



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building a Resilient Legal Profession:
Lessons from Ireland's Trainee Solicitor
Counselling Service

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW



This executive summary presents the findings from an eight-year review of the Law

Society of Ireland's counselling service for trainee solicitors.

Drawing on over 500 qualitative responses from service users between 2015 and 2023, the paper explores why trainees sought support, how it impacted their personal and professional lives, and what the broader implications are for legal education and professional culture. The data reveals a shift in how the next generation of legal professionals engage with mental health - seeing it as foundational, not optional.

This research is not only a reflection of the experiences of trainee solicitors. It will also be used to strengthen the counselling service and guide the development of future supports for solicitors throughout their careers. More broadly, the findings represent a meaningful step in the cultural shift taking place within the legal profession, where wellbeing is increasingly recognised as a core part of professional life.

1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Trainee solicitors operate under unique dual pressures: the academic rigour of legal study and the real-world expectations of professional performance. Research has consistently shown high rates of anxiety, stress, and psychological distress among law students and junior solicitors.

Junior solicitors and law students have historically been reluctant to seek help, primarily due to stigma or fear of professional repercussions. The nature of legal work – often adversarial, high-stakes, and outcome-focused tends to reinforce a culture of perfectionism, objectivity, and emotional restraint. As a result, open conversations about personal challenges have not always felt compatible with professional identity.

Trainee solicitors often fall between the academic and professional support systems available to law students and junior solicitors. The Law Society of Ireland recognised this gap and in 2013 launched a free, confidential counselling service embedded into the Professional Practice Course (PPC).

The Law Society of Ireland, as the sole provider of the Professional Practice Course, is uniquely positioned to offer consistent and universal access to this support. Every future solicitor in Ireland has the opportunity to benefit from counselling during a formative stage of their development. This shared exposure not only provides immediate support but also lays a foundation that solicitors can draw on throughout their professional lives, helping to shape a professional

culture that values wellbeing, a potential clearly reflected in the findings of this research.

2. METHODOLOGY

An open-ended survey was distributed to trainee solicitors who used the counselling service between 2015 and 2023. Over 500 anonymous responses were collected. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify key themes and experiences across three domains:

1. Motivation for accessing counselling
2. Impact on personal life, and
3. Impact on professional development.



3. KEY FINDINGS

3.1 Motivations for Access

- Trainees sought support due to stress, anxiety, bereavement, personal difficulties, and academic pressures.



- Many accessed the service proactively, out of curiosity or a desire for personal development.

'I signed up partially out of curiosity and also because there were a few minor issues in my life that I wanted to talk to someone outside of family and friends about'

- The fact that the service was free, promoted by the Law School, and endorsed by peers significantly reduced stigma.

3.2 Personal Impact

- Participants reported increased emotional and self awareness, stronger coping strategies, and improved personal relationships.



'I also started being more self aware, something that the counsellor noted. I have carried this forward.'

- Counselling helped users identify, explore and address deep-rooted

issues including trauma, identity and interpersonal challenges such as family conflicts.

3.3 Professional Impact

- Trainees developed better stress regulation, confidence, and assertiveness in legal work environments.



'I will hopefully be more aware of managing stress and other similar issues in my professional life and hopefully never let myself get overwhelmed.'

- They reported better work-life balance, a reassessment of professional values, and clearer career direction.
- Many stated that personal wellbeing improvements translated directly into enhanced professional performance.

'I definitely gained more from the service in respects of my personal life rather than professional life, although this could probably be attributed to the fact that all my issues with my professional life stemmed from personal.'

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR LEGAL EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

The success of the Law Society of Ireland's approach has broader implications for the legal profession. Embedding counselling within the formal training structure not only reduces barriers to access, but also normalises mental health support as a shared professional responsibility amongst solicitors. This model challenges the entrenched culture of stoicism and perfectionism in law, paving the way for healthier and more sustainable legal careers.



5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Integrate structured mental health services into legal education.

Legal training programmes should embed accessible, confidential mental health services from the outset, making support an expected and routine part of professional formation.



Design services to reduce barriers and build trust.

Services must be free, visible, and backed by cultural signals from educators, employers, and peers—making it clear that seeking support is a professional strength, not a weakness.



Promote mental wellbeing as core to legal competence through sustained professional campaigns.

Regulators, law societies, and training bodies should lead public-facing



campaigns that position mental wellbeing as a foundational element of legal professionalism, on par with ethics, skills, and lifelong learning.

6. CONCLUSION

Trainee counselling is more than a mental health service, it is a strategic investment in the future of the legal profession. The Law Society of Ireland's initiative has set a national and international standard for how the legal field can proactively support its members from the earliest stage of their careers.

This white paper calls on legal institutions worldwide to follow suit.



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