



Law Society
of Northern Ireland

Country Report: Northern Ireland

European President's Conference, Vienna

2025

CONTEXT

The Law Society of Northern Ireland (the 'Society') represents and regulates circa. 3,000 practising solicitors working in approximately 450 solicitor firms and in public, private and third sector organisations in Northern Ireland (NI).

Under the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, the Society acts as the regulatory authority for the solicitor profession and works to uphold the independence, ethical standards, professional competence, and quality of services offered to the public.

The Society works in the public interest to influence law reform, defending everyone's right to have access to justice and promotes the rule of law.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND JUSTICE REFORM

The Society welcomed the restoration of the NI Legislative Assembly in January 2024. Representatives from the Society appeared before the Assembly's Justice Committee in March 2024, providing briefing on the Society's refreshed 'Justice Agenda' as well as highlighting other key issues affecting solicitors. The refreshed 'Justice Agenda', sets out a roadmap of

reform in the justice system across the themes of Access to Justice, Upholding the Rule of Law and Justice Reform.

The Society partnered with the Bar of Northern Ireland to establish an All-Party Group on Access to Justice, with the aim of informing political representatives across the political spectrum on the importance of matters relating to access to justice.. Political engagement has also increased through attending local Political Party Conferences to raise awareness of and draw attention to key issues facing the legal profession.

The Society developed a ‘Pledge to Uphold the Rule of Law’ and the independence of the legal profession in response to increasing attacks on lawyers in the media and from politicians. The Pledge commits signatories to uphold the following key principles: Independence, Responsibility, Fairness, Balance and Impartiality, Transparency and Accuracy. The Pledge has the support of the Lady Chief Justice, the Minister of Justice, the Attorney General, as well as MLAs and MPs.

The Society was designated ‘**Bar of the Year 2024**’, an award as part of the annual Ludovic-Trarieux International Human Rights Prize, in recognition of work undertaken to uphold the Rule of Law and the Independence of the Legal Profession.

LEGAL AID & ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The Society has continued to press for a sustainable Legal Aid Budget recognising the value provided by solicitors in delivering Access to Justice to citizens across NI. This resulted in a Legal Aid Budget for the Financial Year 2023-24 of £110m.

As a result of increasing delays in the time taken to process Legal Aid fees, the Society along with the Bar Council, issued Judicial Review proceedings

against the Department of Justice. This resulted in a declaration by the Court that the average 12-week delay in processing payments breached lawyers' rights to prompt payments.

A Fundamental Review of Criminal Legal Aid in NI was undertaken in 2024. As part of the Society's input into the Review, we commissioned a research report on the 'Viability of Criminal Legal Aid Practice in Northern Ireland' which presented compelling evidence on the state of the sector. The Society also engaged in a Foundational Review of Civil Legal Aid.

As a result of these Reviews, the Minister of Justice announced a comprehensive Access to Justice Reform Programme in December 2024, including a proposal to increase Legal Aid fees by 16%.

The Society commissioned an independent research consultancy to carry out a study into the 'Social Value of Legal Aid in Northern Ireland'. This involved conducting a Social Return on Investment assessment and encompassed all areas of Legal Aid including criminal, civil and family. It found that every £1 invested in Legal Aid generated social value, and highlighted many positive benefits of investing in Legal Aid.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

The Society's Human Rights and Equality Committee is responsible for overseeing the delivery of the Law Society's Diversity and Equality Action Plan 2022. Since its publication, a range of initiatives have been undertaken. Work was undertaken to refresh the Action Plan, and an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for 2024-28 was launched following consultation with members. The Strategy sets out priority areas of focus across the themes of: Access to the Profession, Building a Successful Career and Culture Respecting Diversity.

The Society marked International Human Rights Day in December 2024 by hosting a Conference as part of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Festival, on the topic of ‘From behind closed doors to online spaces: Confronting gender-based violence’.

LEGAL TECHNOLOGY

The Society’s Law Tech Group considers the challenges and opportunities technology presents for the solicitor profession. The Group has focused on preparing the profession for the future. The Group is also exploring issues around Artificial Intelligence and its impact on rights and the Rule of Law.

The Group has collaborated with stakeholders in the law tech sphere and recently partnered with Law Tech UK to deliver a conference in Belfast which covered emerging technologies. Towards the end of 2024, a survey of solicitors was conducted to better understand the law tech landscape in NI and the findings of this survey will help the Society to target its response to law tech issues.

CLIMATE JUSTICE

The Society’s Climate Justice Group focuses on taking pro-active steps to address climate change issues affecting the solicitor profession and to promote and enhance the role of solicitors in tackling the climate emergency. In January 2024, the Group launched a Sustainability Strategy setting out a roadmap toward a more sustainable future for the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. Work is ongoing to deliver the actions outlined in the Strategy which cover the four key themes of: Sustainable Workplace, Stakeholder Engagement, Training and Development, and Climate Justice.

The Group is currently working on the development of a Sustainability Hub which will provide practical guidance on sustainability, including case

studies, resources for strategic litigation, and a focus on scope four emissions. The Group is also planning to hold several awareness raising days throughout the year aligned with the UN's climate justice calendar, and will be holding a conference later in the year on the role of solicitors in a sustainable future.

ENTRY INTO THE PROFESSION

The Professional Development Department has been leading on a Review of Entry Routes into the Profession, which involved a comprehensive survey of Trainees and training firms, as well as a consultation paper on 'Enhancing Access to the Profession'. Options for reform will be considered by the Society's Council later this year. This work will provide an opportunity to widen access to the profession and support smaller practices who currently face challenges recruiting and retaining talent.

INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The Society continues to have representatives on international bodies such as the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, the International Bar Association and the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe. Work undertaken by these respective organisations has increasingly focused on access to justice, climate change, digitisation, and diversity and inclusion.

REGULATION

The Society continues to regulate the solicitor profession in the public interest. The Lay Observer for Northern Ireland publishes an annual report which commented that the number of complaints against solicitors in Northern Ireland remains low. In her report, the Lay Observer has acknowledged the Society's proactive approach to issues raised and the enhancements made to the complaints process.

The Society is preparing for the commencement of the remaining provisions of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which will establish a new Solicitors Complaints Committee which will operate at arm's length from the Society. The new Committee will have power to impose awards of up to £5000 for loss, distress, and inconvenience.

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