

9 The Criminal Justice Operational Hub

- 9.1 The criminal justice sector is responsible for the investigation and prosecution of criminal offences. The sector also manages offenders both in prison and in the community. Figure 9.1 provides an illustration of the key agencies operating within the sector. Effective communication between these agencies is required for the criminal justice system to work in an efficient manner.

Figure 9.1 Key agencies in the criminal justice sector



Source: Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

- Notes:
- a Non-statutory executive agency.
 - b As set out in the Prosecution of Offences Act, 1974, the Director of Public Prosecutions operates independently.
 - c Irish Youth Justice Service is not an agency but rather a collocated team comprising staff from the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.

- 9.2 The Criminal Justice Strategic Committee (the Committee), chaired by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (the Department), was established in 2015 to coordinate activities and processes across the criminal justice system, while recognising the independence of the work of each organisation.¹ The Department stated that policing oversight bodies such as the Policing Authority and the Police Ombudsman are not part of the strategic committee due to their independent oversight roles.

1 The Committee comprises the heads of the following independent organisations in the sector: An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service, Forensic Science Ireland, Irish Prison Service, Legal Aid Board, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Probation Service.

- 9.3 The Committee published its first strategy in 2022. The principle of data sharing underpins core elements of this strategy.²

- 9.4 The Criminal Justice Operational Hub (the Hub) is a collaboration between agencies operating in the criminal justice sector. It facilitates the automated sharing of data and is led by the Department.

2 [Criminal Justice Sectoral Strategy 2022 – 2024](#).

- 9.5** This examination assesses how the Department is managing the development of the Hub and the related individual projects. The report examines
- the development of the Hub, the governance arrangements in place and programme costs
 - the impact of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) considerations on the development of the Hub, and
 - whether anticipated benefits have been achieved on two projects.
- 9.6** The examination team reviewed relevant documentation and engaged with the Department and project partners during the examination.

Scope and functionality of the Hub

- 9.7** The development of the Hub began in 2017. It is designed as a secure system to exchange data between State agencies operating in the criminal justice system, taking appropriate information from one system and ensuring compatibility between systems.¹ As stated in the business case for the project, the ultimate objective of the Hub is to enable the effective end-to-end management of cases and persons through the criminal justice system.
- 9.8** The Hub concept is based on the Northern Ireland Causeway programme, launched in 2002, which
- supports the sharing of operational data across criminal justice agencies
 - harvests data to allow a criminal search function, and
 - provides a data repository for research.
- 9.9** The Hub does not have a fixed scope as it is designed to respond to the changing priorities and emerging needs of the participating agencies.² At the outset, it was planned that the Hub would have two work strands.
- Strand 1: data harvesting and person search
 - Strand 2: operational data exchanges.

¹ The Hub platform is hosted by the Department behind a secure firewall. The Hub does not hold any data and the data that passes through is not retained.

² Participating agencies are: the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service, Forensic Science Ireland, Irish Prison Service, Probation Service, Office of the Director of Public Prosecution and the Legal Aid Board.

³ [Circular 14/2021](#) Arrangements for Oversight of Digital and ICT-related Initiatives in the Civil and Public Service.

Programme governance

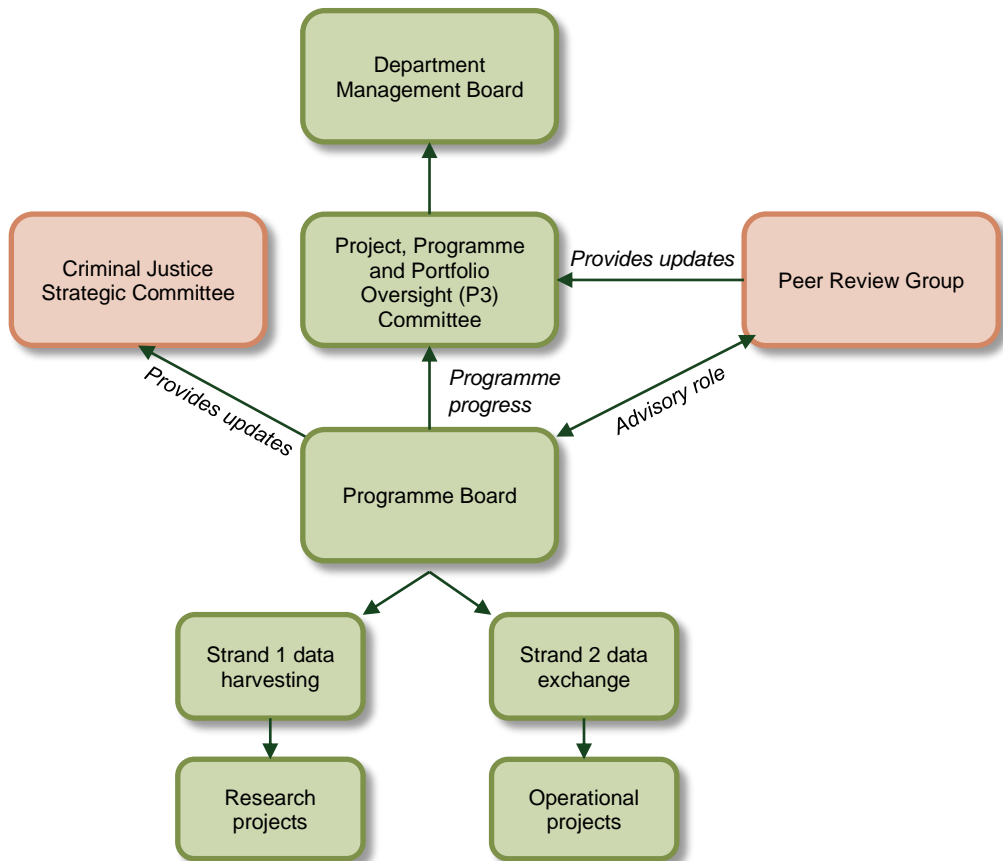
- 9.10** A Hub Programme Board (the Board) was established in 2017 to oversee the progress of the Hub and its individual projects. This includes providing direction and approving the commencement of projects. The Board is made up of senior representatives from the participating agencies.
- 9.11** The Board reports to the management board of the Department via a subcommittee — the Project, Programme and Portfolio Oversight Committee (P3 Committee). The Board also provides updates to the Criminal Justice Strategic Committee on the progress of the Hub (see Figure 9.2).
- 9.12** Significant digital and ICT initiatives are required to establish a ‘peer review’ process.³ The Hub Peer Review Group works with the Board in an advisory role to support quality assurance and continuous improvement.

- 9.13 A programme ‘charter’ is required to be provided to the Board on an annual basis. The charter provides details in relation to the current state of progress of individual Hub projects, the priorities for the coming year and overall annual Department expenditure, broken down into broad categories of spending: contractor costs, hardware, software licensing and telecommunication costs. The charter does not provide a breakdown of expenditure incurred for individual projects.

- 9.14 This examination noted that minimal updates were provided in relation to either of the key work strands in the charters covering the years 2021 to 2023. No charter was available for 2024.

- 9.15 The Department confirmed that due to an oversight, the charter for 2024 was not generated until August 2025.

Figure 9.2 Governance for the Criminal Justice Operational Hub



Source: Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Project delivery

Data harvesting and person search

- 9.16** The goal of strand 1 was to have criminal justice data held centrally in the Department. This would support inter-agency analytics and evaluations that could inform the Department's policymaking and reporting. This data would also be available to agencies to improve operational and administrative processes across the criminal justice system. The data was to be collected from four key agencies, namely An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service, the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service.
- 9.17** Three research initiatives were launched to progress the inter-agency analytics function.¹ One began in 2022 but was paused in 2023 due to data quality concerns. The two additional projects commenced in 2023 but have since stalled, pending the completion of required data protection documentation.
- 9.18** The Department stated that it considered implementing a unique identification number in relation to the 'person search' function of strand 1. This would assist in linking data from multiple sources. However, due to potential data protection issues and limited access to agency data, this was not progressed. The person search project was removed from strand 1 in 2021. The Department has stated that it has initiated a separate project to introduce a unique identifier across the Justice sector.
- 9.19** Progress on strand 1 has been limited because
- the projects on the data harvesting element have not progressed since 2023 and are currently on hold, and
 - the person search project has been removed from the scope and the Department confirmed that it will not form part of strand 1 in the future.

Operational data exchanges

- 9.20** Strand 2 focused on the development of operational data exchanges to enable the automated transfer of data across participating agencies operating in the criminal justice sector. Specific projects are set up to facilitate this transfer.
- 9.21** An initial list of 14 project options (projects) was accepted for consideration by the Board in 2017, on foot of proposals from the participating agencies. The projects are presented as 'key data interoperability project options' in the initial 2017 Hub business plan. Additional projects were subsequently added to the list and several projects have been approved by the Board since 2017 for progression to scoping stage (see Figure 9.3).
- 9.22** In March 2025, the examination team requested a definitive list of all projects under strand 2 along with their current status (e.g. completed projects, projects approved for progression, projects that are unlikely to progress). Despite several attempts, the Department was unable to provide a consistent list. The list of projects at Figure 9.3 was provided to the examination team in August 2025.
- 9.23** Of the 20 projects identified, the Department stated that project scheduling along with the development of data sharing agreements meant that none of these projects commenced until 2020.

¹ The three research initiatives were a Youth Diversion study, a study on re-incarceration rates for early release prisoners and an Irish Prison Service/Probation Service project.

Figure 9.3 Criminal Justice Operational Hub projects, status at August 2025

Project name	Agencies involved	Comments
Completed projects		
Charge sheets and station bail	The Courts Service and An Garda Síochána	Electronic exchange of charge sheets to the District Court.
Court lists	The Courts Service and Irish Prison Service	Electronic transfer of court lists from the Courts Service to prisons.
Court lists	The Courts Service and Oberstown	Electronic transfer of court lists from the Courts Service to Oberstown.
District court outcomes and probation report requests	The Courts Service and the Probation Service	Automation of court outcomes and district court data to the probation service database.
Partially completed projects		
Pulse incident updates to Forensic Science Ireland	Forensic Science Ireland and An Garda Síochána	Electronic transfer to deliver improvements of how exhibits/items of evidence are prioritised or removed from the queue.
Projects approved for scoping		
Electronic warrants	Irish Prison Service and The Courts Service	Automation of electronic warrants to ensure that sentences are calculated correctly.
Higher court outcomes	The Courts Service and An Garda Síochána	Automation of higher court outcomes to An Garda Síochána.
Non-Garda summons	The Courts Service	Automation of summons sent to the Courts Service from 116 agencies.
Projects awaiting approval		
C56 form transfer	Forensic Science Ireland and An Garda Síochána	Electronic transfer of C56 from An Garda Síochána to Forensic Science Ireland.
Court lists	The Courts Service and An Garda Síochána	Electronic transfer of court lists from the Courts Service to An Garda Síochána.
Court outcomes	The Courts Service and the ODPP ^a	Automation of court outcomes to the ODPP.
Court outcomes	The Courts Service and Legal Aid Board	Automation of court outcomes to the Legal Aid Board.
Criminal legal aid payments	The Courts Service and Legal Aid Board	Automation of the manual process of completing legal aid payments.
Criminal records	The Probation Service and An Garda Síochána	Electronic transfer of details of the criminal record of probation clients from the An Garda Síochána.
Custody record	Legal Aid Board and An Garda Síochána	Automation of custody record to improve the effectiveness of criminal legal aid solicitors.
DNA database	Forensic Science Ireland and DNA Database	Electronic transfer of information into the DNA Database.
Garda views on temporary release proposals	Irish Prison Service and An Garda Síochána	Electronic exchange of An Garda Síochána views when considering a prisoner for temporary release.
Prison outcomes	The Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service	Automation of prison outcomes, i.e. various release dates, to the probation database.
Prosecution file/decision exchange	ODPP and An Garda Síochána	Electronic automated transfer of An Garda Síochána prosecution files to the ODPP. Ability for ODPP to communicate decision electronically.
Unlawfully at large	Irish Prison Service and An Garda Síochána	Automation of Irish Prison Service daily list of prisoners deemed to be unlawfully at large transmitted to An Garda Síochána.

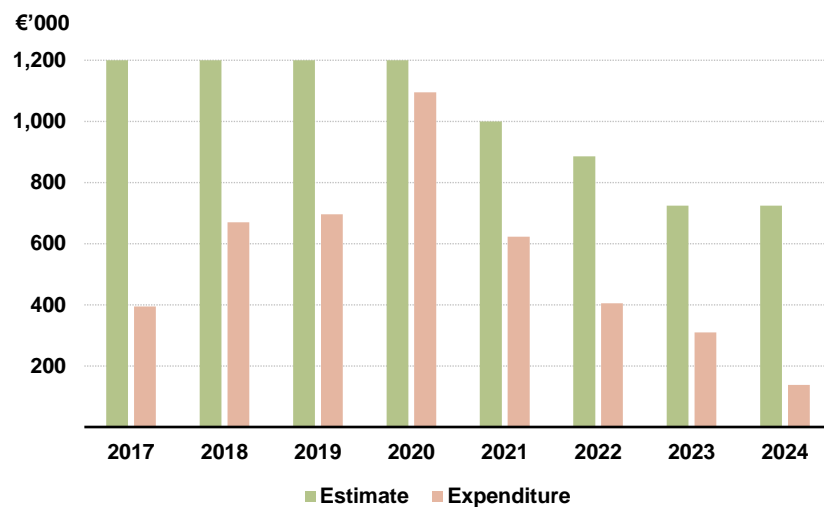
Source: 2017 Criminal Justice Operational Hub business plan, Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; engagement during examination by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General

Note: a Office of the Director of Public Prosecution.

Programme costs

- 9.24** The 2017 business plan for the Hub set a budget of €7.2 million, based on a three-year delivery programme. In the period 2017 – 2024, the Department incurred costs of approximately €4.3 million relating to the Hub. Costs incurred by the Department relate to the initial set up of the Hub and for individual projects within the Hub. Most costs, i.e. 97%, relate to consultant/contractor costs.
- 9.25** Except for 2020, the Department has significantly underspent on the Hub's annual funding allocation in the period 2017 – 2024 (see Figure 9.4). Approximately €1.75 million of this expenditure occurred before any strand 2 project commenced in 2020.

Figure 9.4 Hub estimate and expenditure 2017 to 2024^a



Source: Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Note: a Expenditure relates to Department costs only.

- 9.26** The Department reported that the significant variances between estimated and actual spending is primarily attributed to the following factors.
- Project timelines progressed more slowly than expected due to the need for extensive technology discovery to determine the appropriate Hub technology toolkit.
 - Substantial data quality analysis was required to address risks associated with poor data.
 - There were delays in finalising and signing of data sharing agreements.
 - Technology costs were lower than anticipated as required tools were provided by the Department's ICT section at no additional cost to the Hub.

9.27 Project partners also incur costs for the projects they are involved in. However, a centralised record of costs incurred by project partners on each project is not maintained. Therefore, the examination team could not always determine the total spend on individual projects. The Department stated that the Probation Service and Forensic Science Ireland are 'part of the Department' and that Forensic Science Ireland do not have their own IT budget (project costs are covered in the Department spend). It would appear that at least €4.9 million in total has been incurred on the Hub broken down as follows.

- The Department has reported a spend of at least €4.3 million.
- The Courts Service, Irish Prison Service and An Garda Síochána have reported that they have incurred expenditure of €385,000, €172,000 and €65,000 respectively.
- The Department reported that the Probation Service external project costs amounted to €10,000 and that Forensic Science Ireland did not incur any external project costs.

Approval for ICT expenditure

9.28 Since 2016, central government departments and offices are required to obtain prior specific approval for all new ICT-related expenditure or initiatives which may give rise to expenditure of €25,000 or greater from the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Department of Public Expenditure).¹

9.29 The Department has confirmed that a submission for approval was not made in relation to the Hub, despite the budget of €1.2 million sought for 2017. The Department has stated that once it became aware of this oversight in 2020, it moved to rectify the matter at that point. However, under the Department of Public Expenditure's protocol, as set out in its circular 02/16, 'retrospective approval' is not available.

Data protection considerations

9.30 The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the associated Data Protection Act in 2018, in place since May 2018, applies to the processing of all personal data in the EU. The GDPR also sets out more extensive obligations on data controllers and processors and provides strengthened protections for data subjects.

9.31 The introduction of the GDPR, and the associated Data Protection Act in 2018, raised some data governance concerns for the Department including the definition of responsibilities between data controllers and processors, the legal basis for processing personal data and the legitimacy of interagency data sharing.

9.32 The Department established a Data Protection Working Group to address these concerns and engaged legal advice when developing data sharing agreements and data protection frameworks.² These agreements were signed by all participating agencies in April 2020. The Department stated there have been no GDPR issues or data breaches in relation to the Hub and its strand 2 projects.

¹ [Circular 02/16](#) Arrangements for Digital and ICT-related Expenditure in the Civil and Public Service.

² The Data Protection Working Group consists of 14 senior members of the Department.

- 9.33** In relation to strand 1, GDPR issues are presenting significant challenges for the Department, particularly the principle of purpose limitation.¹ The Department originally proposed to retain a copy of collected data, but such retention is not aligned to this principle. The Department stated that it has not been in a position to address the issues to date, resulting in significant delays and a reduced scope for strand 1.

Project and benefit delivery

- 9.34** The examination team selected two strand 2 projects for review — the charge sheets and station bail project and the court list project. The scope and objectives of each project were defined in a planning initiation document.

Charge sheets and station bail project

- 9.35** This project, approved by the Board in 2017, was a collaboration between An Garda Síochána and the Courts Service. The aim was to facilitate electronic transfer of charge sheets and station bail information from An Garda Síochána's Police Using Leading Systems Effectively (PULSE) system to the Courts Service's Criminal Case Tracking System (CCTS).
- 9.36** Prior to this project, around 110,000 charge sheets were printed from the PULSE system each year and hand delivered to the Courts Service by members of An Garda Síochána. The information from the charge sheets would then be manually entered into the CCTS. This Hub project set out to electronically transfer the information from PULSE to CCTS.
- 9.37** The Department's project initiation document approved in June 2020 identified a list of 20 potential benefits of the project, to the advantage of the Courts Service and/or An Garda Síochána. These included a reduction in the risk of human error, minimising the need for follow-up queries and enhanced interagency communication. Estimated financial values were not attached to the potential benefits e.g. value of staff time savings.
- 9.38** The project initiation document did not outline a proposed budget or cost projection for the project. The Courts Service set its own budget of €200,000 for the project. Neither the Department nor An Garda Síochána set related project budgets.
- 9.39** Planned completion of the project was November 2020 but the project did not commence until June 2020 and was completed in July 2022. The delay in completing the project was due to
- the impact of Covid-19 restrictions
 - revised priorities of the project partners, and
 - additional functional requirements identified during the design and discovery phase and user acceptance testing.
- 9.40** The total recorded cost of the project was €583,000. The Department and An Garda Síochána reported a spend of €299,000 and €65,000 respectively. The Courts Service reported an actual spend of €219,000 with the 9% overspend due to the requirement for additional development work to improve the data exchange.

¹ Purpose limitation states that personal data must be collected for a specific, explicit and legitimate purpose, which are determined at the time of collection and cannot be further processed in a manner incompatible with those purposes. Further information can be found in [Article 5\(1\)\(b\) of the General Data Protection Regulation](#).

- 9.41** A project closure report is prepared by the relevant project manager on completion of any Hub project and sets out the key success targets for the project and the determined outcome. The aim of this report is to identify lessons learned and to consider if projected benefits have been realised.
- 9.42** The project closure report provided to the examination team, dated December 2022, did not address all the projected benefits that were contained in the project initiation document. The Department subsequently provided a revised project closure report to the examination team dated August 2025 that now reports that all the projected benefits were achieved.
- 9.43** The key benefit achieved from the project was a significant reduction in Courts Service staff time required to create cases on the CCTS system. The estimated average case creation time prior to implementation was ten minutes per case, and the target was to reduce the average time to four minutes per case. The project closure report estimated that, after implementation, cases were being created in an average of 3.5 minutes. Across the Courts Service, this was estimated to equate to freeing up 3.2 full-time equivalent posts and a saving of approximately €180,000 a year.
- 9.44** Information from the charge sheets is now transferred electronically from An Garda Síochána to the Courts Service through the Hub at scheduled intervals daily. However, under court requirements, charge sheets are still printed and delivered to the courts.¹
- 9.45** The inclusion of court outcome information on the PULSE system potentially improves An Garda Síochána's ability to analyse and report on crime outcomes. The Courts Service has reported that electronic transmission of District Court outcomes to An Garda Síochána was already in place prior to this project. The transmission of the outcomes of the higher courts will form part of a future project.

Court lists project

- 9.46** Court lists are used by the Irish Prison Service (IPS) and the Prison Service Escort Corps (PSEC) to schedule and manage court appearances for prisoners.² The aim of this project, approved for development by the Board in 2018, was to automate the exchange of court lists from the Courts Service to the IPS covering a seven-day advance period.
- 9.47** Prior to this project, the IPS used a paper-based method to manually verify prisoner court appearances. This involved cross-checking information on the Prisoner Information Management System (PIMS) against court lists provided by the Courts Service. If appearances were missing from the PIMS, they would then be manually entered.
- 9.48** The project initiation document identified five potential project benefits. The project commenced in January 2020 and was completed in December 2021, 11 months behind schedule. The Department stated the main reason for the delay was late-stage design changes.
- 9.49** A seven-day forecast of prisoners required in court is now sent to the IPS and changes for the next day's hearings are sent to the PIMS so that the IPS can plan for the prisoner's appearance more efficiently.

¹ Charge sheets continue to be printed as they are required in court. They must be signed by a member of An Garda Síochána of sergeant rank and must legally be provided to the defendants. The Courts Service has stated that the need for a physical charge sheet is governed by legislation and can only be replaced with a digital charge sheet by way of legislative amendment.

² The PSEC is a unit within the IPS. It is responsible for the secure transportation and escort of prisoners between the courts, prisons, hospitals and other locations.

- 9.50** Neither the Department nor the IPS set a budget for the project, while the Courts Service set a budget of €72,000. The total cost of the project was €403,000. The Department and the IPS reported a spend of €80,000 and €172,000 respectively. The Courts Service reported an actual spend of €151,000, with the 109% overspend due to unanticipated system modifications required to facilitate the data transfer to the Hub.
- 9.51** The project closure report, completed in December 2022, indicates that all of the potential benefits and planned functionality of the system were delivered. Court lists are now sent to the IPS electronically which has led to a reduction in manual cross-checking and an unquantified reduction in incorrect court appearances.
- 9.52** The project closure report also sets out three success criteria and the determined outcomes. The key benefits achieved from the project was a reduction in the IPS staff time in manually checking court lists. The target was to reduce the need for an average of 0.5 full time equivalent per prison, to an average of 0.1 full time equivalent per prison. Although the target was not achieved, the time input requirement was reduced to an estimated 0.25 full time equivalent per prison, equating to an annual staff-time saving to the value of €68,840 a year across the IPS.
- 9.53** The IPS has confirmed that it does not collect centralised and consistent data on the actual number of incorrect court appearances. The IPS state that the number is very low due to the use of electronic court lists and direct contact with the court offices.

Self-evaluation benchmarking exercise

- 9.54** The Department undertook a formal exercise with a third-party provider to assess its performance across a broad set of functional activities within the Department, benchmarked against other Government organisations. The results were summarised in an April 2024 report.¹
- 9.55** The assessment was undertaken on a self-assessment basis on the Department's Project Management Office generally. It focused on six objectives with 27 related activities. Across all the objectives, the Department assessed its performance at a score of '3 minus' out of a maximum score of 5. This was higher than the equivalent score for the peer benchmark, which was 2 out of 5.
- 9.56** One of the activities under the 'manage strategic and other portfolios' objective was the activity 'measure and manage benefit realisation'. For this activity, the Department self-assessed itself at 1 meaning it conducts benefit realisation informally. This was slightly below the peer benchmark of '2 minus'. Achievement of a score of 2 requires a set of financial and non-financial benefit metrics to be defined as part of portfolio management.
- 9.57** The Department stated that this benchmarking exercise identified measuring and managing benefit realisation as a key area for development and that it is currently identifying actions to develop this area.

¹ PowerPoint presentation entitled 'IT Score for Program and Portfolio Management' (April 2024).

Conclusions and recommendations

- 9.58** The Criminal Justice Operational Hub is a necessary collaboration between agencies operating in the criminal justice sector. It is intended to facilitate the automated, efficient and secure sharing of necessary data to streamline the operation of the criminal justice system. The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is the lead agency for delivery of the programme.

Development of the Hub

- 9.59** The objectives of the Hub are the better use of technology and data management systems, removing duplication and unnecessary work, including duplication of electronic and paper files and integrating systems to provide accurate and timely information.
- 9.60** The programme to develop the Hub commenced formally in 2017. To date, there has been very little progress made in the areas of data harvesting and person searching — outlined in the original Hub plan as strand 1 — due to data quality issues and data security concerns. The ‘person search’ project — which aimed to allow an authorised user search for an individual and review their records — was removed from the programme in 2021.
- 9.61** The GDPR principle of purpose limitation has been cited as a significant impediment to progress as the Department originally proposed to retain a copy of collected data which is not aligned with this principle. Such issues do not appear to have had a similar impact on the operational strand 2 projects as the data transits through the Hub and is not held by the Department.
- 9.62** The level of progress made on the identifiable strand 2 projects has been mixed, with many of the initial projects accepted by the Board for consideration in 2017 not yet started. As a result, it is unlikely that the Hub will achieve its ultimate objective of an effective criminal justice system that enables end-to-end management of cases in the short to medium term.

Governance and oversight

- 9.63** An annual project ‘charter’ is one of the key documents that keeps the Board and Department management informed of the progress of the Hub programme and projects. Updates in the annual charter appear to be minimal since 2020 and the Department has confirmed that a charter for the work to be done in 2024 was not prepared until August 2025. This, combined with the fact that only four projects have been completed since 2017, may indicate a loss of momentum in the programme and the loss of potential net economic benefits from deployment and use of improved technology.
- 9.64** Project initiation documents are produced at the start of projects but do not contain projected costs of budgets for the projects. There is no centralised record maintained of the costs incurred on projects by all project partners and therefore the total cost of the Hub and its projects is not known.

- 9.65** A review of two delivered strand 2 projects found references to delays in the project schedules reported to be because of, *inter alia*, late-stage design changes. In addition, the examination team had difficulty in establishing a definitive list of strand 2 projects. Although the Department has stated that there have been improvements in oversight processes since 2020, there still appears to be a weakness in project planning and management. While the benchmarking exercise reported on in April 2024 did not set out formal recommendations, it does provide a useful framework for the Department to improve its project management function, including a stronger focus on benefit monitoring.

Programme costs

- 9.66** Availability of funding for coordination of the Hub programme does not appear to have been a factor in the delays. The 2017 business case for the Hub set out a budget of €7.2 million over three years, to be provided through Vote 24 Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. However, in the period 2017 – 2024, the total costs incurred on the Vote have amounted to approximately €4.3 million. Of this, approximately €1.75 million was incurred in the period 2017 – 2019, before any strand 2 projects commenced.
- 9.67** Further costs were incurred by the project partners, but a centralised record of costs incurred by project partners on each project is not maintained. At least an additional €0.6 million has been spent by the Courts Service, Irish Prison Service, An Garda Síochána and the Probation Service on certain Hub projects. The Department stated that Forensic Science Ireland did not incur any external costs on the Hub projects it engaged in.

Recommendation 9.1

The Department should update the planning and management of projects with a view to strengthening the process, in particular around project design, global estimated costs and reporting mechanisms.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

Since the commencement of the Criminal Justice Operational Hub programme, significant steps have been taken by the Department to strengthen our project planning, governance and management processes.

The Project, Programme and Portfolio (P3) oversight committee was established in 2020. This committee, composed of senior leadership from the Department along with external members meets quarterly to review project proposals, monitor progress, approve changes to scope/budget, and assess performance of projects against objectives and costs. The P3 committee is supported by a review group of IT and finance experts who validate the technical and financial feasibility of proposed business cases. This oversight ensures independent review and accountability at key decision points.

A specialised Project Management Office (PMO) was also established to provide centralised oversight, promote standardised practices and ensure all projects follow a consistent governance framework.

The Department is fully committed to continuous improvement of our project management capability and regularly reviews processes to ensure they remain effective and aligned with best practice. To this end, a project and portfolio management maturity exercise was carried out in 2024 to benchmark current practices and identify areas for improvement. Findings from this assessment will inform future targeted enhancements to our methodology.

The PMO will update the Department's project handbook and processes to reflect this by end November 2025. To implement this, the PMO will make targeted updates to the project handbook and supporting templates, focusing on the following areas.

- Project and process design: strengthening the project initiation section to include clearer guidance on defining objectives, scopes, and governance arrangements, as well as updated checkpoints at each project phase.
- Global estimated costs: introducing a new subsection and template requirement for capturing high-level cost estimates at initiation stage, with guidance on refining these estimates as projects progress through the lifecycle.
- Reporting mechanisms: building on the existing status update template by
 - Standardising red, amber, green (RAG) criteria and thresholds for consistency across projects.
 - Enhancing the portfolio level dashboards to provide Senior Management with an overview of cost, schedule, risk and benefit trends.
 - Embedding exception reporting and escalation triggers (e.g. when cost or schedule variance exceeds defined limits).
 - Clarifying reporting and audience, ensuring alignment from project teams through to senior management and oversight committees.

Timeline for implementation

End of November 2025.

Anticipated benefits

- 9.68** For the two operational projects reviewed as part of this examination, it was clear at the outset what the anticipated benefits were, but economic values were not always associated with these expected benefits. The complete estimated costs of the projects were not always evident from the planning documentation.
- 9.69** Post-completion reporting on the projects quantified and evaluated some of the benefits achieved, and this suggests that value has been obtained from the interconnected systems. However, to be able to assess the success of projects and ensure they are delivering valuable benefits for the costs incurred, a clear mapping of the benefit/cost relationship of the projects is needed.

- 9.70** The Department stated that the benchmarking carried out in the 2024 exercise identified measuring and managing benefit realisation as a key area for development and that it is currently identifying actions to develop this area.

Recommendation 9.2

The Department should ensure that post-project reviews explicitly address each anticipated benefit as recorded during the planning stage and conclude on whether the benefit has been achieved, in line with the results of the Department's benchmarking exercise.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

In 2024, the Department assessed the maturity of its project management processes. The maturity level is benchmarked against peers — in this case, other Government organisations. The Department achieved a score of 3 in this assessment, against a peer benchmark of 2, indicating a much higher than average level of maturity in relation to project management within the Department.

From this exercise, measuring and managing benefit realisation was identified as a key area to focus on and develop. Actions are currently being identified by the PMO to address this, and it is a focus of all new business cases.

Work is already ongoing to review processes around benefits realisation and this will be completed by the end of October 2025. The PMO will update the Department's project handbook and processes to reflect this immediately thereafter, to be completed by the end of November 2025.

In particular:

- Benefits identification and planning: reinforcing requirements at the project initiation stage to document anticipated benefits clearly, defined measures of success.
- Benefits tracking during delivery: introducing guidance for periodic review of benefits as projects progress, ensuring early visibility of risks to benefits realisation.
- Post-project review: revising the post-project review template to include a mandatory assessment of each benefit identified as the planning stage, with a conclusion on whether it has been achieved, partially achieved, or not achieved.
- Portfolio oversight: ensuring lessons learned from benefits reviews are captured and fed back into departmental planning and decision-making.

Timeline for implementation

End of November 2025.