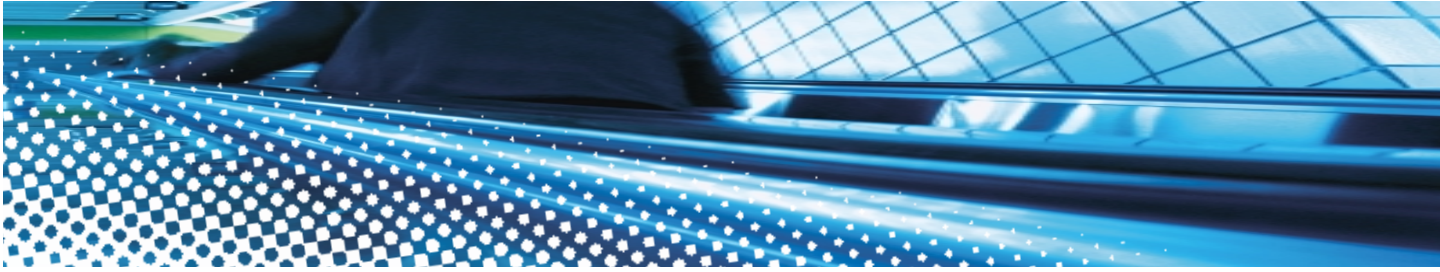




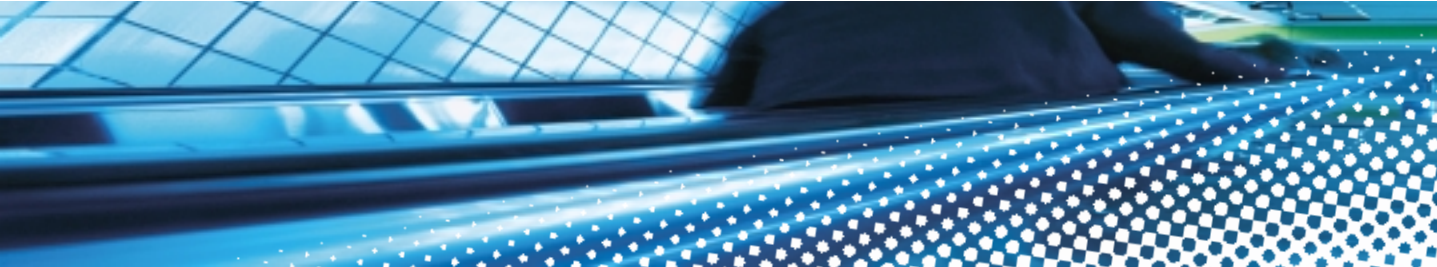

Labour Relations
AGENCY
Improving Employment Relations

CORPORATE PLAN • 2003-2006



CONTENTS

Foreword	3-4
Mission Statement	5
Core Values	5
Chapter 1: The Labour Relations Agency	6-7
1.1 Who We Are	
1.2 What We Do	
1.3 The Make-up of the Agency	
1.4 Users of our Services	
1.5 The Agency's Commitment	
1.6 Service Standards	
1.7 Equality Statement	
Chapter 2: A Changing Employment Relations Environment	8-9
2.1 Global Competitiveness and New Technology	
2.2 Individualism and Collectivism	
2.3 Europe and Beyond	
2.4 Employment Legislation	
2.5 The Government of Northern Ireland	
Chapter 3: Northern Ireland - Enhancing Economic Development	10-11
3.1 Strategic Theme	
3.2 Background	
3.3 Programme of Work	
3.4 Performance	
Chapter 4: Setting Standards for Workplace Employment Relations	12-14
4.1 Strategic Theme	
4.2 Background	
4.3 Programme of Work	
4.4 Performance	



Chapter 5: Promoting a Culture of Alternative Dispute Resolution 15-17

- 5.1 Strategic Theme
- 5.2 Background
- 5.3 Programme of Work
- 5.4 Performance

Chapter 6: Supporting the Delivery of Quality Services 18-19

- 6.1 Strategic Theme
- 6.2 Background
- 6.3 Programme of Work
- 6.4 Performance

Chapter 7: Agency Resources 20

- 7.1 Baseline Allocation
- 7.2 Estimated Resource Requirement 2003-2006

FOREWORD

We are delighted to present the Corporate Plan developed by the Board of the Labour Relations Agency for the three-year period from April 2003 to March 2006. It sets out how we intend to lead employment relations in partnership with the social partners, Agencies and Government for the next three years and in so doing contribute to social cohesion and economic success for all in Northern Ireland.

Above all, the LRA recognises that achieving our targets and goals is dependent on how well we build and conduct our relationships with employers, employers' associations, trade unions, workers, other organisations or individuals, as well as Government Agencies, Departments and regional political interests. We recognise that our strategy and policies are not created in a vacuum, but are increasingly driven by the business and social/political environment within Northern Ireland, within the UK, the European Union and internationally. That is why, having reviewed our employment relations in detail at Board level, we consulted widely with other organisations including the CBI, the NIC-ICTU, the Federation of Small Businesses, agencies such as Invest Northern Ireland and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the universities and with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). In addition, we drew heavily on the results of the Quinquennial Review of our work commissioned by DEL during 2002. Also, we exchanged information with our sister organisations, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, Washington DC, the Labour Relations Commission in the Republic of Ireland and ACAS in Great Britain. Most importantly, we involved our staff, drawing extensively on their practical experience and relying on them to track the influences and trends that relate to employment relations today. It is from all these processes that the Board of the LRA has distilled this, our second published Corporate Plan.

Workplaces in Northern Ireland have never faced such changes and challenges as they will meet in the next 2-3 years. We set out some of these in Chapter 2, anticipating even greater challenges arising from international economic pressures in an increasingly uncertain world. However, one thing is certain. Job security and business

survival are enhanced by better employment relations within the workplace. No business can expect to survive by ignoring workers, nor is any job secure if the employee withholds commitment. The overarching priority of the LRA is therefore to add value, competitiveness, survivability to business organisations and trade unions and employability to employees. We do this by providing a range of advisory services on individual and collective employment matters and by offering alternative dispute resolution methods. Increasingly, these services are preventive, being delivered to avoid conflict, to build mutual trust at the workplace and thereby enhance productivity, quality and competitiveness. Recent research and evaluation shows that positive employment relations and workplace attitudes are central to being able to manage change successfully and enhance performance, yet are so often overlooked or taken for granted. Whilst there is no funded scheme in Northern Ireland at present for building mutuality in employment matters, unlike the United States, GB and RoI, the LRA has some ability to assist, if requested, through giving advice and facilitating change.

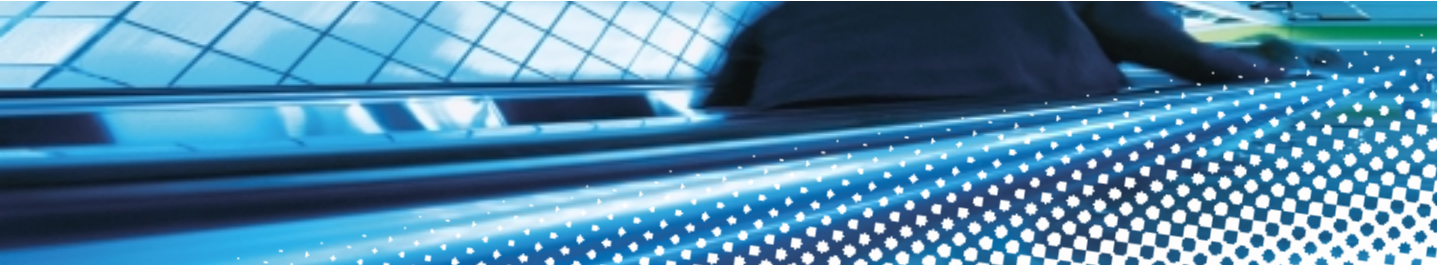
Such change in workplace practices is necessitated by employees acquiring more "voice", and increasingly by the implementation of new employment regulations originating in Europe. During the lifetime of this Plan, regulations will require every place of employment having more than 150 employees to introduce measures for employee consultation and involvement in decision making. The demands on the LRA to assist in the drafting and introduction of new workplace practices are expected to be considerable. When implemented, these practices will have the potential to transform collective employment relations as well as business performance. They will require, for some, significant change in both employee and employer attitudes. In such circumstances LRA staff are ideally placed to facilitate the mutual development of best practice within organisations. The LRA will develop closer working relationships with other relevant >>



Patrick McCartan
Chairman



William Patterson
Chief Executive



agencies, Invest Northern Ireland, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and DEL, as well as the social partners, the CBI and NIC-ICTU, to ensure Northern Ireland implements the EU Directive on consultation and employee involvement as an asset.

The increasing financial and emotional risk to employers and employees in asserting employment rights is of concern. The risk to small businesses (10-49 employees) and to micro-businesses (1-9 employees), is regarded as particularly acute and has heightened Government interest in reviewing employment tribunal procedures at national level. It has also focused attention on alternative methods of resolving employment rights issues in Northern Ireland, since we have a proportionately higher dependence for employment on small and micro-businesses. We address these crucial issues in Chapters 4 and 5, but already the LRA has launched its Arbitration Scheme for the Resolution of Unfair Dismissal Disputes. This is an alternative to the industrial tribunal for determining unfair dismissal cases. It is quick, easily accessed and less confrontational. There is no cost to the parties, yet full entitlements are accessed. The LRA expects to develop more efficient and effective methods for alternative dispute resolution and to assist in developing in-house practices aimed at avoiding the necessity to assert employment rights through tribunals and courts. The trend at national and international level is to prioritise the use of third party mediation and facilitation roles and to ensure the parties to an individual or collective dispute bear the primary responsibility for resolving it. This trend is being reflected in Northern Ireland. It brings new challenges to us all, including LRA staff.

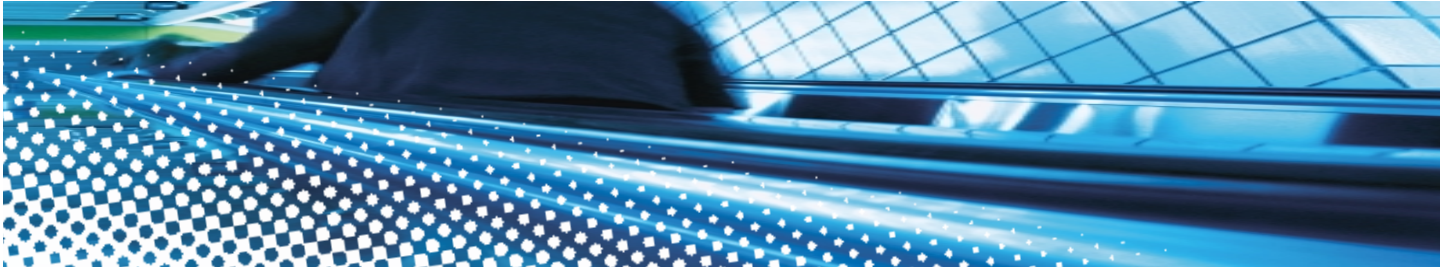
Last but not least is the need to meet the ambitious programme of work set out in this Corporate Plan, to provide our services to Charter Mark quality standards and to gain full Investors in People accreditation for our employee and organisational development. Whilst we have made a good start with our web-based services (www.lra.org.uk), much remains to be done to market and exploit the potential of the website in providing the 24-hour information and advisory services demanded by clients in a cost-effective and user-friendly way. It is likely that staff and financial resources will be increased arising from the Quinquennial Review, but there is a continued upward trend in the volume and complexity of employment relations work which is expected to stretch our capacity to meet all the challenges we face.

The Board, management and staff of the LRA look forward to meeting those challenges, to developing good relationships with our partners and to contributing to social cohesion and economic success through leading employment relations.

We commend the LRA's Corporate Plan for the 2003-2006 period to you.

Patrick McCartan
Chairman

William Patterson
Chief Executive





MISSION STATEMENT

The Agency aims to be the leading organisation in Northern Ireland for improving employment relations. We will contribute to organisational effectiveness by providing, on a quality basis, impartial and independent services for promoting good employment practices and preventing and resolving disputes.

CORE VALUES

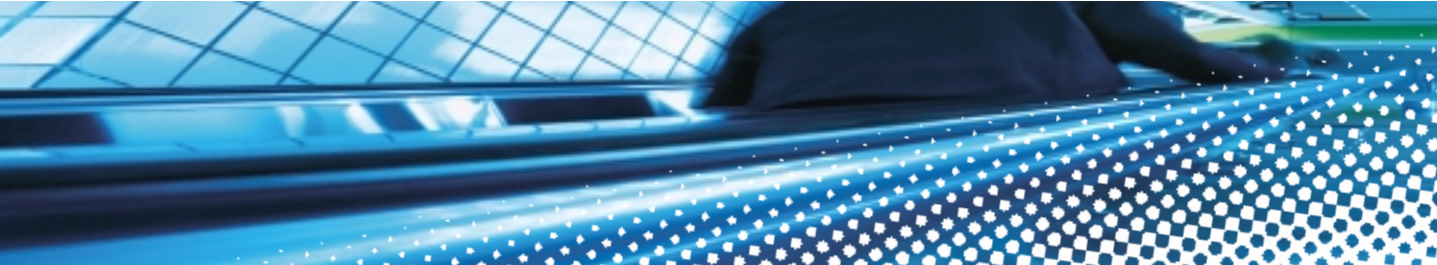
In delivering services the Agency will:

- be accessible;
- respond to customer needs;
- be open and accountable;
- act promptly;
- be professional;
- behave with integrity;
- maintain confidentiality;
- respect opinions.



... leading
employment relations

www.lra.org.uk



CHAPTER 1: THE LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY

1.1 Who We Are

The Labour Relations Agency (the Agency) is the Non-Departmental Public Body, independent of Government, responsible for promoting the improvement of employment relations in Northern Ireland. Good employment relations are critical for maintaining the effectiveness of organisations and for ensuring a high quality of working life.



1.2 What We Do

The Agency provides an impartial and confidential employment relations service to those engaged in industry, commerce and the public services. The Agency's services include the provision of advice on good employment practices and assistance with the development and implementation of employment policies and procedures. The Agency is also active in resolving disputes through its conciliation, mediation and arbitration services.

1.3 The Make-up of the Agency

A Board consisting of a part-time Chairman and nine other members appointed by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) determines the policy of the Agency. Members of the Agency's Board are appointed on the basis of their knowledge of, and experience in, employment relations. The Board is comprised of members from employer bodies, trade unions and others who have a relevant academic or employment law background. The Agency is managed through a Chief Executive who is supported by three Directors. The Agency publishes an Annual Report and Accounts.

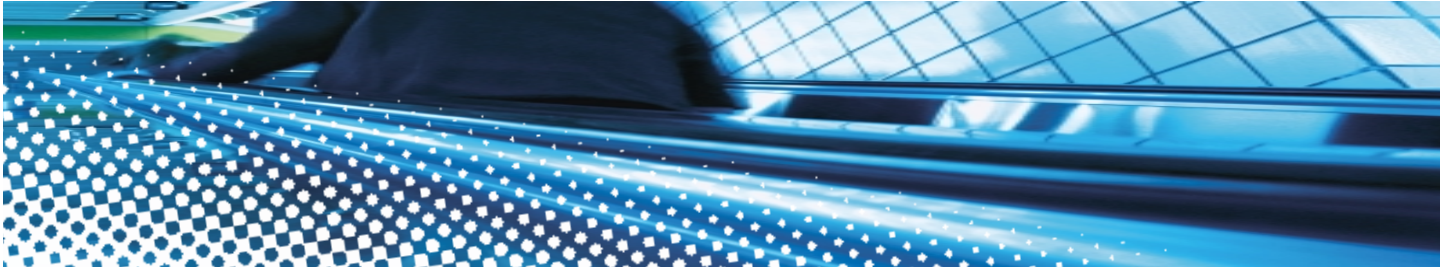
1.4 Users of Our Services

Users of the Agency's services are normally employers, employers' associations, trade unions, workers and other organisations or individuals who require assistance with matters relating to employment practices and employment relations.

1.5 The Agency's Commitment

The Agency is committed to improving employment relations in Northern Ireland by:

- promoting and supporting the use of good employment practices;
- providing impartial advice and assistance on employment relations and employment policies and procedures;
- publishing Codes of Practice;
- encouraging employee involvement;
- seeking the avoidance and resolution of employment disputes by agreement through conciliation, mediation or arbitration;
- supporting research and promoting a wider knowledge of Northern Ireland's employment relations systems.



1.6 Service Standards

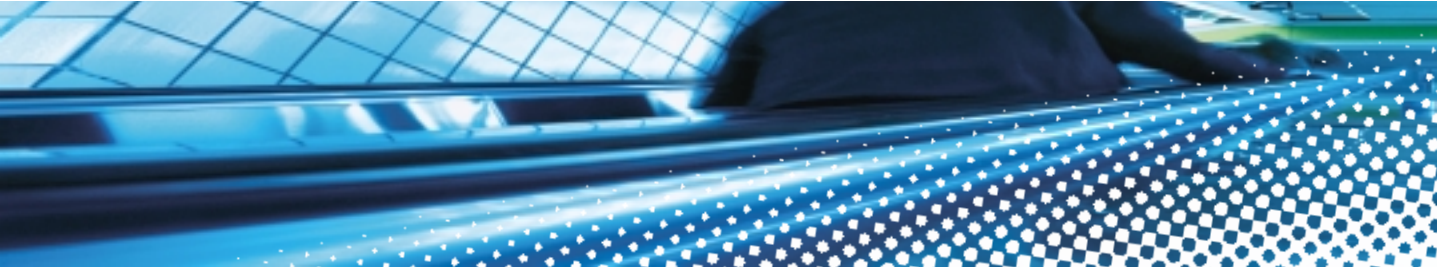
The service standards set by the Agency are consistent with those set by Government in the Citizen's Charter. All Agency staff are pledged to ensure that clients and customers are aware of the quality of service that we aim to provide. Any complaint about the delivery of a service can be taken up through a Director of the Agency. All complaints will be investigated fully and responded to within five working days. If the person complaining is still not satisfied he/she may raise the matter with the Chief Executive who will reply within seven working days. Any complainant who remains dissatisfied may refer the matter to the Ombudsman.

The Board and staff ensure that the Agency's independence is maintained and always exercised. All Agency staff are committed to providing impartial advice and support in seeking to introduce good employment practices and improve workplace employment relations.

1.7 Equality Statement

The Labour Relations Agency, in line with our Equality Scheme approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in July 2001, is fully committed to supporting the elimination of all forms of discrimination in employment and to using its services to help secure the objectives of fair employment, equality of opportunity and good relations. As a provider of services the Agency includes equality of treatment as a fundamental principle of good employment relations and best employment practice. As an employer the Agency seeks to ensure that its employment policies, procedures and practices conform to good practice as outlined in the relevant Codes of Practice. The Agency's Equality Scheme is available on the Agency's website.





CHAPTER 2: A CHANGING EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS ENVIRONMENT

2.1 Global Competitiveness and New Technology

Global competitiveness and pressures on productivity continue to drive change in the private sector. Overall there has been a significant shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy in the UK. The gender mix of the workforce is also changing. More women are participating in the UK labour market. Linked to this is an increase in part-time working, although this trend cannot be exclusively associated with the increase of women in the workforce.

Information communications technology (ICT) is impacting on all organisations. Will developments in ICT make home working common place? ICT not only affects how we work but also what products we produce and which relationships we develop particularly through the Internet. New patterns of association are evolving. Employers and trade unions are finding these networks a challenge and an opportunity. ICT is not only driving innovation in production methods and management techniques but is also influencing the structure of the workforce. More highly skilled and white-collar jobs are being created. On the down side fewer craft and manual jobs are becoming available.

Global competitiveness and ICT are creating an ever changing economic environment in which the shelf life of a product is short and the pace of change unrelenting. The demands of 'instant consumerism' require innovation that can most effectively be delivered through collaborative working between management, employees and their representatives. Gone are the days when employers, employees and trade unions could define their relationship solely in adversarial terms.

2.2 Individualism and Collectivism

Over recent years trade union density has remained high in the public sector with the general decline in trade union membership, particularly in the private sector, being arrested. Since 1997 there has been an increase in trade

union recognition, a significant increase in individual employment rights, a resurgence of management initiative and a trend for management to deal directly with employees. However, in the public sector the collective agenda has remained prominent with negotiations and consultation between management and trade unions being the primary means by which terms and conditions are determined and organisational change handled. Individualism and collectivism do co-exist.

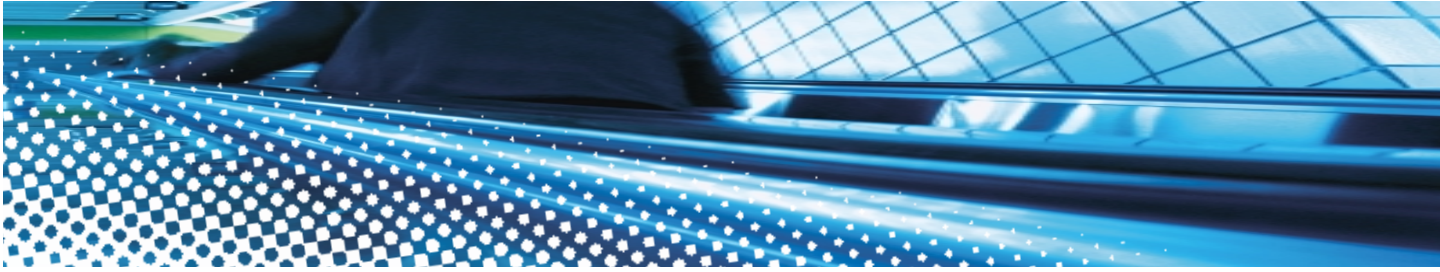
Some other trends include: the tendency by employees to take the tribunal route to resolving individual rights disputes; local bargaining has become more prominent; corporate social responsibility and training issues have become more significant, indeed the scope of collective bargaining may be widening beyond the traditional pay and terms of employment issues. The influence of these and other trends have made the world of work and the employment relationship more complex.

Pressures for change remain in the public sector, not least of which is the Public Private Partnerships Programme. Ongoing change driven by pressures on public spending will continue to challenge public sector management and the trade unions.

More generally, equal pay, the need for the provision of flexible working arrangements, the reported long-hours culture and bullying at work continue to require attention.

2.3 Europe and Beyond

The internationalisation of employment relations is likely to become more significant in coming years. Debate is already taking place on whether a market model, as practised in the USA, or a European social model is best suited for local employment relations. Europe has been a major influence in national employment legislation and will continue to be so. European-level employment relations institutions are also likely to become more influential as the global economy becomes a matter of competition between major economic blocks.



2.4 Employment Legislation

Over recent years a number of legislative changes have been introduced. Changes of direct significance for the Agency have been:

- the introduction of the Agency's Arbitration Scheme for the Resolution of Unfair Dismissal Disputes;
- provision for an Agency arbitration scheme for cases of religious and political discrimination;
- the Agency now promotes good employment practices on the same basis as the resolution of disputes. It is notable that Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 applies to employment policies and their impact on equality of opportunity;
- the Agency continues to be required to provide conciliation services for new employment rights.

The ongoing implementation of new employment legislation and the promotion of collaborative working as the preferred means of conducting employment relations continues to have an impact on the work of the Agency. Significant areas arising from pending legislation include:

- the requirement to produce and revise Codes of Practice as a result of the introduction of the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999;
- the adoption of a European Directive on Information and Consultation;
- the adoption of a European Directive on Fixed-Term Contract Working;
- the adoption of a European Directive on Temporary Agency Work;
- the review of the provisions regarding Transfer of Undertakings and Working Time;
- the introduction of the right to request flexible working conditions;
- the potential introduction of legislation in respect of age discrimination;
- the possibility that indirect discrimination will

be made unlawful in respect of disability and that harassment will be recognised as a form of direct discrimination;

- the potential introduction of the remaining provisions of the Employment Act GB 2002;
- the work of the Human Rights Commission which is likely to become influential.

It is recognised that Government policy seeks to maintain a balance between progressive employment legislation and the need for organisations, both public and private, to be efficient, effective and economic.



2.5 The Government of Northern Ireland

A devolved administration to the Northern Ireland Assembly will require the Agency to relate to processes of local public policy and legislative decision making. In coming years it is likely that local needs and the development of a regional employment relations agenda will require consideration.

CHAPTER 3: NORTHERN IRELAND - ENHANCING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Strategic Theme

Through improving employment relations the Agency will contribute to the enhancement of regional development in Northern Ireland.



3.2 Background

Northern Ireland is recognised for having good employment relations. Government has argued for sustainable economic development on the basis of sharing benefits fairly, real partnership and social cohesion. Emphasis is put on the need for collaborative working, the introduction of good employment practices, resolving disputes without going to law and taking a positive approach to Europe.

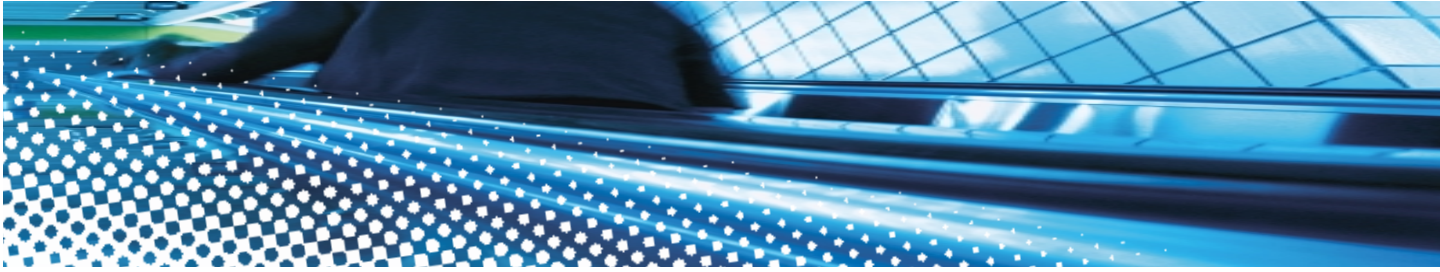
The following are notable features of the Northern Ireland labour force drawn from local commentaries on the Northern Ireland economy:

- unemployment - currently running at its lowest level since records began - has fallen steadily from a peak of 17.2% in 1986 to **6% (October 2001)** compared with the current

EU's average of 7.6%. It is noted that problems relating to long-term unemployment and economic deprivation are the subject of a report submitted to DEL in December 2002 by the Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment;

- over the five-year period 1996-2000, the average number of working days lost per 1000 employees was 15. This compares with 16 days lost in Great Britain. In the Republic of Ireland, 73 days were lost per 1000 employees during the same period;
- approximately 12% of the total labour force are self-employed;
- 50.6% of employee jobs are occupied by women (26.1% full-time and 24.5% part-time);
- 64.9% of the total labour force are in the services sector of which 60% are female;
- 13.9 % of the total labour force are in manufacturing of which 72% are male;
- in December 2000 there were 201,254 public sector jobs in Northern Ireland (31.5% of total employee jobs). Of those employed in the public sector, 62% were female;
- between 1997-99 trade union membership amongst male manual workers increased from 28% in 1997 to 36% in 1999. Male non-manual workers remained the same at 38%, female manual workers fell from 34% to 30% and female non-manual workers from 43% to 39%;
- in Northern Ireland approximately 84.5% of businesses have fewer than 10 employees;
- the number of applications to tribunals increased from 2787 in 1992/93 to 6364 in 2000/01.

These statistics and the composition of the Northern Ireland economy reinforce the need to pay attention to the impact of employment policy and legislative developments on small firms and on a highly unionised public sector. What is missing is information on employment policies and practices at enterprise level. There is a need for research in this area.



3.3 Programme of Work

By working in partnership with key stakeholders, such as, DEL, Invest Northern Ireland, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, employer representatives, trade unions, professional bodies and the universities, the Agency will encourage debate on the most appropriate employment relations system and policies for Northern Ireland. It will also facilitate developments in making Northern Ireland a recognised region of excellence in employment relations throughout the private, public and voluntary sectors. To this end the Agency will undertake the following programme of work:

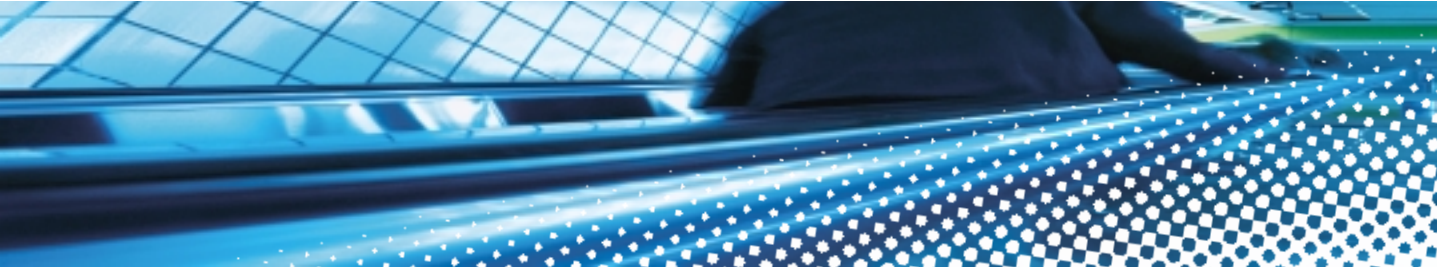
- take the lead in supporting the social partners with a review of employment relations in Northern Ireland;
- initiate and facilitate joint working amongst employer representatives, trade unions, professional bodies and Government Departments;
- will commission and publish occasional papers and research on employment relations in Northern Ireland in partnership with local universities;
- partner with organisations such as the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and the Labour Relations Commission on European and cross border employment relations initiatives;
- promote and facilitate the development of an employment relations network in Northern Ireland;
- partner with ACAS, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and Northern Ireland-based organisations to ensure that the thinking of national and international experts and opinion-formers in the employment relations field are made available in Northern Ireland;
- keep up-to-date on the key factors influencing organisational change, productivity and business growth and will facilitate, at regional level, awareness of these factors;
- nominate staff to act as liaison officers for sectors of the economy in order to strengthen links with clients and raise the profile of the Agency;
- promote awareness of and debate on contemporary issues relating to work and society;
- seek to contribute to good relations in Northern Ireland by improving employment relations through the provision of its services.

3.4 Performance

Objectives relating to each element of the above programme will be set out in the Agency's annual operational plans 2003/04 - 2005/06. Progress will be reported to the Agency's Board on a quarterly basis.

In broad terms the Agency aims to:

- establish a Northern Ireland Network for Employment Relations by 31 December 2003;
- set out a programme of conferences/seminars in each of the Agency's annual operational plans 2003/04 - 2005/06;
- have initiated an ongoing programme of occasional papers and research;
- in light of changing needs complete a review of services by 31 March 2005;
- have staff dedicated as liaison officers for specific sectors of the Northern Ireland economy by 1 September 2003.



CHAPTER 4: SETTING STANDARDS FOR WORKPLACE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

4.1 Strategic Theme

To be innovative in providing advisory support and information services which facilitate the development and maintenance of high quality employment relations practices.

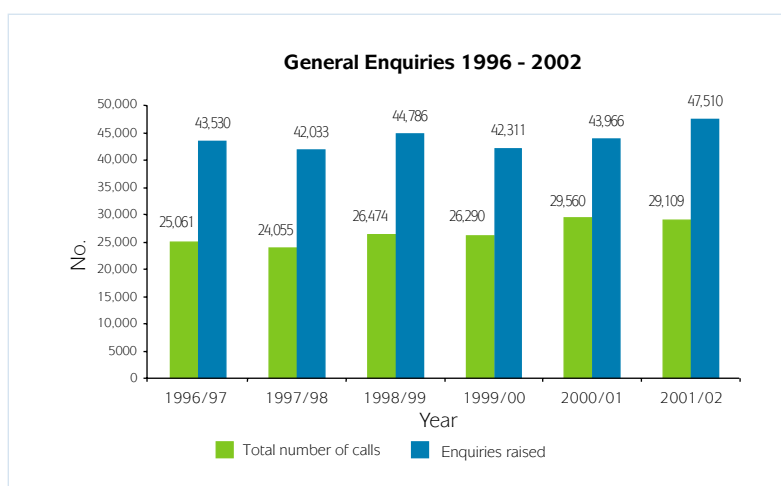
4.2 Background

The following sets out the demand for the Agency's main advisory services over the period 1996-2002.

4.2.1 General Enquiry Service

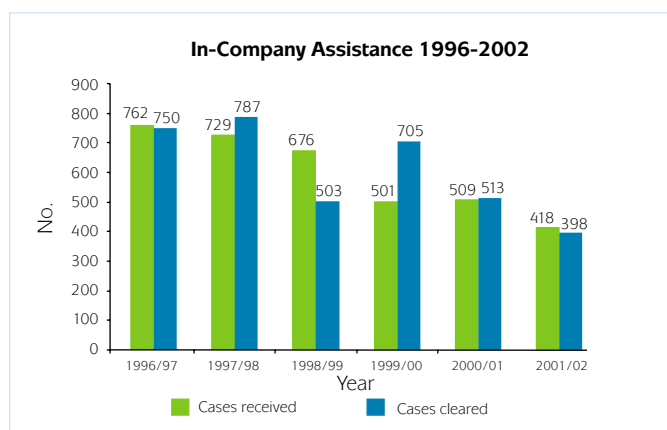
This service responds to the high demand for information and advice on a wide range of employment-related matters. It is often the first point of contact between the Agency and the client and can be an important diagnostic point for identifying circumstances, or clients, who would benefit from other Agency services.

The number of calls received and enquiries raised for the six-year period 1996-2002 is set out below:



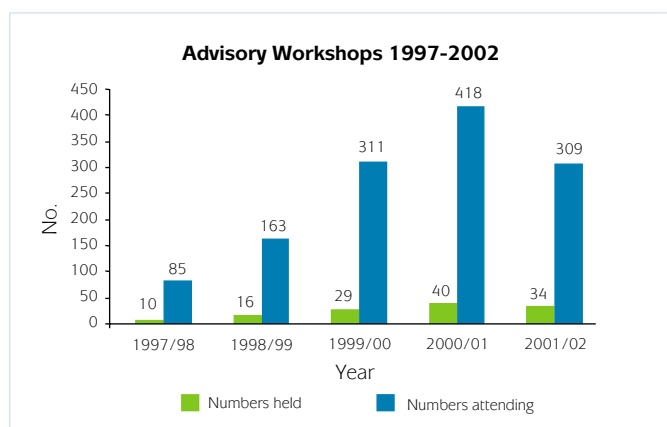
4.2.2 Direct In-Company Assistance

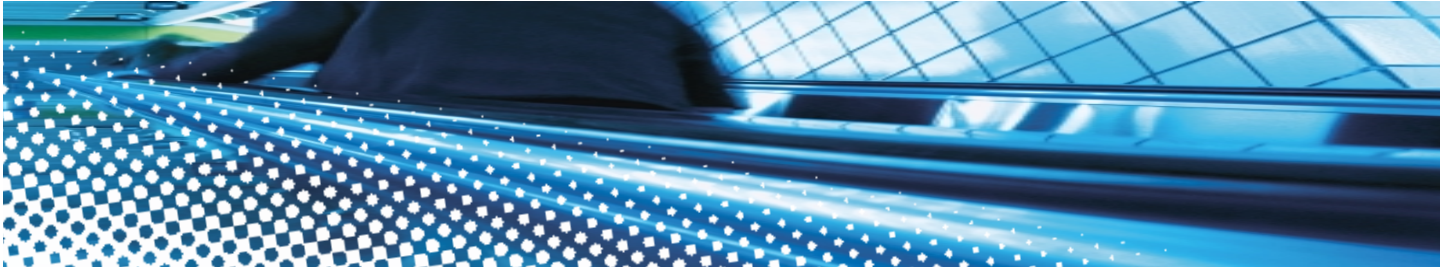
This service involves an Agency officer drafting or vetting employment documentation for an individual organisation. The service is in high demand as is displayed in the following figures. The introduction of advisory workshops in 1997 was designed to provide this service more economically. This explains the reduction of direct in-company assistance from 1997.



4.2.3 Advisory Workshops

Advisory Workshops are aimed primarily at small organisations employing fewer than 50 employees. At the workshops practical guidance is given on the preparation of employment documents. Introduced in 1997 the use of advisory workshops to deliver the advisory services has increased noticeably, as displayed in the following figures:





4.2.4 Summary of Demand for Advisory Services

Analysis of the demand for the main advisory services provided by the Agency shows:

- a 16% increase in the number of callers to the Agency's enquiry lines;
- a constant demand for in-company assistance;
- a likely increase in demand for advisory workshops.

There has also been a continuous demand for speakers at conferences and seminars. Over recent years the Agency has reduced the number of in-company projects undertaken, owing to limited resources. The in-company project is an excellent means of facilitating collaborative working in organisations. This is an area in which the Agency wishes to renew the level of work of former years.

4.3 Programme of Work

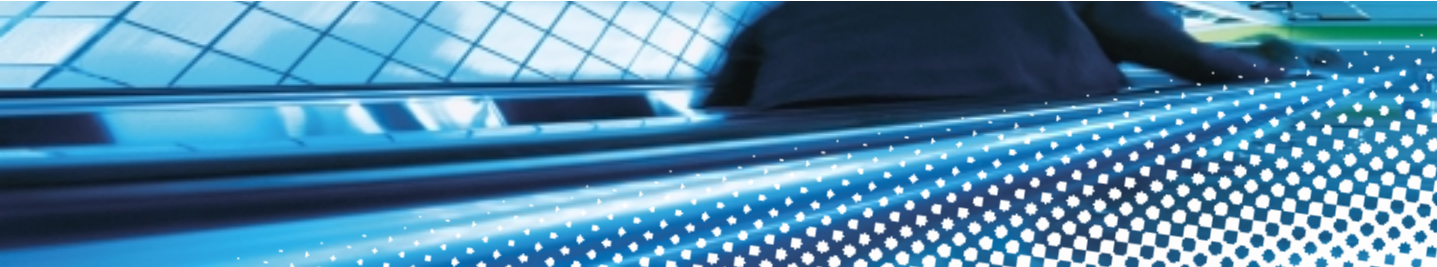
An organisation's success is built on good practice in human resource management and the maintenance of good employment relations. Increasingly employers, employees and trade unions are expressing the need for imaginative and holistic responses to meet the complex demands of working life. This is what the Agency aims to promote in providing advice, information and support to those involved in employment relations. To this end the Agency will undertake the following programme of work:

- standards of good employment relations practices will be published and promoted;
- continue to enhance arrangements for the handling of enquiries and advice, in respect of collective and individual employment relations matters;
- collaborative working will be promoted. The Agency will provide advice on and facilitate the development of employee involvement, joint working and partnership with a particular

emphasis on the effective handling of change;

- the topics covered by the Agency's good employment practices workshops will be increased in line with customer requirements;
- continue to partner with organisations working in the employment field in order to maximise the support provided, in particular, to small and medium-sized organisations;
- in-company project-based assistance will be provided where an organisation seeks to revise, improve or innovate in relation to employment relations policies and practices;
- promote, facilitate and provide employment relations skills training preferably on a joint working basis;
- web-based information and advisory services will be developed and systematically introduced;
- the Agency's advisory publications will be expanded to provide a comprehensive resource on good employment relations practices;
- the format of all Agency advisory publications will be reviewed and the content updated in line with new employment legislation and developments in employment relations.



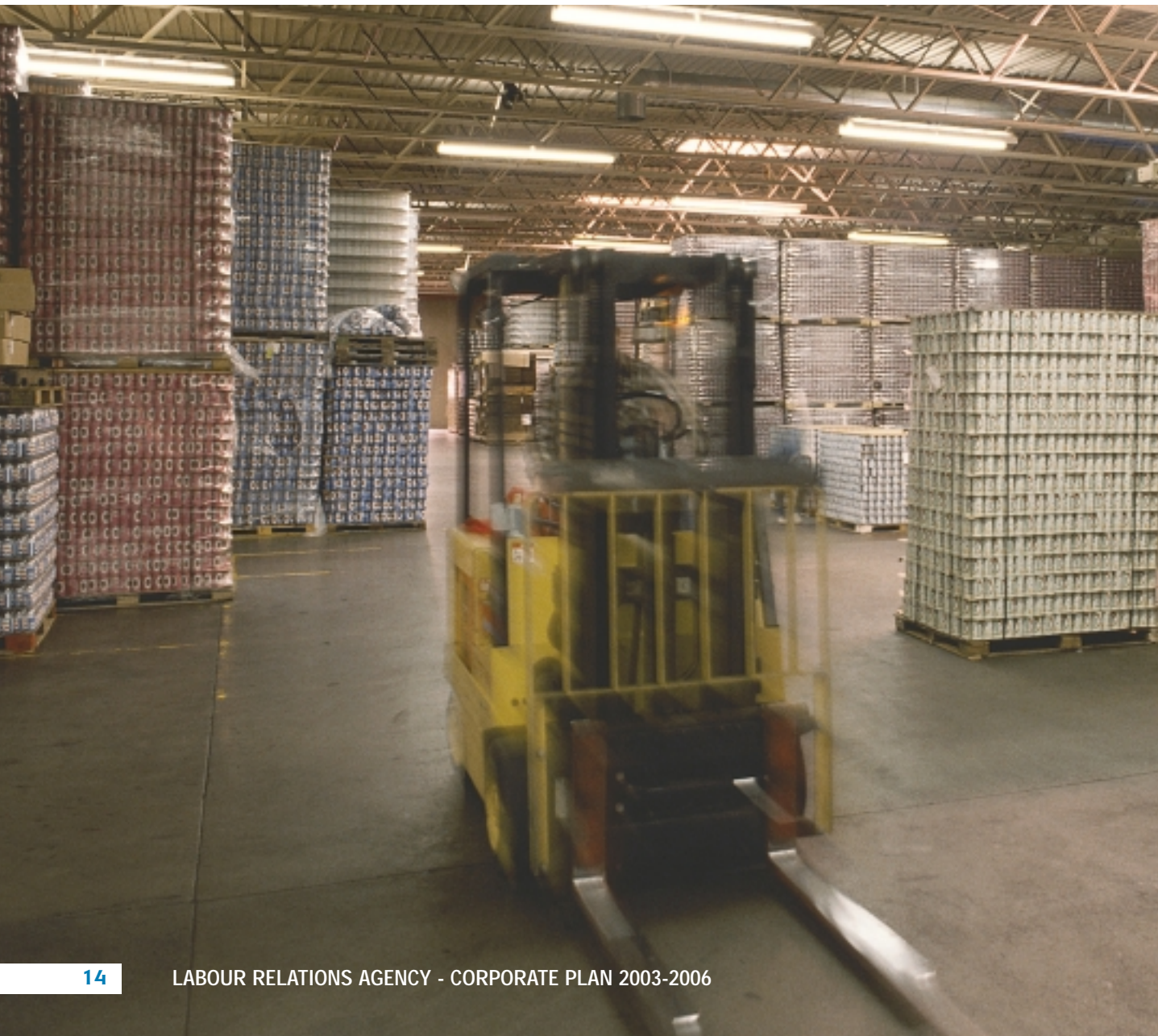


4.4 Performance

Objectives relating to each element of the above programme of work will be set out in the Agency's annual operational plans 2003/04 - 2005/06. Progress will be reported to the Agency's Board on a quarterly basis.

In broad terms the Agency aims to:

- increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the enquiry service;
- establish measures of and improve the level of user satisfaction;
- publish comprehensive quality standards for the effective handling of employment relations by 31 March 2005;
- review on an ongoing basis all the Agency's publications in response to legislative requirements and developments in good practice;
- complete or have in progress at least two major employment relations projects by 30 September 2005.



CHAPTER 5: PROMOTING A CULTURE OF ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION

5.1 Strategic Theme

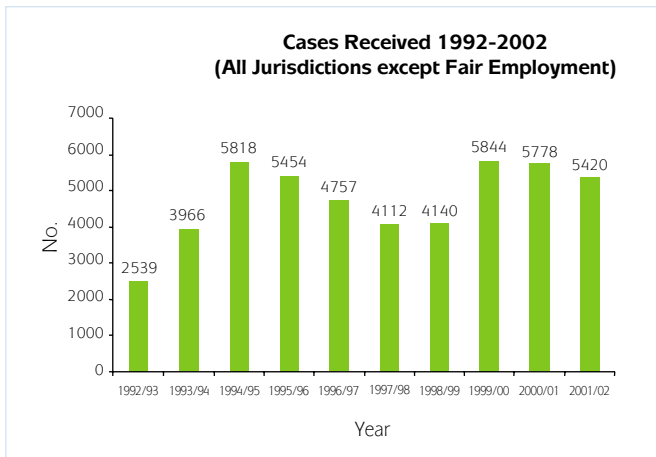
To provide third party dispute resolution services and to facilitate the use of alternative dispute resolution processes for workplace conflicts.

5.2 Background

The following sets out the demand for the Agency's conciliation, mediation and arbitration services over the period 1992-2002.

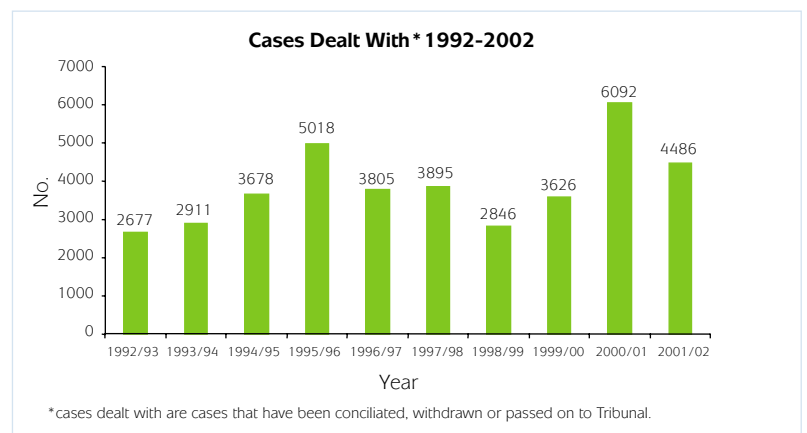
5.2.1 Individual Conciliation Cases Received

This ten-year analysis shows a general increase in the number of cases received. Whilst individual years can be exceptional, the five-year period 1992-1997 averaged receipts of 4500 per annum whereas the five-year period 1997-2002 averaged 5056, an increase of 12%.



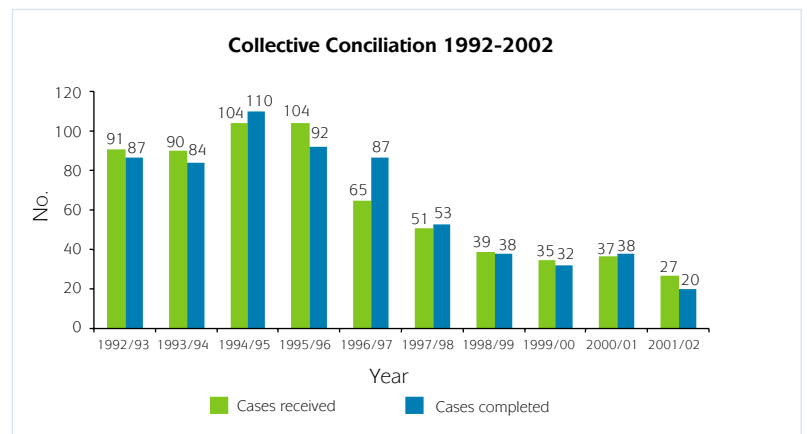
5.2.2 Individual Conciliation Cases Dealt With

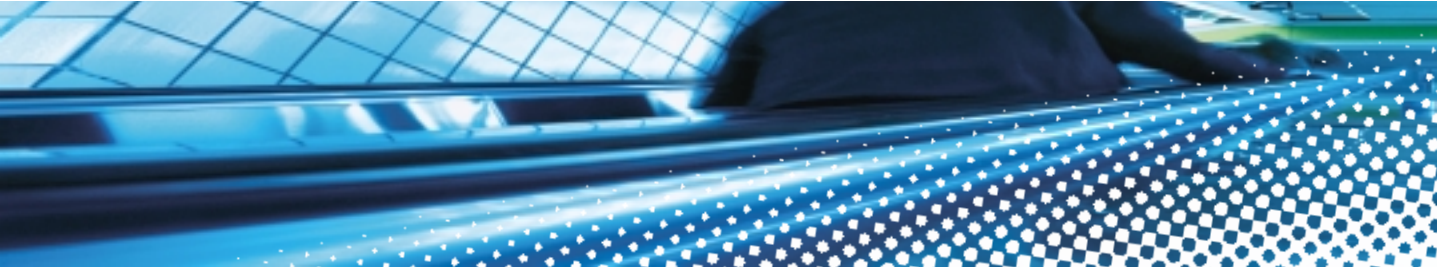
Over the same period, cases dealt with have also increased, from an average of 3612 jurisdictions in the first five-year period to 4184 in the second period, an increase of 16%.



5.2.3 Collective Conciliation

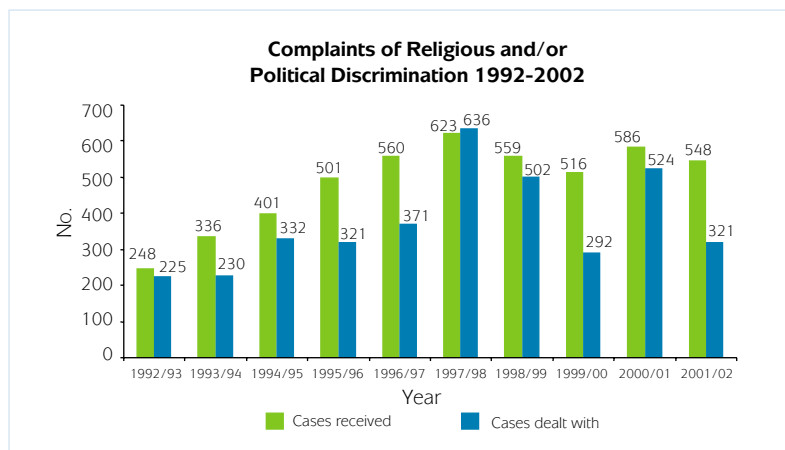
It is noteworthy that a sharp and continuing decline in collective conciliation requests has occurred from 1996 onwards. There is no single reason for this, but one factor may be that trade unions are increasingly encouraging members to refer disputes to tribunals. However, the recent rise in trade union recognition agreements may influence this downward trend.





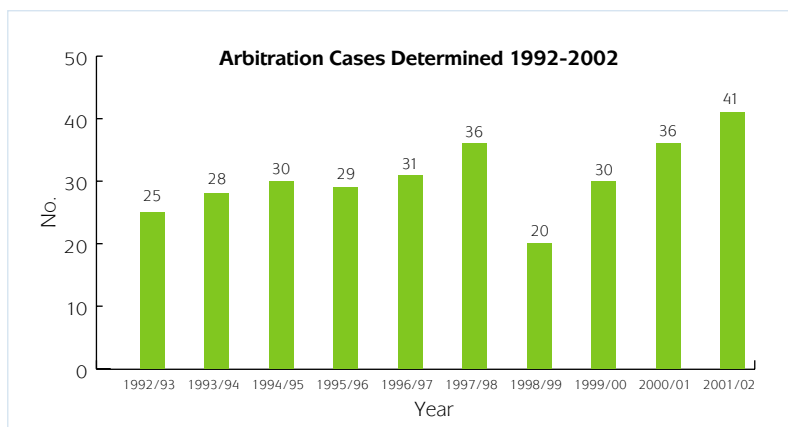
5.2.4 Complaints of Religious and/or Political Discrimination

Following the introduction of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989, the Agency was given a conciliation role in individual complaints of alleged unlawful religious or political discrimination. Whilst individual years can be exceptional, the trend over the ten-year period 1992-2002 has been for an increase in cases received and the cases dealt with, particularly noticeable in the past five years.



5.2.5 Arbitration

The volume of arbitration cases determined has remained fairly stable over a ten-year period with a slight rise in 2001/02. The introduction of the Agency's statutory arbitration schemes for unfair dismissal and religious/political discrimination disputes may increase the number of arbitration hearings.



5.2.6 Summary of the Demand for Dispute Resolution Services

Analysis of the demand for dispute resolution services shows:

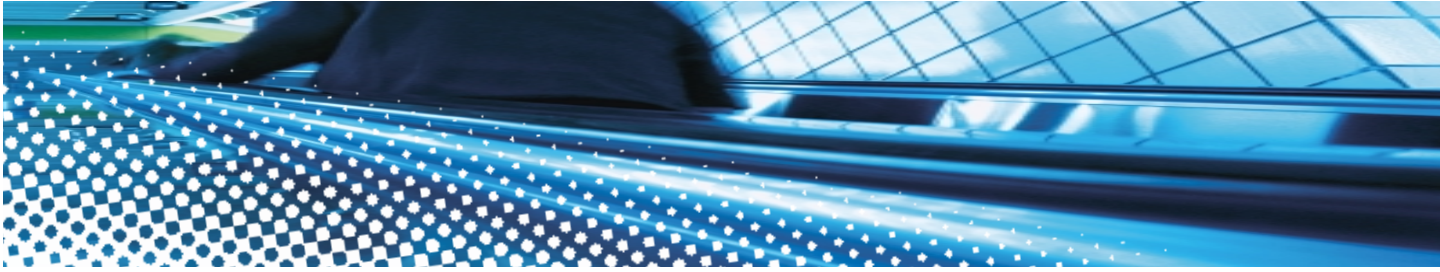
- an increasing demand for conciliation in individual employment cases;
- a steady demand for arbitration services;
- a notable increase in cases received alleging religious and/or political discrimination;
- a declining demand for conciliation in collective trade disputes.

The use of third party alternative dispute resolution processes and the development of the associated skills are being promoted by the Agency. The Agency's policy is to promote, in the first instance, the resolution of disputes in-company with the use of third party alternative dispute resolution processes being made available thereafter as a viable alternative to resolving disputes through legal processes.

5.3 Programme of Work

Is it possible to resolve workplace disputes and for the parties to feel that justice has been done without using the law or taking industrial action? The Agency believes that this is not only possible but that the use of alternative dispute resolution processes such as grievance procedures, consultation, negotiation, conciliation, mediation and arbitration have advantages over the use of the law and avoid the potentially destructive consequences of industrial action. In promoting the use of alternative dispute resolution processes the Agency seeks not only to resolve issues but also to restore positive relationships. To this end the Agency will undertake the following programme of work:

- continue to provide third party services in relation to the resolution of collective and individual employment disputes;
- proactively promote the use of alternative dispute resolution processes and will aim to



be recognised as the leading provider of dispute resolution services in Northern Ireland;

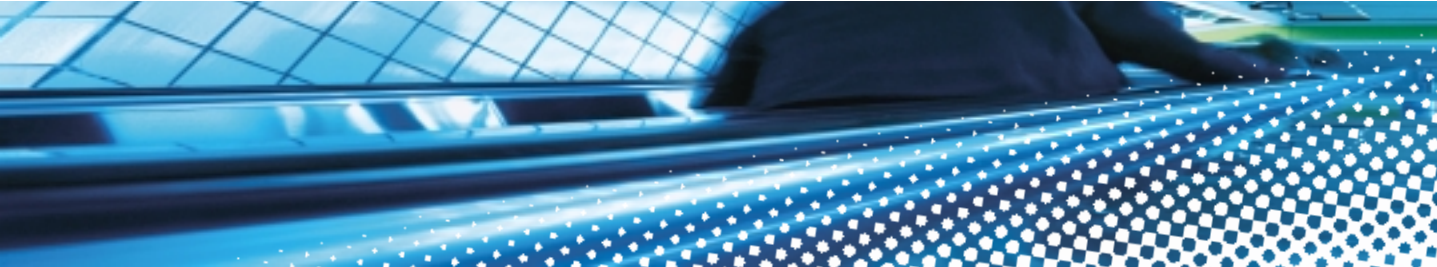
- promote the extension of statutory arbitration to appropriate employment jurisdictions;
- submit to DEL a statutory arbitration scheme for the resolution of religious and political discrimination disputes;
- training for participation in the Agency's statutory arbitration schemes will be provided for employer and employee representatives;
- the Agency's lists of arbitrators and independent experts will be reviewed and rationalised;
- training will be provided for those on the Agency's list of arbitrators and for panel members participating in arbitration hearings undertaken by the Agency;
- training will be provided, preferably on a joint basis, in handling conflict in organisations through means of alternative dispute resolution processes which will include collective bargaining;
- the effectiveness and efficiency of the conciliation processes applied by the Agency will be assessed on an ongoing basis;
- continue to partner with organisations working in the field of dispute resolution in order to minimise the negative outcomes of organisational conflict and employment disputes.

5.4 Performance

Objectives relating to each element of the above programme of work will be set out in the Agency's annual operational plans 2003/04 - 2005/06. Progress will be reported to the Agency's Board on a quarterly basis.

In broad terms the Agency aims to:

- maintain at least an 85% settlement/withdrawal rate for individual employment disputes referred to the Agency;
- maintain at least a 65% settlement/withdrawal rate for equality employment disputes referred to the Agency;
- increase the use of the Agency's Arbitration Scheme for the Resolution of Unfair Dismissal Disputes;
- maintain at least a settlement rate of 85% in collective disputes;
- in each operational year complete a promotion and facilitation programme for alternative dispute resolution processes.



CHAPTER 6: SUPPORTING THE DELIVERY OF QUALITY SERVICES

6.1 Strategic Theme

To continue to develop the skills and knowledge of Agency staff, to promote the Agency as the first choice organisation for dealing with employment relations matters and to manage the Agency effectively, efficiently and economically.

6.2 Background

Over recent years the Agency has undergone considerable organisational change. The most significant change was related to staff turnover. A number of staff retired and have been replaced through internal promotions and external appointments. The staff training budget has been considerably enhanced and significant progress has been made in introducing new technology. Recognised quality models (eg EFQM, Investors in People, Charter Mark) continue to be the basis for systematically improving the management of the Agency.

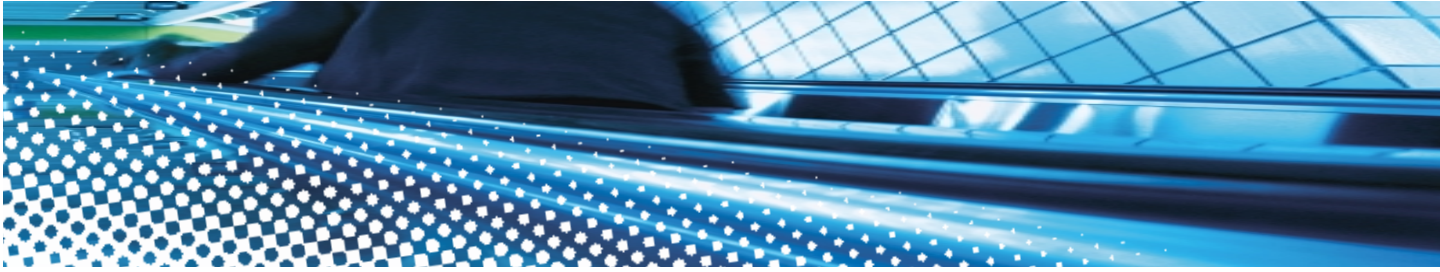
There are outstanding matters still to be progressed. Some have been identified in the 2002 Quinquennial Review of the Agency. Some are long-term issues carried over from the Agency's Corporate Plan 2000-2003. The most significant areas are the ongoing evaluation of service provision, the raising of the Agency's public profile, legislative compliance and the continuous improvement of internal and external communications.



6.3 Programme of Work

The Agency achieves recognition and maintains its credibility through the commitment and performance of staff. By raising its public profile the Agency aims to stimulate debate on improving employment relations in Northern Ireland. This will be complemented by the Agency continuing to provide quality services on a value for money basis. To this end the Agency will undertake the following programme of work:

- in order to maintain continuous improvement in the quality of Agency services client satisfaction surveys will be carried out and operational reassessments made for all the Agency's services;
- seek to gain public recognition by achieving Investors in People and a Charter Mark award;
- the profile of the Agency will be raised through the systematic management of public relations and the marketing of Agency services;
- staff development will be enhanced through the review of Agency competences for management, professional and administrative work;
- performance appraisal will be reviewed and the system updated;
- a revised information systems and technology strategy will be implemented (the strategy will address the management of knowledge by the Agency);
- internal and external communications, including the management of information, will be reviewed and a communications strategy implemented. The communications strategy will address consultation in respect of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;
- funding will be sought, as appropriate, in addition to the Agency's allocated grant-in-aid;
- a risk management approach will continue to be applied to provide assurance on matters of accountability and performance. The Agency's risk management strategy will address the risks identified with this



Corporate Plan such as those associated with the information technology programme and the increasing backlog of individual conciliation cases;

- good employment relations will be maintained within the Agency through management and trade union representatives working together to enhance the effectiveness of the Agency, improve staff satisfaction, develop equality of opportunity and good relations and complete the revision of the Agency's Staff Handbook.

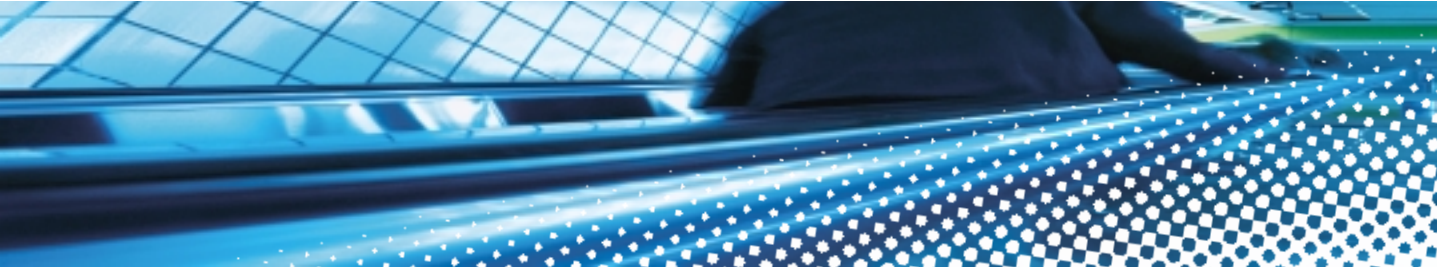
6.4 Performance

Objectives relating to each element of the above programme of work will be set out in the Agency's annual operational plans 2003/04 - 2005/06. Progress will be reported to the Agency's Board on a quarterly basis.

In broad terms the Agency aims to:

- establish measures for and demonstrate an increase in the public profile and influence of the Agency;
- demonstrate a measurable increase in staff satisfaction on an annual basis;
- demonstrate measurable improvements in the dissemination of information to and communication with Agency stakeholders;
- demonstrate measurable improvements in accountability in the use of Agency resources;
- manage Agency resources to within 2% of allocated budget.





CHAPTER 7: AGENCY RESOURCES

7.1 Baseline Allocation

DEL allocates the Agency's resources over a three-year period through the Public Expenditure Survey process. The Spending Review 2002 has fixed the Agency's grant-in-aid at £2.1m for 2003-2004, £2.2m for 2004-2005 and £2.3m for 2005-2006.

7.2 Estimated Resource Requirement 2003-2006

The grant-in-aid funding for the Agency during the period 2003/04 is set at £2.1m. The Agency has performed within this allocation however it is estimated that resources additional to allocations will be required from 2003/04 in order to maintain the level of services currently provided, to meet the developmental requirements of the Agency's Quinquennial Review 2002 and to fully implement the programmes of work set out in this Plan.

The Agency's performance priorities are as follows:

- to meet the Agency's statutory duty of improving industrial relations;
- to promote good employment practices;
- to resolve individual and collective disputes.

In the main these three performance priorities will be met within the allocated grant-in-aid. The most significant areas that are likely to require resources additional to the grant-in-aid will be:

- aspects of the programme of work set out in Chapter 3 of this Plan particularly in the areas of research, conferences and seminars;
- the facilitation of major projects relating to collaborative working;
- the development of ICT services such as the Agency's website;
- the introduction of training services in relation to the promotion of alternative dispute resolution processes;
- maintaining acceptable standards of in-house ICT provision;
- accommodation for the Certification Office and for any increase in Agency staffing.

The Agency estimates that to achieve the aims of this Corporate Plan, resource greater than the allocated baseline will be required. The Agency will be seeking to acquire resources from European sources, from joint funding arrangements in partnership with other organisations and from reviewing the Agency's grant-in-aid provision.

Overall there is a growing volume of and complexity in the work undertaken by the Agency. The Agency will therefore revise the programmes of work set out in this Corporate Plan in light of available resources.



LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY

Head Office:

2-8 Gordon Street
Belfast BT1 2LG

T: 028 9032 1442
F: 028 9033 0827
TDD (Textphone): 028 9023 8411
e-mail: info@lra.org.uk

Regional Office:

1-3 Guildhall Street
Londonderry BT48 6BJ

T: 028 7126 9639
F: 028 7126 7729
e-mail: info@lra.org.uk

ISBN 1-904401-07-4

www.lra.org.uk