

Written Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

Accelerated Review of Criminal Legal Aid

Wednesday 3rd June 2026

Naomi Long MLA

Minister of Justice

Written Ministerial Statement

Department of Justice – Accelerated Review of Criminal Legal Aid

Following my previous statements on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme, I write to provide the Assembly with an update on the Accelerated Review of Criminal Legal Aid.

The Review concluded on 27 April 2026. I am grateful to His Honour Judge Tom Burgess and John Miskelly, Associate Strategic Advisor with the Strategic Investment Board, who jointly led the Review, for their efforts to complete what was a substantive undertaking at pace and for the rigour they brought to the process. Having considered the Report, I am persuaded by their analysis and have decided to accept all the recommendations in full and will now take the necessary steps to implement:

- A further 8.66 percent increase to all criminal legal aid fees;
- An 8.66 percent increase in counsel fees for preparing and submitting skeleton arguments on sentencing in the Crown Court; and
- A 26.05 percent increase to hourly rates for Exceptional Preparation in the Crown Court.

In line with the observations of the Review, I am also commissioning work to develop an enhanced evidence base to support additional changes to Exceptional Preparation hourly rates and criteria and other associated fees to be implemented early in the next mandate.

In recognition of their continued efforts to deliver justice, and the applicability of the rationales supporting the Review recommendations, I have decided to extend the general 8.66 percent uplift to civil and family proceedings also. Following separate constructive engagement with the Solicitors Criminal Bar Association, I am also initiating a PACE remuneration pilot which aims to enhance early engagement to improve disposal times for the benefit of victims, witnesses and defendants and the public purse in the longer term.

As Members will be aware, these decisions follow the very significant steps I have already taken to address concerns of the professions That includes the 16 percent increase in fees I implemented earlier this year, which resulted in an annual increase in legal aid spend of £11.5m. I also took the unprecedented step of backdating the increase to December 2024, at a cost of £6.15m.

The steps I am announcing today will add significantly to that investment and will result in additional expenditure of £5.4m per annum. I am making that investment in the interests of the system, the victims, witnesses and defendants who have affected by the CBA action and in recognition of the ongoing commitment of those members of the profession who have continued to deliver services to their clients and who have continued to engage constructively in an effort to help build the evidence that has enabled me to make these decisions.

I met separately today with representatives of the SCBA and CBA to apprise them of my decisions and welcome the positive feedback received from the SCBA. I understand representatives of the CBA will now liaise with their members. I await updates in that regard and will of course provide further updates to the Assembly in due course.

Naomi Long
Minister of Justice