

Event:

**European President's Conference 2026**  
**Country Report: Northern Ireland**

## **Background**

The Law Society of Northern Ireland (the 'Society') represents and regulates around 3,000 practising solicitors, working in approximately 430 firms and across public, private and third-sector organisations in Northern Ireland.

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

The Society works in the public interest to influence law reform, defend access to justice and promote the rule of law at home and internationally

## **Political Engagement and Justice Reform**

The Society, alongside the Bar of Northern Ireland, continued to support the All-Party Group on Access to Justice, which has provided useful briefings to Members of the Legislative Assembly on topics such as Legal Aid reform, safer communities, court broadcasting, and children's rights.

A "Legal Townhall" initiative was commenced, bringing local solicitors and elected representatives together to discuss access to justice in local constituencies, with the first event in Fermanagh leading directly to an Assembly Adjournment Debate on Access to Justice in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

The Society hosted a high-profile event in the Stormont Senate Chamber to mark the opening for signature of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer and to promote the Society's Pledge to Uphold the Rule of Law, signed by several justice sector leaders and politicians.

## **Legal Aid and Access to Justice**

Following reviews of Legal Aid in Northern Ireland, a 16% interim increase in legal aid fees came into effect in January 2026 (backdated to December 2024). The Society also negotiated and secured further uplifts for specific areas such as PACE, parole hearings and immigration and asylum, along with backdating arrangements. A series of other projects are ongoing on topics such as refresher fees and the interim payment of disbursements and costs.

Effective lobbying by the Society helped secure the Legal Services Agency's highest ever opening legal aid budget of £119.5 million for 2024/25.

As a result of the Society and Bar's Joint Application for Leave to apply for Judicial Review in relation to the prompt payment of legal aid fees, a judgement was obtained in the High Court declaring a statutory duty on the LSA to deliver payments within a reasonable period of time. The Department has subsequently launched an appeal in the case, with matters ongoing.

## **Solicitor Safety**

A new Solicitor Safety Group was established to respond to harassment, stalking and intimidation directed towards solicitors in the course of their work. The Group has been involved in lobbying for policy and legislative change and engagement with senior stakeholders. A new Liaison Group was also established with representatives across the justice sector to ensure a coordinated approach to issues.

## **Human Rights and Equality**

The Human Rights and Equality Committee continued to oversee delivery of the Society's Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Strategy 2024–28. Some notable progress during the year related to the launch of a Women's Network and the retention of the Diversity Mark Accreditation.

2025 marked 25 years of the Human Rights Act in Northern Ireland, and an event was organised to reflect on its significance.

## **Legal Technology and Innovation**

Through the Future of the Profession Committee and its Law Tech Group, the Society strengthened its work on legal technology, AI and innovation. In collaboration with Baskerville Drummond and LawtechUK, the Group ran surveys of small and micro firms (under 50 staff) and the wider profession to map IT and law tech usage and co-hosted a major law tech conference in Belfast showcasing innovation in justice and practice.

Sub-groups on cybersecurity, data protection and emerging technologies were established in July 2025 to develop targeted resources, CPD and awareness campaigns. Enhanced partnerships were developed with the NI Cyber Security Centre, PSNI and insurance providers, including fully funded Cyber Essentials training for conveyancing firms and new risk management and cyber-insurance offerings.

## **Climate Justice and Sustainability**

The Climate Justice Group continued to implement the Society's Sustainability Strategy. The Group partnered with CarbonFit to develop a clear and credible roadmap towards net-zero emissions, which subsequently led to a significant reduction in the Society's electricity and gas costs and emissions.

The Group delivered a new CPD offering with Business in the Community to enhance carbon literacy across the profession and organised an event with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Minister discussing climate justice and the future of sustainability from a legislator's perspective, underscoring the Society's convening role in this area.

## **Entry into the Profession and Education**

Work continued to modernise and enhance access to the solicitor profession. An Enhancing Access to the Profession Consultation was published, which engaged a number of stakeholders to gather views on how to make qualification pathways more flexible, accessible and sustainable. Respondents endorsed reform and the exploration of new routes such as a Solicitor Modern Apprenticeship Scheme, part-time and hybrid qualification routes, and a Returners Programme.

155 newly qualified solicitors were admitted to the Roll of Solicitors in 2025 and a record 169 trainees were registered for the 2025 intake.

The Centenary Bursary Scheme (now in its third year) awarded further bursaries to support candidates with fees for the Diploma in Professional Legal Studies, playing a vital role in widening access to the profession.

### **International Engagement**

The Society maintained a strong international presence through active participation in the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE), Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA) and International Bar Association (IBA).

In October 2025 Belfast hosted the International Institute of Law Association Chief Executives (IILACE) Annual Conference for the first time in 27 years.

Northern Ireland's leaders, including the Lady Chief Justice, Attorney General, Chief Executive and President of the Society, contributed to the 2025 Commonwealth Law Conference in Malta, sharing experience on rule of law, mediation, constitutional issues and professional independence.

### **Regulation and Professional Standards**

The Society continued to regulate the profession in the public interest. The Lay Observer noted in their annual report that the number of complaints against solicitors in Northern Ireland remained low in comparison to other UK jurisdictions.

The Society prepared for the full commencement of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, including the establishment of a new arm's-length Solicitors Complaints Committee.

### **February 2026**