

# Appendix 1 - Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA) Template – Accessible Version

## SECTION 1 – Defining the activity subject to Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016

### 1A. Name of Public Authority.

Department of Justice – Enabling Access to Justice – Legal Aid Remuneration

### 1B. Please provide a short title which describes the activity being undertaken by the Public Authority that is subject to Section 1(1) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

Criminal Legal Aid Fees for Directly Committed Cases to the Crown Court

### 1C. Please indicate which category the activity specified in Section 1B above relates to.

- Developing a  Policy  Strategy  Plan
- Adopting a  Policy  Strategy  Plan
- Implementing a  Policy  Strategy  Plan
- Revising a  Policy  Strategy  Plan
- Designing a Public Service
- Delivering a Public Service

### 1D. Please provide the official title (if any) of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service document or initiative relating to the category indicated in Section 1C above.

Criminal Legal Aid Fees for Directly Committed Cases to the Crown Court

### 1E. Please provide details of the aims and/or objectives of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service.

For Committal Reform the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Act (NI) 2022 was implemented to simplify the committal process. In phase 1 the use of oral evidence during committal proceedings was eliminated for new cases. Direct

Committal is phase 2 of the Committal Reform Programme, being introduced to speed up justice. Direct Committal is overseen by the Criminal Justice Board and is part of a wider Speeding up Justice Programme.

Direct Committal removes the traditional committal process for the most serious offences from the magistrates' court with most cases being transferred to the Crown Court at the first court appearance (depending on the complexity of the case). The aim is to reduce the number of hearings and ensure that serious offences are dealt with more efficiently and expeditiously. Therefore reducing costs and delays, improving the experience of victims and witnesses, and lowering attrition rates.

The role of Enabling Access to Justice Directorate is to support the Justice Performance Team and the Speeding up Justice Programme by developing and introducing legal aid fees for directly committed cases. This includes remuneration for:

- a Direct Committal Hearing in the magistrates' court
- additional Case Management Hearings in the Crown Court
- Discontinuance for those cases in the Crown Court
- an application to dismiss for those cases in the Crown Court.

It is anticipated that Direct Committal will commence in November 2026.

**1F. What definition of 'rural' is the Public Authority using in respect of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?**

- Population Settlements of less than 5,000 (Default definition).
- Other definition (Provide details and the rationale below).
- A definition of 'rural is not applicable'

Details of alternative definition of 'rural' used.

N/A

Rationale for using alternative definition of 'rural'.

N/A

Reasons why a definition of 'rural' is not applicable.

N/A



## SECTION 2 - Understanding the impact of the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service

**2A. Is the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service likely to impact on people in rural areas?**

Yes  No

If the response is **NO GO TO Section 2E.**

**2B. Please explain how the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas.**

The policy proposals will impact equally on legal practitioners in both rural and urban areas as they will have access to the same fees, regardless of where they work.

**2C. If the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently from people in urban areas, please explain how it is likely to impact on people in rural areas differently.**

This policy relates to the introduction of fees for directly committed cases to the Crown Court. It will not impact legal practitioners differently, regardless of their geographical location.

**2D. Please indicate which of the following rural policy areas the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is likely to primarily impact on.**

- Rural Businesses
- Rural Tourism
- Rural Housing
- Jobs or Employment in Rural Areas
- Education or Training in Rural Areas
- Broadband or Mobile Communications in Rural Areas
- Transport Services or Infrastructure in Rural Areas
- Health or Social Care Services in Rural Areas

- Poverty in Rural Areas
- Deprivation in Rural Areas
- Rural Crime or Community Safety
- Rural Development
- Agri-Environment
- Other (Please state)

N/A

**If the response to Section 2A was YES GO TO Section 3A.**

**2E. Please explain why the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service is NOT likely to impact on people in rural areas.**

This policy relates to the introduction of fees for directly committed cases to the Crown Court. It will not impact legal practitioners differently, regardless of their geographical location.

## SECTION 3 - Identifying the Social and Economic Needs of Persons in Rural Areas

**3A. Has the Public Authority taken steps to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas that are relevant to the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service?**

Yes  No

If the response is **NO GO TO Section 3E.**

**3B. Please indicate which of the following methods or information sources were used by the Public Authority to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.**

- Consultation with Rural Stakeholders
- Consultation with Other Organisations
- Surveys or Questionnaires
- Published Statistics
- Research Papers
- Other Publications
- Other Methods or Information Sources (include details in Question 3C below).

**3C. Please provide details of the methods and information sources used to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas including relevant dates, names of organisations, titles of publications, website references, details of surveys or consultations undertaken etc.**

Engagement with the legal professions by the Justice Performance Team

Impact Screening and Assessments have been completed

A public consultation will be undertaken

Legal Aid Annual Statistics to March 2024

Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland, Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Strategy 2024-28

The Law Society of Northern Ireland Access to Justice Under Threat

A joint submission on the draft Northern Ireland Executive Budget 2022-25  
Stakeholder engagement meetings

The Law Society of Northern Ireland

The Bar of Northern Ireland

**3D. Please provide details of the social and economic needs of people in rural areas which have been identified by the Public Authority?**

This policy relates to the introduction of fees for directly committed cases to the Crown Court. It will not impact legal practitioners differently, regardless of their geographical location.

There are no proposed changes to scope or eligibility for legal aid and therefore no impact on the citizen.

**If the response to Section 3A was YES GO TO Section 4A.**

**3E. Please explain why no steps were taken by the Public Authority to identify the social and economic needs of people in rural areas?**

N/A

## **SECTION 4 - Considering the Social and Economic Needs of Persons in Rural Areas**

**4A. Please provide details of the issues considered in relation to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas.**

The Department considered issues in relation to the review of criminal legal services by HHJ Burgess.

## SECTION 5 - Influencing the Policy, Strategy, Plan or Public Service

**5A. Has the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, been influenced by the rural needs identified?**

Yes  No

**If the response is NO GO TO Section 5C.**

**5B. Please explain how the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or delivery of the Public Service, has been influenced by the rural needs identified.**

N/A

**If the response to Section 5A was YES GO TO Section 6A.**

**5C. Please explain why the development, adoption, implementation or revising of the Policy, Strategy or Plan, or the design or the delivery of the Public Service, has NOT been influenced by the rural needs identified.**

This policy relates to the introduction of fees for directly committed cases to the Crown Court. It will not impact legal practitioners differently, regardless of their geographical location.

There are no proposed changes to scope or eligibility for legal aid and therefore no impact on the citizen.

## SECTION 6 - Documenting and Recording

**6A. Please tick below to confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained by the Public Authority and relevant information on the Section 1 activity compiled in accordance with paragraph 6.7 of the guidance.**

I confirm that the RNIA Template will be retained and relevant information compiled.

**Rural Needs Impact Assessment undertaken by:**

Linda Arneill

**Position/Grade:**

Deputy Principal

**Division/Branch:**

Enabling Access to Justice Division – Legal Aid Remuneration

**Signature:**

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Date:**

15 April 2026

**Rural Needs Impact Assessment approved by:**

Stewart Malcolm

**Position/Grade:**

G7

**Division/Branch:**

Enabling Access to Justice Division – Legal Aid Remuneration

**Signature:**

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Date:**

23 April 2026