



Country Report: Northern Ireland
European Presidents' Conference, Vienna
2024

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, 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.

STATE OF THE LEGAL SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Throughout 2023, the Law Society's focus has been on supporting the interests of a solicitor profession which is constantly diversifying and evolving. During the Society's Centenary year in 2022, one key activity undertaken was a comprehensive review of the state of the legal sector in Northern Ireland. This review, whilst identifying challenges faced by the profession and areas for the Law Society to assist the profession with, also highlighted that Northern Ireland's legal economy has great growth potential. This has resulted in the Society developing a Transformation Programme, led by the Society's Council, which focuses on the four pillars of responsibility – Education, Regulation, Representation and Member Services.

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

A Sustainable Practices Working Group was established under the Society's Future of the Profession Committee to bring forward proposals for support measures that the Society could provide to small and medium general practices to mitigate the challenges identified and improve sustainability.

A key recommendation arising from this Group is the creation of a new online Business Hub for Members, which will provide vital and practical resources and support for firms. The Group is also considering what actions the Society can take on recruitment and retention issues, succession planning and the costs of compliance on firms.

In addition, the Society has partnered with the Institute of Legal Finance and Management to provide a professionally accredited qualification path for legal bookkeepers and other legal finance practitioners.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT & ACCESS TO JUSTICE

In the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland, the Society has continued to engage with Government Departments, the Northern Ireland Office, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on matters affecting the profession.

The Society has refreshed its 'Justice Agenda' in anticipation of a potential restoration of the NI Assembly and Executive. The Agenda features 10 priority actions across three themes of Access to Justice, Upholding the Rule of Law, and Justice Reform, and provides a roadmap to reform of Northern Ireland's justice system.

The Society has also partnered with the Bar of NI to establish an All-Party Group on Access to Justice, with the aim of informing elected representatives across the political spectrum on the importance of legal aid and access to justice.

LEGAL AID

The Society has strongly pressed for additional funding to be put in place as a matter of urgency to ensure the timely payment of professional fees. This resulted in a baseline budget of £95m for this year and an additional £10.9 million was secured in November 2023.

The Society have partnered with an independent research consultancy to carry out a study into the social value of legal aid in Northern Ireland.

A Fundamental Review of Criminal Legal aid is currently underway in Northern Ireland in which the Society is actively involved in to ensure the Legal Aid system is sustainable, fit for purpose and delivers access to justice.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND LEGACY ISSUES

The Society continues to monitor policy and legislative developments. A major focus this year has been on the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act, the Illegal Migration Act, and the proposed Bill of Rights Bill. The Society made several public statements and engaged with the UK Government highlighting its concerns around the proposals contained within these pieces of legislation during their parliamentary passage.

The Society marked International Human Rights Week in December 2023 by hosting a Tenx9 storytelling event, in conjunction with Public Interest Litigation Support Northern Ireland (PILS) Project, on the theme of "Dignity, Freedom, and Justice for All".

DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY

The Society's Human Rights and Equality Committee have been overseeing the delivery of the Society's Diversity and Equality Action Plan 2022, which were targeted at two main objectives: improving the experience of women in the solicitor profession and improving access to the profession for minorities. Progress continues to be made with the implementation of several actions, including:

- Holding a series of roundtable workshops and conducting a survey in relation to women who have left private practice and/or the solicitor profession.
- Launching a refreshed Mentoring Programme.
- Introducing a 'Centenary Bursary' to support trainees entering the profession.
- Obtaining the Diversity Mark Accreditation.

Work is underway to refresh the Action Plan, including the development of a longer-term Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Strategy.

LEGAL TECHNOLOGY

The Society's Law Tech Group aims to consider and address impacts, challenges and opportunities for the solicitor profession arising from technological developments.

The Group organised several Law Tech CPD events for members throughout the year, including an event on Technology in the Courts which covered topics such as e-discovery and e-bundling. The Group also hosted a LawTech Showcase event in conjunction with LawTech UK, a UK Government-funded body charged with connecting and growing the UK LawTech industry.

CLIMATE JUSTICE

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.

To build upon the Climate Resolution adopted in September 2022, the Group developed a Sustainability Strategy. The Strategy provides a roadmap for the Society in creating a sustainable workplace, and in leading the profession in a fast-developing area of law and business. The Strategy is focused across four main themes: Sustainable Workplace, Stakeholder Engagement, Training and Development, and Climate Justice. Work has commenced on delivering the actions contained within the Strategy, including the launch of a Climate Justice CPD series, providing direct training and support for members on key legislation and emerging caselaw in this area.

INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The Society continues to have representation 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 Society appointed an independent consultant to review the system for dealing with professional conduct complaints and other disciplinary matters involving solicitors and to make recommendations for improvement. An Improvement Plan is being developed in response to the Review recommendations.

The Lay Observer for Northern Ireland's 2021/2022 Report highlighted that the Society displays a positive trend in how it addresses complaints, and that complaints to the Society remain low.

January 2024

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