

LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY

CORPORATE PLAN FOR 2017-21

Better Workplaces

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 employment relations; and,

Responsive – listening to our customers and adapting to ensure our services meet their needs.

These values underpin all that we do.

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FOREWORD

This Corporate Plan covers the four-year period from April 2017 to March 2021. It sets out how the Agency intends to contribute to the effectiveness of the Northern Ireland labour market through the delivery of high quality employment relations services. Our plan also demonstrates the Agency's commitment to work with our delivery partners, key stakeholders and our sponsor department (the Department for the Economy (DfE)) in promoting the economic benefits of a cohesive industrial relations landscape. Although the Executive's Programme for Government has yet to be ratified the Agency's Board is very supportive of an outcomes-based approach to the delivery of public services.

The Agency's vision is that the needs of employees, organisations and the wider economy will be best served through the promotion of productive workplace relations. This plan presents our advisory and services under a single strategic theme to ensure that we are able to respond to emerging needs through the delivery of a range of bespoke and integrated services. Our services will be orientated towards improving organisational performance and responding to the needs of individual citizens.

The NI Executive's own vision for 2030 is for Northern Ireland to "become a globally competitive economy that works for everyone," and "an economic powerhouse," is dependent on, among other issues, strong employment relations. This is not without its challenges given the current budget pressures and the uncertainty around Brexit. There is also the ongoing programme of structural reform across the public sector. All of these factors create volatility within the labour market and the focus of this corporate plan is to deliver advisory and dispute resolution services that reduce workplace conflict and build organisational capacity.

This plan establishes an agenda for change; we will increase the scope and range of our services through the use of a wide range of communication channels; we will develop self-help tools that will empower our service users; and we will provide managers and employee representatives with the necessary skills to improve workplace relationships.

The Agency's Board and staff are highly committed to ensuring the improvement of employment relations in Northern Ireland through our engagement with key stakeholders and, in particular, through our facilitation of the work of the NI Employment Relations Roundtable which is representative of all of the main employer and trade union bodies.

We commend this plan to our customers and stakeholders.



Marie Mallon
Chairperson



Tom Evans
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.

The Agency is overseen by an independent Board, comprising members with business, trade union, employment law and academic backgrounds. Board members are public appointments, appointed by the Minister for the Economy.

We employ around 70 staff who operate from two locations – our Headquarters in Belfast and a Regional Office in Derry/Londonderry.

We have an annual budget of approximately £3.5 million.

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:

- **Enquiry Point** – this is a confidential advice line for employers and individuals, and their representatives.
- **Briefings, seminars, and workshops** – these are aimed at disseminating information and good practice on a range of employment issues and enhancing the employment relations skills of line managers.
- **Document reviews** – these provide commentary on an individual employer's employment documentation, including contracts of employment, to ensure legislative compliance and promote 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 a problem or disagreement where an individual has made, or could make, a claim to an employment tribunal.
- **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 tool 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.

Influencing employment relations policy

As well as being a service provider, the Agency has a key role in working with representative bodies of employers and employees to facilitate discussion and seek to influence strategic employment relations issues. 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 with all the main sectors, including the public, private, education and research, and voluntary and community sectors.

A major initiative in this field is the Agency's facilitation of the NI Employment Relations Roundtable which enables discussion and collaboration by key stakeholders on matters of public policy, skills and research.

THE PLANNING CONTEXT

The absence of an agreed Programme for Government and Industrial Strategy has presented a significant challenge for the Agency Board in determining our priorities over the lifetime of this corporate plan. However, we remain steadfast in our commitment to deliver on the Agency's core purpose, to promote the improvement of employment relations. We do appreciate the feedback from our delivery partners, stakeholders, service users and our sponsor, the Department for the Economy, which has informed our thinking on what needs to be achieved by 2021.

In developing this corporate plan we have identified longer term planning objectives to ensure that the Agency continues to be a net contributor to the Northern Ireland economy. The Agency has also used the draft Programme for Government as a reference point to provide assurance that our frontline services focus on the needs of employees, employers and the wider labour market. As a result, a new vision and organisational values have been established, with business priorities now set against three strategic themes focusing specifically on service delivery, stakeholder engagement and good governance.

The current political impasse has also put on hold the Executive's legislative programme including the implementation of Early Conciliation provided for in the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. This service, which is already in place in Great Britain, would require parties, in the first instance, to consider the offer of the Agency's dispute resolution services as an alternative to an employment tribunal. We are planning on the basis that this new service will be introduced in 2018.

The Agency's 2017-18 budget has been reduced by 2%; and when compared to the 2016-17 outturn represents a real cut of approximately 6%. As a result, the Agency has agreed to release some staff through the implementation of a Voluntary Exit Scheme. It is intended that any savings will be used in part to alleviate the current budget pressures but also to provide additional resources to facilitate organisational transformation in 2018-19 and beyond.

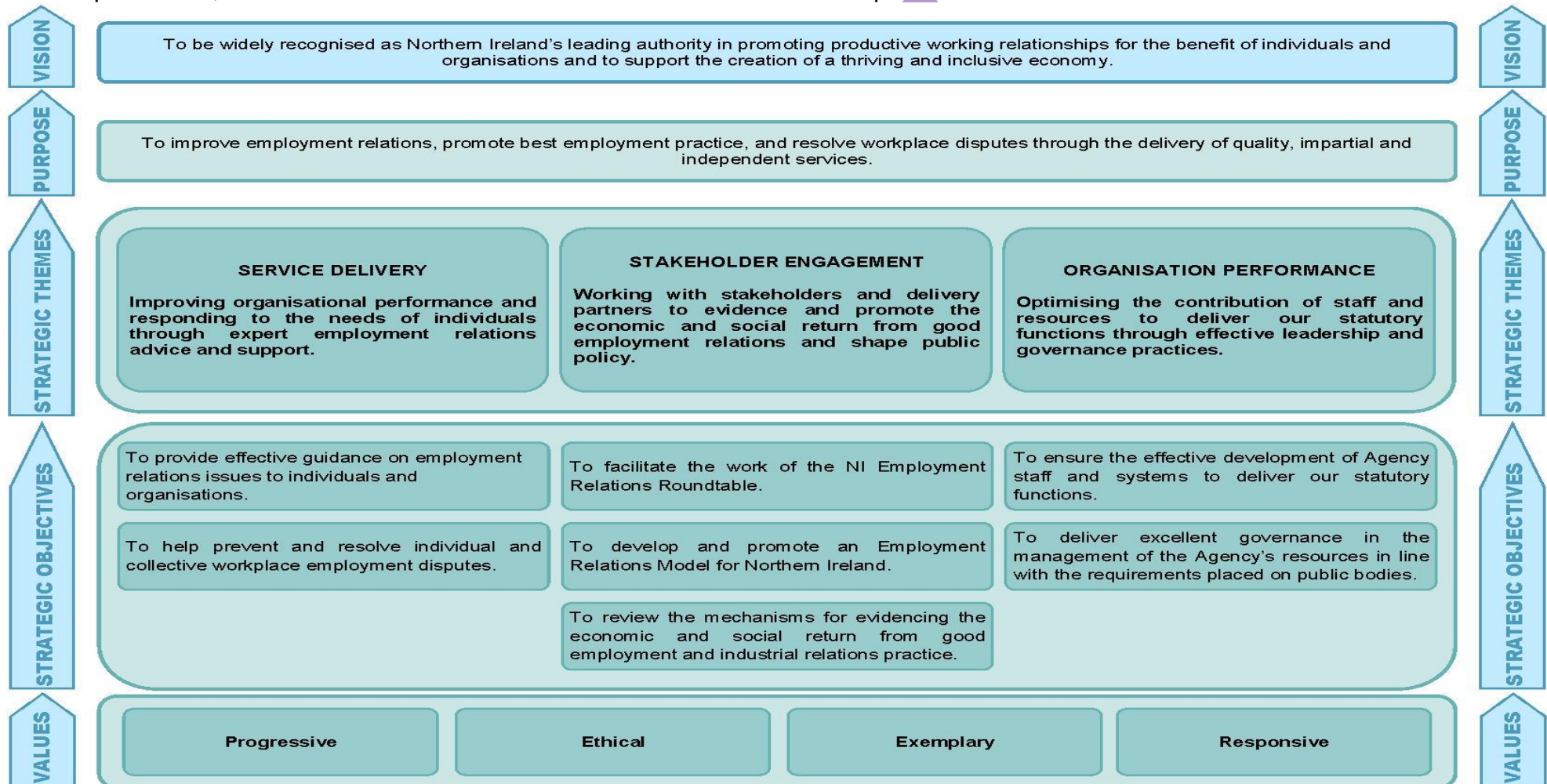
The Agency occupies a unique position within the Northern Ireland labour market having a statutory duty to promote the improvement of employment relations. Demand for many of our services continues to grow; the challenge for the Agency is to be able to respond positively to competing demands for both our advisory and dispute resolution services in the context of a reducing budget. In 2016-17, there was a 25% rise in the number of individual conciliation cases received, and we experienced a 53% increase in the number of multiple disputes. Furthermore, a number of our seminars were oversubscribed.

While calls to our Enquiry Point fell by 6% to approximately 19,500 in 2016-17, the complexity of many of these calls has increased. In response to budget pressures and changing demands for our services, we are looking at more innovative ways of meeting customer needs. We have adopted the Customer Service Excellence framework as the basis for driving innovation and expect to introduce changes to the way in which our services are delivered during 2017-18 and beyond. The way in which organisations communicate with customers has changed dramatically with the advent of social media; it is our intention to roll out a new communications/social media strategy to widen our reach with small and medium-sized employers and a more IT-savvy demographic.

The Agency recognises that it does not have a monopoly on labour market issues and has a very strong track record in working in partnership with other delivery organisations to embed good workplace practices. The Agency currently supports the work of the Northern Ireland Employment Relations Roundtable which is representative of all the main employer bodies and trade unions. A key objective for the lifetime of this corporate plan is to work with the Roundtable and DfE to evidence and promote the economic and social return from good employment and industrial relations practice.

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.



Our new vision and values were derived from workshops involving Board members and our staff, and affirmed in discussions with key stakeholders. Our core purpose is drawn from the statutory basis for the Agency.

STRATEGIC THEMES

Our strategic themes draw on the emerging Programme for Government and, in turn, Economy 2030: The Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland. These guide our work for the period to 2021. 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 inform 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 year.

LINKS TO THE PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

As a public body, the Agency is committed to making a positive contribution to the delivery of the Programme for Government in its totality; however, for business planning purposes, our work has been referenced against the following PfG outcomes:

- ***We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy (PfG Outcome 1)*** – our advisory services promote greater employee engagement and job satisfaction resulting in higher productivity; our dispute resolution services provide the stability to grow a strong economy. A more cohesive labour market is more likely to attract organisations to invest in Northern Ireland, which is seen as a good place to do business.
- ***We have a more equal society (PfG Outcome 3)*** – our advisory and dispute resolution services are delivered on a fair and equitable basis, promote greater co-operation, and develop harmonious, productive workplaces. Where disputes arise we help the parties to reach an agreed settlement to resolve these.
- ***We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their full potential (PfG Outcome 5)*** – our collaborative work with delivery partners contributes to the wellbeing of organisations and individual employees. The Agency continues to explore more innovative ways of reaching out to new and existing customers; our work with the public sector contributes to the delivery of more effective and efficient public services; and our work with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) enhances productivity and employee engagement.

- ***We have more people working in better jobs (PfG Outcome 6)*** – our work in supporting the improvement of organisational performance is critical. Productive employment relations have the power to transform services and improve productivity which opens up opportunities to develop more and better jobs and to facilitate career development opportunities for existing employees. There is also a strong link between effective line management and the health and wellbeing of employees and resulting in a reduction in unnecessary turnover of staff within the labour market.
- ***We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest (PfG Outcome 10)*** – our work contributes to higher levels of productivity and harmonious industrial relations which encourage greater levels of investment in our economy, both in terms of indigenous companies and potential foreign direct investment (FDI).

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STRATEGIC THEMES FOR 2017-21

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

Strategic objectives

- 1.1 To provide effective guidance on employment relations issues to individuals and organisations.
- 1.2 To help prevent and resolve individual and collective workplace employment disputes.

What we will do

- Develop and deliver a number of employment/industrial relations signature projects covering both the public and private sectors.
- Set standards and provide good practice guidance and support to help employers and employees understand their rights and responsibilities and develop positive working relationships.
- Provide managers and employee representatives with the practical skills and confidence to deal with employment issues and create positive, efficient and productive working environments.
- Review and adapt our services and use a wide range of channels to increase the number of employers and individuals who use our services.
- Develop self-help tools that increase uptake of our services and empower our service users
- 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.
- 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.
- Provide timely and effective conciliation, arbitration and mediation services to resolve work disputes.
- 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.
- Review our Statutory Arbitration Scheme and secure DfE approval of the review recommendations, where appropriate.

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

- 2.1 To facilitate the work of the NI Employment Relations Roundtable to enable discussion and collaboration by key stakeholders on matters of public policy, skills and research.
- 2.2 To develop and promote an Employment Relations Model for Northern Ireland.
- 2.3 To review the mechanisms for evidencing the economic and social return from good employment and industrial relations practice.

What we will do

- Promote the economic and social return from good employment and industrial relations practice with Government and our stakeholders.
- Facilitate ongoing engagement between Government and the NI Employment Relations Roundtable on a range of public policy issues.
- In partnership with the NI Employment Relations Roundtable, host a major labour market conference showcasing good employment/industrial relations practice.
- Develop an Employment Relations Model for Northern Ireland, which is endorsed and promoted by key stakeholders.
- Seek to embed employment relations skills within the wider NI Skills Strategy.
- 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

- 3.1 To ensure the effective development of Agency staff and systems to deliver our statutory functions.
- 3.2 To deliver excellent governance in the management of the Agency's resources in line with the requirements placed on public bodies.

What we will do

- 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.
- Deliver an accommodation plan that meets the Agency's longer term operational requirements post-2019.
- Achieve and retain the Investors in People Platinum Standard.
- Achieve and retain the Customer Service Excellence Award.
- Retention of ISO 27001 certification for information security management.
- Maintain our reputation for excellent governance and sound financial management, as evidenced by internal and external audits.

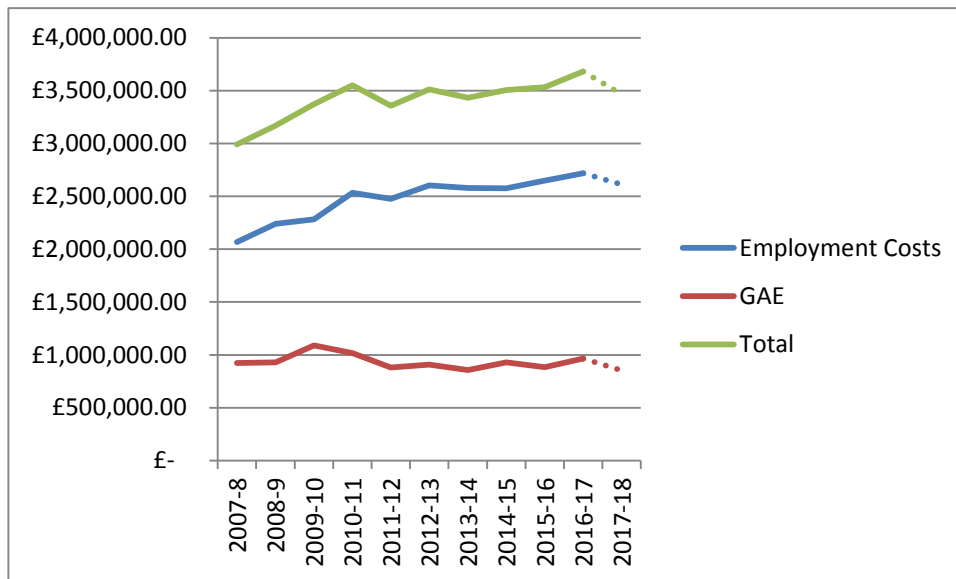
PERFORMANCE AGAINST THE PREVIOUS CORPORATE PLAN (2014-17)

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Service	Total 2014-17	Annual Average
Enquiry Point contacts <i>KPI: Waiting time of less than one minute</i>	62,969	20,990 59 seconds
<i>KPI: 'Lost call' rate less than 10%</i>		10%
Advisory cases dealt with <i>KPI: At least 50% of customers amend employment documentation/systems following Agency advice</i>	630	210 86%
Workshops/Seminars delivered <i>KPI: At least 75% of attendees feel better equipped to deal with employment matters as a result</i>	735	245 86%
Individual Conciliation cases dealt with <i>KPI: No more than 20% of individual rights claims are subsequently dealt with by a Tribunal¹</i>	20,723	6,908 5%
Independent Appeals dealt with	62	21
Statutory Arbitration hearings held <i>KPI: All agreed performance standards met</i>	8	3 100%
Service	Total 2014-17	Annual Average
Mediation cases dealt with <i>KPI: Settlement promoted in at least 70% of cases where mediation takes place</i>	166	55 84%
Collective Conciliation cases dealt with <i>KPI: Settlement promoted in 70% of collective disputes in which the Agency is involved</i>	84	28 88%

¹ Excludes 'strike out' and insolvency cases as the Agency is not able to influence the outcome via conciliation.

Financial Outturns (Resource Expenditure)



The above chart shows the Agency's employment costs and related general administrative expenditure for the last 10 years and (in a dotted line) the budget for 2017-18. The figures include approximately £200k per year for the Northern Ireland Certification Office.

Additional funding has been provided in 2017-18 for the operation of a Voluntary Exit Scheme and in anticipation of the implementation of the new Early Conciliation service. This funding is not included in the above. Capital funding of £65k per year is also not included.