



CORPORATE PLAN FOR 2021–25

Rebuilding our Economy through Better Workplaces

June 2021

VISION: To be widely recognised as Northern Ireland’s leading authority in promoting productive working relationships for the benefit of individuals and organisations and to support the creation of a thriving and inclusive economy.

PURPOSE: To improve employment relations, promote best employment practice and resolve workplace disputes through the delivery of quality, impartial and independent services.

VALUES: To achieve our vision and purpose, our values are to be:

Progressive – forward thinking, outward looking, and creative in seeking better ways to support the economy;

Ethical – always acting with integrity, impartiality and utmost professionalism, and demonstrating openness and accountability;

Exemplary – challenging ourselves to be the best we can be and a role model in how we conduct employment relations; and,

Responsive – listening to our customers and staff, adapting to ensure our services meet customers’ needs.

These values underpin all that we do.

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FOREWORD

This Corporate Plan sets out the Labour Relations Agency's strategic priorities for our work for the four-year period to March 2025. It builds on the successful delivery of the previous Corporate Plan, which resulted in the transformation of the Agency. This transformation gave the Agency a greater focus on the needs of our customers and our visibility. We enter the period of this new Corporate Plan with a much higher profile following implementation of a new Communications Strategy, delivery of the new Early Conciliation service, and our facilitation of the Northern Ireland Engagement Forum on Covid-19.

Demand for our services is as high as it has ever been as a result of the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and holiday pay disputes. Through business continuity planning, the Agency was able to respond effectively to the pandemic by ensuring our staff could work from home and continue delivering services, which were prioritised to meet customer needs.

Our key priority for 2021-25 is working with partner organisations and stakeholders to support post-Covid economic recovery. We plan to do this by helping employers adopt best employment practices through high quality advice and webinars, delivered in partnership with employer representative bodies. We also intend to achieve this aim by developing the knowledge and skills of managers and employee representatives, so that they can put in place good employment relations that boost productivity and create better workplaces.

Where things do go wrong, we will continue to be available to employers and employees alike to resolve disputes in ways that minimise disruption to workplace harmony and stress for all concerned.

A key challenge ahead, both for the Agency as an employer and service provider, and all other employers alike will be building on the lessons of the pandemic as they affect the world of work. In particular, grasping the opportunities afforded by new working practices that emerged from the use of technology, including 'hybrid' working and service delivery. Working with others, we intend to play our part in articulating through guidance and example how workplaces and working practices can be transformed to increase productivity and quality of life for all.

During the life of the last Corporate Plan, the Agency achieved the Investors in People Gold and Customer Service Excellence standards, demonstrating that we live our values, and we are now an official producer of statistics. This new Corporate Plan builds on these achievements, seeking to drive continuous improvement in the way we support our staff and customers, use digital technology to innovate and reach more customers more efficiently, and use data and customer insight to guide the development of our services.

We commend this Corporate Plan to you.



Gordon Milligan
Chairperson



Don Leeson
Chief Executive

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

The Agency is a publicly funded body established by the Industrial Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, and continued by the Industrial Relations Order (Northern Ireland) 1992. We are independent of, but accountable to, the Department for the Economy.

Our independent Board, comprising members drawn from business, trade union, employment law and academic backgrounds, establishes the Agency's strategic direction. Board members are public appointments, appointed by the Minister for the Economy.

We currently employ the equivalent of approximately 60 full-time staff who operate from two locations – our Head Office in Belfast and a Regional Office in Derry/Londonderry.

The Agency's budget baseline is approximately £4 million per year.

Services

The Agency provides a range of **advisory services** to promote good employment practice and advise employers and employees on their rights and responsibilities. These services include:

- **Workplace Information Service (WIS)** – this is a confidential information and advice line (telephone number: 03300 555 300) for employers, individuals and their representatives.
- **Briefings, seminars/webinars, and workshops** – these are aimed at disseminating information and promoting good practice on a range of employment issues and enhancing the employment relations skills of line managers.
- **Document Service** – this online service allows employers to compile workplace documentation – from written statements of employment particulars through to employee handbooks – with guidance on compliance and good practice.

The Agency also provides a range of confidential **dispute resolution** services designed to deal with problems that arise in the workplace. These include:

- **Conciliation** – this service seeks to find a mutually agreeable solution to an employment problem or dispute where an individual could make a claim to a tribunal. There are three aspects to this:
 - **Early Conciliation** – potential tribunal claimants are required to notify the Agency of a dispute and consider conciliation before submitting a tribunal claim;

- **Post-claim conciliation** – once a tribunal claim has been submitted, the Agency continues to be available to the parties to settle their dispute through conciliation; and,
 - **Employer-led conciliation** – the Agency provides a service to employers who wish to avoid the risk of a tribunal claim by using conciliation to resolve an employment matter.
- **Arbitration** – where a solution to a problem or disagreement to an individual dispute cannot be found, and the parties wish to avoid a tribunal, our arbitration service provides a quick, confidential, non-legalistic process to resolve the matter. Arbitration decisions, and remedies that flow from these, are legally enforceable in the same way as tribunal decisions.
 - **Mediation** – this is an effective process for restoring positive working relationships, using a mediator to work with those in conflict or dispute to find a mutually agreed resolution to overcome their differences.
 - **Collective Conciliation** – this service aims to help employers and trade unions resolve disputes typically affecting larger numbers of employees.

Influencing the employment relations policy agenda

As well as being a service provider, the Agency has a key role in working collaboratively with and providing platforms for representative bodies of employers and employees to facilitate discussion and seek to influence employment relations issues at a strategic level. These bodies include the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), Chambers of Commerce, Institute of Directors (IoD), and the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU). We also work across all sectors, including the public, private, education and research, and voluntary and community sectors.

The Agency chairs and facilitates two key fora of stakeholders:

- **The NI Employment Relations Roundtable** – this promotes the strategic importance of strong and equitable employment relationships and industrial relations to economic competitiveness and social wellbeing.
- **The NI Engagement Forum on Covid-19** – established in March 2020 at the request of the NI Executive, the Forum provides advice on Covid-19 matters as they apply to workplaces and the labour market.

The Agency is an official provider of statistics regarding employment disputes, which is conferred by the Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

THE PLANNING CONTEXT

Where we have been

Our people

The Agency's Corporate Plan for 2017-21 hailed an exciting new vision and staff devised and led values for the organisation. A substantial transformation programme was needed to ensure that the Agency had the right structure, business model and ways of working to deliver that plan. This was completed in 2018. It resulted in:

- Restructuring three Directorates into two, with Advisory and Dispute Resolution Services merged into a single Employment Relations Services Directorate;
- Merger of all administrative functions to create the Business Support Team within the Corporate Services Directorate;
- Expanding the Senior Leadership Team to include Employment Relations Managers (rotationally based), as well as the Chief Executive and Directors; and,
- Changes in working practices, which led to greater versatility among staff allowing them to undertake different roles as determined by business need (e.g. Early Conciliation – see below).

A Voluntary Exit Scheme in 2017-18 resulted in the departure of nine staff members. While some posts were suppressed to offset financial pressures, others were transformed to facilitate new ways of working.

A new People Strategy was approved at the November 2017 Board meeting. At the core of this was a focus on embedding and living the Agency's values, and promoting positive changes in organisational culture. This new culture places an emphasis on leadership at all levels of the organisation, on customer service excellence, and on being more outward-looking. Implementation of this strategy led to the Agency securing recognition, in October 2020, against the new and more demanding sixth generation Investors in People (IiP) Gold standard (to date, the only public body in NI to do so).

Board membership and arrangements remained stable throughout the lifetime of the 2017-21 Plan. The absence of a Minister, while the Assembly was suspended between 2017 and 2020, resulted in extensions to the appointments of Board members. An appointments process to select a new Chair and four new Board members concluded in March 2021 (see below).

Service delivery

As the Agency has transformed, so has the way in which services are delivered. Service modernisation has been underpinned by a commitment to the Customer Service Excellence standard, which the Agency achieved in March 2021.

The most significant change was the introduction in January 2020 of **Early Conciliation** (EC). EC had been delayed by the suspension of the NI Executive in 2017; its implementation was the first announcement made by the new Minister for the Economy when the Executive was restored in 2020. EC implementation required changes in working practices across the organisation and ongoing investment in technology, particularly a web portal to facilitate digital service delivery.

EC implementation coincided with a continued surge in tribunal claims regarding incorrectly calculated holiday pay. Resolution of these tribunal claims have been deferred pending resolution of the case of Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) v Agnew (Alexander) and Others. However, a number of organisations are now seeking to settle backdated holiday pay liabilities – the Agency is currently dealing with approximately 20,000 such cases. This is being achieved through the deployment of extra staff, with additional funding provided by DfE.

A further increase in demand for conciliation services is anticipated when the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends in September 2021, with the risk that a significant proportion of the 100,000 individuals currently ‘furloughed’ are made redundant as a result of the profound economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (see below).

The Agency has continued to resolve disputes between employers and their recognised trade unions through **collective conciliation**. This remains an important and highly valued service, and has assisted in resolving a number of otherwise costly and damaging disputes (typically around 20 per year).

Unfortunately, there have been no hearings under the **Statutory Arbitration Scheme** during the corporate planning period. A planned review of the Scheme by the Department for the Economy, which may result in changes to address concerns by potential users, has been delayed by other priorities.

Volumes for the Agency’s other dispute resolution services, **mediation** and facilitated **independent appeals**, have remained constant; typically 30 mediations and 30 appeals conducted per year. Customer satisfaction with mediation is high; independent appeals have proved more problematic with concerns expressed about shortcomings in the governance framework in collective agreements that provide for appeals. Both services are subject to review (see below).

Call volumes to the **Workplace Information Service (WIS)**, which had plateaued at around 18,000 during the early part of the corporate planning period, increased by approximately 30 per cent as a result of Covid-19 and have remained around this level. A new website, with clear, accessible information, has meant that employers and employees are now able to resolve straightforward queries through it, resulting in an increase in the complexity of issues being handled by the WIS Team. The use of web chat was piloted by the WIS Team but proved unworkable given the level of complexity associated with cases (web chat has however been successfully deployed as a channel for general enquiries).

Service provision in respect of **seminars, document vetting, inter-agency partnerships** has been under review during the latter part of the corporate planning period. A new online self-help document development service, to be delivered through the website, is being developed for launch later in 2021. As a result of Covid-19, in-person public seminars have been successfully replaced by webinars.

An important development during the corporate planning period was the introduction in 2018-19 of the **LRA Certificate in Effective Line Management Practice**. This equips managers with the skills to manage employment relations in the workplace effectively and has proven itself to be a very popular service offering. This also moved successfully online in response to Covid-19 restrictions.

Strategic interventions

The Agency has sought to influence and promote good employment practice at a strategic level during the corporate planning period.

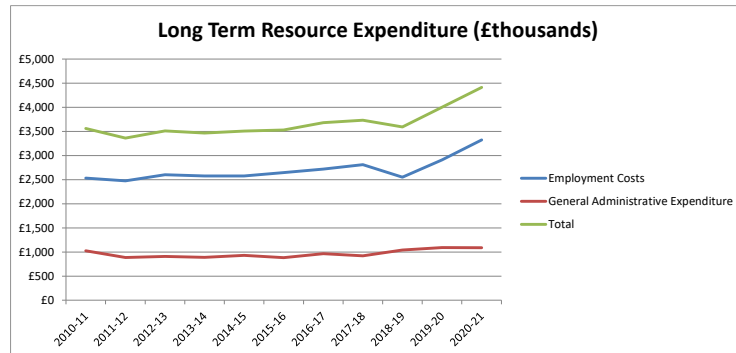
The **NI Employment Relations Roundtable** continued to meet regularly until the start of the pandemic and it had been planning to host a major employment relations conference in 2020. The **NI Engagement Forum**, which drew membership from the Roundtable and elsewhere, was formed at the Executive's request in March 2020 to advise it on pandemic-related workplace matters. Like the Roundtable, the Forum is facilitated by the Agency and has brought employer and employee representatives together to successfully resolve issues of concern and arrive at consensus on matters impacting on employment relations on a sector-wide basis. Meetings of the Roundtable resumed in February 2021.

'**Signature**' projects have evolved during the corporate planning period. These are focused on employment relations issues within sectors, rather than employers. This has allowed the Agency to exert a more strategic level of employment and industrial relations influence in sectors such as health, education and local government.

The Agency commissioned two **research projects** during the corporate planning period. The first of these was UK-wide research undertaken by the University of Cardiff on behalf of Acas in Great Britain and the Labour Relations Agency. This looked at workplace dispute resolution practices and, among other findings, highlighted the need for improved employment relations skills among managers and reinforced the importance of interventions such as the LRA Certificate in Effective Line Management Practice.

The second research project was conducted by the University of Warwick to inform the development of an employment relations model for NI. This reported in late 2020. The recommendations emanating from the research propose an incremental route map providing a strategic approach to employment relations from organisational-level up to Government policy level to support post-Covid economic recovery (see below).

Funding



The above chart illustrates the Agency's resource expenditure over the last 10 years. As can be seen, there has been a marked increase in employment costs during the last two years, following a reduction in 2018-19 as a result of the Voluntary Exit Scheme (which was implemented in early 2018). The recent increase results from additional employer pension contributions, pay awards, and deployment of additional staff resources to respond to Early Conciliation and increased demand for services because of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), Covid-19 and holiday pay settlements.

Much of the increase in employment costs in the last two years has been funded through in-year bids and applications for special funding to respond to the economic impact of EU exit and Covid-19. In 2020-21, the temporary additional funding for employment costs amounted to approximately £450k; in 2021-22, additional funding amounts to almost £1,100k mostly for employment costs to support economic recovery.

General administrative expenditure (GAE) has remained relatively constant throughout the last 10 years, despite inflationary pressures (most notably the 2019 increase in Head Office rent). This is testimony to the Agency's efforts in successfully identifying efficiency savings, so that as much resource as possible is devoted to staffing and service delivery.

This Corporate Plan has been prepared on the basis of the Agency's opening resource baseline (i.e. £3,823k). However, the Agency will seek to increase this baseline during the planned four-year Spending Review in 2021-22 to maintain the capacity we have built-up in recent years to respond to increased demand for services and to continue to support economic growth.

Accommodation

Accommodation matters were prominent during the corporate planning period. In line with NI Executive policy, the Agency sought to identify suitable accommodation on the Government Estate for both our Head and Regional Offices, while balancing the need to remain independent and at arm's-length from Government. None was available and, in 2019, interim solutions were implemented. The Head Office lease was extended by three years; the Regional Office relocated to more accessible and less expensive premises, leased by the Department for Communities (DfC).

In common with many organisations, the Agency closed its offices in response to the threat of Covid-19 in March 2020. Thanks to effective pre-existing business continuity planning, all staff were able to work from home effectively from the outset with minimal disruption to services.

Communications

A key development driven by the last Corporate Plan was an increased focus on external communications. This work was underpinned by a Communications Strategy, which led to:

- The appointment of a Communications Manager on an interim basis to allow evaluation of the benefits of such a role;
- New corporate branding and image;
- Establishing greater general awareness levels of the Agency and our services;
- Greater media engagement, with regular press and radio coverage;
- Development of a new accessible and customer-focused website; and,
- Establishing social media channels to communicate with customers.

Where we are now

The NI economy has been profoundly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. A deep and prolonged economic downturn is forecast.¹ The vaccine programme offers hope that restrictions affecting workplaces will be eased later in 2021.

¹ 'Rebuilding a stronger economy – the medium term recovery', Department for the Economy, June 2020 (available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/rebuilding-stronger-economy-medium-term-recovery>).

The aspiration to 'Build Back Better', echoed by leaders across the world, including the UK Prime Minister,² articulates the opportunity to apply learning from the pandemic to create a better, more equal society and more productive and 'greener' economies.

DfE published, in February 2021, the Economic Recovery Action Plan for NI with the strapline, "*Rebuilding a Stronger Economy*".³ This references the Agency's work in, "*Providing advice and guidance to NI employers, employees and policy makers on the NI Labour Market, employee relations, best practice and compliance in response to the pandemic and its impact on labour relations.*" Among other actions, the plan identifies a highly skilled and agile workforce as one of the outcomes required for the rebuilding of the NI economy.

The Agency has a critical role to play in supporting economic recovery and growth by substantiating and articulating the correlation between good employment relations and productivity. Critical to this will be ensuring the DfE's planned new Skills Strategy highlights the importance of employment relations skills to economic success.⁴ At individual employer level, the Agency is focused on disseminating good employment practice to newly established and growing employers, including delivery of employment relations skills in partnership with others such as Invest NI, local government, and employer and employee representative bodies.

Furthermore, in May 2021, DfE published its 10-year vision for the economy, '10x Economy: Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation'.⁵ This focuses on transforming the economy and, as the Minister for the Economy states, creating "...*better jobs with better wages, in a more flexible working environment...*". The Agency will have a key role in supporting new and expanding employers develop workplaces and flexible working arrangements that will attract and retain high calibre employees.

The Agency has received funding to support economic growth following the UK's exit from the EU. In addition, the Agency is establishing a partnership with the Equality Commission and NI Human Rights Commission's Dedicated Mechanism Unit (DMU), which has been established to monitor post-EU exit issues. The Agency envisages a role in providing information and expertise to the DMU on employment law matters.

² See, for example, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/biden-boris-johnson-build-back-better-b1613419.html>.

³ Available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/economic-recovery-action-plan>.

⁴ DfE published its consultation document on the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, 'Skills for a 10x Economy' on 27 May, with a closing date of 19 August 2021. It is available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/skills-strategy-10x-economy-consultation.pdf>.

⁵ Available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/10x-economy-ni-decade-of-innovation.pdf>.

DfE is currently progressing new legislation on Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay entitlements, which is expected to become law in 2021-22 and be implemented in 2022-23. Looking further ahead, it is anticipated that the Department will continue to develop new employment relations policies and legislation in light of the references in 'New Decade, New Approach'⁶ and the draft Programme for Government (see below). The Agency anticipates working in close partnership with DfE throughout the corporate planning period to develop, and promote awareness of, new employment rights. The Agency will continue to provide advice to DfE as it develops further employment policy and legislation.

Lastly, the latest iteration of the draft Programme for Government (PfG) was published for consultation in early 2021.⁷ The Agency's work is particularly relevant in delivering the following outcomes:

- Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral;
- People want to live, work and visit here;
- We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment;
- We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect; and,
- Everyone can reach their potential.

We anticipate playing an important role in helping shape and deliver a number of the key PfG priorities and underpinning strategies, including 'Better Jobs' with its focus on giving employees a voice, and the Economic Strategy and Skills Strategy.

Where we are going

In line with our vision and values, the Agency will continue to find new ways to improve our services to respond to our customers' and stakeholders' changing requirements.

At the macro-economic level, we will work with the NI Engagement Forum to promote take-up of the Covid-19 vaccine and guide employers through the challenges that the virus will continue to create, and support the safe re-opening of our economy through advice to DfE and the Executive.

⁶ Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/deal-to-see-restored-government-in-northern-ireland-tomorrow>.

⁷ Available at: <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government-pfg-2021>.

Strengthening the role of social partnership and social dialogue will be key features of work across Europe as countries emerge from the pandemic.⁸ We will work with the Employment Relations Roundtable to promote effective partnerships between employer and employee representatives, as envisaged in the Employment Relations Model for NI developed by the University of Warwick. This will need to be supported by further research, including evidencing the positive link between effective employee engagement and productivity. A major conference in 2022 will showcase best practice examples of employment relations in workplaces.

The Roundtable, as a ready-made collective stakeholder forum, will also have an important role in supporting and informing DfE in the development of employment relations policies and legislation.

The Agency will review its key employment relations services during the corporate planning period. In line with DfE's evaluation strategy, EC will be reviewed after one and three years' operation in June 2021 and 2023 respectively. These reviews will look at the impact that early resolution of disputes has on relationships, productivity, whether tribunal claim levels are reduced, the impact on 'settlement culture' and whether the Agency's processes are as efficient as they can be, and whether EC is appropriately resourced. Reviews of the facilitated independent appeal hearings and mediation services will also be undertaken in partnership with customers and stakeholders.

The Agency's full range of conciliation services are likely to be in high demand throughout the corporate planning period. This will particularly be the case during 2021-22 as employers seek to settle their holiday pay calculation liabilities, and as redundancies materialise when current furlough arrangements end.

We have secured additional resources to ensure greater capacity to provide the advisory support which will be critical in post-Covid economic recovery. We envisage delivering this in partnership with others, particularly Invest NI, local government, and employer and employee representative bodies. This support will be in the form of training and follow-up advice and guidance on good employment practices.

Internally, the delivery of this Corporate Plan will be underpinned by a number of new corporate strategies, which will be developed during 2021-22. These will cover our people, information technology, communications, and harnessing the data we collect.

We will continue to evolve and develop our organisation and service delivery models throughout the lifetime of this Corporate Plan. Planned service and business process reviews, along with the development of the new corporate strategies, will enable further transformation of the Agency and working practices.

⁸ 'Industrial Relations: Developments 2015-2019', Eurofound, December 2020 (available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/flagship-report/2020/industrial-relations-developments-2015-2019>).

In line with our values, we want to be widely recognised as an exemplar employer. Over the lifetime of this plan, we will create closer alignment between the best practice we promote and our own internal people policies and practices. A particular priority will be continuing to support and develop our staff, so that they can fulfil their potential and put the Agency on the path to achieving the prestigious Investors in People Platinum award.

We will develop a new People Strategy founded on the following principles:

- Internal Partnerships;
- Health and Wellbeing;
- Engagement;
- Agility and flexibility; and,
- Leading-edge practices.

A workforce planning model will be key to the strategy. This will assist us with succession planning, knowledge management, talent management, and flexible resourcing. We will continue our programme of leadership development, introduce coaching and mentoring programmes, and identify more opportunities for cross-functional project working.

We will relocate our Head Office in 2022. This will also affect how we engage with each other and with our customers. We will make this transition as seamless as possible and keep our approaches under review in what is likely to be a rapidly changing environment in terms of the way we work and live for years to come. Our other accommodation requirements will be reviewed in light of Government plans for regional hubs.⁹

The move to agile working methods allows us to think beyond the traditional team set-up and physical office environment. Agile working practices will continue to be developed to ensure we use accommodation effectively, engage better with our customers, and meet staff aspirations to work partly from home and achieve improved work/life balance. This approach, which has been used effectively during the pandemic, combined with technology investment, has already resulted in more environmentally sustainable ways of working and we expect to be an even 'greener' organisation when we occupy new, energy-efficient modern office accommodation in 2022 and through reduced paper usage and a much smaller work-related travel carbon footprint.

Technology will continue to play a critical role in how we deliver our services. Our primary focus will be on achieving integration and connectivity across our platforms, media and devices. Ensuring stability of the technology environment, and continuity of digital services as we move to a more hybrid and agile delivery model will be important themes for the next four years.

⁹ Further information is available at: <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/connect2-regional-hubs-written-ministerial-statement>.

We will enable the growth of our digital presence by ensuring a permanent and stable environment for our digital outreach, our webinars, podcasts and online clinics.

We will also complete a review of our core case management and records system against defined business and customer needs to determine if it remains fit-for-purpose for longer term delivery.

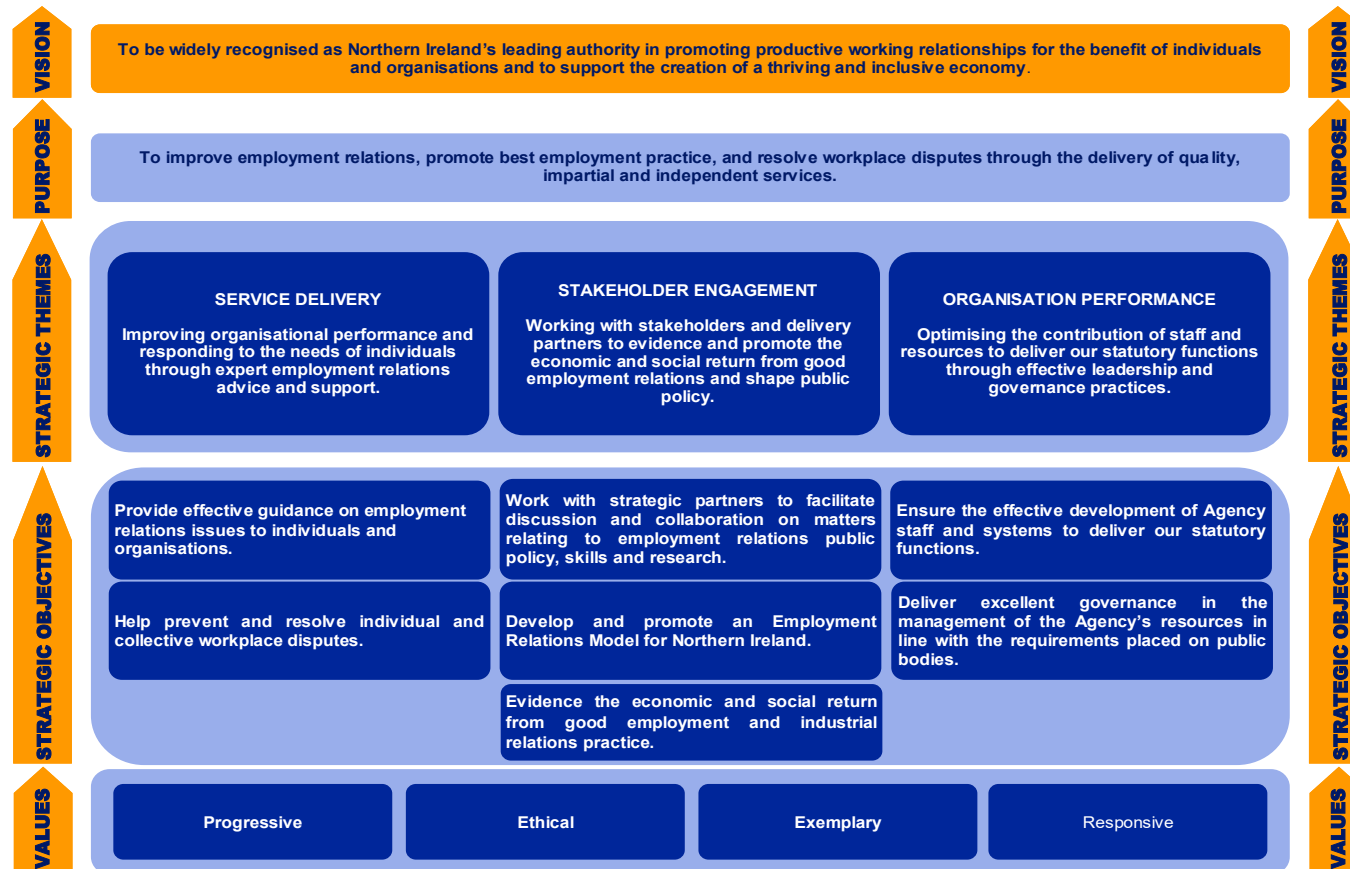
We will develop a new Communications Strategy to promote the value of good employment relations and our core services, and deliver information and assistance to our customers and stakeholders.

Our approach will be both planned and responsive. This will allow us to quickly mobilise targeted media campaigns (social and traditional) for emerging issues, and promote and enable the work of the Agency generally. Our communications will also be critical in reinforcing messages around our role and remit in the context of supporting economic recovery.

Lastly, through improved use of data analytics, we plan to use the insights generated to better target service delivery and communications regarding best employment practices to ensure the greatest impact of the Agency's resources on economic recovery in NI.

OUR APPROACH TO THE CORPORATE PLAN

Set out below is the Agency's strategy map, which gives a visual presentation of our vision and purpose, the strategic themes which drive improvement, the core activities we need to excel at and the values we uphold to ensure our success.



The vision, values and strategic themes are carried forward from the Corporate Plan for 2017-21. These were reviewed by Board members and Senior Leadership Team at planning workshops where it was agreed they remain appropriate for the current planning context and the Agency's priorities.

STRATEGIC THEMES

Our strategic themes draw on the emerging Programme for Government and DfE's Economic Recovery Plan. These are:

- 1. Improving organisational performance and responding to the needs of individuals through expert employment relations advice and support.**

This theme focuses on the delivery by our expert and knowledgeable staff of advisory and dispute resolution services to improve the performance of organisations and help create better workplaces for individuals.

- 2. Working with stakeholders and delivery partners to evidence and promote the economic and social return from good employment relations and shape public policy.**

This theme focuses on working with others to undertake research and generate data on the value of positive and harmonious employment relations and to influence Government policy.

- 3. Optimising the contribution of staff and resources to deliver our statutory functions through effective leadership and governance practices.**

Through effective leadership and excellent governance arrangements we will make the best use of the resources available to the Agency to deliver our statutory role.

Under each strategic theme, we have identified a number of objectives that we wish to achieve over the next four years.

Performance Reporting

The Agency has already invested significant energy in aligning our performance reporting with the outcomes-based approach promulgated in the draft Programme for Government (PfG) and relevant NIAO guidance. This has resulted in the development of three performance 'scorecards' for all of our services. These are designed to demonstrate the difference that the Agency makes to its customers and stakeholders. The scorecards showing these outcomes are at pages 27-29.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR 2021-25

Strategic Theme 1: Improving organisational performance and responding to the needs of individuals through expert employment relations advice and support.

Strategic objectives and priorities

1.1 Provide effective guidance on employment relations issues to individuals and organisations.

To achieve this objective we will:

- Focus advisory services to support post-Covid economic recovery and growth;
- Provide an effective Workplace Information Service;
- Provide managers and employee representatives with practical skills and confidence to create positive and productive working environments;
- Work in partnership with DfE to raise awareness of changes in employment legislation;
- Work in partnership with stakeholders on key issues affecting good employment relations; and,
- Provide thought-leadership on best employment practice.

1.2 Help prevent and resolve individual and collective workplace disputes.

To achieve this objective we will:

- Provide effective individual conciliation services;
- Provide effective collective conciliation services;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of Early Conciliation in partnership with DfE and Office of The Industrial Tribunals and The Fair Employment Tribunal; and,
- Review and adapt the delivery of all alternative dispute resolution services to ensure the most effective use of resources, in line with customer needs.

Strategic Theme 2: Working with stakeholders and delivery partners to evidence and promote the economic and social return from good employment relations and shape public policy.

Strategic objectives and priorities

2.1 Work with strategic partners to facilitate discussion and collaboration on matters relating to employment relations public policy, skills and research.

To achieve this objective we will:

- Continue to facilitate any engagement forum as established by the NI Executive, if asked to do so;
- Facilitate the NI Employment Relations Roundtable (and secure resources to support its work);
- Further develop partnership arrangements to progress collaborative projects with Acas and the Workplace Relations Commission;
- Further develop partnership arrangements to progress work with the Equality Commission;
- Host a major employment relations conference in partnership with DfE and the Roundtable; and,
- Provide advice and support to DfE in the development and implementation of employment relations policies and legislation.

2.2 Develop and promote an Employment Relations Model for Northern Ireland.

To achieve this objective we will:

- Consult on the University of Warwick research recommendations on an Employment Relations Model for NI;
- Develop an action plan to deliver the University of Warwick research recommendations regarding the Agency's work;
- Develop best practice advisory projects to build on the University of Warwick research recommendations; and,
- Develop best practice advisory projects to build on the findings from the University of Cardiff research on dispute resolution practices in NI.

2.3 Evidence the economic and social return from good employment and industrial relations practice.

To achieve this objective we will:

- Work with DfE and other key stakeholders to evidence the economic and social return from good employment and industrial relations practice.

Strategic Theme 3: Optimising the contribution of staff and resources to deliver our statutory functions through effective leadership and governance practices.

Strategic objectives and priorities

3.1 Ensure the effective development of Agency staff and systems to deliver our statutory functions.

To achieve this objective we will:

- Implement a programme of organisational transformation in line with the Agency's Corporate Plan;
- Continue to embed leadership, competence and commitment with our core values through our learning and development programmes;
- Establish our role as an exemplar employer and achieve liP Platinum;
- Establish a workforce planning model, including an Apprenticeship Programme;
- Review longer term accommodation requirements, including the use of new regional hubs;
- Identify new information systems delivery partners;
- Undertake a review of the case management and records system (CMRS);
- Agree and implement a programme of business process reviews; and,
- Develop business analytics capability to improve service delivery.

3.2 Deliver excellent governance in the management of the Agency's resources in line with the requirements placed on public bodies

To achieve this objective we will:

- Maintain our reputation for excellent governance and sound financial management, as evidenced by internal and external audits;
- Ensure effective quality management arrangements;
- Secure sufficient resources to deliver statutory duties and support post-Covid economic recovery and growth; and,
- Ensure Board effectiveness.

PERFORMANCE SCORECARDS

Advisory Services

HOW MUCH DID WE DO?	HOW WELL DID WE DO IT?
<p><u>Good Practice Seminars/Briefings/Workshops</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of events delivered • Number of participating organisations • Number of line managers undertaking the LRA Certificate in Line Management Practice <p><u>Document Reviews</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number registered <p><u>Good Employment Practice Projects</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of projects registered • Number of collective agreements/policies facilitated <p><u>Partnership working</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of partners worked with • Number of joint events held <p><u>Workplace Information Service</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of enquires received/handled 	<p><u>Good Practice Seminars/Briefings/Workshops</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % planned events delivered • % of line managers achieving the LRA Certificate in Management Practice • Customer satisfaction with the quality of the events <p><u>Document Reviews</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer satisfaction with the quality of the service <p><u>Good Employment Practice Projects</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % projects completed • Customer satisfaction with the quality of the service <p><u>Partnership working</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % planned events held • Partner satisfaction with the quality of the Agency's input • Customer satisfaction with the quality of the events <p><u>Workplace Information Service</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average waiting time • Lost call rate
<p>IS ANYONE BETTER OFF?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and % of customers reporting greater confidence in dealing with employment relations matters as a result of attendance at events • Number and % of line managers applying learning/skills in the workplace as a result of completing the LRA Certificate in Line Management Practice • Number and % of customers reporting greater confidence in applying their policies/procedures as a result of document reviews • Number of more effective policies in place • Number and % of customers reporting a more positive employment relations environment and reduced likelihood of disputes occurring • Number and % of Workplace Information Service contacts reporting increased knowledge and understanding of good practice or the law regarding employment relations issues 	

Dispute Resolution Services

HOW MUCH DID WE DO?	HOW WELL DID WE DO IT?
<p>Individual Conciliation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of employee-led cases received • Number of employer-led cases received <p>Collective Conciliation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of collective conciliation cases received <p>Mediation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of requests received <p>Arbitration and Independent Appeals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of arbitration and independent appeals cases received 	<p>Individual Conciliation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of employee-led cases completed • % of employer-led cases completed • Customer satisfaction with the service provided <p>Collective Conciliation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % collective conciliations cases undertaken • % resulting in a settlement to resolve the dispute • Customer satisfaction with the service provided <p>Mediation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of requests undertaken • % resulting in agreement to resolve the dispute • Customer satisfaction with the service provided <p>Arbitration and Independent Appeals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of arbitration and independent appeals cases completed • Customer satisfaction with the service provided
<p>IS ANYONE BETTER OFF?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and % of cases not proceeding to tribunal • Number and % of tribunal days saved • Number and % of customers reporting better working relationships following mediation • Number and % of customers reporting higher levels of engagement/trust following collective conciliation • Number and % of customers reporting a difference in behaviours/attitudes following an arbitration or independent appeal hearing 	

Corporate Services

HOW MUCH DID WE DO?	HOW WELL DID WE DO IT?
<p>Human Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of performance reviews conducted on time • Number of days spent on learning and development • Number of return to work interviews conducted within three working days <p>Finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of invoices paid <p>Quality Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of internal/external/ISO 27001 audit recommendations implemented • Number of Customer Service Excellence Award non-conformities v conformities <p>Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of external events and exhibitions • Number of social media posts • Number of news releases/press statements • Number of pages of new/refreshed web content 	<p>Human Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of performance reviews conducted on time • % of days lost through sick absence • % of return to work interviews conducted within three working days • Level of employee engagement <p>Finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of invoices paid within 10 working days and 30 calendar days • % of budget spent • Annual report and accounts certified without qualification <p>Quality Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of internal/external/ISO 27001 audit recommendations implemented • ISO 27001 retained • Customer Service Excellence Award achieved/retained • liP Status maintained/improved <p>Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of engagement with social media • Reach of social media posts • % increase in social media followers • Proportion of coverage • % increase in website usage <p>Overall</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal customer satisfaction with Corporate Services
<p align="center">IS ANYONE BETTER OFF?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and % increase in employee engagement • Number and % increase in attendance at work • Number and % increase in public awareness of the Agency and its services 	

EQUALITY CONSIDERATIONS

As a public body, the Labour Relations Agency is guided by commitments set out in our Equality Scheme, designed to ensure substantial compliance with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Agency is committed to mainstreaming equality in relation to both the delivery of employment relations services and all of our corporate functions. We have a duty to have due regard to the promotion of good relations and equality of opportunity towards:

- People with different religious belief;
- People of political opinion;
- People of different racial groups;
- People of different ages;
- People of different marital status;
- People of different sexual orientation;
- Men and women generally;
- People with a disability and people without; and
- People with dependents and people without.

In terms of this Corporate Plan, we have screened it out for equality impact assessment. This is on the basis that we have found no adverse equality in the delivery of our services or the way in which the Agency is governed. Equality data collected on service users suggests there is no under-representation from people in the above equality categories and no equality issues were raised by stakeholders consulted in the development of this Corporate Plan.

Moreover, the nature of the Agency's work is to promote best employment practice. This goes beyond compliance with anti-discrimination legislation in terms of employment, but promoting the benefits of equality, diversity and inclusion. In delivering our work, we work in partnership with others including the Equality Commission.

PERFORMANCE AGAINST THE CORPORATE PLAN FOR 2017-21

ACTION	PROGRESS
Strategic Theme 1	
Develop and deliver a number of employment/industrial relations signature projects covering both the public and private sectors.	Achieved – the Agency has worked with a number of partners, including Invest NI, district councils, and the Equality Commission, to deliver guidance and workshops. A number of sectoral projects have been undertaken to improve employment relations, including with health, education and local government.
Set standards and provide good practice guidance and support to help employers and employees understand their rights and responsibilities and develop positive working relationships.	Achieved – the Agency worked with Invest NI and the Equality Commission to develop and disseminate good practice guidance. Further partners are planned for the new corporate planning period.
Provide managers and employee representatives with the practical skills and confidence to deal with employment issues and create positive, efficient and productive working environments.	Achieved – the LRA Certificate in Line Management Practice was launched in 2019.
Review and adapt our services and use a wide range of channels to increase the number of employers and individuals who use our services.	Achieved – demand for services, particularly conciliation and information have increased significantly over the course of the corporate planning period. Services switched successfully to online channels as a result of Covid-19.
Develop self-help tools that increase uptake of our services and empower our service users.	Carried over into the new Corporate Plan – a new online document self-service will be launched in 2021-22.
Promote the benefits of early and alternative dispute resolution and work with employers, employees and employee representatives to reduce the risk of future conflict at work.	Ongoing – this work will be a particular focus of the Agency’s post-Covid economic recovery work.
Help organisations acquire the capability to manage conflict as a strategic issue, and support individual managers to have the personal skills to respond confidently to potential and actual disputes using both informal and formal approaches.	Ongoing – this work will be a particular focus of the Agency’s post-Covid economic recovery work.
Provide timely and effective conciliation, arbitration and mediation services to resolve work disputes.	Ongoing – demand for these services, particularly conciliation, has been strong throughout the corporate planning period.
As soon as the necessary legislative consent is in place, deliver an Early Conciliation service in line with the provisions of the Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 2016.	Achieved – Early Conciliation came into effect in January 2020.
Review our Statutory Arbitration Scheme and secure DfE approval of the review recommendations, where appropriate.	Not progressed – awaiting DfE to initiate the review.

Strategic Theme 2	
Promote the economic and social return from good employment and industrial relations practice with Government and our stakeholders.	Carried over into the new Corporate Plan – research to evidence this will be planned as part of further work on an Employment Relations Model for NI.
Facilitate ongoing engagement between Government and the NI Employment Relations Roundtable on a range of public policy issues.	Achieved – the Roundtable, and more recently the Engagement Forum, have facilitated engagement between Government and employer and employee representatives on a range of key strategic issues, including EU exit and Covid-19.
In partnership with the NI Employment Relations Roundtable, host a major labour market conference showcasing good employment/industrial relations practice.	Carried over into the new Corporate Plan – the conference planned for September 2020 was postponed because of Covid-19 and has been rescheduled for 2022.
Develop an Employment Relations Model for Northern Ireland, which is endorsed and promoted by key stakeholders.	Carried over into the new Corporate Plan – research to inform the Employment Relations Model was completed in 2020. Discussions with key stakeholders on how to progress the recommendations from the research are planned for later in 2021.
Seek to embed employment relations skills within the wider NI Skills Strategy.	Carried over into the new Corporate Plan – the Skills Strategy is expected to be developed in 2021-22.
Work with DfE and other key stakeholders to evidence the economic and social return from good employment and industrial relations practice.	Carried over into the new Corporate Plan – discussions with Acas and WRC are planned to seek to progress this work on a UK and Ireland basis.
Strategic Theme 3	
Implement a programme of organisational transformation in line with the Agency's Corporate Plan.	Achieved – the transformation programme concluded in November 2018.
Continue to embed leadership, competence and commitment with our core values through our learning and development programmes.	Achieved – three Leadership Development Programmes, involving half the Agency's staff, have been undertaken. Commitment to leadership development will continue in the Corporate Plan for 2021-25.
Deliver an accommodation plan that meets the Agency's longer term operational requirements post-2019.	Achieved – interim accommodation arrangements were put in place in 2019. The Agency's Head Office will relocate to new premises in April 2022; a review of the Regional Office's requirements will be undertaken in 2021-22.

Achieve and retain the Investors in People Platinum Standard.	Carried over into the new Corporate Plan – the Agency achieved Investors in People Gold under the new more challenging sixth generation standard in October 2020, the first public body to do so in NI.
Achieve and retain the Customer Service Excellence Award.	Achieved in March 2021.
Retention of ISO 27001 certification for information security management.	Achieved – annual audits demonstrates strong compliance with the standard.
Maintain our reputation for excellent governance and sound financial management, as evidenced by internal and external audits.	Achieved – annual programmes of internal and external audits demonstrate that sound control systems are in place.