



**Country Report: Northern Ireland**  
**European President's Conference, Vienna**  
**16-18 February 2023**

**CONTEXT**

The Law Society of Northern Ireland (the 'Society') represents and regulates circa. 3,000 practising solicitors working in approximately 460 solicitor firms across the public, private and third sector organisations in Northern Ireland (NI).

Under the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, the Society acts as the regulatory authority governing the education, accounts, discipline, and professional conduct of solicitors to maintain 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 upholding the rule of law.

**CENTENARY YEAR**

2022 was the Centenary year of the Society which allowed celebration of the solicitor profession's contribution to Northern Ireland over the past 100 years and also involved much work to help position of the profession to build for the next century. The theme for the Centenary year was 'Shaping Our Future Together' with a focus on ensuring the profession remains resilient and fit to serve the public for the next 100 years and beyond.

Some of the key events of a packed year included:

- Publication of a Centenary commemorative book celebrating the first 100 years of the Society. This was launched at an event held at Parliament Buildings in Belfast with a copy of the book provided to every solicitor firm in Northern Ireland and to all contributors.
- A Centenary Conference took place in September 2022 bringing together 400 members of the profession to hear from and engage with high-profile speakers from business, academia and the media on the key themes of Climate Justice, Mental Health and Wellbeing, Legal Technology and Media Law.

- The Society's Council met on 12 September 2022, 100 years to the date of the first Council Meeting, and members were presented with a facsimile of the minutes of the inaugural meeting to mark its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

## **POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT & ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

The Society has had a very active year of political engagement, notably in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in May 2022. In advance of these elections, The Society published *The Justice Agenda 2022* which set out ten strategic priorities across the themes of Access to Justice, Post-COVID Recovery and Justice Reform. The 'Justice Agenda' was launched at an event which included discussion and engagement between the profession and the largest Northern Ireland political parties on the key issues facing solicitors today.

In the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland, the Society – often in partnership with the Northern Ireland Bar has continued to engage with local Government Departments, the Northern Ireland Office, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on matters affecting the profession. This has focused on Access to Justice issues and emphasised the vulnerability of legal aid suppliers resulting from the lack of adequate funding for the legal aid system in NI. It was also highlighted that the lack of sufficient funding created unacceptable delays in payments to practitioners for legal aid work.

Effective lobbying throughout the year has resulted in an additional legal aid funding being provided in the jurisdiction first in May 2022 and again towards the end of the year, resulting in a significantly increased budget for the current financial year which was positive news for legal aid practitioners and the communities and clients they serve.

## **POST-COVID RECOVERY AND JUSTICE REFORM**

The operation of the justice system has continued to be impacted by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Work has been undertaken with key stakeholders to ensure that Court business levels return to pre-lockdown levels. The Deputy Chief Executive represents the Society on the Department of Justice's Recovering the Justice System Working Group and provides regular updates.

The Society continues to engage with the Department of Justice (DoJ), Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and other stakeholders on digital transformation and other law and justice reform matters.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS AND LEGACY ISSUES**

The Human Rights and Equality Group (HREG) rejected the UK Government's Bill of Rights Bill which seeks to reform human rights law in the UK. The HREG highlighted their concerns on the draft legislation, including the impact it would have on the rule of

law in NI. It also set out its view that the proposed legislation diminishes human rights and weakens the ability for citizens to hold the state accountable for breaching human rights. The HREG continues to monitor progress on the Bill and to raise its concerns about this retrograde step for human rights protections in NI and across the UK.

The Society raised concerns regarding the contents of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill. The Society published a public statement and wrote to the Joint Committee on Human Rights to formally lodge concerns around the proposals non-compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights. The Society continues to monitor the draft legislation's passage through the House of Lords and has reiterated its request that the Government address concerns raised.

The Society marked International Human Rights Day in December 2022 by hosting a special screening of documentary 'Before the Flood', followed by a panel discussion on issues around climate justice and human rights matters.

## **DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY**

The Society launched its first ever Diversity and Equality Report in September 2022, which can be accessed [here](#). The report contains findings from a survey which was conducted in late 2021, across various categories including age, gender and associated issues, socio-economic background etc. It also contained a dedicated Action Plan to improve diversity and equality in the solicitor profession in NI. The actions are based across the following key themes: outreach/engagement, overcoming financial barriers, equality and diversity resources, and external equality accreditation. Work is underway to achieve the actions set out, and actions achieved so far include, for example, the revitalisation of the Society's Mentoring Programme, and the publication of a Diversity and Equality Toolkit.

## **LEGAL SECTOR REPORT**

The Society engaged Hook Tangaza, a specialist legal sector consultancy, to lead a focused study into the solicitor profession in NI. A central part of the research was a detailed survey of member firms. The research has identified the trends, opportunities and challenges facing the solicitor profession, and highlighted the economic importance of the legal sector to the NI economy. Its findings will shape the Society's strategic plans to support members in the coming years. The Society published a summary report of the research, which can be accessed [here](#).

## **OTHER EMERGING ISSUES - LEGAL TECHNOLOGY AND CLIMATE JUSTICE**

The Society's Law Tech Group aims to consider and address impacts, challenges and opportunities for the solicitor profession arising from technological developments. This year, the Group has prioritised the development of Law Tech CPD and online resources for members.

The Society's Climate Justice Group aims to take proactive steps to address climate change issues affecting the solicitor profession in NI and to promote and enhance the role of solicitors in tackling the climate emergency. In September 2022, the Society published its 'Climate Change Resolution', outlining the role that the Society and its members can play in addressing the climate crisis. The Resolution can be accessed [here](#). The Society is also currently developing a Sustainability Strategy in conjunction with KPMG.

## **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.

The Society was publicly recognised by the International Bar Association as one of the first Law Societies to contribute financially to the work being done on the Ukraine crisis.

In May 2022, the Law Society Mediation Service (LSMS) partnered with the Commonwealth Lawyers Association to deliver a Mediation Conference, which attracted delegates from around the globe as well as local practitioners. The Society won the best 'Business and Professional Services Event' category at the Belfast Ambassador Awards, recognising the success of this event.

LSMS launched a new website as a 'one stop shop' to enable easy access to local mediator's profiles, and to provide information about mediation and how to become an LSMS mediator.

## **REGULATION**

The Society continues to effectively regulate the solicitor profession in the public interest. Various external inspections took place over the past year, and the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner, Office for Professional Body AML Supervision and the Insolvency Service of Northern Ireland have all delivered positive feedback over this period.

In July 2022, the Society launched a new Professional Conduct Complaint section on its website to support those wishing to raise a complaint about the professional conduct of a solicitor or a firm of solicitors.

January 2023

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