

The
Annual Report of
the Lay Observer
for Northern Ireland

2024/25

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Craigantlet Buildings, Stoney Road, Belfast BT4 3SX
Tel: 028 9016 3396

Contact Details

Marian Cree

Lay Observer

Legal Services Oversight Commissioner for NI

Craigtantlet Buildings

Stoney Road

Belfast

BT4 3SX

Email: marian.cree@legalcommissioner-ni.org.uk

Website:

www.layobserverni.com

www.legalcommissioner-ni.org.uk

This report can be accessed on www.layobserverni.com and requests for alternative formats can be submitted at marian.cree@legalcommissioner-ni.org.uk.

SOLICITORS (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 1976

SOLICITORS (AMENDMENT) (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 1989

Presented to the Lady Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, the Permanent Secretary Department of Finance, and the Council of the Law Society Northern Ireland pursuant to Article 42 of the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 and Article 17 of the Solicitors (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

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Chapter 1:

Opening Comments



Marian Cree

- 1.1 This is my eighth report since being appointed on 3rd April 2017 as Northern Ireland's first Legal Services Oversight Commissioner (the 'Commissioner'). I am delighted to be able to report that, as I write this report, the secondary legislation necessary to enact all the Commissioner's powers was approved by the NI Assembly, commencing on 1st September 2025. Consequently, the new complaints process went live on that date. This report, however, relates to my work as Lay Observer and it is therefore provided under the existing Lay Observer legislation, the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976. It focuses on my work as Lay Observer but does also include some narrative on my preliminary work as Commissioner.
- 1.2 This report reflects my work from April 2024 to March 2025, in the context of the complaints process as it relates to solicitors and the Law Society of Northern Ireland (the 'Society'). The Lay Observer role relates only to complaints associated with solicitors and, ultimately, the Society. The Commissioner role is more embracing in the context that it relates to both solicitors and barristers.
- 1.3 As stated in my previous reports, a key trend in the resolution of complaints for clients is that it does not always result in the outcome the client hopes for. This is due to a number of reasons, not least the fact that the powers of both the Society and my office in dealing with this aspect of complaints handling are limited. Consequently, the existing process that is operated within the boundaries of legislation has yet again flagged up the fact that it does not always serve the needs and interests of the client, something which the new process will aim to address. This report, however, presents another twelve-month period which has seen a continued positive trend in how complaints are registered and handled by the Society.

Chapter 2:

Role of the Lay Observer for Northern Ireland

- 2.1 The Lay Observer for Northern Ireland is the public official charged with overseeing the complaints handling system in place covering the solicitor profession in Northern Ireland. The work of the Lay Observer is governed by a set of principles clearly laid out on my website (www.layobserverni.com). It is to be noted that I also operate my role to the standards laid down by the Ombudsman Association, of which I am a member. It is from these standards that, in part, I derive my legitimacy as a complaints handler and in the way I carry out my work.
- 2.2 I investigate complaints from clients who have exhausted the complaints process, firstly with their solicitors (Tier 1) and secondly, the solicitors' representative and regulating body – the Law Society of Northern Ireland (the 'Society') (Tier 2). The Lay Observer is the final stage in the complaints handling process (Tier 3).
- 2.3 My work as the Lay Observer for Northern Ireland is part-time. I employ no staff, and all administrative tasks and secretarial work are carried out by me directly, in addition to investigations and auditing. My work is located either at the Society or in my own home.
- 2.4 During the year I have had valuable meetings with the President, the Senior Team and with the Chief Executive of the Society, representing the Council. I am grateful for these meetings, and for their generally most constructive nature. I value this contact as it enables both parties to consider strategic matters and provide an exchange of views and information appropriate to that level.
- 2.5 My day-to-day links are with the Society's Head of Professional Conduct and her staff. I can report that in 2024/25 I found them to be very helpful, accommodating and professional. I am particularly grateful for the efforts they made to provide me with necessary data to assist in the completion of my report.
- 2.6 I maintain helpful and excellent contact with the Department of Finance (the 'Department') at all levels. This is my sponsoring Government Department, and appropriate personnel provide support for my function in several ways. In particular, I can be contacted by complainants through their address, as well as a website, which technical persons in the Department maintain on my behalf. I wish to thank the Permanent Secretary for making all this possible.

- 2.7 On day-to-day matters, I link with Mr Jonathan McNaught and his colleagues. I thank them for their very willing and invaluable facilitation, which is often proactive, and always imaginative, in providing advice and help in solving any problem I may face.
- 2.8 The Lady Chief Justice takes an interest in my work. Her role in our Justice System provides a distinctive overview of the work of the solicitors' profession, and I value her advice and observations. She is, of course, a formal recipient of my Annual Report under the legislation.

Chapter 3:

Law Society Complaints Statistics 2024/25

Table 1: Circumstances of the Complaint / number of associated Complaints

Circumstance of complaint	Number	Circumstance of complaint	Number
A. Accidents	12	L. Immigration & Asylum	1
B. Bankruptcy & Insolvency Debt		M. Land & Property Disputes	2
C. Commercial Work	1	N. Libel & Slander	
D. Contract Disputes		O. Licensing	
E. Conveyancing	6	P. Mental Health	
F. Criminal Injuries & & Criminal Damage compensation		Q. Planning	
G. Criminal Law	1	R. Personal Injury	
H. Employment Law, Equality/Discrimination Issues		S. Professional Negligence	1
I. Enforcement of Judgments		T. Trusts, Tax & Financial Planning	
J. Family Law – Children	1	U. Bills, Probate & Intestacy	3
K. Family Law – General	8		

Note: In most cases a single complaint may be included under one or more heading.

Table 2: Category of Complaints / number of associated Complainants

Nature of Complaints		
Code	Category	Number of Complainants
1	Undue delay or inaction	27
2	Failure to keep client properly informed	25
3	Delay / Failure to respond to reasonable enquiries	26
4	Withholding / loss of documents	11
5	Disclosing confidential information	3
6	Acting in conflict of interest situation	2
7	Acting contrary to the client's instructions	13
8	Breach of undertakings	
9	Failure to provide bills of costs / cash statements; incurring expense without client's authority	9
10	Failure to deal with legal aid issues properly	
11	Failure to provide proper client care information or not complying with agreed client care arrangements	5
12	Failure to provide proper costs information including Legal Aid Rules at the outset of the transaction or not adhering to arrangements made	7
13	Failure to properly consider client's complaints under solicitor's own in-house complaints procedure	28
14	Other factors	
	All factors (total 1 – 14)	156

Chapter 4:

Comment on Complaints Statistics 2024/25

Number of Complaints

4.1 In the 2024/25 year the Law Society (the ‘Society’) received a total of 33 individual complaints covering 156 categorised areas. These complaints were made in relation to 32 solicitors with 1 solicitor’s firm receiving more than one complaint made against it. The outcome of those complaints was:

Not Upheld	11
Upheld	19
Discontinued	2 - both
Resolved	withdrawn 1

4.2 All of the upheld cases had some degree of sanction against the solicitor, such as a formal warning/reprimand. An example of some of the specific actions/sanctions of the Society’s Client Complaints Committee (the ‘Committee’) include:

- One matter was upheld, and the Committee utilised the powers delegated to them under Article 41A(b), (c) and (d) of the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 in directing the solicitor that they take such steps as may be necessary to obtain a copy of the builder’s warranty and 10-year guarantee certificate pertaining to the complainant’s property.
- One matter was upheld, and the Committee utilised the powers delegated to them under Article 41A(2)(c) of the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 and directed that the solicitor’s bill of costs be waived in its entirety.
- One matter was partially upheld, and the Committee directed that the solicitor send a copy of any documentation or data to which the complainant may be entitled, in whatever format the solicitor deemed to be appropriate forthwith, the costs of which were to be borne by the solicitor’s firm.

Circumstances of the Complaint

- 4.3 In my 2023/24 report, Conveyancing received the highest number of complaints, accounting for 11 of the 43 complaints, which equates to 25% of the complaints received. In this reporting period, it was the primary circumstance in 6 of the 33 individual complaints, which equates to 18% of the complaints received. This is a significant improvement in this area. Wills Probate & Intestacy, which was highlighted in my 2023/24 report as an area of concern with 33% of the complaints received that year, has reduced significantly to 3 complaints in 2024/25 (less than 10%).

Complaints under the heading of Accidents, which also featured in last year's report as an area of concern, received the highest number of complaints in this reporting period. Whilst the number of complaints received in this category had reduced to 12% 2023/24, it has risen to 36% in this reporting period. Family Law (general) had 8 complaints associated with it, which was the second highest number of complaints. This equates to 24% of the complaints received in this reporting period.

- 4.4 I am aware the Society uses this data and identifies trends to inform the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme for solicitors – I commend this approach. I am also aware of the proactive steps the Society continues to take in picking up on these types of trends and addressing them through several strategies. I comment further on this in Chapter 5 of my report.

Category of Complaints

- 4.5 On review of the overall categorised complaints figures outlined in table 2, the key issue was poor communication on behalf of the solicitor – this has been the key issue in all my reports since I took up office. Categories 1, 2, 3, 7, 11 and 12 above, all of which relate to communicating with the client, were the basis for 103 of the 156 categories associated with the 33 complaints the Society received – in essence, approximately 66% compared to 65% in 2023/24. So often, my role in dealing with complaints is explaining to the complainant what the solicitor, and in some instances the Society, seems to have been unable to communicate when they have attempted to resolve a complaint. It could be surmised that many of the complaints would not have got to the second tier of the complaints process if the solicitors who had complaints made against them had adopted a more proactive and regular communication approach with their client. I have made this statement in every report that I have produced since taking up office, yet the trend continues.

- 4.6 As with previous reports, the fact that 28 (18%) of the categorised complaints related to the solicitor failing to properly consider the client's complaints under the solicitor's own in-house complaints procedure remains a concern. Whilst the Society has continued to take significant steps to address this issue and remind solicitors of their obligations regarding complaints, it is unacceptable that a solicitor would believe that not dealing appropriately with a complaint from a client who has paid for their services is acceptable. Estimated costs was also an area that was the basis for 18 (12%) of the complaints as set out in categories 9 and 12 in table 2. Overall, these three areas - communication, solicitors own in-house complaints procedure and costs made up 95% of the categorised complaints.
- 4.7 Finally, it is most important to note that the level of complaints against solicitors in Northern Ireland remains very low, unlike in the legal professions elsewhere in the United Kingdom and, in comparison, with many other fields of professional activity. This should be seen, as I have emphasised before, in the light of the enormous volume of transactions that solicitors here must undertake for clients every year. No-one knows how many this must be but given there were 434 firms (excluding sub offices) practising within private practice on January 2025, then I would assume the volumes of transactions are in the thousands.

Chapter 5:

Work of the Lay Observer 2024/25

Review Requests/Outcomes

- 5.1 During this reporting period I received 27 (42 last year) requests from individuals requesting that I investigate their complaints relating to the legal profession. I formally reviewed 6 of these complaints, which had already been reviewed by the Law Society's (the 'Society') Client Complaints Committee (the 'Committee') (Tier 2). This equates to 18% of the complaints that I received, which had already been subject to the Tier 2 process. This compares to the 21% that I reviewed last year. 5 of the complaints were not upheld and 1 was partially upheld.
- 5.2 The remaining 21 complaints I dealt with from complainants where either outside of my remit, or I carried out some remedial investigation to enable me to signpost them to other organisations/bodies who could provide assistance. These queries can be equally as complicated or time consuming, e.g. one complainant sent me over 100 separate emails with attachments over the 12-month period. The frustration for both me and the complainant is the fact that, in many of the complaints I received, there has been the basis for a complaint, but the current legislation does not permit me, or the Society, to accept their complaint. In other cases, the complainants were wishing to complain about legal fees, conduct issues, negligence, barristers or they were outside the 6-month time limit for making a complaint.
- 5.3 I also received correspondence from Members of the Assembly. Their queries related mainly to the lack of powers associated with the Lay Observer and queries regarding the implementation of the full powers associated with the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner (the 'Commissioner').
- 5.4 As with previous reports by the Lay Observer, the cases I received during the period of this report were mainly complex in nature. The complexity derives mainly from the fact that many complaints have multiple categories associated with them, as outlined in the above statistics. The increase in categorised complaints has contributed to the length of time it takes for me to review a case, as I have to satisfy myself that I have reviewed every aspect of the complaint. On average it takes 6 weeks to investigate a complaint from the time I receive it until I issue my final report.

Key Issues

Ignoring the Client Complaint Process

- 5.5 Solicitors failing to properly consider the client's complaint under the solicitor's own in-house complaints procedures is an all too familiar issue in the complaints I reviewed. This issue has appeared every year in my Annual Report as an area of concern, yet it is still a dominant feature of the complaints analysis. In many of the complaints that I reviewed, the Committee just reminded the solicitor of their obligations under Practice Regulations 2008, Schedule 5 (v). I restate my comments from my 2023/24 Annual Report that I would strongly suggest that the Society consider taking a much sterner approach on this issue when deciding on sanctions against a solicitor.

Requests for Extensions/Deadlines

- 5.6 I noted the significant number of times a solicitor asked for extensions to the deadlines for responding to the Society during the investigation process. Whilst I acknowledge that the reasons for the extensions in a few of the requests appeared genuine, in some of the cases I reviewed, the requests were (in my opinion) unjustified as I surmised that the solicitor was just not prioritising the complaint process over other demands on their time. For the complainant this just drags out the process and leaves them in 'limbo'. In one particular case which I partially upheld, it took 11 months from the date the complainant formally registered their complaint with the Society until the date they received the decision of the Committee. Most of the delays emanated from the consistent requests by the solicitor for extensions and claims of non-receipt of requests/documents issued by the Society, as well as challenges to the requests for certain information. I am of the opinion that, at times, there was no practical reason for some of the extension requests, yet the solicitor was still granted the extensions by the Society. The solicitor also at one stage threatened a Judicial Review during the process, which I found to be unacceptable. All of this was tolerated by the Society with no reprimand forthwith.
- 5.7 However, I am aware of the steps the Society have continued to take during this reporting period to ensure their processes are open, fair and transparent for both the complainant and the solicitor

Law Society Enhancements 2023-24

5.8 In all my Annual Reports I have referenced steps that the Society has taken during the reporting period to further enhance their complaints process. During this reporting period the Society has delivered:

- Staff Training
All Case Officers within the complaints team have completed additional training and received accreditation on complaints handling and investigation.
- Training to the Profession
The Society continues to hold their bespoke client complaint CPD series to the profession, which included the following:
 - Engaging with the Lay Complainant
 - Dealing Effectively with In-House Complaints
 - Conveyancing complaints – Regulatory themes arising from conveyancing and effective complaint management
 - Litigation complaints – Regulatory themes arising from litigation
 - Probate complaints – Regulatory themes arising from probate
 - Family Complaints – Regulatory themes arising from family law
 - Risk Management – Implementation of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (NI) 2016

Whilst each of the complaint CPD series presentations contained reference to the pending changes to the complaints sphere, the Risk Management CPD (which is compulsory for all practitioners) was dedicated to educating members on the provisions and impact of the (then) pending commencement of Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the 'Act'), learning from my experience as Commissioner in my role as Lay Observer, and introducing them to the Chair to the new Solicitors Complaints Committee to better understand the expectations upon the profession for the new complaints system.

The Society included a dedicated article within the Winter 2024 Edition of The Writ on the Lay Observer's Annual Report, highlighting the key trends and areas for improvement which practitioners should be cited upon.

- Lay Observer engagement and implementation of the new complaints system

The Society has continued to work with me in my role as Lay Observer by highlighting the annual report and complaints statistics to their members, requesting input from me on my experience of escalated complaints and inviting me to attend and present on some of the CPD presentations to the profession.

The Society has continued to engage with the relevant stakeholders, including with me, the Department of Finance and Bar of Northern Ireland to ensure understanding of the pending changes, agreeing transitional matters and aiming to ensure a smooth implementation of the new complaints system pending commencement of the Act. The Society, in consultation with me, also undertook recruitment of the Chair to the new Solicitors Complaints Committee pending commencement of the Act.

5.9 All of the above demonstrates a willingness within the Society to continue to improve their complaints process for all concerned. It shows their desire to make the process more transparent, and customer focused, whilst still working within the legislative and regulatory framework which governs them and all solicitors in Northern Ireland.

5.10 The Society's response to my last report is attached at **Appendix 1**.

Chapter 6:

Work of the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner

- 6.1 As noted earlier in this report, I am still operating in a dual role, albeit the greater percentage of my time has been devoted to the Lay Observer functions. The Lay Observer role relates only to complaints associated with solicitors and ultimately the Law Society (the 'Society'). The Legal Services Oversight Commissioner (the 'Commissioner') role is more embracing in the context that it relates to both solicitors and barristers. Whilst this report reflects the work of the Lay Observer from April 2024 to March 2025, I will use this chapter of the report to outline the significant developments regarding the implementation of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the 'Act'), at the time of writing – November 2025.
- 6.2 John O'Dowd MLA, the Minister of Finance, brought before the Northern Ireland Assembly the secondary legislation to commence the Act and introduce the new complaints process with effect from 1st September 2025.
- 6.3 Prior to that date, significant work was carried out between me, the Department of Finance, the Society, Bar Council (the 'Bar'), The Benchers and the Lady Chief Justice in the development and finalisation of the new processes necessary to introduce the new complaints process in line with the legislation. This included:
- The appointment of the lay Chairpersons of both the newly established Solicitor Complaints Committee and Bar Complaints Committee.
 - The recruitment and appointment of both the lay and legal members for both Committees.
 - Training of all new Committee members.
 - Drafting and agreement on new procedures and rules which will govern the new process.
 - Completion and sign off of Complaint Handling Plans for both the Society and the Bar.
 - Establishment of new websites providing information and advice on the new process for potential complainants.

- 6.4 There was much debate and drafting to reach the point of final sign off on all of the above. My role has been to ensure that the issues that I consistently highlighted in my previous reports have been taken on board and included in the new process going forward. As previously highlighted, the Society has operated its complaints process under the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 (the '1976 Order'), as amended, prior to 1st September 2025. The 1976 Order provides a very narrow framework within which solicitor complaints operate. The inability to award compensation to those complainants whose complaints have been upheld has consistently been a key issue identified my reports. Much work and discussion have taken place in the past 6 months between all of the stakeholders involved in the new process to finalise the fine detail of the rules and procedures, in particular, inclusion of compensation where the complainant has suggested that there may have been an element of negligence by the solicitor or barrister. This inclusion will make it possible for the new Committees to award compensation to the complainant for loss, inconvenience or distress under the powers contained in the Act. This is a significant change to the current complaints processes currently operated by the Society and Bar.
- 6.5 I am also continuing to work to establish the processes that my office needs to introduce to carry out the full functions of the Commissioner as set out in the Act. Functions such as imposing penalties for the submission of an inadequate complaints handling plan or for the non-submission of a complaints handling plan are all elements of the new Commissioner's office. My new website www.legalcommissioner-ni.org.uk is now live, reflecting the roles and responsibilities of the Commissioner post 1st September 2025.

Chapter 7:

Closing Comments

- 7.1 The positive issues I have outlined in my report again demonstrate the willingness and commitment by the Law Society (the 'Society') to continue to improve the existing complaints process. The improvements that the Society has made to their complaints process has, over the 8 years that I have carried out the functions of the Lay Observer, brought the Society closer to the type of complaints service envisaged under the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.
- 7.2 Whilst it has been a frustrating journey trying to assist with the introduction of the new complaints process, I am delighted that it has become a reality in 2025. I will continue to carry out a dual role as both the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner (the 'Commissioner') and Lay Observer until approximately April 2026 to maintain a tier 3 function in the complaints process for those complaints received prior to the new process being introduced on 1st September 2025.
- 7.3 This Annual Report is presented to the Lady Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, the Permanent Secretary Department of Finance and the Council of the Law Society Northern Ireland, pursuant to Article 42 of the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 and Article 17 of the Solicitors (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. It is also laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly pursuant to Article 42(8) of the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.
- 7.4 I understand the Society will take steps to ensure that every solicitor on the Northern Ireland register receives a copy electronically. **I hope that solicitors will make it their business to review the content of the report and to determine its relevance to the work of their own firms.**



Marian Cree

Legal Services Oversight Commissioner for NI Craigtantlet Buildings

Stoney Road

Belfast

BT4 3SX

Email: marian.cree@legalcommissioner-ni.org.uk

Website:

www.layobserverni.com

www.legalcommissioner-ni.org.uk

Appendix 1:

Law Society response to the Lay Observer 2023/24 Annual Report

Introduction

- 1.1 This is the Law Society of Northern Ireland's formal response to the Lay Observer's Report for 2023/24.
- 1.2 The Society welcomes the Lay Observer's Report, which is the seventh report published by Ms. Marian Cree since her appointment as Northern Ireland's first Legal Services Oversight Commissioner in April 2017.
- 1.3 The Annual Lay Observer's Report will be made available to all Society members.
- 1.4 The Society is committed to continuous improvement in all aspects of the client complaint handling process, particularly given the proposed commencement of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 in September 2025. The Lay Observer continues to play an important role in assisting the Society to improve its effectiveness when handling client complaints.
- 1.5 The Society notes the Lay Observer's comment that this report shows a "continued positive trend in how complaints are registered and handled by the Law Society" whilst acknowledging that "the powers of both the Law Society and my office in dealing with this aspect of complaints handling are limited".
- 1.6 The level of complaints against solicitors in Northern Ireland continues to remain low. This is testament to those within the profession who are involved in large volumes of demanding client transactions each year whilst maintaining high standards of professional service. Complaints Statistics 2023/24
- 1.7 This year the Lay Observer has noted that 5 of the 22 upheld complaints resulted in the solicitor being referred to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal. Furthermore, it is noted that all other upheld cases resulted in some degree of sanction against the solicitor. The Society appreciates the Lay Observer's commentary that "the Law Society continues to take a sterner approach to the area of complaints" and will continue to robustly address cases of inadequate service to ensure high standards are maintained.

- 1.8 As with previous years trends, the most prevalent complaints continue to relate to Family, Conveyancing, Probate and Litigation with Probate making up almost a third of the complaints received in 2023/24. The Society has and will continue to address the common themes arising via its bespoke Complaints CPD series.
- 1.9 In 2023/24 the Lay Observer received 42 requests from complainants to review their complaints (a rise on 34 from 2022/23) and undertook a formal review of 9 of these referrals. The Lay Observer notes that she dealt with a further 33 queries (another significant rise from 19 in 2022/23) which she was unable to progress as they were beyond her remit.
- 1.10 The Lay Observer stated that “the frustration for both me and the complainant is the fact that, in many of the complaints I received, there has been the basis for a complaint, but the current legislation does not permit me or the Law Society to accept their complaint” and further stated that “often my role in dealing with complaints is explaining to the complainant what the solicitor, and in some instances the Law Society, seems to have been unable to communicate when they have attempted to resolve a complaint”.
- 1.11 Whilst the frustration is shared, the Society remains mindful that it must work within the confines of the current legislative and regulatory framework pending commencement of the 2016 Act, for which preparatory works continue to be undertaken with a focus on simple language and a consumer friendly process.
- Key Issues
- 1.12 The Lay Observer has identified the following key issues within her report:
- 1.13 Ignoring the client complaints process - The Lay Observer noted that this is “an all too familiar issue” which has appeared in every Annual Report to date and has strongly suggested a much sterner approach when deciding on sanctions. Referrals to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal continue to be made where a solicitor fails to engage with the complaints process and accounted for 2 of the 5 referrals made in this reporting period. The Society continues to deliver a bespoke complaints series of CPD which focuses on ensuring the profession understand their regulatory obligations upon receiving a complaint. This is used as a forum to reiterate the importance of responding to a client complaint, the Society, and the standards of engagement that are expected with the complaint process.

- 1.14 Extensions - The Lay Observer notes that a significant number of times a solicitor asked for extensions to deadlines which “just drags out the process and leaves (the complainant) in limbo”. This concern was brought to the attention of the Client Complaints Committee during the reporting period and as a result the Society implemented an Extension Requests Policy across the Professional Conduct Department to ensure that extensions requests are only permitted in exceptional circumstances. It is envisaged that the introduction of this policy will ensure progression of complaints to conclusion for the benefit of both the complainant and solicitor.
- 1.15 Unsigned terms of business letter - The Lay Observer identified that in a number of complaints, a retainer letter produced during the complaint process remained unsigned by the client and commented that “this practice appears to be acceptable to the Law Society as no reprimand was issued to any solicitor for adapting this practice”. The Lay Observer goes on to state that she “would like to see the Law Society address this issue of unsigned letters as, in essence, it is the contract between the client and the solicitor and therefore it should not be acceptable to allow it to be unsigned”. The signing of a terms of engagement by a client and the retention of the same on file is not a mandated regulatory requirement and therefore a reprimand cannot be issued. This is also not a requirement in any other of the four jurisdictions and prescription would come with difficulty. The Society is content that the current requirements with regards client care information and costs are adequately addressed via the Solicitors (Client Communication) Practice Regulations 2008 and that compliance with the same is monitored effectively.
- 1.16 Lack of clarity in solicitor and Law Society response - The Lay Observer highlighted that “a number of complaints I believe would not have reached my stage in the complaints process if the correspondence from both the solicitor and the law society was clear and written in layman’s terms”. The Society thanks the Lay Observer for bringing this to the attention of the Chairperson of the Client Complaints Committee during the reporting period. The Society has reflected on communications issued and has made necessary improvements with a lay focus where necessary. Law Society Enhancements 2023/24
- 1.17 The Lay Observer sets out in her report the significant steps the Society has taken during the reporting period to ensure the complaint process is open, fair and transparent to both the complainant and solicitor and acknowledges that this demonstrates a willingness to continue to improve the complaints process for all concerned.

- 1.18 The Society appreciates the Lay Observer’s commendation of the continued enhancements made by the Society which recognises the Society’s “desire to make the process more transparent and customer focused, whilst still working within the legislative and regulatory framework which governs them and all solicitors in Northern Ireland”.

Concluding Remarks

- 1.19 The Law Society welcomes the report of the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner in her capacity as Lay Observer for Northern Ireland.”.
- 1.20 The Law Society appreciates that the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner acknowledges the Society’s willingness and commitment to continue to improve the complaints process.
- 1.21 The Society looks forward to working in collaboration with the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner particularly during the transitional arrangements of the coming year as the complaints landscape changes upon commencement of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (NI) 2016 in September 2025.