

15 May 2025

REFERENCE: FOI25142

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for your request for information dated 11 April 2025 and detailed below.

In the public interest and under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I am requesting access to the following information:

1. How many criminal court cases were delayed beyond six months from initial charge to final verdict in 2023 and so far in 2024?
2. What measures have been implemented in 2023 and 2024 to reduce case backlog in Magistrates' and Crown Courts?
3. How many complaints were filed by members of the public against police, prison officers, or court staff in 2023 and 2024, and how many were upheld?
4. What steps have been taken since January 2023 to improve access to legal aid for low-income individuals?
5. How many civil legal aid applications were submitted, approved, and rejected in 2023 and so far in 2024?
6. What policies or reforms were introduced in 2023 and 2024 to improve access to justice for victims of domestic abuse?
7. How many prisoners were held on remand for more than 12 months as of the latest data in 2024?
8. What investment has been made in court digitalisation and remote hearings during 2023 and 2024?

9. How many interpreters were employed or contracted for court services in 2023 and 2024, and what is the average response time when one is requested?
10. What training or awareness programmes were conducted for judicial staff in 2023 and 2024 on equality, diversity, and trauma-informed practices?

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives you two rights of access when you write to us asking for information. You have the right to know whether we hold recorded information falling in scope of your request, and you have the right to receive this recorded information subject to cost limit or exemption.

The information you have requested is provided below:

1. How many criminal court cases were delayed beyond six months from initial charge to final verdict in 2023 and so far in 2024?

Number of cases disposed in NI courts taking more than 6 months from charged/informed date to court disposal date, 2023 and 2024

	<u>2023</u>	<u>2024</u>
Cases	11,736	11,217
% of all Cases	44%	43%

Note:

- Figures relate to cases dealt with at both Crown Court and magistrates' courts.
- Figures relate to cases brought on behalf of the PSNI, NCA, Harbour and Airport police in Northern Ireland that resulted in a court disposal.
- Figures relate to cases disposed at court during the 12 months for each calendar year specified.
- Court recess dates are not taken into account.
- Appeals are not included.
- Figures do not include cases where the case was dismissed but an out of court diversionary disposal was administered (with the exception of such cases concluded at Crown Court), fixed penalty registrations, penalty notices for disorder or cases resulting from a breach of a court order. Successful youth engagement cases were also excluded.
- The figures relate to non-validated information from management information systems and should not be considered official statistics.

2. What measures have been implemented in 2023 and 2024 to reduce case backlog in Magistrates' and Crown Courts?

Reducing the backlogs of cases, created as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, in both the magistrates' and Crown Courts remains a key priority of the Criminal Justice Board (CJB), who are the main strategic oversight group for the criminal justice system.

New ways of working have been introduced in the years following the pandemic including making better use of technology and digital platforms. Up to and including 2024 initiatives that have been introduced are:

- expanding the number available courts;
- remote access for defendants, victims and witnesses through 'livelinks' and remote evidence centres;
- the abolition of oral evidence, removing the need for victims and witnesses to give oral evidence during committal proceedings in the magistrates' court;
- the electronic exchange of digital evidence between PSNI, PPS, NICTS and the legal profession;
- the 'No File Decision' pilot - changing how 'No File Decisions (ie no prosecutions) are managed between PSNI and PPS.
- under 13's voluntary protocol – a judge-led voluntary protocol to expedite serious sexual offences cases involving child witnesses aged under 18.

In January 2023, following a wider review of the justice system to identify areas in need of transformation, the Criminal Justice Board prioritised a programme of work which seeks to reform the way in which cases are handled, getting the most serious cases to court more quickly, reducing the demands on courts and the wider system, enhancing our digital capabilities, and finding better, more efficient ways of dealing with low level offending behaviour.

This programme incorporates continued efforts to reduce backlogs within the courts and is built around five key workstreams which will take forward existing work on committal reform, existing and emerging work in the digital arena and explore other areas for efficiencies such as early engagement, court remits and out of court disposals.

3. How many complaints were filed by members of the public against police, prison officers, or court staff in 2023 and 2024, and how many were upheld?

In 2023 there were 6 complaints filed by members of the public against court staff, none of which were upheld. In 2024 there were 6 complaints filed by members of the public against court staff, two of which were upheld.

There were 17 complaints filed in 2023 and 2024 by members of the public against prison officers, with 1 upheld.

4. What steps have been taken since January 2023 to improve access to legal aid for low-income individuals?

Since 2023 we have been conducting a review of Legal Aid, which included desk based research on legal aid in other jurisdictions, meeting with relevant stakeholders, issuing a call for evidence and the development of a programme for reform. There are two tests for legal aid. These are the financial eligibility test and the merits test. Responses from the call for evidence highlighted concerns surrounding the barriers presented by the financial eligibility thresholds and how they had not been reviewed for some time. The actual application process was also viewed as complex and time consuming.

Following consideration of the evidence, Minister Long launched a Reform Programme in December 2024 which includes actions to review the eligibility thresholds with a view to extending the pool of people eligible, to simplify the process, and to align the thresholds in relation to Criminal and Civil legal aid where possible to make them fairer and easier to understand. Policy proposals are in train and will form part of an extensive consultation which should significantly address the barriers for those on low incomes.

5. How many civil legal aid applications were submitted, approved, and rejected in 2023 and so far in 2024?

Civil legal aid: Number of applications submitted, granted and refused, 2023 and 2024

	Applications submitted		Applications granted		Applications refused	
	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024
Advice & Assistance (Civil)	7,700	6,515	5,051	4,860	132	217
Representation Lower	8,961	8,809	7,689	7,606	37	25
Representation Higher	10,410	10,555	6,634	8,039	1,140	1,271
Exceptional Funding	42	65	24	26	2	18
All Civil	27,113	25,944	19,398	20,531	1,311	1,531

Source: Legal Services Agency NI

Notes:

1. The above figures constitute Management Information and may be subject to change.
2. As an application can be submitted and have an outcome determined (granted / refused) in different calendar years, the two sets of figures presented in the above Table should be considered independently.
3. Applications refused reflect the outcome at the first decision, of which a small number may be subsequently granted on appeal following the provision of additional and more complete information.

4. In addition to applications being granted and refused, a substantial proportion will also have been 'Withdrawn' or have an outcome of 'Undetermined' where an applicant has refused the offer of legal aid with an associated applicant contribution.

6. What policies or reforms were introduced in 2023 and 2024 to improve access to justice for victims of domestic abuse?

As part of the implementation of the Gillen Review into Serious Sexual Offences, the Department established two Remote Evidence Centres (RECs) in Belfast and Craigavon, in addition to the existing NSPCC-led facility in Derry/Londonderry. RECs have already proven they can deliver important benefits to victims enabling them to give their best evidence in a more relaxed environment where there is no chance they will encounter the defendant or their supporters in or around the court building on the day of the trial.

The conviction rate for all cases that used a REC in 2024 was 91% and so we are hopeful that RECs will continue to contribute to the longer term objectives of the Gillen Review by helping to increase reporting of sexual offences, reduce attrition and assist in enhancing public confidence in the criminal justice system.

While the RECs were primarily established to support victims of sexual offences, victims of domestic abuse also have a right to give their evidence remotely from a REC as a Special Measure permitted by Article 5 (5)(c) of The Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

In the autumn of 2023, Presiding District Judge (Magistrates Court) Keown, proposed piloting a Domestic Abuse Contest Court (DACC) where several contests would be scheduled on the same day with all complainants based in the Belfast REC. The first DACC was held on 9 December 2023 with a 7 further DACC days having taken place to date.

The new Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031 and Performance Framework launched in September 2024 and can be found at [Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031 | Department of Justice](#) along with the action plan.

The Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime represents all victims of crime but also recognises the specific needs of vulnerable victims and gives specific attention to victims of domestic and sexual abuse and to victims of hate crime.

Additional funding is provided to the Commissioner's Office from the Victims of Crime Fund for a Policy and Research Officer post to focus specifically on domestic and sexual abuse and hate crime. This role supports the development of policy and promotes the work of the Commissioner in this area.

7. How many prisoners were held on remand for more than 12 months as of the latest data in 2024?

529 inmates served more than 365 days on remand. This is showing any inmate committed after September 2005 and released before 31/12/2024.

8. What investment has been made in court digitalisation and remote hearings during 2023 and 2024?

2023/24 - £757k

2024/25 - £420K

9. How many interpreters were employed or contracted for court services in 2023 and 2024, and what is the average response time when one is requested?

Between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023, 262 interpreters were contracted by NICTS to service a total of 2,296 bookings.

Between 1 January 2024 and 31 December 2024, 268 interpreters were contracted by NICTS to service a total of 2,184 bookings.

The average response time between NICTS requesting a booking for an interpreter and receiving confirmation from the service provider that an interpreter will be provided to attend court is 5.86 days.

Bookings for an interpreter to attend court is made days/weeks/months in advance of the interpreter being required.

10. What training or awareness programmes were conducted for judicial staff in 2023 and 2024 on equality, diversity, and trauma-informed practices?

We can confirm that the NICTS does not hold the information requested under the FOIA. Statutory responsibility for the provision and content of training for the judiciary rests with the Lady Chief Justice as Head of the Judiciary in NI, in line with Section 12 of the Justice (NI) Act 2002, and the judiciary are not a public body for the purposes of FOIA (they are not listed under Schedule 1 of the Act).

If you are unhappy with the result of your request for information you may request an internal review within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you request an internal review please do so in writing stating the reasons to the address above.

If following an internal review you were to remain dissatisfied you may make a complaint to the Information Commissioner and ask the Commissioner to investigate whether the DOJ has complied with the terms of the FOIA. You can write to the Information Commissioner at:

Information Commissioner
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

The Commissioner will not investigate a complaint unless an internal review procedure has been carried out.

Further details on the role of the Information Commissioner and the handling of appeals can be found at: www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk

Yours sincerely

Records & Information Manager