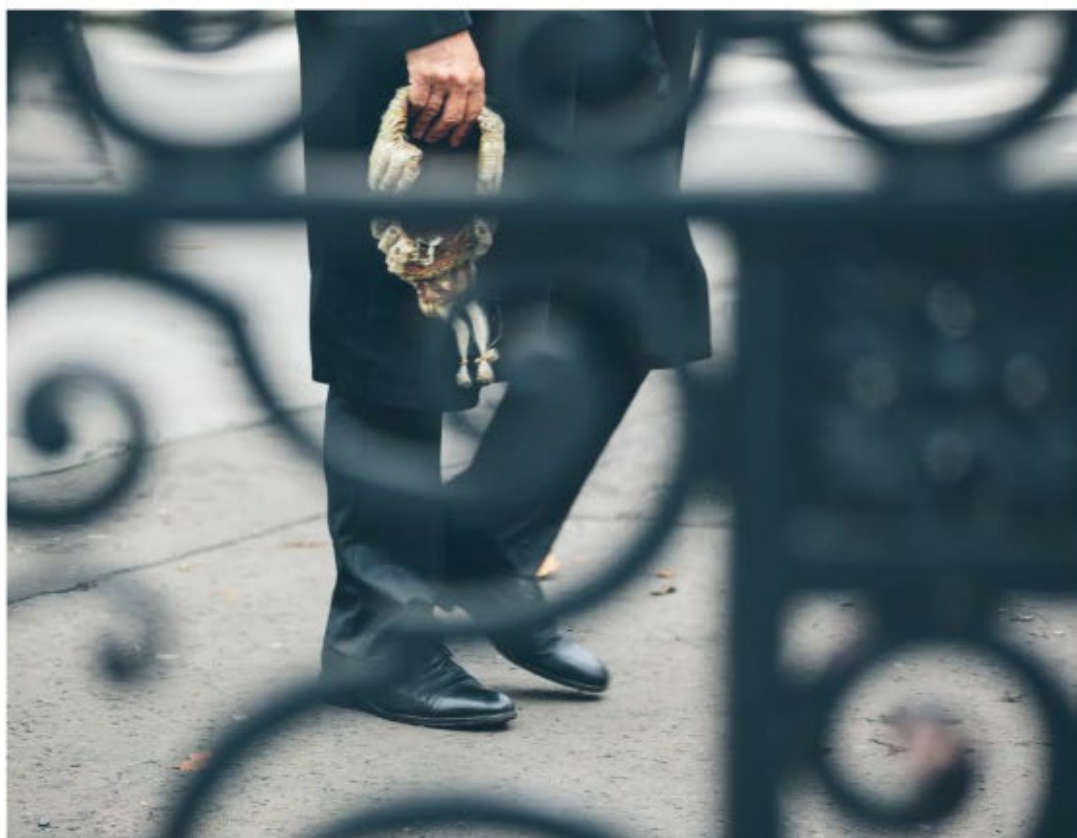


THE BAR *of*
NORTHERN
IRELAND

Chair Of Executive Council & Bar Council

ANNUAL REPORT



Chair's Introduction

I am delighted to present this Annual Report to the membership of the Bar of Northern Ireland.

This Report covers the 12 months since our previous AGM.

Undoubtedly the past year has been a challenging one. Profound issues relating to Legal Aid, Access to Justice and the viability of the profession have been at the forefront of the Bar Council's work. The action taken by our colleagues in the Criminal Bar Association to withdraw services from all Crown Court cases was not taken lightly. Indeed, it was an option of last resort, which came after an extended period of patient forbearance amidst a steadily worsening crisis. The Bar Council continues to call on the Department to take the urgent and pragmatic action required to resolve this situation and enable our members to get back to work.

The Bar Council has also remained steadfast in challenging the Department more broadly on its proposed reforms to Legal Aid, especially in relation to Taxation Reform. Representing the profession by raising these issues and influencing policy that affects the viability of the profession has been a key priority throughout 2025.

Despite these challenges it has been very rewarding to have taken some positive action throughout the past year to sustain and enhance diversity, inclusion, and excellence in our profession by means of granting the first ever Bar of NI Scholarships which will assist deserving candidates to meet the costs of their IPLS studies. These scholarships add to the existing support the Bar is giving to the QUB Brighter Futures programme and of course the support available from the Bar Library to new entrants to the profession.

Our Charity Committee reached new heights, raising £88,254.21 for Dementia NI. My thanks go to Laura King, Chair of the Charity Committee, and all members who supported the Committee's fundraising efforts.

2025 also saw some exciting work take place within our Member Services Committee, under the direction of our Vice Chair Denise Kiley KC. The Committee has been developing an ever expanding and improving range of Library services that support members in running their practices amidst at a time of change. They have also looked at exciting potential enhancements to the Bar Library building and have designed a series of pilots relating to the adoption of AI within the Library. These projects will run throughout 2026.

The Bar Council also oversaw the introduction of a wholly new regulatory regime for the Bar in the form of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act which took legislative effect from September 2025. Although the operation of the Act is still in its relative infancy, a lot of detailed preparatory work had to take place on behalf of the Bar and we now have a very clear and proportionate set of procedures to implement this new legislation alongside our continuing self-regulation of conduct complaints.

On behalf of the profession as a whole I was delighted to welcome a new set of entrants to the profession over the course of the past year. I wish you all well in your career within this profession which continues to offer great opportunities to those who commit to it. The Bar was also delighted to congratulate Mr Justice Paul McLaughlin KC on his elevation to the Bench after a very successful career at the Bar.

As ever, an Annual Report of this nature, can inevitably only ever provide a summary and a snapshot of the vast amount of work that is undertaken by the many members who serve on Committees, Associations and working groups on behalf of the profession.

I therefore want to pay tribute to all of those barristers, whether they are specifically mentioned in this report or not, who have given their time and skill over the year on behalf of their fellow colleagues.

Despite the many proud achievements that are celebrated in this report, the year was however marked by the sad event of the passing of Ronnie Bentley KC. I want to conclude by remembering him and all other current and former members of the Bar that passed away over the past year.

We fondly remember their contribution to the profession and keep them within our thoughts.

Donal Lunny KC, Chair of the Executive Council and Bar Council





The work of the Executive Council and Bar Council

In exercising the functions, duties and powers contained within its Constitution and Byelaws, the Bar Council performs a number of key roles including:

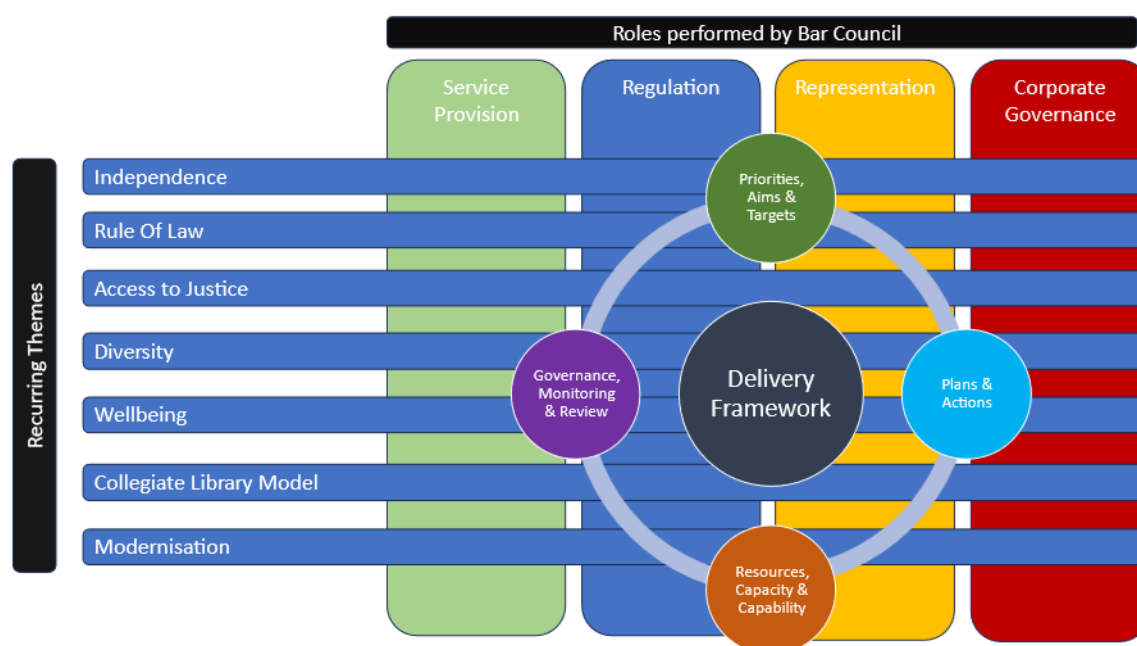
- **Service Provider-** The Bar Council's role as a service provider involves ensuring that the Bar Library offers a range of bespoke physical and online services to members at an attractive price, helping them to run their practices in an efficient manner, reducing administrative burdens and other distractions so that practitioners are supported in giving priority to their practices. This is delivered with the assistance and oversight of the Member Services (Library) Committee and involves directly designed and delivered in-house services alongside some services which we procure competitively from external providers, leveraging the ability to pool the buying power of barristers together so that services are procured at favourable rates.
- **Regulating the Profession** – Our Bar is one of very few legal bodies that have retained an element of self-regulation. It follows that the approach taken to regulation is of critical strategic importance to the Bar. The extent to which the Bar can remain independent and in control of the profession depends on the effectiveness with which regulation is performed. This is a precious prize which cannot be taken for granted or neglected. The Bar Council discharges many of its ongoing regulatory functions through the Bar Council Office. The regulatory role of the Bar Council also requires it to devise a Code of Conduct and determine the professional standards to be followed in this jurisdiction. The public expect to see that we take conduct seriously, uphold standards in an effective manner and have transparent and timely complaints mechanisms. To observe appropriate separation of powers the Bar Council also delegates the responsibility for professional conduct and discipline to the Professional Conduct Committee.
- **Representing the Profession** –The Bar Council engages with members of the profession, understanding the key issues that they face, responding to their concerns and advocating effectively on their collective behalf. It does so by means of internal member engagement and communication, and also through external engagement where the Bar Council will interact with a very wide range of external parties in an effort to ensure that their policies and practices are informed and influenced by the views and values of the Bar. This requires the Bar to maintain positive relationships with many others. Relationships with stakeholders require long term investment and management. It also requires the Bar Council to be well informed of the views and priorities of both our members and other stakeholders and to have influential and impactful policy positions that can be communicated clearly and effectively. The Bar Council is assisted in this regard by the various Bar Associations.
- **Corporate Governance** – The Bar Council performs a range of important corporate governance functions. It is the steward and custodian of the Bar's reputation, assets and staff. The Constitution requires the Bar Council to perform various duties regarding Annual General Meetings and other procedural matters which are governed by byelaws and rules. This requires the members of the Bar Council to consciously perform a different role from that of their status as members of the Bar Library. Bar Council members are required to:
 - Adhere to the Nolan Principles.
 - Observe and manage any potential conflicts of interest
 - Maintain confidentiality and data security of any material placed in their possession.

In performing these various roles, the Bar Council involves a number of recurring themes.

It is very important that the Bar Council adopts a clear position on these themes, whilst also being able to react to unforeseen issues. It is crucial that the Bar Council delivers outcomes that are seen as relevant and impactful in the eyes of the membership.

The Bar Council therefore needs to have a Delivery Framework that enables it to have a meaningful and direct impact. This requires, not just the agility to react to evolving situations, but also a structured set of:

- Agreed priorities and plans.
- Resources (budgets, staff, technology, building) to enact these plans.
- Effective governance and decision-making procedures.
- The ability to identify risks and opportunities and address them before it is too late.

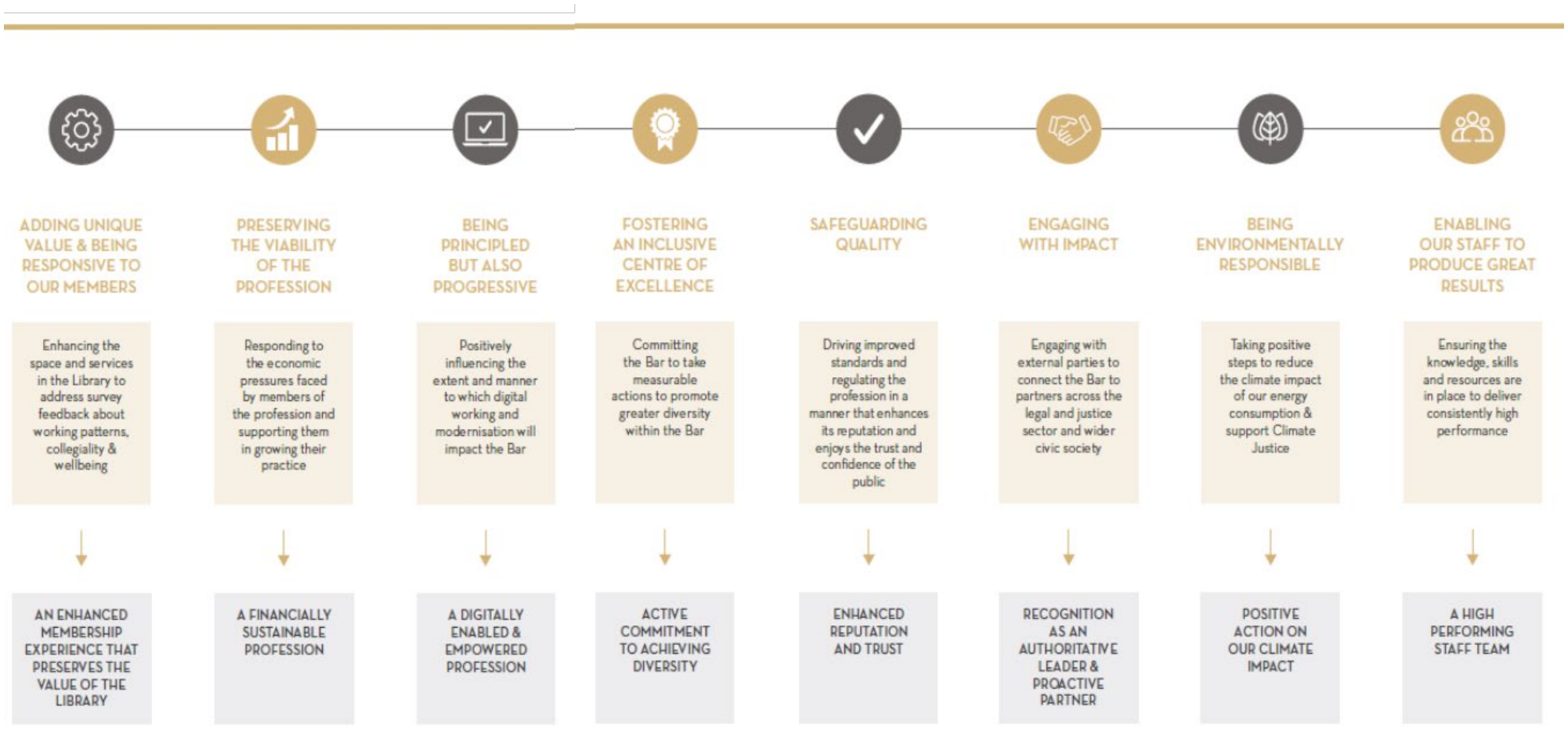


At the start of 2023, after having carefully considered a number of key strategic issues facing the profession, the Bar Council approved a new Corporate Plan.

This Corporate Plan set out eight key priority areas which the Bar Council agreed to focus upon whilst always also remaining responsive to emerging and new opportunities and issues. The Corporate Plan also articulated a range of outcomes that the Bar Council resolved to make progress towards between 2023 and 2025.

These are summarised below.

This Report therefore presents an update against a selection of these Strategic Priorities and describes some of the progress that has been made towards achieving the target outcomes over the course of 2025.



Strategic Priority: Preserving The Viability of The Profession

Legal Aid

Concerns around Legal Aid remained a major issue throughout the whole of 2025. The Bar Council engaged extensively in a sustained campaign throughout the year to require the Department of Justice (DoJ) to address the crisis within the Legal Aid system in Northern Ireland.

Throughout 2025 the Bar Council engaged extensively with the Minister, Permanent Secretary, Justice Committee, individual MLAs and the media to advocate on behalf of members and the need for action to be taken to avert a growing crisis within the Legal Aid sector

Legal Aid Reform

On 2nd December 2024, the Justice Minister announced plans¹ to, “reset the justice system” having conducted a Foundational Review of Civil Legal Aid; the Fundamental Review of Criminal Legal Aid conducted by Judge Burgess and a, “priority setting exercise for victims of domestic abuse” that the Minister jointly commissioned with the Commissioner designate for Victims of Crime.

As part of her announcement, the Minister proposed to progress reform in five key areas - Improving Access to Justice; Ensuring Appropriate Quality Services; Ensuring Value; Managing Public Funds; and Oversight.

When commenting on Ensuring Value, she said: *“I will be initiating a root and branch review of remuneration to examine what work we are asking practitioners to undertake, and the added value and the fees that should attach. We’ve already made good progress through the work undertaken by Judge Burgess and evidence from other sources, but I plan to establish a reference group to consider how we can further enhance the evidence base going forward.*

“I am also persuaded there is a case for a more immediate increase to fees and will be taking the necessary steps to introduce an uplift at pace. I am further persuaded that uplift should apply across both criminal and civil and family cases. Much has been said recently about the need to increase the fees payable for criminal legal aid, but there is also a case for increasing fees for advice and representation in civil and family cases.”

Consultation and Ministerial Update

The Department issued two consultations relating to this Reform programme.

1. A consultation on proposals relating to revised remuneration rates (criminal legally-aid work, civil and family legal services) ran between 30 January and 27 March 2025.
2. A consultation on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme Delivery Plan ran between 30 January and 27 March 2025.

In the course of the consultation period, and against a backdrop of direct engagement on aspects of the proposed Delivery Plan (relating to the “Tiernan” position; the appointment of an Independent

¹ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/ministerial-statement-long-announces-plans-reset-justice-system>

Chair of the Working Party; backdating of increases), the Minister gave an oral update² to the Assembly in March 2025.

She confirmed that she had made some changes to the original Delivery Plan. She was also highly critical of the CBA's decision in late 2024 to commence a withdrawal of services and devoted a significant element of her update expressing views on that front.

In relation to comments made about remuneration and timing, she advised the Assembly that *"I am pleased to report we are on track to introduce a significant 16% uplift in civil, family and criminal legal aid fees in May." [...] "There are a few areas where Judge Burgess has acknowledged further evidence is required to implement changes and so I have appointed him to Chair a working group to that end. [...] "Subject to emergent evidence and Departmental analysis, the Terms of Reference for the Group anticipate that further fee changes might be effected alongside the sixteen percent uplift in May."*

A Post Consultation Report³ relating to the Remuneration consultation was issued in June 2025. This confirmed that a general uplift of 16% will apply to most legal aid fees across criminal, civil and family legal services and that, subject to economic appraisal and approval, the Department will bring forward draft legislation to give effect to these finalised policy proposals as soon as possible.

It also stated that the Department is currently considering a number of aspects of wider civil legal aid policy and intends to establish a Civil Legal Aid Working Group to consider remuneration in due course.

A Post Consultation report has yet to be issued on the consultation relating to the Delivery Plan.

CBA Industrial Action

Faced with mounting frustrations about the lack of any increase in fees since 2005 and the lack of any statutory review, the CBA faced sustained calls from its members over recent years for a withdrawal of services. Action was considered but averted during the period of the Independent Review of Criminal Legal Aid led by Judge Burgess. The Bar engaged extensively in the review. An abundance of evidence on the issues described above was presented to and tested by His Honour Judge Burgess.

However, when the DoJ did not share any element of the Burgess Report when it was first made available to the Department in August 2024, the pressure for action in the form of a withdrawal of services grew again.

On 18th October 2024 the CBA announced that it would hold a full-scale day of action on 4th November 2024, and, in addition, they would refuse to take instructions in new Category A Crown Court cases from that date.

² <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/ministerial-statement-enabling-access-justice-programme-update>

³ <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/post-consultation-report-proposals-relating-revised-remuneration-rates-criminal-legally-aid-work-civil-and-family-legal-services>

The Burgess Review was published in December 2024, alongside the Minister's announcement on 2nd December about the new Legal Aid reform programme.

On 11th December 2024 the CBA voted to extend their existing withdrawal of services. This action was taken in response to the Minister's Legal Aid proposals and original Delivery Plan. The Bar commented at the time that the proposals did not reflect the intention or urgency of the full recommendations in the Burgess Review.

In a statement, the Chair of the Bar Council noted, *"The Department of Justice has received independent advice on actions that would help to address the unsustainable crisis in the Crown Court. It has chosen instead to select proposed reforms which will exacerbate these intolerable pressures."*

The vote to extend the withdrawal of services meant that from 6th to 31st January 2025, the CBA withdrew from appearing in all legally aided Crown Court cases in addition to maintaining their earlier action.

The Department was warned publicly and privately that a response to the issues highlighted by the Bar would be needed if an extension of this action were to be averted. But, in the absence of any progress, at the end of January, the CBA voted to extend this action until the end of February and to broaden the scope of the action to include multi-complainant Category D cases.

As described above, the Department did latterly make some changes to its original plans, amending aspects of the Delivery Plan relating to the Tiernan judgment, the appointment of an Independent Chair (Judge Burgess) of a Working Party and the backdating of the 16% .

Accordingly from 1st March 2025, the January and February escalation ceased, and the CBA returned to dealing with cases listed before the Crown Court, whilst maintaining their refusal to accept instructions in defined classes of new Crown Court cases – namely Category A, retrials, and multi-complainant Category D cases.

A proposal was made by the CBA in April 2025 that, in return for a modest interim increase in Refresher fees, in the form of a Pilot (as this was a faster route than pursuing a legislative change) the withdrawal of services could be reconsidered. A second Pilot to address unpaid written work was proposed shortly thereafter.

Over the course of the Burgess Working Party, the Bar made multiple submissions concerning the areas that, with reference to existing and independent empirical data, have fallen behind levels that represented fair remuneration and therefore required urgent attention alongside the Working Party.

Along the way, the Bar moderated its asks, not seeking full immediate parity with directly relevant comparators but, instead, indicating outcomes that would provide the urgently needed stability that the system requires, on an interim basis, whilst working towards justifiable longer-term outcomes.

It has been a consistent feature of these submissions that, although welcome, an interim increase of 16% applied to certain fees, would not of itself ever be sufficient to address the accumulated decline that had taken place across multiple areas of remuneration.

A specific area that the Bar raised with the Working Party was in relation to the Magistrates Court. The Bar submitted detailed papers seeking to preserve the current system of certification within the Magistrates Court. Further engagement remains to take place. This therefore continues to be an area of critical importance, and the Bar must continue to ensure that progress is made but that in doing so, the Bar's position is protected.

Over the months of October 2025 and November 2025 in particular the Bar supplied a range of requests and proposals to the Department relating to the Crown Court but with very limited progress being achieved.

A potential immediate withdrawal of services was avoided in early November and new CBA Committee was elected.

The new CBA committee supplied a paper which was sent to the Department on 25th November which specified various asks and then, crucially, met twice with the Department and submitted further proposals and queries about the areas in which, if progress could be made, would avert further action.

The CBA had highlighted that, during the time taken to engage on these issues in Northern Ireland, greater and more frequent increases for the same or similar work have already been applied by the State in other areas of publicly funded work in both this jurisdiction (in areas other than Legal Aid) and in Great Britain.

However, despite extensive engagement with the Department over the course of 2025, by the start of December, the 16% uplift had still to be implemented and progress had stalled in relation to the Pilots and other issues that the CBA had been attempting to resolve.

A final report of the Burgess Working party was produced on 8th December 2025 which described a “roadmap” that would see further research and evidence gathering take place. The report confirmed that the Department had given agreement in principle for the hourly rate for the Bar to be informed by the recently reviewed Government Legal Services Panel Rates. However the report did not provide a guarantee of when any such changes would apply and nor did it commit to any further increases in the near future.

Following a meeting of members of the Criminal Bar Association (CBA) on 11th December, a vote was taken by criminal barristers to extend their current withdrawal of services to involve the full withdrawal from all current Crown Court cases, commencing on 5th January 2026. Of the 193 criminal barristers who voted, 89% supported the full withdrawal. That action remains ongoing.

In addition to advocating on behalf of defence counsel, the CBA has also been engaging with the PPS to seek increases to prosecutor fees as well. The CBA hopes to be able to confirm some positive changes within the coming weeks.

The promised 16% uplift was eventually introduced on 7th January 2026 and has been applied to both criminal and family fees and has been backdated to Certificates granted after 1st December 2024.

GLSNI Fees

In contrast to the protracted difficulties encountered in relation to Legal Aid, the Chair of the Bar Council wrote to both the Departmental Solicitor and Crown Solicitor to ask if GLSNI had plans to follow the 25% fee increase that had been applied by the Attorney General’s Panel of Counsel across England and Wales. They were able to confirm that this was indeed their intention and the fee increases came in to swift effect a matter of weeks later without the need for any further evidence or advocacy from the Bar Council. The Bar Council has highlighted this positive experience when discussing Legal Aid challenges with the Department of Justice.

Justice Bill and Taxation Reform

In the Department's summary report for the 'Foundational Review of Civil Legal Service' they identified 'Taxation Strategy' as Pillar 4 of a five-pillar programme aimed at reforming Legal Aid.

Along with the Minister's announcement on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme, the Department published a 'Taxation Reform and Extradition' Summary Report. In this report, they outlined that the aim of taxation reform would be to, "bring the expenditure currently assessed by the Taxing Master under the purview of the Accounting Officer, so that it is subject to the same audit and accountability mechanisms as other legal aid expenditure."

In this paper, the Department noted that they carried out a file review of 106 taxed bills of cost, spanning all 15 'primary nature' types. They stated that during this review *"it became apparent that given the breadth of the case types, volumes and associated expenditure, a phased approach to reform would be prudent, beginning with the expedition of proposals in relation to remuneration of High Court Bail applications, whilst evidence gathering continued in relation to other primary nature types"*.

In the first iteration of the Enabling Access to Justice Delivery Plan, the Department therefore, had planned a 'phased approach' to taxation:

- Issue proposals to reform taxation of legal aid costs for High Court bail applications in March 2025, and introduce legislation for these new arrangements in March 2026.
- Issue proposals to reform taxation of legal aid remuneration for Criminal Court of Appeal cases in December 2025 and introduce legislation for these new arrangements in March 2027.
- Issue proposals to reform taxation of legal aid remuneration for Judicial Review applications in March 2026, and introduce legislation in December 2026.

Justice Bill

Clause 28 of the Justice Bill currently before the Justice Committee outlines proposed changes to the taxation of legal aid costs and inserts Clause 59A into the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978. The aim of this appears to be to restrict the role of the court via the Taxing Master in determining payment for legal aid work where the basis of payment is set out in a remuneration order made under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland).

It was envisioned that this change would support the future introduction of alternative methods of determining the remuneration payable in relevant legal aid cases.

Stated Evidence Base for Taxation Reform

The Department's stated evidence base for reforming the process of taxation of legal aid costs is as follows:

- The Public Accounts Committee published a report on managing legal aid in 2016. This recommended that the Department conduct a review of how expenditure, currently adjudicated upon by the Taxing Master, could be "properly brought under the purview of the Accounting

Officer”.⁴ In 2016, the NIAO also discussed the role of the Taxing Master and made similar recommendations.

- The Department launched a consultation exercise on taxation in 2022. They received two responses; one from the Law Society NI who noted that the Taxing Master was a “suitable mechanism that should not be changed”, and one from an individual member of the public who agreed with their proposals. The Department appear to acknowledge that substantial further consultation regarding taxation reform is still required.⁵
- In the Department’s Enabling Access to Justice ‘Taxation Reform and Extradition’ Summary Report, they quote ‘the most recent data on taxed legal aid expenditure’. They quote that in 2020/21, civil taxed expenditure accounted for 35% of overall civil legal aid expenditure, and in 2023/24 that figure was 59.5%. They also note that in terms of total taxed civil expenditure, the amount paid between 2015/16 and 2018/19 was consistently in the region of £20m per annum, and this increased to £37.7m in 2023/24. The Department also noted that the average cost per taxed civil bill has gone from £9,700 in 2015/16 to £21,800 in 2023/24.

Motivation for Reform

- The Department previously noted that the key objective of taxation reform was, “to preclude the High Court and Court of Appeal from granting orders for taxation of legal aid costs where the Department has the necessary legislation and administration in place to determine payment...”⁶
- The Department also cited concerns with the independence of the Taxing Master, which is therefore, “not accountable to the Departmental Accounting Officer”. They went on to state that the “separation between the Department and judiciary has also caused issues when attempting to assess the level of official error attributed to the legal aid fund”.⁷
- A further issue raised by the Department is that there is “often little predictability” over the assessments of legal fees from a Departmental perspective. They have argued that the future taxation reforms will, “provide the Department with the opportunity to introduce a degree of predictability and establish a line of accountability.” This was also noted in the 2016 PAC paper which noted, “there is [a] need for improved transparency and accountability”.
- Finally, the PAC noted their alarm at the “extent to which legal representatives have had their claims reduced” by the Taxing Master. They submitted that this represents an unacceptable level of claims that are disproportionate or not reasonably incurred.⁸
- In the Department’s Enabling Access to Justice ‘Taxation Reform and Extradition’ Summary Report, they noted that the aim of taxation reform is to, “bring the expenditure currently assessed by the Taxing Master under the purview of the Accounting Officer” so it has the same “audit and accountability mechanisms as other legal aid expenditure”.

The Bar of Northern Ireland’s Response: Committee appearances and written papers

⁴ [report-on-managing-legal-aid.pdf](#) – see recommendation 3 on pg 7.

⁵ See para 33 of the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum of 17.9.24 submitted with the Justice Bill.

⁶ [Post consultation report on taxation and statutory charge.pdf](#)

⁷ Ibid, para 5.5.

⁸ (n 2)

In providing evidence to the Committee of Justice, [the Bar submitted a written paper](#), and [gave oral evidence](#). The following is a summary of the key points raised by the Bar:

- 1. A disjointed and incoherent approach to reform:** The Department is undertaking a Legal Aid reform programme simultaneously to the Justice Bill. The Bar noted that it was difficult to reconcile why the Justice Bill would propose taxation reform when the Department's own review of taxation was still at an early stage.
- 2. Independence of the Taxing Master:** We noted that the Taxing Master is an independent Judicial Office Holder and should operate without inappropriate or unwarranted interference. Further, we noted that the Taxing Master is already legally bound to protect the Legal Aid fund. The Bar also emphasised that similar concerns arose in England and Wales when they tried to transfer responsibility from the HMCTS to the LAA solely assessing civil Legal Aid costs above £2,500. In response, stakeholders in England & Wales stated that the Department/LAA reviewing costs, as the paying party, meant that they may be incentivised to assess bills at a lower amount than the respondents.
- 3. Legal Aid Budget Predictability and Accountability:** The Bar noted that it was clear that the Department's motivation behind taxation reform is aimed at achieving predictability over Legal Aid expenditure. We reinforced that Legal Aid is a demand-led service, not supplied induced, and attempts to force fit Legal Aid into the constraints of a fixed budget represents prioritisation of affordability over merit, which is dangerous.
- 4. Delays to Payments for Practitioners:** We noted our concerns that any changes to the taxation system could increase payment times.
- 5. Pre-Existing Checks and Balances:** The Bar emphasised that taxation is an independent judicial process where fees claimed are disallowed if it was unreasonable to incur them, and are reduced if, although reasonable incurred, the amounts claimed are too high. Criticism regarding the level of bills which are marked down, is actually evidence of the taxation system positively working. Furthermore, there are safeguards and sanctions in place to ensure that practitioners do not mark an excessive fee.
- 6. Alternative measures:** Clause 28 is envisioned to support, "future introduction of alternative methods of determining the remuneration payable". We noted that MLAs are therefore being asked to vote 'blind' on a principle, whilst it remains entirely unclear what the alternative methods are.
- 7. Scale Fees:** We noted concern about the Department introducing statutory scale fees, due to the Department's repeated inability to review scale fees in the limited areas where they have been introduced. We raised the use of 'Comerton Scale' which are prepared with the Bar Council with references to principles laid down in case law. We noted that this Scale introduces attributes of predictability of fees and efficiency of administration for payers, as well as controlled flexibility in order to accommodate non-standard or exceptional cases.
- 8. Two Tier System** The Department is not seeking to have access to taxation denied to all litigants, only to those who meet the financial conditions for access to Legal Aid and only where the Legal Aid fund is paying.

Latest Position

The most recent submissions made by the Department to the Justice Committee indicate that they wish to make a primary legislation amendment to the Justice Bill that is currently going through Committee stage so as to grant them further enabling power for DoJ to set the rates that can be applied by the Taxing Master when they make a determination about a bill.

The Department has described a desire to be able to remove Brief fees and replacing these with time-based bills. The powers of the Taxing Master would be limited to determining whether the hours claimed are appropriate (the hourly rates having been already set by DoJ).

The Committee scrutiny of the Justice Bill continued until March and further submissions and evidence will be made before that deadline.



Payment Delays Judicial Review

Having issued pre-action proceedings in 2023, challenging the payment delay policy operated by the Legal Services Agency, the Judicial Review application taken jointly by the Bar of Northern Ireland and the Law Society of Northern Ireland (LSNI) progressed to a full hearing in November 2024.

The hearing dates were 19th, 20th November 2024 and 13th January 2025 and the matter was heard by The Honourable Mr. Justice McAlinden.

The High Court found in favour of the applicants on Monday 27th January.

The Bar Council is very pleased that the matter has been considered and a judgment delivered within a prompt timeframe. The unreasonableness of excessively delayed payments has been recognised by the court and we look forward to working with the Department of Justice to implement the requisite changes that can lead to improved and reasonable payment times for legal practitioners.

Bar Library Financial Support

As part of their package of benefits, members of the Bar Library can access support in the financial management of their practices.

A market-leading Practice Management Software package has been offered to members as part of their membership benefits at no additional cost, and by the end of 2025, over 310 members had registered to use it.

The Fees Collection Service continues to play an important role in assisting members with the recovery of outstanding fees. In the past 12 months 100 new cases have been referred to the service, with fee notes totalling close to £280,000 successfully closed for members.

On behalf of the membership, the Bar Council successfully negotiated a reduction in the Professional Indemnity Insurance group policy for our members for the 2025/26 year.

Subsidised subscription fees remain on offer to members entering the Bar, and hardship relief can be requested to assist with Library fees at times of financial difficulty.

24 members left Bar Library membership in 2025, with retirement or an appointment to the Judiciary being the most common reasons for departure.

Strategic Priority: Engaging with Impact



All Party Group on Access to Justice

The Bar of Northern Ireland was pleased, in conjunction with the Law Society, to support the establishment of a new All-Party Group on Access to Justice at Stormont.

The All-Party Group is seen as playing an important role in enhancing political and public understanding of access to justice, assisting elected representatives in understanding the value and meaning of access to justice as it relates to the everyday lives of their constituents.

The Bar of Northern Ireland was involved in four sessions of the All-Party Group on Access to Justice across 2025.

March 2025 - APG session on the Enabling Access to Justice reform programme.

June 2025 - APG event focusing on the NI Executive PFG safer communities priority.

October 2025 - APG event on future of court broadcasting in Northern Ireland.

November 2025 - APG event on children and the justice system.



Justice Committee Engagement

In February 2025 the Bar Council provided oral evidence to the Justice Committee on the Justice Bill and in particular, Clause 28 of the Bill which proposes taxation reform. The Bar Council expressed concern that this reform proposal would interfere with the important principle of judicial independence and that alternative models to the present system of taxation had not been made clear by the DoJ.

In May 2025, the Bar Council provided oral evidence to the Justice Committee on the Enabling Access to Justice Reform programme. In doing so, the Bar Council warned that while reform of the administration of Legal Aid was important and necessary, the programme represented over ambitious reform proposed during an access to justice crisis and without a robust evidence base for many policy interventions.

Council of Europe Convention on the for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyers.

The Bar of Northern installed a visual design piece to mark the opening for signatures of the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyers.

The Council of Europe Convention is the first binding treaty dedicated to the protection of the legal profession and was drafted following concerns that lawyers are increasingly becoming the target of threats, harassment, and intimidation in the course of their professional activities.

The Convention aims to strengthen the rule of law and, in so doing, the protection of legal professionals whose work is fundamental to the administration of justice and the protection of fundamental rights.

The Convention opened for signatures on 13 May at the Council of Europe Foreign Affairs Ministers' meeting in Luxembourg. The Convention will enter into force once it has been ratified by at least eight countries, including six member states of the Council of Europe.



The Bar Council also conducted a number of stakeholder meetings in May/June 2025 to mark the opening for signatures of the Council of Europe’s Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyers.

Thought Leadership

In partnership with the Office of the Lady Chief Justice, the Bar initiated a new public policy engagement series which contextualises and examines the Rule of Law through a series of thematic discussions.

The “Rule of Law in Perspective” series aims to draw together a range of individuals and organisations from across the spectrum of our civic society to provide a focus on current issues and how they connect to the rule of law. Over the course of the series we will explore the following topics:

1. Understanding the Rule of Law
2. Undermining the Rule of Law
3. Upholding the Rule of Law



The series was launched with an event in the Inn of Court on 12th November which explored how the rule of law underpins equality, fairness, and accountability in public life, examining its impact on economic development and social cohesion in Northern Ireland.

The Lady Chief Justice opened the event, which also featured a panel discussion including Bar chairperson Donal Lunney KC and speakers including Fiona Doherty KC; former NI Civil Service head David Sterling KCB; Phoenix Law senior associate Sinead Marmion; Invest NI's head of legal, Tracy Stuart; and the chief commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Geraldine McGahey OBE.

To coincide with the launch the Bar also produced a video which provided an overview of the Rule of Law and the purposed on the Rule of Law In Perspective series [Rule of Law In Perspective Launch](#)

Charity Committee

2025 marked an incredible year of fundraising by the Bar's Charity Committee in support of our partnership with Dementia NI.

Thanks to the generosity of members of the Bar, **£88,254.21** was raised for Dementia NI. This is the largest amount the Bar has raised for a charity partner since our records began in 2002.

Dementia NI has been a fantastic partner. Whether through coffee mornings, wellness days, or our flagship events, their presence in the Bar Library was deeply felt. In particular, none of us will soon forget the moving words of their founder, John, at the Charity Ball; his courage left us all in awe and reminded us exactly why our fundraising efforts matter so much.



Strategic Priority: Fostering An Inclusive Centre of Excellence

Culture & Values

The Bar Council is committed to taking action to establish a working environment and culture where its members and staff are treated with equality, dignity and respect and treat others in the same way.

Work undertaken by the Bar Council over the past couple of years has highlighted areas where, as a profession, we can be rightly proud of the ways we actively demonstrate a collegiate and inclusive ethos within the Bar. Nevertheless, this same work has also highlighted some significant and unacceptable challenges and problems that we must work collectively to address.

In Jun 2024, the Bar Council of England & Wales commissioned an independent review chaired by Baroness Harriet Harman KC. Over the course of a year, the review gathered evidence to consider the impact of bullying and harassment and the efficacy of current reporting mechanisms. It was tasked with considering the reasons for the behaviours and identifying potential solutions.

The Bar Council of Northern Ireland was invited to make a submission to the review. In doing so the Bar Council highlighted some of the recent work undertaken by our Bar in this area including :

- In September 2022 the Bar Council introduced a **new Code of Conduct**. This new Code contained some significant changes from previous versions including a Statement of Principles which is wholly new and articulates the fundamental values and standards that must be at the core of every barrister's conduct. These Principles permeate all other aspects of the Code. Failure to demonstrate these principles can result in a Disciplinary charge.
- In addition, the 2022 Code of Conduct introduced a **new Bullying and Harassment Policy** and reissued the Bar's existing **Whistleblowing Policy**.

- The recommendations of a Legal Diversity Project which, in conjunction with the Lady Chief justice, the Bar undertook in 2023 echoed some of the same concerns that the Bar Council's 2022 Membership Survey had previously identified- reaffirming a view that we must take action to establish the positive working conditions that members of the profession should be able to rely upon.
- The Bar Council therefore compiled a range of resources that are available to all members through a dedicated section of the Bar of NI's membership Portal under the heading of **Culture & Values**.

The Harman Report was published on 8th September 2025. The Bar Council met later that month and has agreed to form a Working Group to look closely at the findings and recommendations contained in the Report so that we might consider any actions that would be relevant for the Bar of Northern Ireland to adopt.

Establishing the appropriate culture and values within the profession will remain an ongoing priority of this Bar Council.

Bar Scholarships & QUB Bright Future Collective

In 2025 Emma Faulkner and Georgia Liddle were announced as the first ever recipients of the Bar of NI Scholarships which support students from under-represented backgrounds to complete the Barrister programme at IPLS. The Bar Council funded these two new scholarships to sustain and enhance diversity, inclusion, and excellence in our profession, especially at a time when the State provides little or no financial support for students seeking to pursue a career at the Bar.

In addition, Rosalind (Rosie) Neeson has been awarded the annual Lord Kerr Scholarship, which was created in memory of the late Lord Kerr of Tonaghmore. The scholarship also supports aspiring barristers by covering their fees at the IPLS. The Bar Council is delighted to continue our association with, and financial support for the Lord Kerr scholarship.



In addition to the scholarships, since 2022 the Bar Council has supported a QUB initiative called the Bright Future Collective Through membership of the Collective, the Bar Council is supporting talented young people who have gained a place to study Law at Queen's through a widening access scheme called the Pathway Opportunity Programme.

The Pathway Opportunity Programme works with schools across Northern Ireland to provide an entry route to Queen's for talented young people who have the ability to thrive at Queen's but need additional support and encouragement to fulfil their potential. As a member of the Bright Future Collective, the Bar partner with Queen's to give talented young people, who face additional barriers in life, the opportunity to fulfil their potential through higher education.

The current Bar Council has identified, as a key priority, initiatives aimed at increasing socioeconomic diversity and is actively looking at new schemes to augment those described above.

Strategic Priority: Adding Unique value and being responsive to our Members

Library Services

The Summer of 2025 saw the delivery of an upgraded suite of consultation rooms in the New Bar Library. Recognising that the rooms would be fully redeveloped as part of the Bar's Review of Space project, the project aimed to deliver recognisable benefits and enhancements within a modest budget. The enhancements to the rooms, such as table top charging points, flat screen televisions, ClickShares, ambient lighting and attractive wall art have been very well received by the membership and their professional clients.



In early 2025, the Member Services Committee was informed that NICTS intended to replace Sightlink, the platform used to facilitate remote court attendance, with the Justice Video Platform (JVP). NICTS invited the Bar to assist with the fine tuning of the tool. To this end a Working Group was established to trial the platform as it was in development and provide advice as to how it may be improved to the benefit of the profession. As a result, the Bar was able to positively influence the JVP's development to ensure it best met the needs of the profession. JVP successfully launched in September 2025 as Sightlink was gradually retired.

Over time, the Member Services Committee had been made aware of a greater number of security incidents being reported and impacting front of house operations. To assist in developing a Risk Register for front of house operations, the Member Services Committee engaged the services of an Expert in Risk Management. As a result of this commission, the front of house teams now have in place a Risk Register with clear and identifiable targets for risk mitigations to be put in place.

The Member Services Committee continued to progress the Review Of Space project, which, when delivered, will provide the membership with solutions to reflect the changes in ways of working and interacting with colleagues and clients that have emerged over the last few years. During 2025, the Committee worked closely with architect John Fitzgerald to refine the long list of suggested "interventions" to 6 priority projects. The Committee is now very close to making final recommendations to the Bar Council.

Reacting to feedback from the Membership that on site bicycle parking was in short supply, the Member Services Committee researched suitable solutions and in February 2025, it finalised the installation of a modern, covered and secured bicycle parking facility in the Bar Library surface carpark. It also developed an appropriate allocation policy which continues to be kept under review.



The third Member Services Showcase was delivered on 3 April 2025 and the numbers attending and subsequent feedback suggest, once again, that it was a resounding success. For the first time,

external partners were invited to Showcase at the event, including Ede & Ravenscroft and LexisNexis. Lightning Talks were offered by the Legal Services Agency on “Instant Insights on Payment Requests”, NICTS outlined its roadmap to transformation using Themis and Willis Insurance informed Members as to how best to manage their professional risks.

The Bar’s commitment to enhance the wellbeing of its members remained a priority in 2025. One element of this was to deliver the third “Be At Your Best” Exhibition & Lightning Talks event which was held on Thursday 6 November 2025 in the Upper Old Bar Library. As with the Member Services Showcase referenced above, numbers attending and subsequent feedback suggest the event was very well received.

For the first time, a range of holistic therapies and advice were offered during the event, including massage, physiotherapy, reflexology and personalised nutrition advice sessions. All of the opportunities were booked out. The event finished with a Deep Relaxation session which was booked to capacity. For the lunch offering, we teamed up with Nutritional Experts “Vital Nutrition” and locally based “Bodega Bagels”, to provide a range of free and healthy lunch choices which proved to be as popular as previous years.

For the first time, in May 2025, the Member Services Committee organised for Kingsbridge Specialists to offer First Aid Training for Members in the convenience of the Bar Library. The course was fully subscribed. It is intended to make this an annual opportunity.



Counselling Service

Over recent years, through ongoing engagement with our members, it became clear to the Bar Council that it should take increased action to support the mental and emotional wellbeing of our practitioners.

Extensive research exists which shows that there are particular and acute stressors and health risks for those working in the legal profession with members regularly exposed to stress, long hours, isolation, vicarious trauma and depression. Our Membership Survey in 2022 made clear that members need support to cope with these and other challenges.

We are continuously working to tackle the root causes of some of these stressors at source by trying to address the financial, cultural and workload demands that we know our barristers, as self-employed professionals, are routinely exposed to.

However, we recognise that, whilst we do so, many barristers would also appreciate the opportunity to avail of some support to help them to manage their mental health and the pressures and challenges that their personal and working lives entail.

For that reason, in the early part of 2023, the Bar Council introduced a new dedicated psychological counselling service which is available for members of the Bar Library to use at no extra cost to their existing Library subscriptions.

The service sits alongside our continued support for the services provided by [LawCare](#) but adds an important additional dimension by enabling members to arrange and attend dedicated counselling services in a confidential and convenient manner.

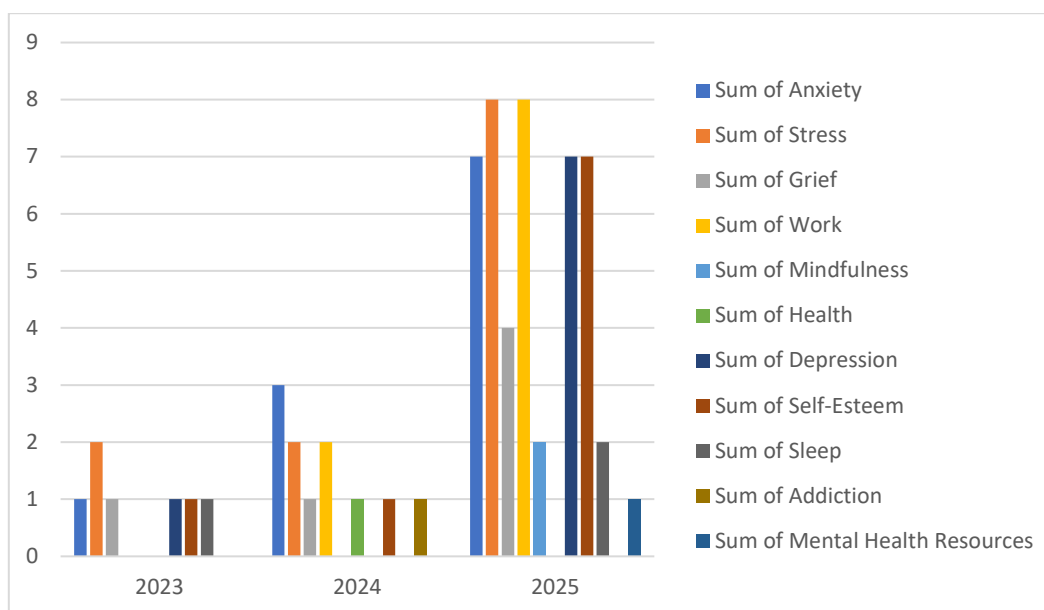
This service is being delivered on our behalf by Inspire Wellbeing under the new brand name of **Lena**.

The key features of this confidential and fully accredited service are

- Access to 24/7 a confidential telephone helpline.
- The ability to avail, including by self-referral, for up to 6 confidential counselling sessions available online/face to face.
- These sessions are delivered by fully accredited counsellors and can be arranged at a time and location that suits the working lives of our members.
- Sessions include anxiety, stress, legal & financial information, alcohol, relationship difficulties, work/career issues, emotional distress plus many more.

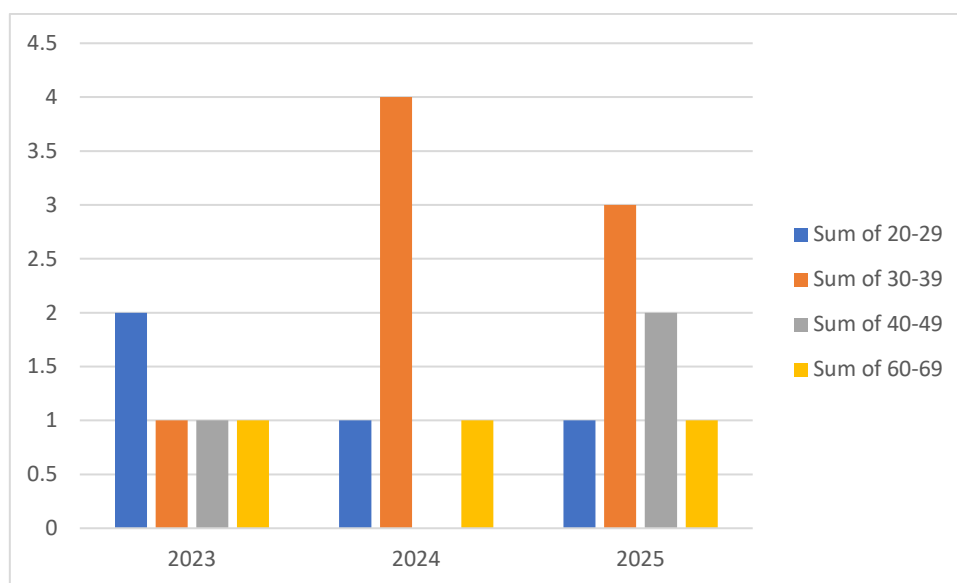
Anonymised data supplied by Inspire showed that the service was being availed of by a number of members throughout 2025, indicating that a previously unmet need was now being addressed.

Registered interest in specific areas when signing up to access Lena services

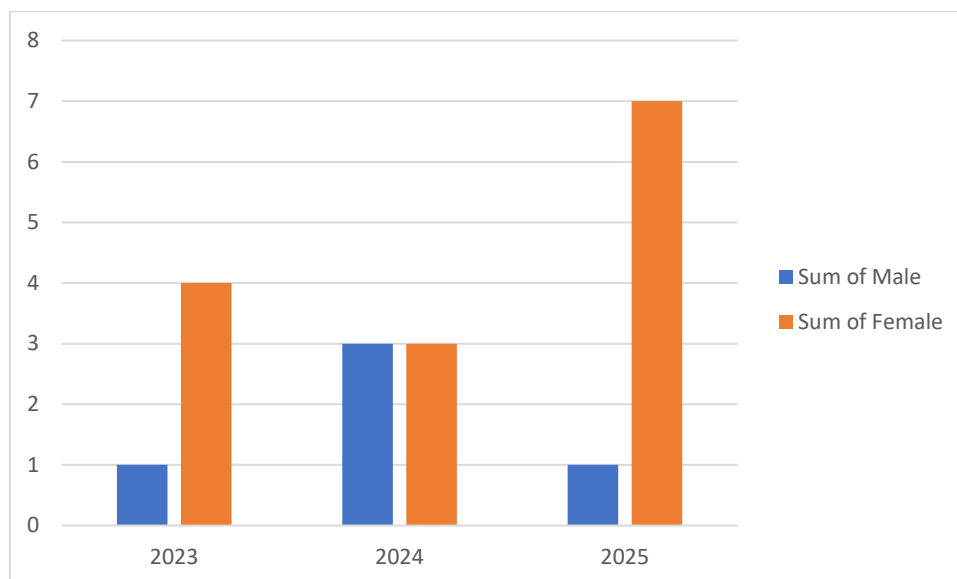


Whilst overall the number of members accessing support are small, the data shows there is an increasing usage of this support service year on year. 2025 saw a jump in members asking to access information across all areas, including stress management and work-related stress.

Age Groups of Users



Gender of Users



Cyber Insurance Cover

From 1st December 2023 a Group Cyber Insurance Policy was opened to all full members of the Bar Library as an additional membership benefit, and at no additional cost. As Professional Indemnity Insurance policies currently exclude cyber-related risks, this new bespoke policy is designed to address some of those key areas of exposure.

The policy includes cover for regulatory fines and penalties, liabilities arising from security failures or data breaches, breach-response and crisis management costs, and expenses relating to ransomware and cyber extortion. The limit of indemnity is £100,000 per member, with a £2,500 excess per claim.

The cover is subject to a number of conditions, which must be met for the policy to provide cover. Members are responsible for ensuring they comply with these requirements, and the IT Department can assist in confirming whether a member currently meets, or can meet, the necessary conditions.



Strategic Priority: Being Principled But Also Progressive

Continuing on the success of digital upskilling delivered in recent years, the Library & Information Services Team and the IT Team delivered 3 more Digital Awareness Programmes for the General Membership. The Programme was delivered across four modules focussing on familiarisation with a Practice Direction compliant digital bundle, navigating the bundle, learning how to annotate and cut from it and finally how to share the bundle using OneDrive. Approximately 100 Members have now attended and benefited from this programme.

In early 2024, the Member Services Committee established a Working Group made up of representatives from each of the Bar's primary Associations, its remit being to develop a Protocol, to be agreed with the Law Society of Northern Ireland, relating to the provision of quality briefs and instructions which will clearly outline the responsibilities of each profession and the standards required. 2025 saw the delivery of a fully worked up draft Protocol which is now with the Bar Council in order for it to introduce it to the Law Society of Northern Ireland.

Cyber Security

The Bar Library's investment in our dedicated Managed Cyber Defence service in recent years, continued to confirm its importance to the Organisation and its Members. 2025 saw a considerable increase in the number of bad actors probing our systems from Malicious IP address, resulting in an associated increase in the number of Leaked passwords and Member account compromises.

Despite this, the Managed Cyber Defence service ensured that these compromises were swiftly dealt with and importantly, no further access was allowed, ensuring that there were no Member Accounts were accessed, thus for the second successive year there were no Member Data Breaches to report or manage.

Statistics for 2025 (with 2024 comparative figures shown in brackets) are as follows:

- 9597 (9581) alerts were generated during the reporting period.
- 3158 (2946) Malicious IP addresses blocked from accessing Bar Library email servers.
- 17 (11) Leaked Member passwords were detected, and remedial action was initiated.
- 16 (9) member email account compromises were detected. The unauthorised access was blocked before any data was accessed.
- 0 (0) member account was accessed, and a malicious mailbox rule was created, triggering our Cyber Incident Response plan

Member Desk Audit and Network Upgrade

A detailed audit of all Member's desks was carried out by the IT Department to determine if Members wanted:

- a wired or wireless network connection
- a Desktop Telephone
- a Direct Dial telephone number

The audit also asked what type of Power connectors would be preferred for member's devices.

On completion of the audit the IT Team removed the Desktop phones and disabled the Telephone extensions which were no longer needed. A considerable monthly saving was realised because of the unneeded telephone extensions being disabled.

Following on from the Member Desk Audit we upgraded our Network Switch infrastructure with equipment meeting today's best practice standards or protection again Cyber Attacks. The new network switch infrastructure has also increased the speed and throughput on the wired and wireless networks for Members and Staff

Strategic Priority: Safeguarding Quality

Professional Conduct Committee

A separate report will be provided summarising the work undertaken by the PCC.

Legal Complaints and Regulation Act

The Legal Complaints & Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (LCRA) came in to legislative effect in September 2025.

This is an important piece of new legislation which is designed to provide a new route for complainants to make complaints against members of the legal profession relating to the service provided by them.

This new complaints process involves two stages. The first stage, which is the responsibility of the Bar Council, is focused on how we might resolve any eligible complaints that we receive.

Should resolution not be possible, complaints can proceed to a second stage which is the responsibility of a new Bar Complaints Committee which has a lay Chairman and a majority of lay members. The Bar Complaints Committee can make a range of findings but in the Commencement Order associated with the Act, it was agreed that the power to make a finding relating to professional negligence has been disappplied.

Before any complaints can be processed under the Act, the Rules for the Bar Complaints Committee had to be consulted upon. This took place between September and October 2025.

How to Complain

The Bar of Northern Ireland aims to provide the highest standards of service. However, there may be occasions when you feel it necessary to make a complaint about a barrister.

You can raise a complaint about:

- **The professional service provided to you by your barrister** - This involves complaints about the quality of service you directly received from a barrister who had been instructed to act on your behalf. Our process aims to resolve all eligible complaints that are presented to it. But where, despite the co-operation of all involved, resolution is not possible, an independent Committee can consider, based on the evidence, whether to award a wide range of findings.
- **The professional conduct of a barrister** - This involves complaints about the behaviour of a barrister and whether they acted in breach of the rules and duties that are placed upon them. Our process will investigate all eligible complaints to determine if a breach appears to have taken place. Where this is the case, depending on the gravity of the issue, an independent Committee can consider applying a wide range of sanctions on the barrister.

On some occasions a complaint might involve both service and conduct issues. These are referred to as hybrid complaints.

Examples of a Service Complaint:

- Work not being performed to the scope and standard that had been agreed and which was therefore proven to be incomplete, inaccurate or erroneous.
- Significant delay in meeting an agreed deadline for work to be performed where no reasonable grounds or explanation was provided for the work taking longer than expected.
- Failure to attend court or a meeting without giving notice, making suitable alternative arrangements or providing an adequate explanation.
- Poor and inadequate information - where you should reasonably have expected to receive important information but it was not provided on time or to the required standard.

Examples of a Conduct Complaint:

- Acting without honesty or integrity
- Suspected dishonesty
- A breach of confidentiality
- Bullying or harassing behaviour
- Breaches of matters described in the Bar's Code of Conduct

If you are unsure of the type of complaint you have, you can consult our more [detailed guidance](#) or [contact us](#) for more information. Provided that a complaint meets the [eligibility criteria](#), you can submit a complaint using the relevant [Complaint Form](#). [Detailed Guidance](#) is available to guide you through the next steps in the process.



Recognising that this is a new piece of legislation and an entirely new complaints process, the Bar Council issued a series of Frequently Asked Questions to members and also redesigned the sections of the Bar's website relating to regulation and complaints.

Training has also been made available for members in relation to the implementation of the Act, including suggestions on how members can manage their practice to mitigate against service complaints.

Education & Training

In 2025 the Bar Education Committee, under the Chairmanship of Martin Wolfe KC, commissioned a series of workstreams. The workstreams will build on established training provision to develop innovative and progressive programmes for Bar students, new and established practitioners.

The Education Committee is grateful to all those members who give freely of their time and experience to support the Pupils. The contributions of Pupil Masters, KC Mentors, YBA peers and more experienced colleagues are all vital to the professional formation of new members of the Bar Library. The Committee is also grateful to those practitioners who undertook the important task of reviewing modules studied by Students of the Inn at IPLS.

The Bar must attract and maintain a diverse membership. The Education Committee welcomed the introduction of the Bar Scholarship Scheme in 2025. The Committee produced a support tool for members offering work experience opportunities to sixth formers in June 2025.

The CPD Committee is responsible for the accreditation of learning activities. Accredited CPD means the learning activity has reached the required standards and benchmarks for barristers and has been scrutinised to ensure integrity and quality. In 2025 the Committee accredited a "Guide to Understanding, Avoiding and Responding to Complaints". This Guide produced by the Education Committee informed members about the new complaints regime introduced by the LCRA(NI)2016. By the end of the 24-25 CPD cycle 95% of members had completed the complaints training using the Guide.

Online education and training remains popular with the resources on the portal and app attracting over 4,250 downloads by members during the 2024-25 CPD year. While online courses offer convenience, face-to-face training remains a vital and irreplaceable component of the Bar's educational landscape. The networking opportunities, hands-on learning, soft skill development, structured environment, and enhanced motivation offered by in-person training make it a compelling choice for self-employed practitioners seeking a collegiate learning experience.

The mixed menu of CPD opportunities accredited in 2024-25 enabled 98% of members to comply with the CPD requirements for their 2026 practising certificate by the end of the CPD year on 30 November 2025.

Barristers undertake CPD over and above the normal challenges of professional practice. Such learning reinforces the technical legal knowledge gained from the daily challenges of practice and hones the skills required to maintain the highest professional standards.

Financial Governance

The Bar Council has continued to exercise sound corporate governance and financial management over all aspects of its operations.

Under the leadership of the Bursar, the Finance Committee regularly reviews the monthly management accounts in addition to reviewing the annual statutory accounts. The Annual Accounts have been separately provided and will be formally presented to the members at the AGM.

Anti-Money Laundering (AML)

The Bar Council is the recognised supervisory authority for barristers in this jurisdiction for the purposes of The Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing and Transfer of Funds (Information on the Payer) Regulations 2020. This places an obligation on the Bar Council to ensure adherence with the Money Laundering Regulations and in doing so to work closely with OPBAS (Office for Professional Body Anti-Money Laundering Supervision), an HM Treasury body that will supervise all existing supervisors. A summary of our AML supervisory activity throughout 2025 can be viewed on our website.

Strategic Priority: Being Environmentally Responsible

The Bar of Northern Ireland recognises the impact that our everyday activities and choices have on the environment, and taking positive action in response to the climate crisis was included as a strategic priority in our 2024 Corporate Plan.

Solar Panels were installed on the roof of the Bar Library building in December 2023, and electricity consumption in 2024 was reduced as a result.

A more modern and efficient Building Management System was installed in 2024, which more effectively controls the building's energy consumption to ensure efficiency and reduce carbon production.



