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13 February 2006

Dear Strategy Team,

Response to *Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology* (Cm 6683)

I write in response to the above strategy document, as presented to Parliament in November 2005. Please accept my apologies for responding after your deadline of 3 February. I hope my response will nevertheless reach you in time to be considered. My purpose is to offer the Judiciary's broad reaction to your strategy, to give an outline of judges' experience of technology, and to invite ongoing dialogue.

Technology is increasingly important for the Judiciary and the Courts. The judges therefore welcome all efforts to manage public sector technology more rigorously and systematically. We share much of your enthusiasm about the potential of technology and agree also that there is considerable scope for greater efficiency and professionalism in the government's handling of IT projects. We have found your document helpful and encouraging.

Most judges are now committed users of information technology and are keen to embrace systems that offer practical benefits in our everyday work. E-mail, word processing, conferencing, and online legal research are now commonplace and invaluable tools for many judges. More advanced facilities (such as computer-assisted real-time transcription in the court-room) are also widely used. We are always interested in emerging technologies that can improve our work. A "Judicial Portal" is currently being introduced – this is an online collection of facilities, available to all full-time judges (over 1000) and part-time judges (over 3000).

Our technology supplier, effectively, is the Department for Constitutional Affairs, as supported by their external contractors. Although we have seen, as is not unusual in the public sector, a variety of delayed and disappointing IT projects, it is generally felt that judges are now, after some years of frustration, adequately equipped with appropriate technology. While we are now well served as computer users, we remain disappointed at progress in the deployment of technology in the more general administration of our civil courts. In contrast with the criminal justice system which has attracted considerable investment for its technology, the civil system fails to attract the financial support of the government and so remains paper-based and, in many ways, antiquated. Your strategy document alludes to the Woolf Report. In 1995 and 1996, in his *Access to Justice* reports, Lord Woolf did indeed recommend the widespread introduction of a variety of information technologies. Despite enthusiasm for these from judges and senior officials, most of these recommendations, sadly, remain unimplemented because of lack of funding. We would welcome any guidance you might be able to offer on how the case for the computerisation of our civil courts might be more compellingly made.

Finally, I am keen that an ongoing dialogue is established between the eGovernment Unit and the Judiciary. I would hope that this regular contact would give your Unit some valuable insight into the experiences and needs of one important group of public sector users. Moreover, this would provide our more technically informed judges with greater understanding of emerging IT policies and developments. With this dialogue in mind, I would suggest that representatives of your Unit might usefully meet with Lord Justice Neuberger (the Judge in Charge of Modernisation and Chair of the Judicial Technology Board) and Professor Richard Susskind (my IT Adviser).

Yours sincerely
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