

JUSTICE MATTERS

AN UPDATE ON JUSTICE AND LAW REFORM



Law Society
of Ireland

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CRIMINAL COURTS THROWN INTO DISARRAY

Changes made to the District Court Criminal Legal Aid Scheme have resulted in severe disruption to the criminal justice system, with many solicitors no longer continuing to work under the Scheme.

The immediate impact is clear. In July 2025, courts issued 10,277 Criminal Legal Aid certificates, which grant legal aid to an individual. In July 2026, that figure fell to 702, a reduction of more than 90%. This downward trend continued in August 2026 when just 394 Criminal Legal Aid certificates issued, down 86% from August 2025.

The Chief Justice, Donal O'Donnell, has said the continuation of the dispute between criminal defence solicitors and the Department of Justice is a matter of concern to him and to judges generally. Mr Justice O'Donnell was speaking at a ceremony in the Four Courts earlier this month to mark the beginning of the new legal year.

The Courts Service has also stated that the impasse is having a "widespread impact" across the criminal justice system.

While the impact is especially acute in Dublin, areas across the country are also impacted. Earlier this month Judge Eoin Garavan expressed major concern about what was happening in Mayo, saying: "As far as I am concerned the position in Mayo is now getting critical and I can only hope that meaningful talks in this dispute can be resolved as soon as possible."

It is very clear that the criminal courts are not operating as intended and that significant pressure is building across the justice system. Court users, including victims of crime, are experiencing growing backlogs and delays.

The Law Society has consistently supported reform of the Criminal Legal Aid system and has identified two targeted changes which it believes would address the principal remaining concerns with the Scheme: ensuring that separate and distinct criminal cases are treated separately where appropriate and providing an additional certificate where a case extends beyond ten court appearances.

The Law Society suggested mediation in an effort to resolve the impasse. This was declined by the Minister for Justice, who cited the ongoing judicial review challenge taken by solicitor John Quinn. The Minister said the matter should be left to the courts to resolve. This week the High Court urged the parties (the Minister for Justice, solicitor Mr Quinn and the Law Society) to resolve the matter outside of court.

The comments from the High Court were significant.

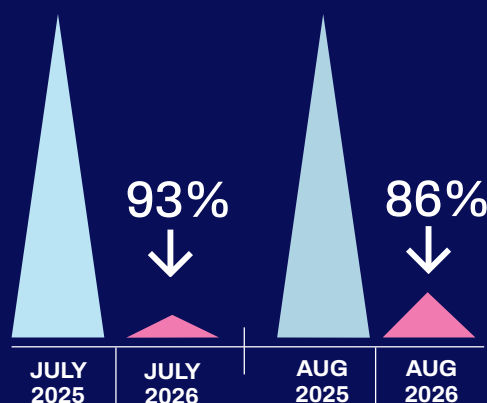
The Law Society agrees that this matter needs to be resolved without any further delay and has again called on the Minister and his officials to meet directly, as the Minister has previously ruled out mediation.

The Law Society has repeatedly sought to resolve this dispute. Our objective is to secure an effective and sustainable criminal legal aid system that protects access to justice and commands the confidence of those who use it.

Drop in Criminal Legal Aid Certificates

July - down 93% from 10,277 in July 2025 to just 702 in July 2026.

August - down 86% from 2,868 in 2025 to 394 in August 2026.



OVER A YEAR TO SEE A SOLICITOR: THE WAIT FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID

People seeking Civil Legal Aid are waiting more than a year for a first appointment in parts of the country, while the number of solicitors on the District Court Family Law Panel has fallen by more than 60% in a decade.

This is leaving thousands of people across the country without access to legal advice. Civil Legal Aid is how people on low incomes get legal representation, often at the most challenging times of their lives.

In August 2026, the wait for a first consultation with a solicitor at Law Centres operated under the Civil Legal Aid Scheme was 66 weeks in Navan, 56 weeks in Castlebar and 50 weeks in Sligo. In Dublin, waits of 48 weeks were recorded in both Jervis Street and Smithfield. These relate just to an initial appointment, meaning people had to wait much longer than that before getting a resolution or getting to court.

Behind those figures are people in difficult, often urgent situations. A person experiencing domestic violence may need advice on protection and safety. A parent trying to put custody and maintenance arrangements in place for a child after separation may face months of uncertainty before getting initial legal support.

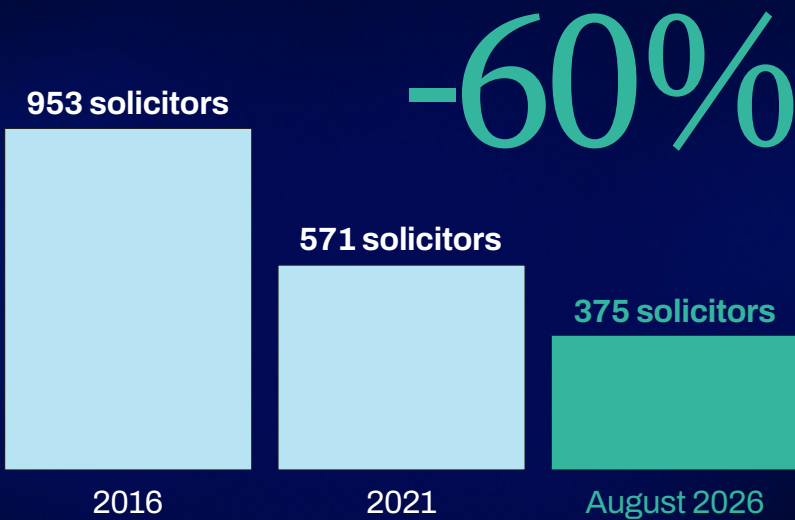
Delay prolongs conflict and instability and can make an already difficult situation worse.

Women's Aid, a national organisation working to prevent and address the impact of domestic violence and abuse, has stated: "We know from our direct services that women find it very difficult to navigate the legal system and that the legal advice and representation provided by Legal Aid is for them invaluable, but unfortunately not always accessible or timely. It has to be noted that women subjected to domestic abuse and coercive control often suffer economic abuse and have little or no financial means and therefore rely to a great extent on Legal Aid to access justice".

Civil legal aid must be treated as the public service it is, so that access to justice is not confined to those who can afford to pay for private representation.

The Law Society welcomes the additional €14.5 million that has been allocated to Civil Legal Aid under Budget 2027. There must be an immediate increase in the financial

Civil Legal Aid - The District Court Family Law Solicitors Panel helps people with family breakdown, divorce, child custody disputes and domestic violence



Solicitors participating nationwide

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026*
953	959	900	962	574	571	587	558	492	385	375

*as of August 2026

SCHOOL LEAVERS CAN NOW TRAIN AS SOLICITORS WITHOUT A DEGREE

Professional Solicitor Apprenticeship

Go to lawsociety.ie/apprentice to register interest.



Law Society
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School leavers will be able to qualify as solicitors without going to university, under an exciting new apprenticeship programme launched by the Law Society of Ireland.

The Professional Solicitor Apprenticeship combines paid work in a law firm with structured legal education. It also opens a new route to qualification for legal clerks and legal executives.

The earn-while-you-learn model builds on the Law Society's existing efforts to widen access to the profession – by removing financial, social and geographic barriers to the profession.

The programme should also benefit firms, particularly in regional and rural areas, that struggle to recruit and keep staff. Training apprentices locally will help these firms plan for succession and keep legal services in their communities.

Existing initiatives that help widen access to the profession include the Access Scholarship Programme, which has supported hundreds of students from disadvantaged backgrounds; hybrid training, which has enabled trainees since 2019 to study while living in their local communities and grants to help smaller regional practices take on trainees.

This new Programme is due to start in September 2027. **Prospective apprentices can register their interest now at: www.lawsociety.ie/apprentice, where more details are available.**

SAFEGUARDING IRISH ELECTIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Ireland needs informed citizens and trusted sources of information, not just regulation, to protect its elections from AI-generated content and online disinformation, according to a new discussion paper from the Law Society's Centre for Justice and Law Reform.

The paper, which was published which was published this month looks at how deepfakes, coordinated online campaigns and foreign interference are changing the information environment in which elections take place.

It finds that while election interference is not new, digital technologies have greatly increased its scale and speed, putting public trust in electoral outcomes at risk. The paper also raises concerns about the effect of online harassment and disinformation on election candidates and democratic participation more broadly.

The paper acknowledges that Ireland has made significant progress in recent years, including by setting up new regulatory bodies and implementing EU measures such as the Digital Services Act. However, it

argues that long-term resilience will also depend on media literacy, cooperation between institutions and effective responses to new technological threats.

The paper concludes with a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening Ireland's capacity to protect free, fair, and trusted elections in an increasingly complex digital landscape.

Centre for Justice and Law Reform is a research centre established by the Law Society of Ireland, with the aim of improving the justice system and shaping law reform to better serve the public interest.

ABOUT THE LAW SOCIETY

The Law Society works to support and shape a just and accessible legal system that works for all. It educates, regulates and supports solicitors throughout their career.



CONTACT US

For information on any of the topics addressed in this newsletter, please contact **Brian Hunt (Director of Policy)** at: b.hunt@lawsociety.ie