

[IE] Final Report of the Working Group on a Courts Commission

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The Working Group on a Courts Commission was established by the Minister for Justice to carry out a wide-ranging review of the Irish courts. The Final Report of the Working Group, which was completed in November 1998, has now been published. Some of the recommendations made by the Working Group are of particular relevance to the media.

Regarding the question of information and access to court documents, the Working Group made a number of recommendations. A Courts Information Office should be set up to facilitate media liaison (inter alia). Basic facilities for journalists should be available in all courts. A Press Room or Media Centre with appropriate facilities should be established in major court centres. Information of practical importance should be made available to journalists. Such information would include court lists, the names and addresses of parties to court cases, and the names of judges and counsel. A rule or practice should be developed regarding the reporting of documents produced in court. Judgments and other information should be available on the Internet. A liaison committee should be established to discuss the development of the courts service. The committee would be made up of representatives of the judiciary, court staff and the press.

The other main area of relevance to the media concerns the reporting of family law cases. (In Ireland, the general rule is that courts shall be open to the public except in special and limited circumstances as prescribed by law. The practice at present is that neither the public nor the media are admitted to family law proceedings). Here the Working Group has recommended the operation of a pilot project: a qualified solicitor or barrister would record and report on family law decisions (the names of the parties would be deleted to ensure privacy), and assemble family court statistics for publication on a regular basis. The Working Group also supports the suggestion that, subject to a varying degree of discretion on the part of the judge, bona fide researchers and students of family law should be permitted to attend family law proceedings.

