

Digital Strategy 2021 - 2026



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Foreword

I am delighted to introduce the Digital Strategy (2021-2026) for the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. The use of modern technology is one of the key enablers as we deliver our [Vision 2030](#) programme. It is essential that we embrace the opportunities that increased digitalisation will bring.

Delivery of our Digital Strategy provides the opportunity for us to redesign and optimise our service delivery models to improve access to justice, increase our efficiency and help us become a more financially and environmentally sustainable organisation.

We will keep the requirements of our service users at the heart of our design approach, so we will design our technology and processes in collaboration with others to ensure that our digital services are easy to use, transparent and inspire public confidence.

We have already achieved significant progress and value in the use of technology within courts and tribunals throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and because of this, we have been able to safeguard the provision of essential public service and access to justice through remote and hybrid hearings. We want to build on this success throughout the next five years and beyond.

We are committed to becoming a Digital First organisation but recognise that, in parallel, we must also continue to improve service design and support people who are unable to utilise digital channels. We will continue to support staff, judiciary, key stakeholders and court and tribunal users as we continue to achieve the objectives of our Digital Strategy.

Our plans are ambitious, and this Strategy will help us transform how we operate as an organisation, and play our part in the effective and efficient delivery of justice for the citizens of Northern Ireland.

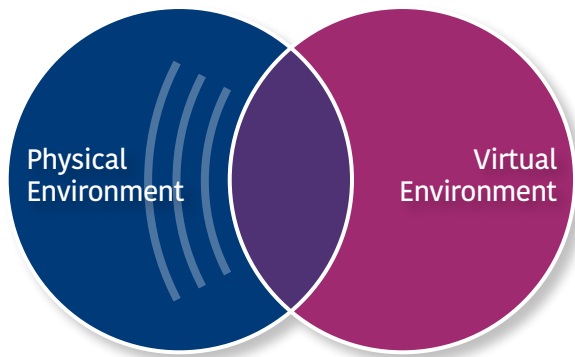
Glyn Capper, Acting Director



Our Strategy on a Page

NICTS Digital Strategy will deliver enhanced outcomes, experiences, and value for money for the judiciary, staff and service users.

Digital will enhance and accelerate the ambitions set out in the Modernising the Courts and Tribunals Vision Statement, and our approach will be aligned with the overarching Department of Justice Digital Strategy.



Digital has allowed us to reimagine the way our services are delivered

NICTS will deliver services across both the Physical and Virtual Environments. Our overarching objectives are to:



Reduce the use of physical hearings and transactions



Increase the use of digital solutions to support physical hearings where they remain appropriate



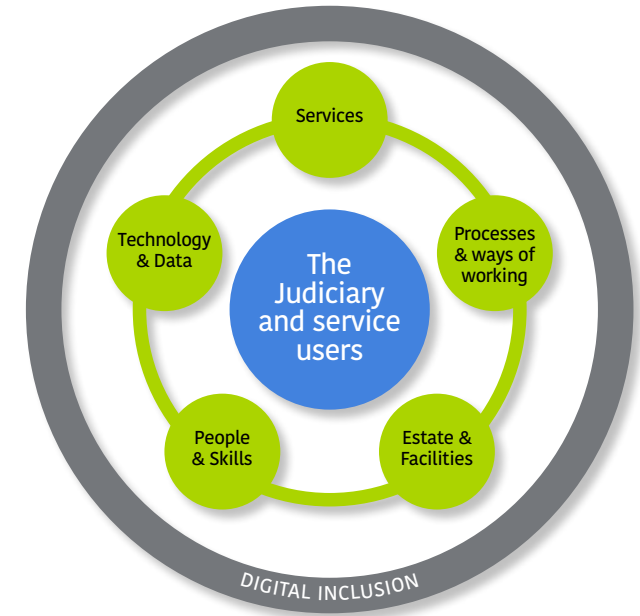
Maximise the access to and delivery of services in the Virtual Environment

Our approach is underpinned by a number of Strategic Design Principles – we will:

- i be a Digital First organisation aligned with the wider transformation of Public Services
- ii collaborate in the design of our services with the judiciary, staff and service users
- iii adopt a whole organisation approach to digital transformation
- iv adopt a whole system approach to digital transformation

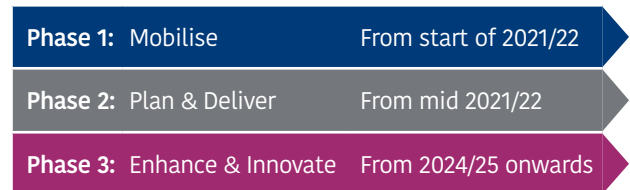
We will work collaboratively with the judiciary and our other service users to:

- Design our services to be digital-first
- Optimise our processes and ways of working to reflect a digital environment
- Modernise our technology and leverage insights from our data
- Build new capabilities and skills across our staff, with opportunities for new roles
- Connect our estate and support use of digital technologies in court
- Enhance the Digital Capabilities of our users and promote wider Digital Inclusion



NICTS will move forward at pace and with purpose to implement this Digital Strategy, adopting a phased approach.

Whilst we will **not** realise all of our digital ambitions in the next five years, our implementation of the Digital Strategy will continue beyond 2026, with the initial roadmap subject to on-going review and refinement.



1. Role of NICTS

The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) is an Agency of the Department of Justice (DoJ).

The role of NICTS is to:

- deliver support to all Northern Ireland's courts, the majority of NI tribunals, the Parole Commissioners for NI (PCNI) and the Planning Appeals Commission and Water Appeals Commission (PACWAC);
- deliver support to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board and process awards on behalf of the Redress Board;
- deliver support to the Coroners Service of Northern Ireland (CSNI) and the Legacy Inquest Unit (LIU);
- support an independent judiciary;
- enforce judgments of the civil courts through the Enforcement of Judgments Office (EJO);
- collect and enforce outstanding financial penalties imposed (or registered) by a criminal court through the Fine Collection and Enforcement Service;
- manage funds held in court on behalf of minors and patients through the Court Funds Office;
- provide suitable courthouses and tribunal hearing centres; and
- act as the Central Authority under certain international conventions.



2. Vision 2030

We have established an ambitious portfolio of Modernisation Programmes for courts and tribunals for the next decade and beyond, known as Vision 2030. Vision 2030 supports the Programme for Government (PfG) commitment to increase the effectiveness of the justice system and improve access to public services online.

Collectively with Sir Declan Morgan, the former Lord Chief Justice, and the Minister for Justice we have set out a [Vision Document](#) for Modernising the Courts and Tribunals in Northern Ireland. Our modernisation 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”.

The overarching objectives of Vision 2030 are to be:

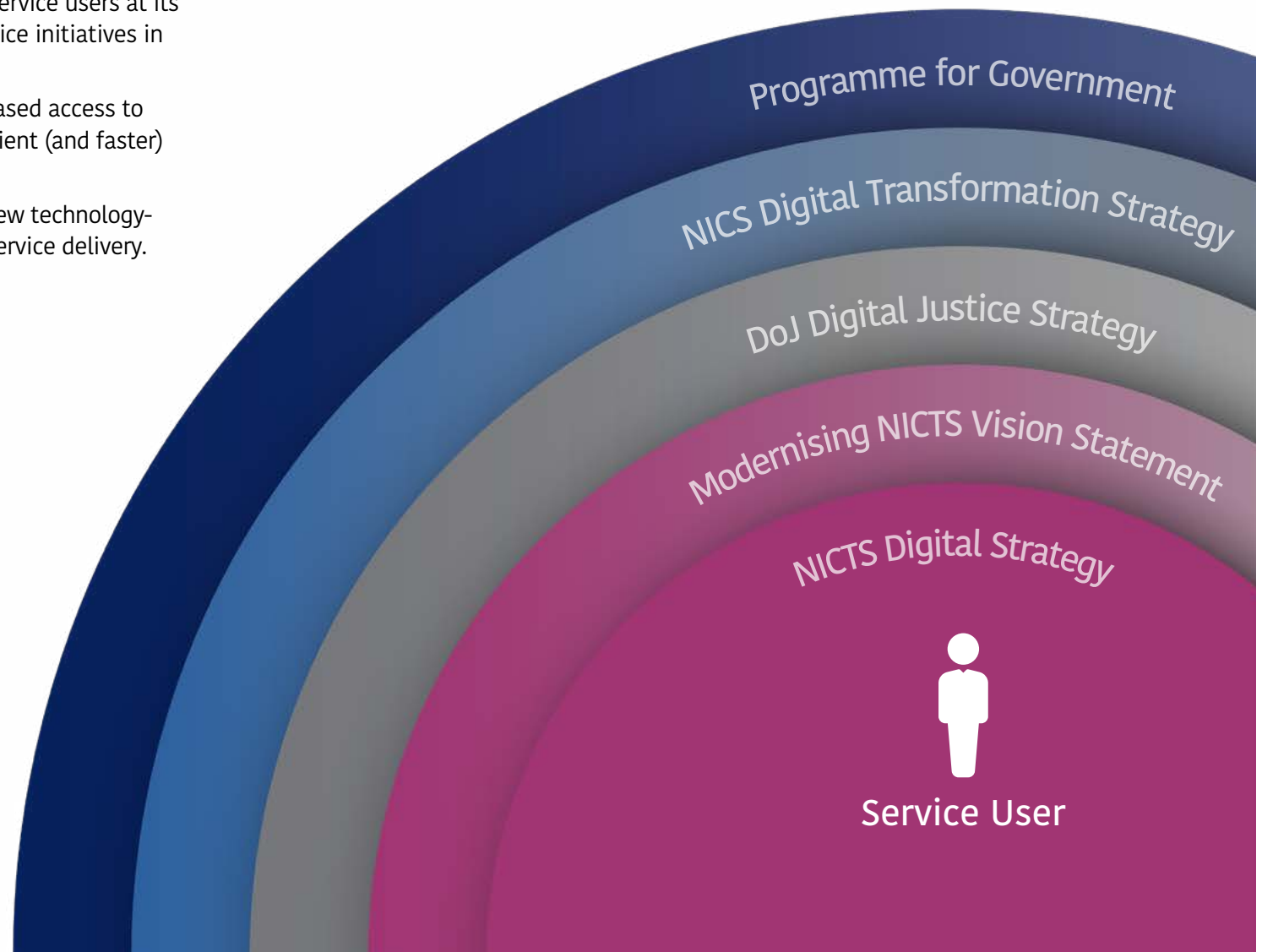
- **Effective** - redesign and optimise service delivery models and processes to provide more effective services
- **Accessible** - improve access to justice through further adoption of digital and other online service delivery channels
- **Enabling** - deliver a reconfigured and modernised physical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



3. Strategic Context

This strategy has been developed, with service users at its heart, in the context of wider public service initiatives in relation to:

- **Justice delivery** with a focus on increased access to justice for all and more effective, efficient (and faster) administration of justice.
- **Digital enablement** with a focus on new technology-enabled approaches to user-centred service delivery.



Modernising the Courts and Tribunals Vision Statement

This statement sets out the ambition of the NICTS to deliver court and tribunal services that work for everyone by increasing the effectiveness of the justice system and increasing and improving access to public services online.

Further information is available [here](#)

Department of Justice Digital Justice Strategy

The Strategy identifies themes of digital communication and skills; a more effective justice system; and innovation. The strategy is underpinned by the principles of citizen engagement; collaboration; and modernisation.

Further information is available [here](#)

NICS Digital Transformation Programme

This programme is focused on, amongst other things, designing, building and running services in new and exciting ways, and in a manner that puts citizen needs at the centre; and investing in our people to build their use of digital capabilities.

Further information is available [here](#)

Programme for Government (PfG)

The PfG sets out a shared and strategic vision for the future which aims to improve wellbeing for all. Access to Justice is a key priority area for the outcome “Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other”.

Further information is available [here](#)



4. Our Digital Vision

The overarching ambition of this strategy is to enhance and accelerate the achievement of the objectives set out in the NICTS Modernisation Vision Statement. Future digital solutions, tools and ways of working will significantly contribute to the delivery of our modernisation objectives by:

Effective	Accessible	Enabling	Efficient	Supportive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling and innovating the redesign of more effective and flexible services centred on the needs and preferences of the judiciary, staff and service users • Optimising processes enabled by new technologies, thereby reducing reliance on paper and manual interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing secure online access (24x7) to a comprehensive range of 'easy to use' digital services and case information • Building the digital capacity of our service users and working with others to help overcome barriers to inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing and expanding deployment of new digital solutions across our estate, enabling, for example, remote attendance at certain hearings, paperless proceedings, digital presentation of evidence and connectivity to the internet for all parties • Reducing the footfall at our buildings by allowing many transactions to be completed online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling appropriate transactions to be dealt with online using lower cost digital services, reducing the need for more expensive face-to-face interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborating in the design of future solutions with the judiciary, staff and service users • Providing online learning tools, resources and training to support the required changes in ways of working

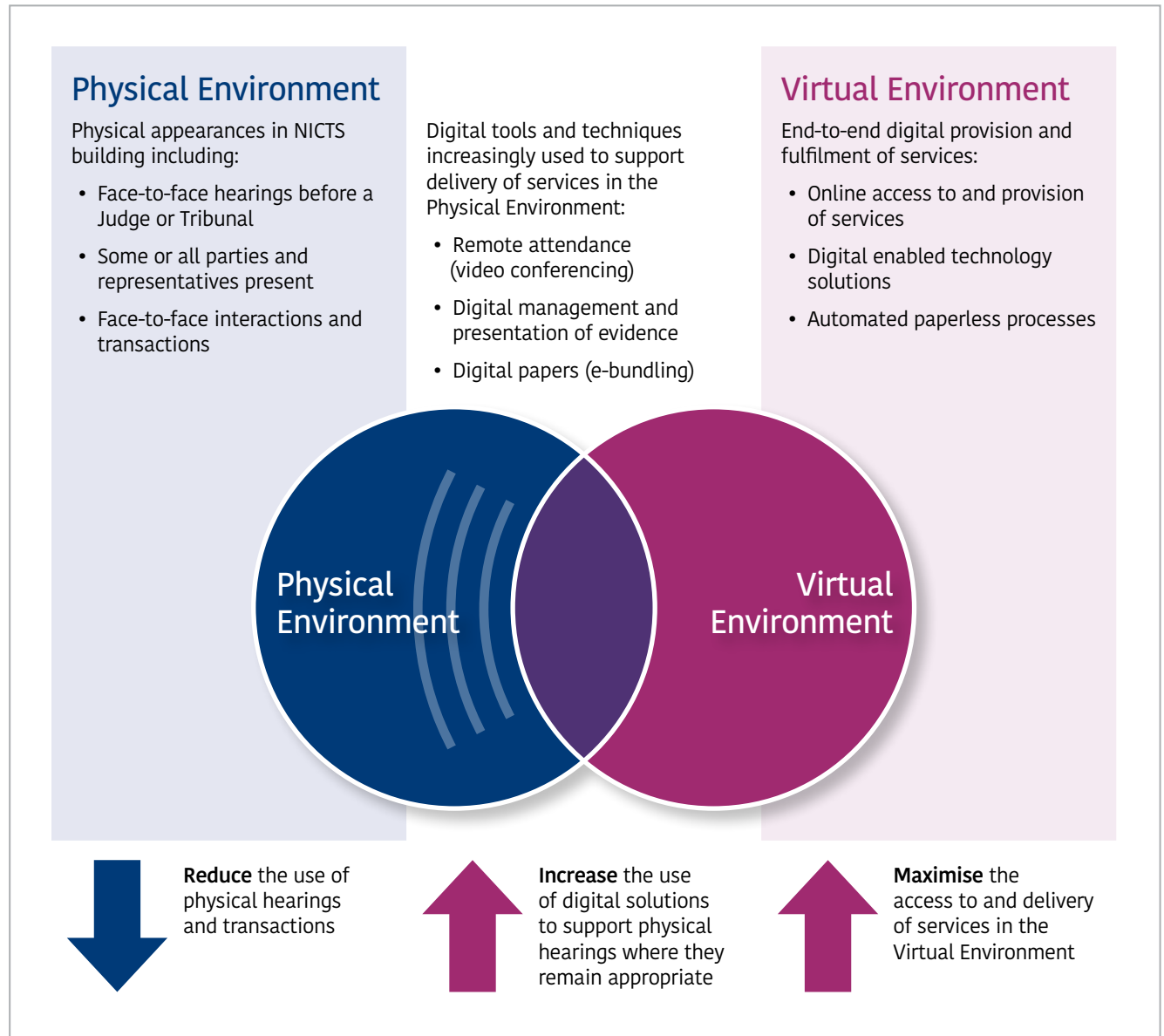


Digital has allowed us to re-imagine the way our services are delivered as it provides the opportunity for the fundamental transformation of business processes rather than simply adding digital solutions alongside existing processes.

Aligned to this approach, NICTS will design, develop and deliver new digital solutions to support two interconnected operational environments:

Physical Environment. This refers to activities, services, hearings or trials where all parties are in attendance, or where some of the parties attend remotely. We will continue to expand our use of digital tools and techniques to support this environment.

Virtual Environment. This refers to new services and ways of working that will be developed by NICTS, where using a combination of digital solutions and changing working practices will create new ways of delivering services and supporting certain types of hearing without the need to be physically present.





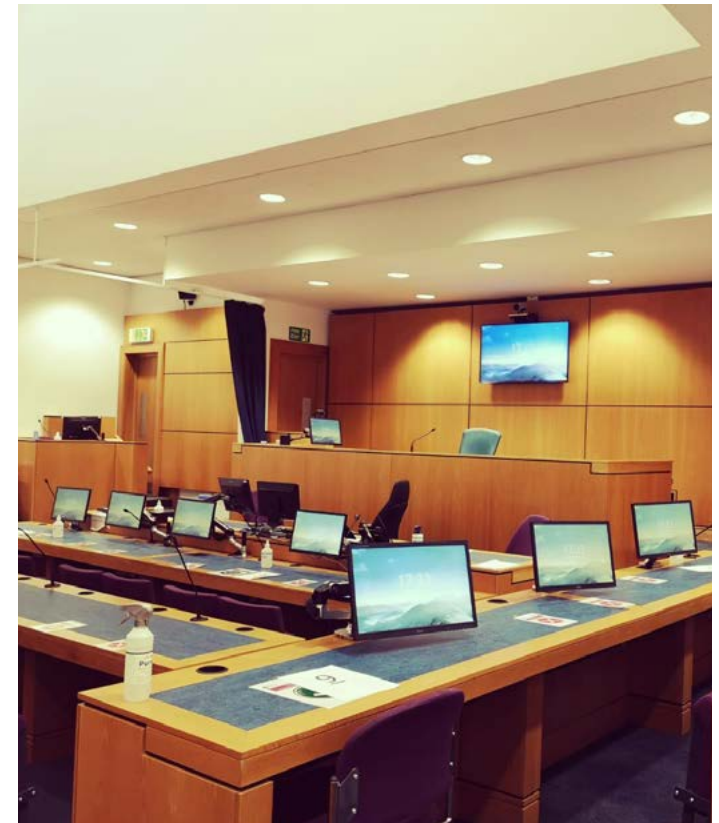
It is expected that, in the future, the Virtual Environment will become the main ‘gateway’ to all NICTS services and hearings – from accessing a comprehensive range of on-line services; to initiating, updating, tracking and progressing cases that require judicial direction / management; to becoming a rich source of information for service users.

The Physical Environment will continue to be an important part of the services provided by NICTS. The Physical Environment will support all services that take place in NICTS premises and hearings with some or all parties appearing in person or remotely. We envisage that digital solutions will increasingly be used in the Physical Environment to deliver and support services such as case progression, scheduling, the development of digital bundles and the presentation of digital evidence at hearings.

In determining the most appropriate environment for the next steps in any particular case, we will be guided by a number of factors including, amongst other things:

- the determination of the judiciary of what is in the best interests of justice;
- complying with the legislation, court practice and procedures. We will work with the Department of Justice, the Judiciary and others to ensure that legislation, court rules and practice directions are consistent with the development and delivery of appropriate services in the Virtual Environment;
- the nature, complexity and sensitivity of the engagement or interaction;
- the needs and preferences of the parties involved and their legal representatives;
- the cost of both access to the service for litigants and their representatives and service delivery for NICTS; and
- ensuring that the chosen environment does not present any new Access to Justice barriers for the parties involved, including litigants in person.

Whatever environment is determined to be the most appropriate, we envisage that in the future, all cases will have the potential to commence in the Virtual Environment; and cases may then be managed (at different stages of their progress), within both the Physical and Virtual Environments (as the context requires).



5. Strategic Digital Principles

There are a number of strategic design principles that have informed the development of this Digital Strategy:

i. We will be a Digital First organisation aligned with the wider transformation of Public Services

We will adopt an evolving Digital First approach to the design and provision of our services. Digital First is at the core of the NI Government's Strategy for Digital Transformation of Public Services [here](#). We recognise that the expectations of our service users is shaped by the broad and ever-increasing range of public services that have adopted a Digital First approach. Digital First does not mean Digital Only, but we will optimise the use of digital solutions where appropriate for the delivery of services and for the completion of transactions. We will continue to provide services in the physical environment particularly to support court hearings, where this meets the best interests of justice or where barriers to digital access exist.

ii. We will collaborate in the design of our services with the judiciary, staff and service users.

We will work with the judiciary, staff and service users as we incrementally design, develop and implement a comprehensive portfolio of digitally-enabled services.

iii. We will adopt a whole organisation approach to digital transformation

We will continue to take a whole organisation approach to digital transformation by innovating the services that we provide and within the business processes we use to deliver these services. We will give our staff the new digital skills they need to enable them to perform their roles, and will provide appropriate training and support to the judiciary as we increase and enhance our use of digital solutions.

iv. We will adopt a whole system approach to digital transformation

NICTS sits within a complex and diverse ecosystem of organisations, processes and users. As such, we recognise that the success of this Digital Strategy will depend on ongoing collaboration with our partner organisations and the legal profession. Therefore, we will adopt a whole system approach to the design, build and implementation of our new digital services including training on new services and systems.



6. Key Digital Actions

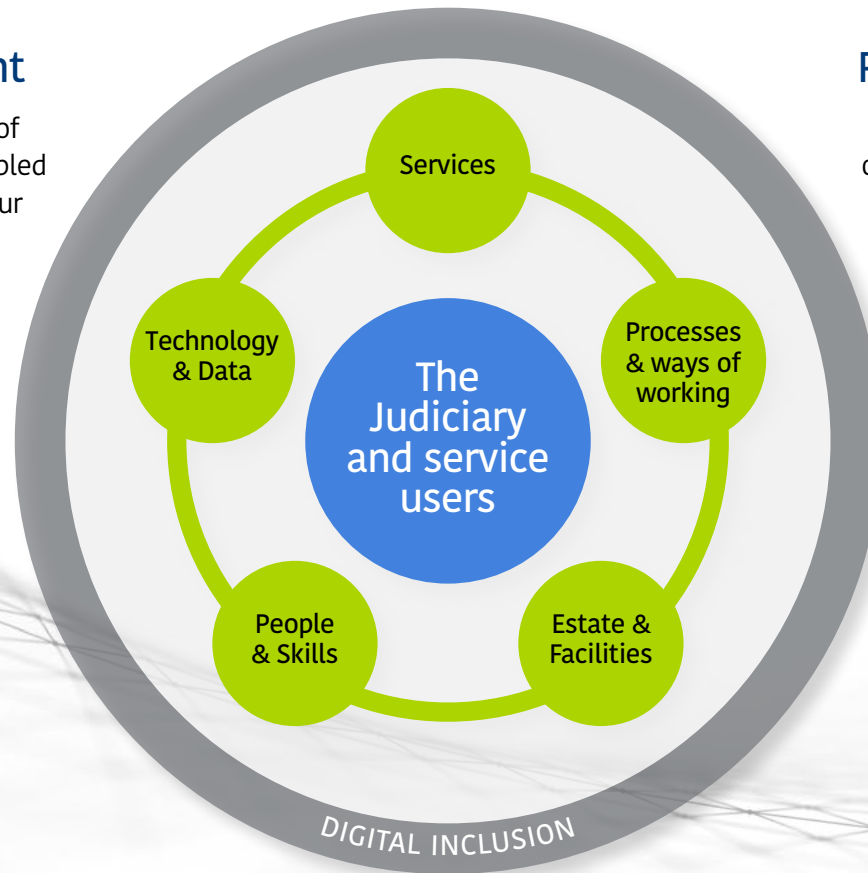
This Digital Strategy will impact on all aspects of our services and how we deliver them. It is centred on the delivery of new and enhanced digitally-enabled services, along with those new and enhanced business capabilities that we will use to deliver these services.

Virtual Environment

A comprehensive catalogue of customer-centric, digitally enabled services provided online to our service users

Physical Environment

A comprehensive catalogue of customer-centric, face-to-face services (supported by digital solutions)



Services

- We will build new and re-designed services that consider our on-line channels as the primary way for service users to interact with NICTS.
- Digital First does not mean “Digital Only” and we will continue to offer an omni-channel approach using, telephone, webchat and face-to-face as appropriate to augment our digital services.
- We will collaborate throughout with the judiciary, staff and service users as we design and produce our digital services. We will listen to their feedback on their experiences of using our digital services and refine these as required.
- As NICTS provides essential administrative support to the judiciary, it is recognised that this Digital Strategy must be underpinned by carefully thought-through changes to the Law, court practice and procedures such as those recommended in, for example, the Civil and Family Justice, and Serious Sexual Offences Reviews. This Digital Strategy will therefore seek to support the judicial vision for digital courts.

Processes & Ways of Working

- We will automate the tasks and activities we undertake to support the judiciary and the wider courts and tribunals system, removing unnecessary manual interventions and paper-based tasks.
- We will maximise the digital exchange of information across NICTS, with our partner organisations and with service users, thereby reducing the handling of physical papers (including evidence).
- We will analyse the data we hold (and wider publicly available data sets) to gain new insights and a fresh perspective on the efficiency and effectiveness of the courts and tribunals system.
- We will use real-time data to inform and support both strategic and operational decisions including allocation and deployment of our resources; the design / re-design of processes & services to make them better and more efficient.

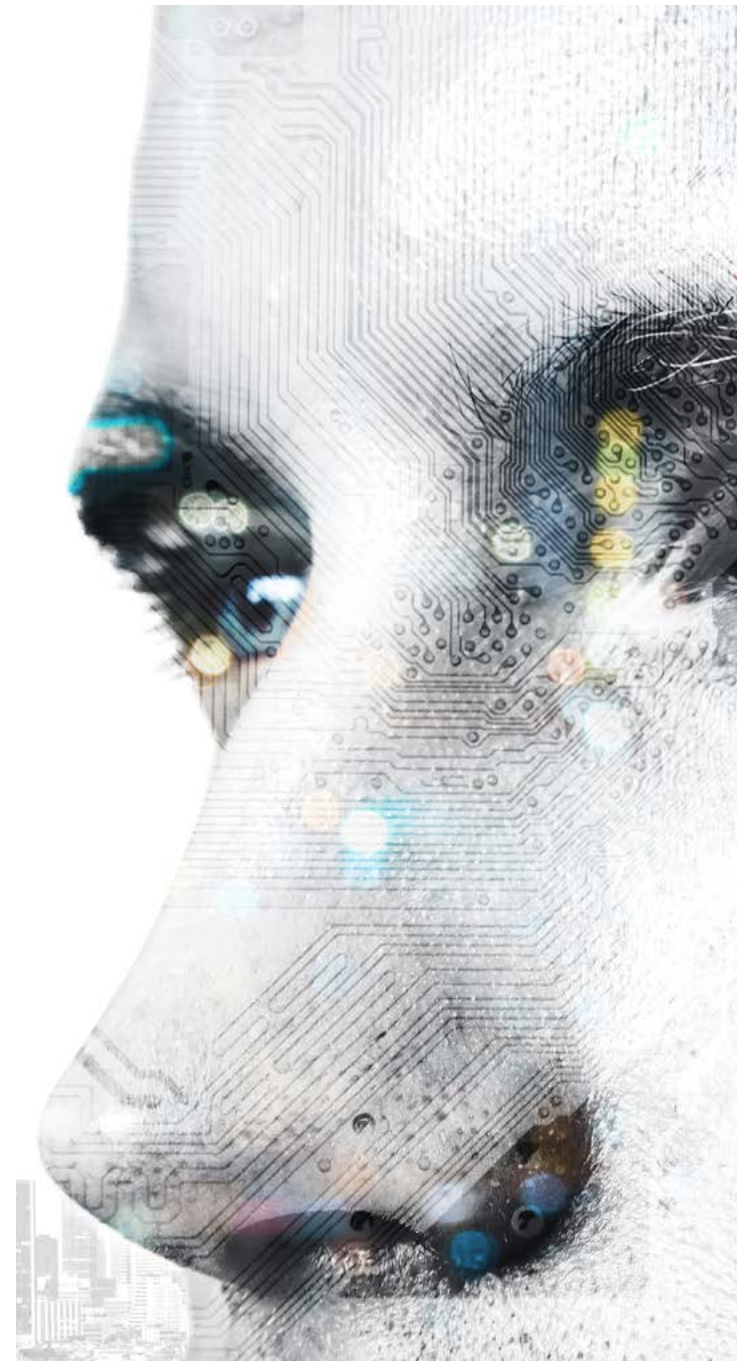


Estate & Facilities

- NICTS will develop an Estates Strategy that will be cognisant of our increasing digital working and service delivery environment.
- We will modernise and digitally enable our physical estate, by providing:
- Secure access to all of our core systems and data analytics tools and visualisations.
- An ability to display digital evidence in court rooms, hearing rooms and chambers and utilise electronic case bundles.
- Enabling of remote attendance at a hearing using video conferencing technologies.
- Secure WiFi connectivity in courtrooms and public areas in courthouses.
- Public Information Displays which will provide timely information to service users.
- NICTS will use the introduction of increased digitalisation and technologies to maximise the value to service users. We will use the introduction of our Virtual Environment to reassess how we use the physical estate.

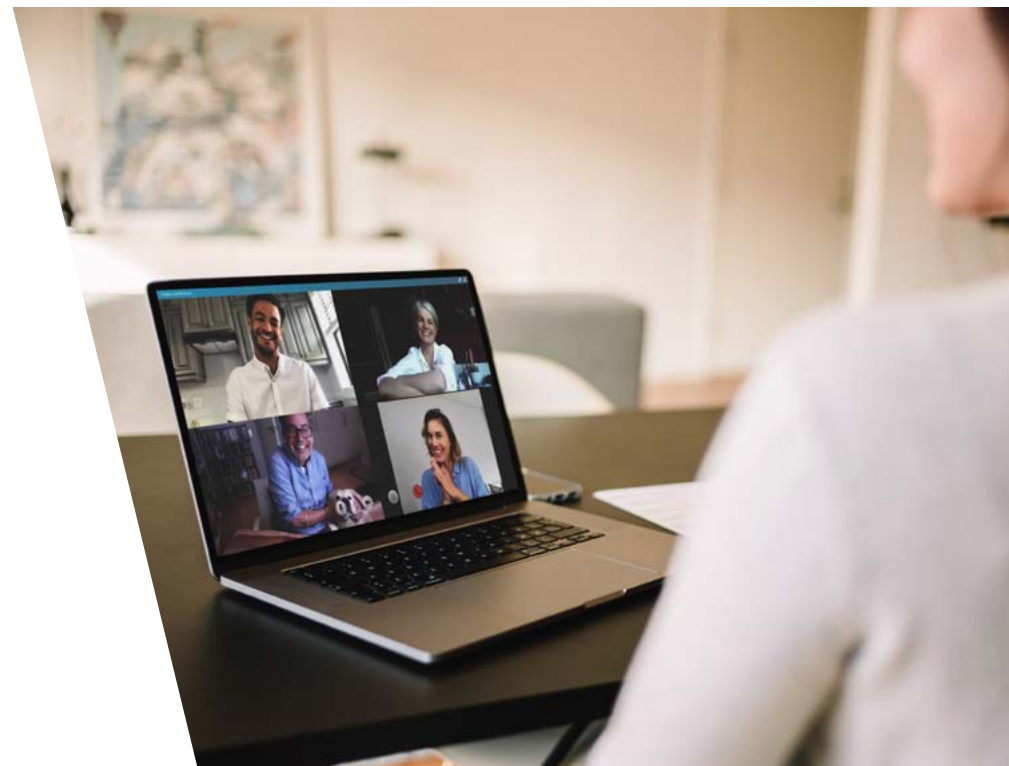
People & Skills

- We will develop a People Strategy which will support staff, not only through the modernisation journey, but in the longer term. A key element of this strategy will be to build the new digital skills and capabilities that staff will need and to maximise the benefits of digitalisation for NICTS.
- We will provide staff with opportunities to learn new skills and deliver added value to service users.
- We will build the capabilities of our staff to support the Virtual Environment and digitally enhanced Physical Environments through a comprehensive learning and development approach.
- We will embed a culture of innovation within NICTS and provide staff with the tools and techniques to identify innovative digital approaches and solutions.
- We will equip staff to meet user needs through strong user insight, a customer service mentality and user-centric decision making and performance targets.
- We will provide support and training for the judiciary and other court users relating to the digital skills required to maximise the use of new digital services and to collaboratively explore new innovative digital solutions.



Technology & Data

- NICTS will implement the necessary digital technologies and data solutions to establish the Virtual Environment and the digitally supported Physical Environment. We will use modern technologies that, as far as possible, comply with Digital First principles.
- We will develop and maintain a Digital Portal for use by citizens and the legal profession, which will be intuitive, easy to use and provide secure on-line access to all NICTS digital services (including initiation, updates, notifications and outcomes).
- The design of our digital solutions will allow straightforward interventions to be automated, freeing both the judiciary and staff to spend more time on activities that matter.
- We will share information securely and digitally with (and from) other organisations as appropriate. We will continue to be active participants in the Causeway Programme and we will work with other Government departments, agencies and other large-volume users of our services (e.g. legal profession, Trusts, etc) to address technical issues that prevent the sharing of relevant information.
- Our digital technology platforms and solutions will be secure by design. We recognise that data is a core digital asset and we will protect the integrity, accuracy and timeliness of the data in line with NICS and DOJ security accreditation policies and practices.
- We will continuously review technology developments and assess what technology initiatives have the most promise in achieving the improvements, commitments, objectives and outcomes we seek to deliver.

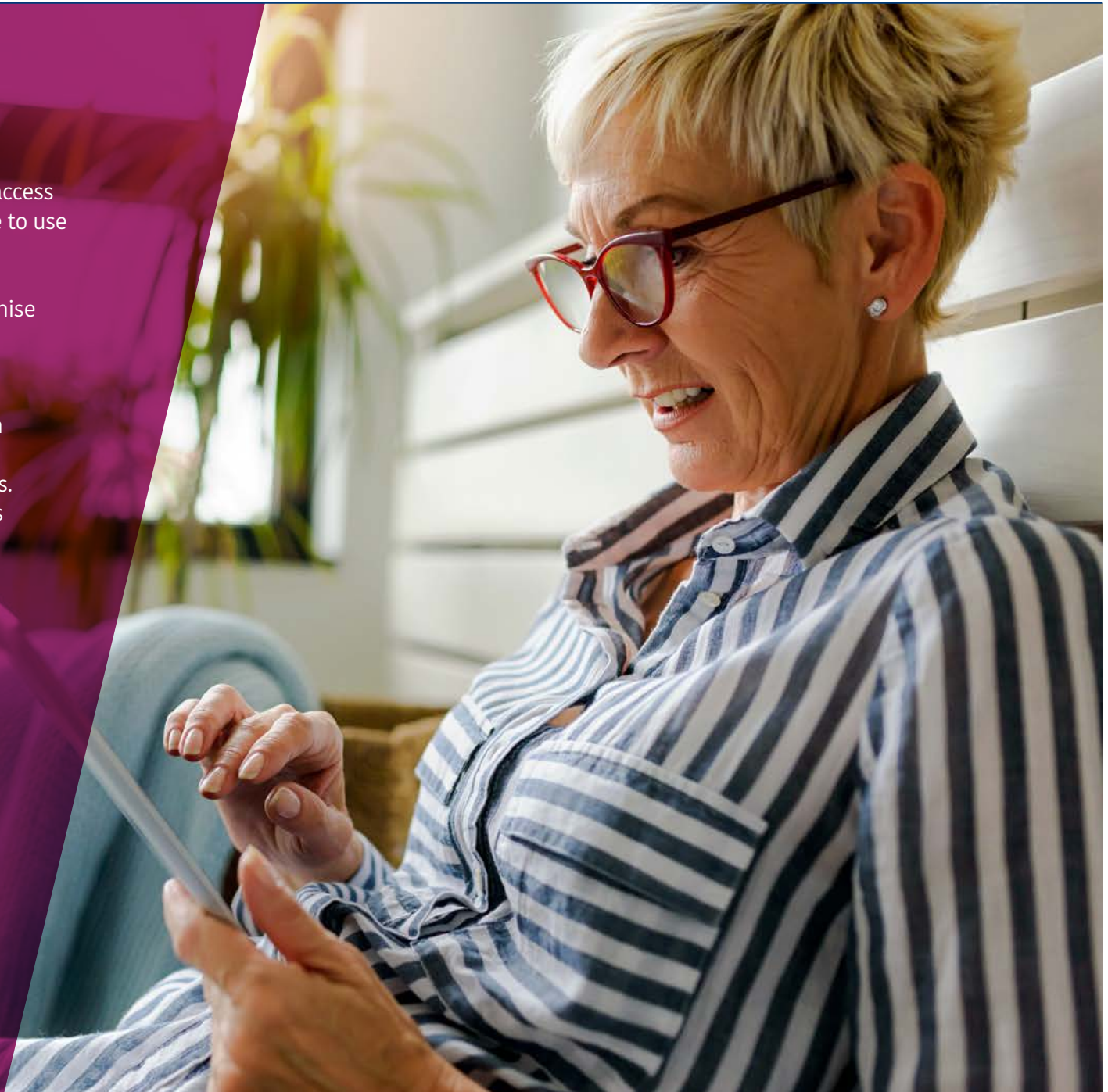


Digital Inclusion

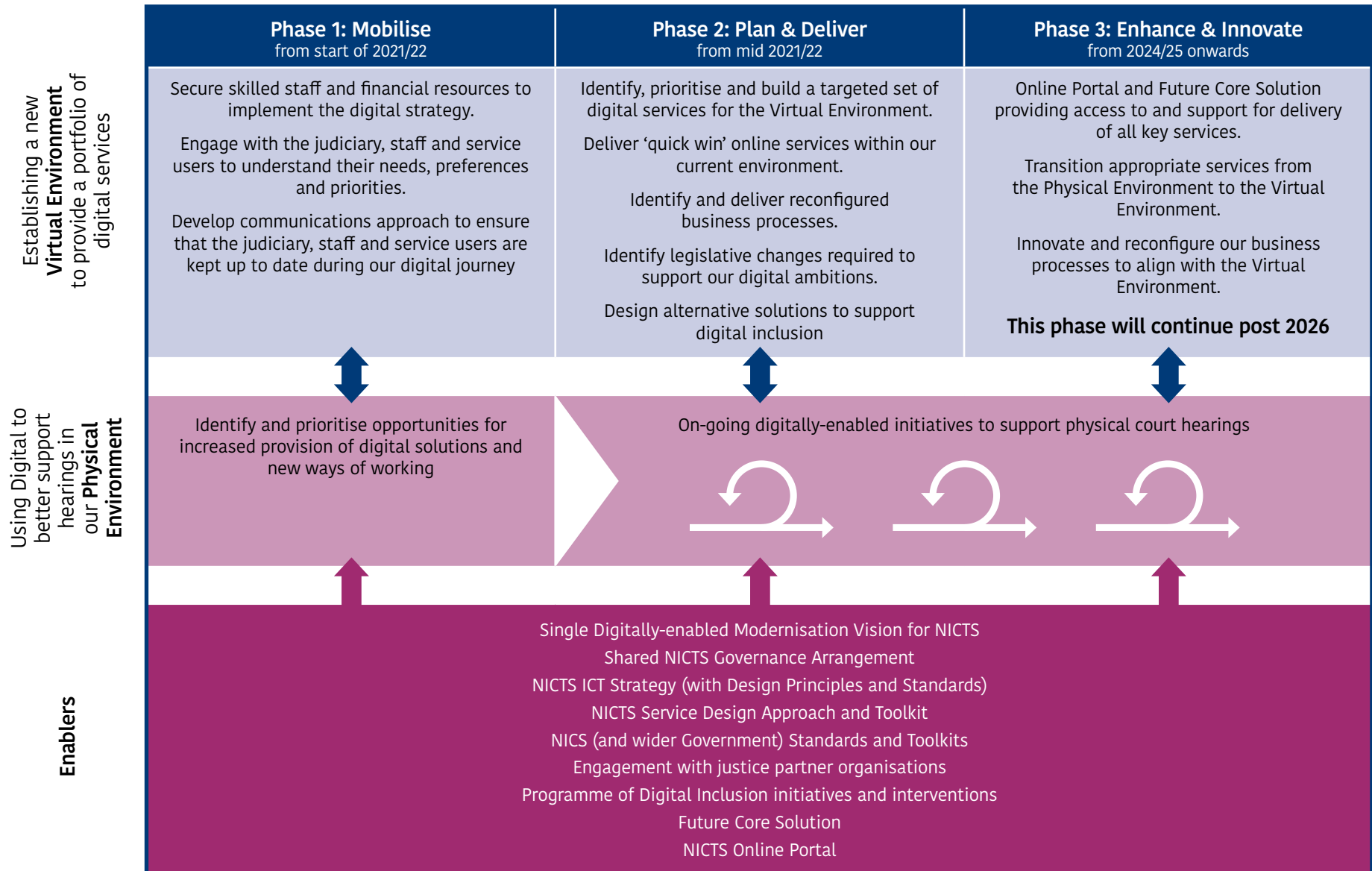
We recognise that some service users cannot access digital services and do not have the confidence to use such services.

Therefore, the design of our services will recognise the different needs and capabilities of service users and will provide alternative methods to access services, such as telephone support, face-to-face, etc. We will continue to work with other departments, Agencies and trusted Third Parties to build service users digital capabilities. We will work to ensure that our digital services are cost-effective for service users.

These actions will be reviewed regularly and updated as appropriate.



7. Our Implementation Approach and Plan



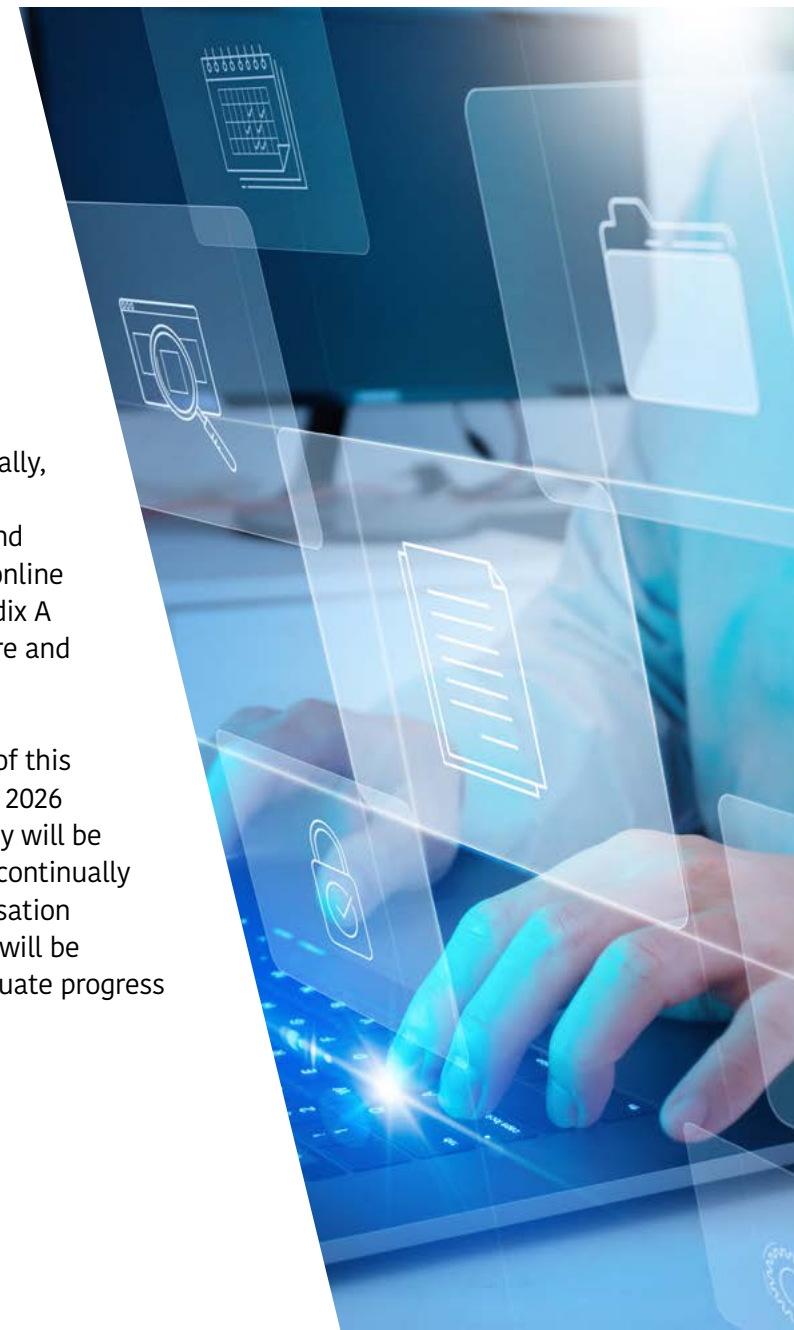
It is envisaged that the Future Core Solution (FCS) will become the technology platform of choice to support future courts and tribunals services and will be based on a service design approach. FCS will replace many of our existing line of business systems and is likely to be hosted in a cloud environment where it will be made available to the judiciary, staff and service users. We expect that FCS and the online portal technology delivery solution(s) will start to roll out at the start of 2024/25.

We will work with members of the judiciary, staff and our other service users to agree our initial priorities, taking into consideration, amongst other things:

- Volumes and complexity (operational/legal)
- Current service user journey / experience
- Available resources/costs
- Optimum use of judicial time
- Ease of transition into the Virtual Environment including consideration of any required changes to legislation and/or Court Rules
- Experiences and digital resources available elsewhere (e.g. HMCTS).
- Lessons learned from our exemplar projects i.e. Probate Online Portal

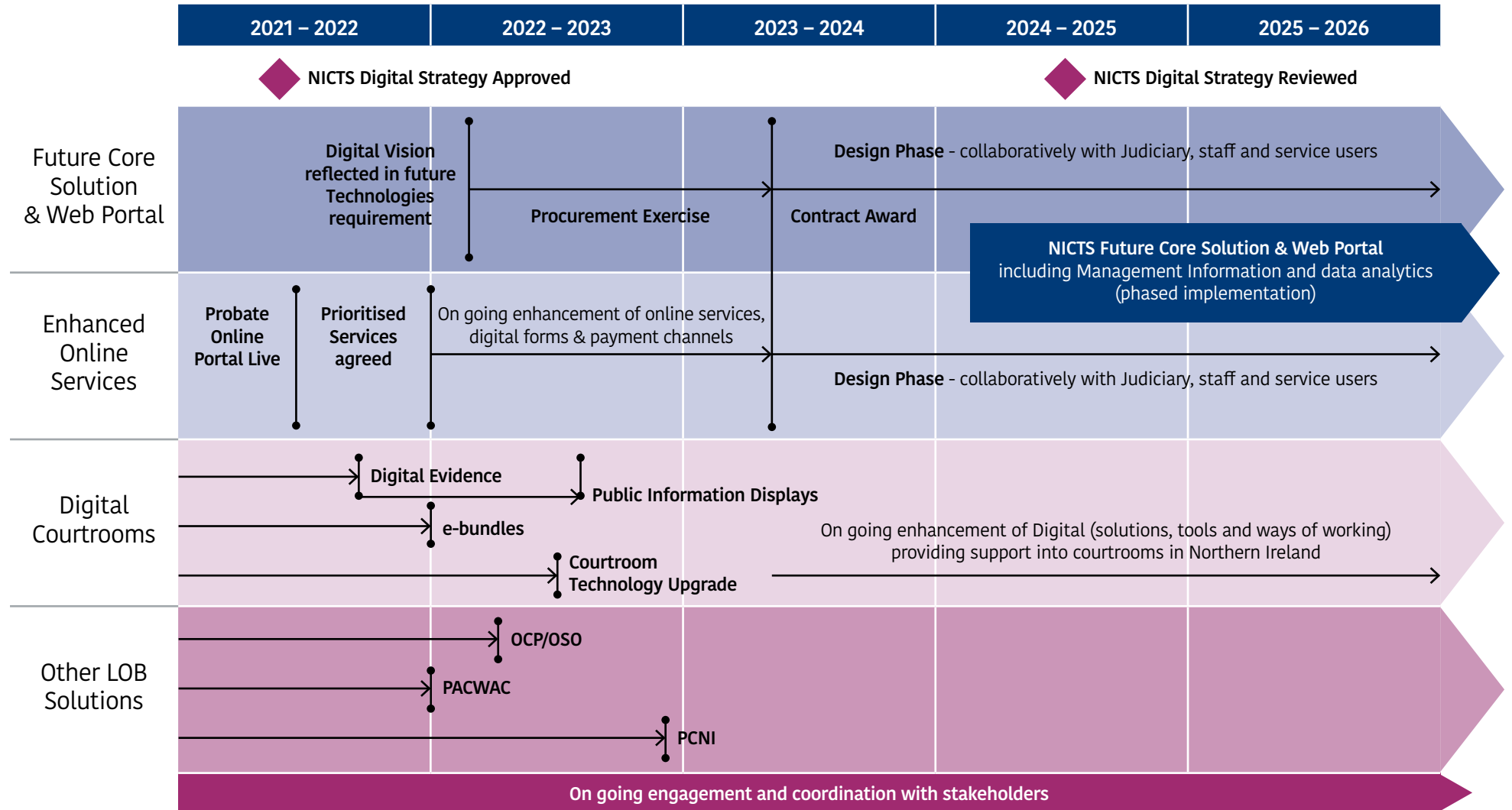
An example of delivery of improved service design, supported by Digital Technology can be seen within the recent delivery of our Probate Online Portal. This has streamlined the process for the user by enabling a simplified application to be completed online, documents uploaded online, fees paid electronically, no requirement for a face to face interview, identity validated online and application progress can be tracked online from initiation to completion. Appendix A shows the Probate user journey before and after service design.

We realise that our implementation of this Digital Strategy will continue beyond 2026 and a further iteration of this Strategy will be required. The initial roadmap will be continually reviewed and refined as the modernisation programme progresses. The strategy will be subject to a review in 2024-25 to evaluate progress and to define future direction.












Strategic Roadmap to 2026 and beyond

Key workstreams underpinning the Digital Strategy












Appendix A - Non-Contentious Probate Process

Before Service Design

								
Obtain & draft hardcopy paperwork and post/lodge by hand	Wait for confirmation of an interview date (normally 2 to 3 weeks)	Citizens travel to High Court or Bishop Street Courthouse for face to face interview	If any paperwork (Will, death certificate etc.) forgotten - return home and re-schedule interview	Once paperwork drafted, citizen asked to swear an Oath	Queue at front of house to pay	Contact Probate Office by phone for update(s) on the application	If any amendments are required, wait for letter to arrive by post - make amendments and post back to Office	Receive Grant in the post

After Service Design

								
Answer a series of simple questions online from office/home	Citizen's identity is verified online through NIDA	Statement of Truth checked and signed online	Secure electronic upload of documents	Pay online and submit application	Post original Will (if applicable)	Receive status updates as application is processed	If any amendments are required, receive an e-mail detailing the issues, complete amendments online & resubmit electronically	Receive Grant in the post



Feedback on this Digital Strategy

Please direct any feedback
on this Digital Strategy to:
Modernisation@courtsni.gov.uk

