improve the effectiveness of criminal Court administration.
- The NICTS need to continue the delivery of their *Vision 2030* strategy and ensure effective workforce planning and staff engagement and development are central to maintaining quality services while developing and implementing their new business transformation system, Themis.

If you would like to know anything more about us or this inspection please get in touch with:

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