

Legal Services Agency Corporate Plan 2025-26 to 2027-28 and Business Plan 2026-27



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnystrie O tha Laa

Contents

Chief Executive's Introduction	2
Our Vision, Mission and Values.....	3
Our Values.....	4
The Role of the Agency in Northern Ireland	5
How We Deliver	6
The 2026-27 Landscape.....	7
Applications Granted, 2024-25 and 2025-26	7
Applications Granted and Fund Expenditure, by Category of Service, 2025-26	8
Key Achievements 2025-26.....	9
Service Delivery.....	9
Policy Development.....	10
People.....	10
Systems Development.....	11
Governance, Accountability and Decision Making	11
Communication and Information	12
Financial and Operating Environment 2025-26	13
2026-27 Position.....	14
Our Strategic Objectives and Priorities	15
Our Pillars.....	15
Strategic Objectives.....	16
Agency Business Plan 2026-27	19
Key performance indicators	19
Annex A Organisation Chart.....	28

Chief Executive's Introduction



I am pleased to present the Legal Services Agency's (the Agency) Business Plan for 2026-27. This is the second Business Plan from our 2025-26 to 2027-28 Corporate Plan. The Business Plan continues to address the strategic objectives and priorities set out in the Corporate Plan and builds on the progress made during 2025-26. This Plan has been approved by the Justice Minister, based on an indicative budget allocation, and is subject to review once a final budget has been set.

The Agency delivered all but one of the targets set in its Business Plan for 2025-26, exceeding a significant number of the targets.

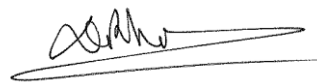
The Agency commenced the year with the highest budget allocation in the history of legal aid of £120.9million (including legacy inquests). This enabled the Agency to deliver services at a consistent level throughout the period. As a result of the introduction of new remuneration arrangements, the Agency successfully processed additional payments of almost £7million without any reduction in the

level of services delivered. The total sums paid in the year, inclusive of legacy inquests was £121million.

The Agency supported individual applicants for legal aid by processing applications within its target times and authorised 19,195 instances of advice, assistance and representation for civil legal services.

The Business Plan for 2026-27 continues to build on the success of our digital platform, improves our key performance metrics, develops our staff and further refines the quality and controls within the legal aid system. The Agency will work collaboratively with Departmental colleagues to support its reform agenda and collaborate with the Law Society and Bar to deliver awareness sessions and enhance our working relationships.

Once again, I acknowledge the dedication and commitment of each member of staff in the delivery of the Agency's performance. The Agency has a performance culture which we will build on with the ongoing support of staff.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Andrews', with a horizontal line underneath.

Paul Andrews
Chief Executive

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Our Vision, Mission and Values

Each initiative the Agency undertakes moves it forward to achieve its vision.

Our Vision

- To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.

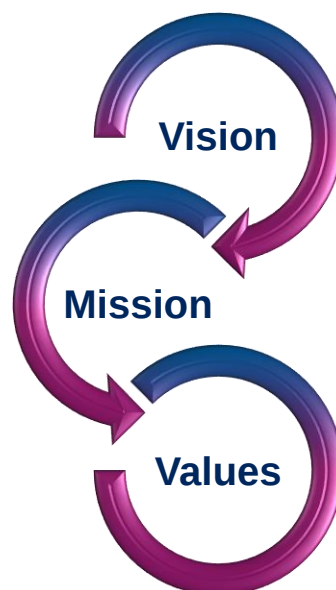
Mission Statement

Facilitate an effective justice system by:

making timely, clear and consistent decisions on the grant of legal aid and the assessment of bills for services provided;

providing timely and useful information, training and advice for users and providers of publicly funded legal services; and

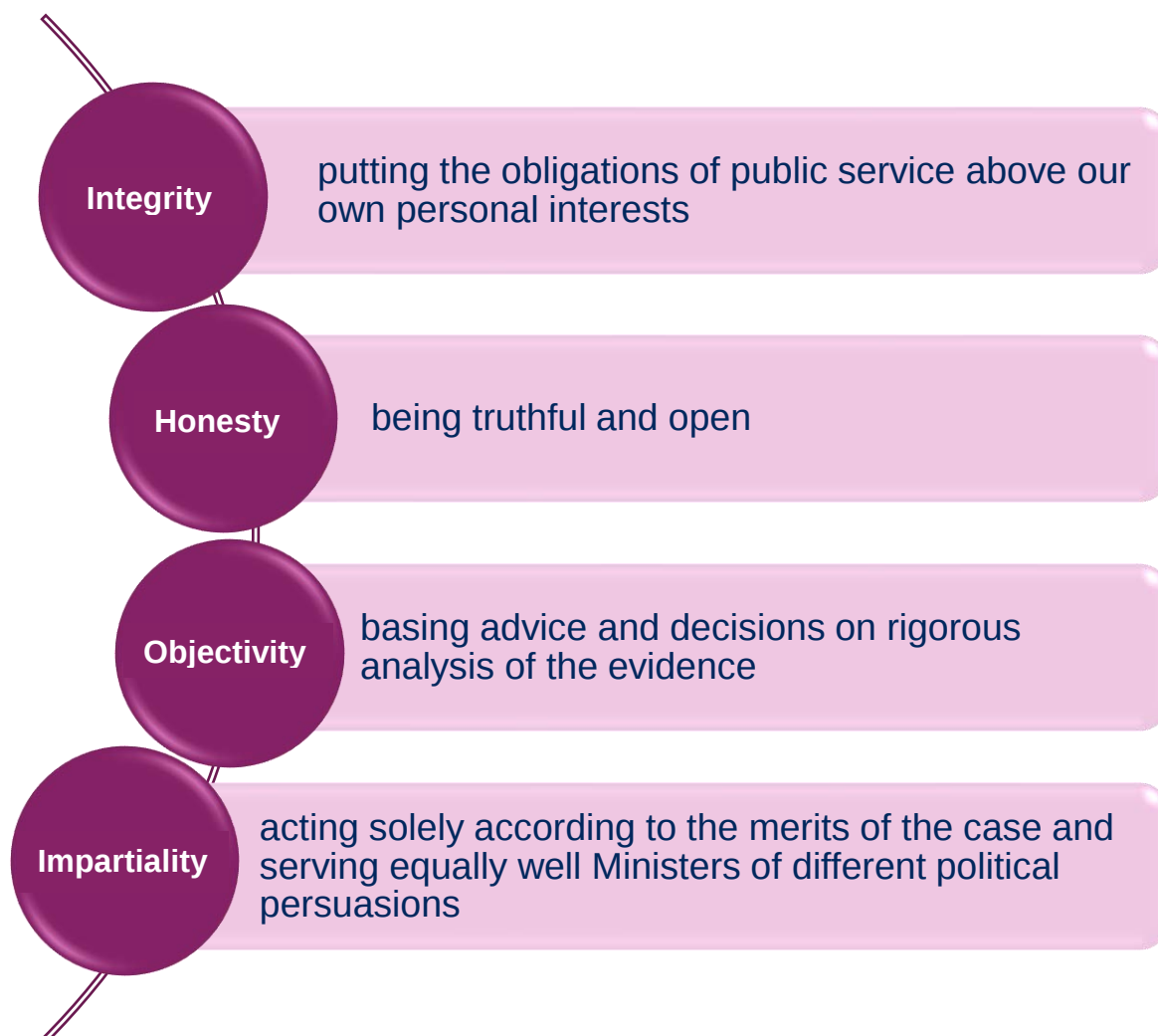
providing comprehensive and insightful analysis and advice in support of policy development.



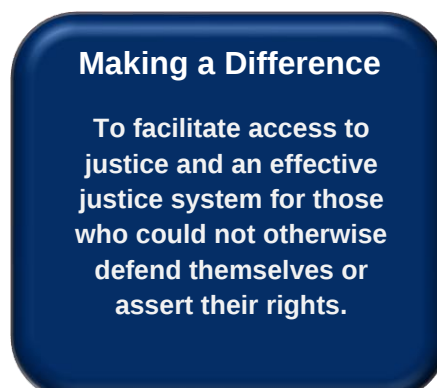
“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Our Values

All of us within the Agency seek to uphold the [Northern Ireland Civil Service \(NICS\) values](#) of:



Through displaying our values, we are committed to:



“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

The Role of the Agency in Northern Ireland

The Agency supports the justice system and enables access to justice by administering publicly funded legal services impartially, effectively and efficiently within the established governing legislative and policy framework.



The Agency works closely within the Department of Justice (DoJ) to achieve the Department's wider strategic objectives. It also works in partnership with providers of services to enhance customer service delivery and to ensure that legal services are available to those who meet the statutory eligibility tests, which support those in greatest need. It also ensures that publicly funded services reflect overall budgetary constraints.

The Agency decides on applications for civil legal services against the statutory financial and legal tests to determine whether an individual should receive support. The Courts are responsible for granting criminal legal aid for defendants in criminal cases. The Agency also makes payments to the legal profession for services provided under both the criminal legal aid and civil legal aid services schemes.

As an Executive Agency within DoJ, the Agency operates under the direction and control of the Minister of Justice. However, the Chief Executive is also a Statutory Office Holder, as Director of Legal Aid Casework (the Director), with obligations to take decisions in relation to individual civil legal aid decisions in Northern Ireland, in accordance with the relevant legislative provisions and independent from any Ministerial or Departmental interference.

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

How We Deliver

	Service Delivery	Policy Development	People	Systems Development	Governance and Accountability	Communications
Deciding applications for civil legal services in respect of advice, assistance, and representation	●					
Authorising independent legal representation for applicants to enable them to enforce and protect their rights	●					
Deciding requests for civil and criminal authorities to include expert witnesses and interpreter/translator requests	●					
Assessing and paying bills received for civil and criminal legal aid	●					
Conducting internal reviews and redeterminations of decisions as necessary	●					
Operational delivery of interpreting services	●					
Supporting the independent civil legal services appeals function	●					
Investigating and tackling fraud and error					●	
Registering firms, solicitors and barristers who do legal aid work	●					●
Maintaining systems, procedures and relationships which support all our key activities and the wider strategic aims of the DoJ		●	●	●		●
Supporting the development and implementation of legal aid reform		●		●		●
Processing all business in a modern, digitally enabled and sustainable way to deliver a high-quality user focused service			●	●		

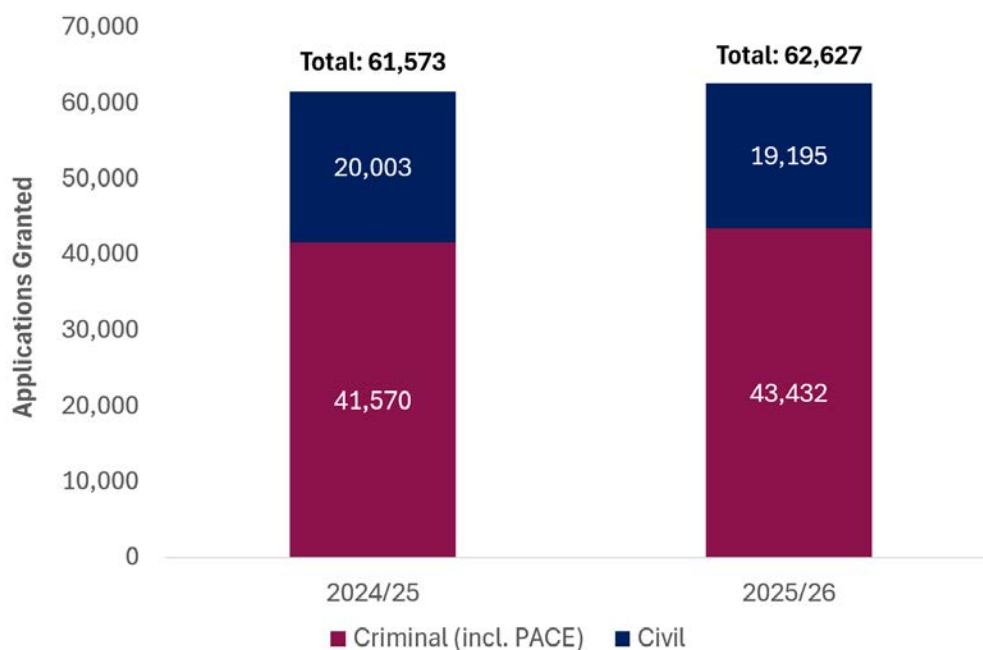
Our Organisational Structure is included at [Annex A](#).

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

The 2026-27 Landscape

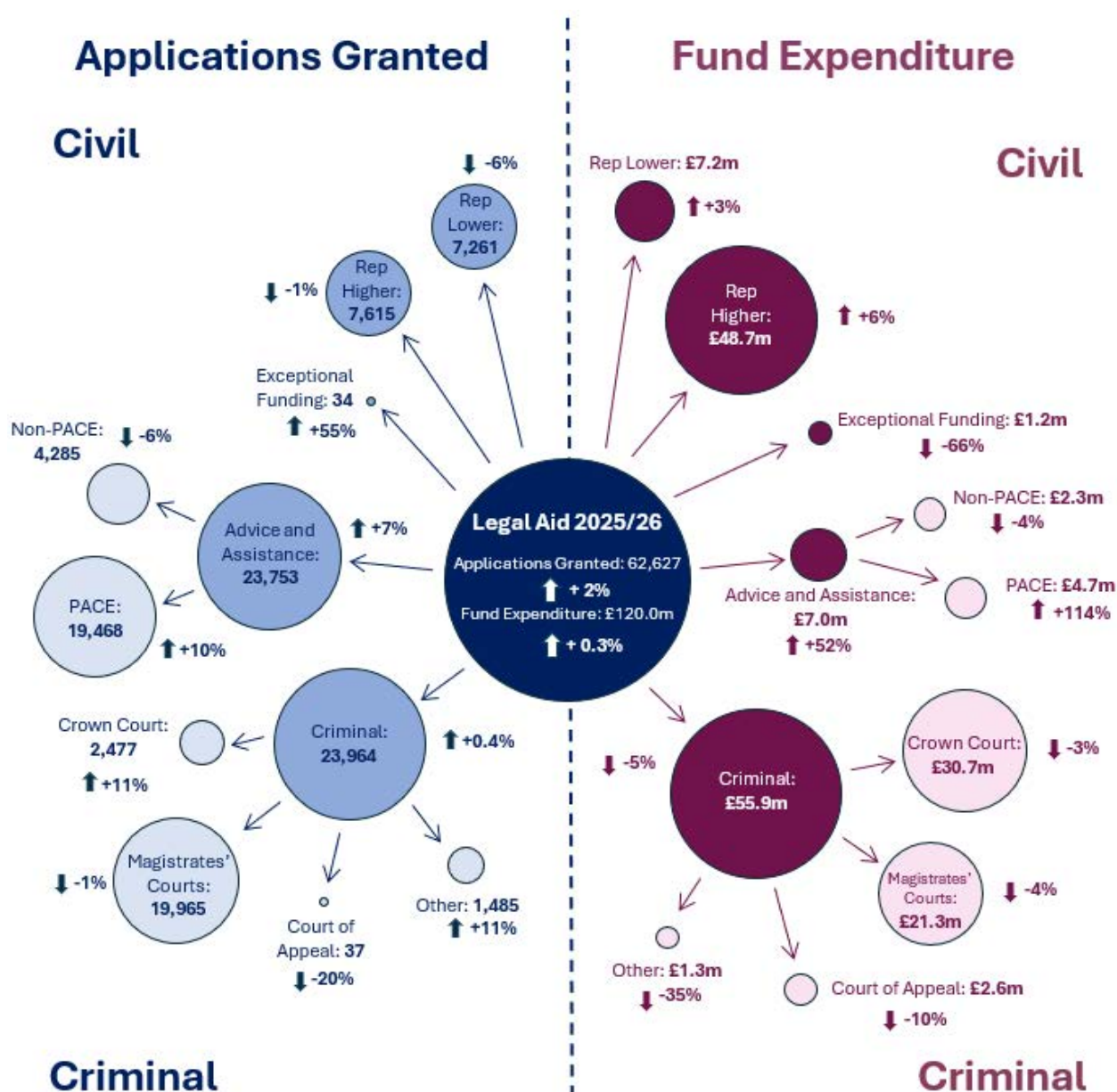
In 2025-26, a total of 62,627 Legal Aid applications were granted, a 1.7% increase on 2024-25 (61,573). A further breakdown by Category of Service shows that while grants of Criminal Legal Aid (including Advice and Assistance PACE) increased by 4.5% to 43,432, grants of Civil Legal Services (Advice and Assistance Non-PACE, Representation Lower, Representation Higher and Exceptional Funding) decreased by 4.0% to 19,195.

Applications Granted, 2024-25 and 2025-26



“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Applications Granted and Fund Expenditure, by Category of Service, 2025-26



Footnotes:

1. Arrow and percentage denote difference to 2024/25, with direction and +/- symbol illustrating an increase or decrease.
2. Expenditure figures represent fund expenditure only and have been rounded for presentational purposes. Subsequently, totals may differ to a sum of sub-categories.

"To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety."

Key Achievements 2025-26

The progress against 2025-26 objectives is as follows:

✓	Completed/Achieved
🕒	In Progress
✗	Not Achieved



Service Delivery

Action	Progress
Determine properly presented applications for civil legal services and criminal exceptionality within Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).	✓ *targets were met for non-emergency applications for representation lower and higher and for all service levels for emergency applications. Target for non-emergency exceptional funding was not met. Only 1 case was processed outside the timescale.
Consistently pay properly presented bills to ensure full annual legal aid budget is utilised throughout the year	✓
Process amendment requests within KPIs.	✓
Process authority requests within KPIs.	✓
Process reviews, redeterminations and appeals of decisions within KPIs.	✓
Support profession to improve quality of bills submitted	✓
Support the independent appeals process	✓
Enhance our debt processes to maximize income collection.	✓

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Policy Development

Action	Progress
Support the development and delivery of departmental projects, including legal aid reform, Themis and the Statutory Registration Scheme in accordance with Departmental priorities and timescales.	✓



People

Action	Progress
Facilitate and enhance staff skills and knowledge and develop leadership.	✓
Promote health and wellbeing.	✓
Increase staff satisfaction scores through addressing staff feedback.	✓

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Systems Development

Action	Progress
Deliver programme of enhancements to LAMS to improve user experience, governance controls and support policy initiatives	✓
Formally adopt our Digital Strategy.	✓
Ensure provision of support services for our systems is in place.	✓



Governance, Accountability and Decision Making

Action	Progress
Implement our Counter Fraud Strategy.	✓
Measure and reduce error within the legal aid system.	✓
Timely preparation and publication of our Annual Report and Accounts.	✓
Improving the estimated value of our legal aid provisions.	✓

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Communication and Information

Action	Progress
Develop and deliver programme of awareness and training initiatives.	✓
Publish Official Statistics	✓
Delivery of enhanced Management Information.	✓
Develop and implement a Communications Strategy	✓
Maintain effective group forums between the Agency and professional bodies.	✓

Financial and Operating Environment

2025-26

The total opening 2025-26 Budget for the Agency was £129.8million - approximately £20million more than the opening position for 2024-25 which continued the pattern of increasing opening budgets seen in recent years. This afforded £120.9million to the Legal Aid Fund (Incl. Legacy Inquests).

	Opening Budget	In Year Budget Adjustments	Closing Budget
	24/25	24/25	24/25
	£k	£k	£k
Staff costs	9,146	(698)	8,448
Non-staff costs	1,467	(25)	1,442
Receipts	(1,800)	0	(1,800)
Legal Aid - General	119,669	0	119,669
Legal Aid - Legacy Inquests	1,274	(625)	649
Unringfenced Resource DEL	129,756	(1,348)	128,408

In-year challenges included the introduction of a range of new fees as part of the Legal Aid Reform Programme which resulted in the Agency administering approximately £7million of additional expenditure. In the final quarter of 2025-26, barristers withdrew their services in Crown Court cases. This resulted in a significant reduction in the number of Crown Court bills submitted in the final quarter of the financial year. The Agency proactively addressed this reduction in Crown Court bills by pursuing responses to bills which had been queried with practitioners and expedited claims which had been held pending legal challenges. As a result of these actions, the £120.9million budget allocation was spent in full with total legal aid spend for 2025-26 of £121million (including Legacy Inquests), the highest in the history of Legal Aid. This level of spend has enabled the Agency to consolidate and build on the significant improvements in payment times made in 2024-25. The Agency also further reduced the volume and value of bills to be assessed.

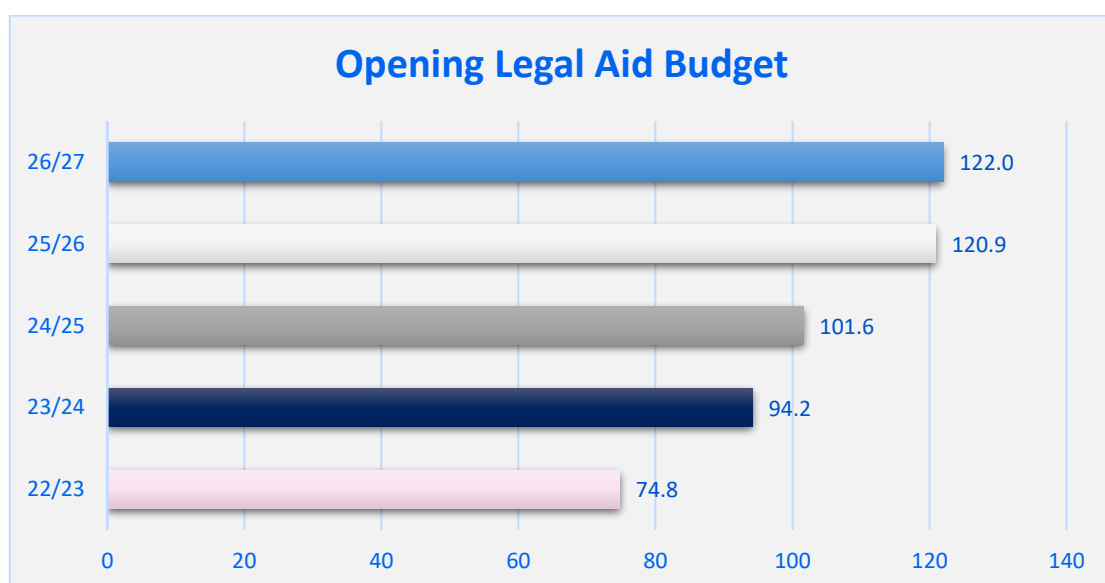
“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

2026-27 Position

In the absence of Executive agreed budgets, the Department of Justice has confirmed an Agency opening draft indicative budget of £131million - approximately £1million more than the opening position for 2025-26. However there remains a risk that draft allocations to the Department could be subject to reduction and if this should be the case, allocations to all DoJ business areas will need to be revisited. As a result, allocations are being considered indicative until the Executive has agreed the Final Budget and the Department has issued Final Budget allocation letters to DoJ business areas.

For now, this has afforded £122.0million to the Legal Aid Fund (incl. Legacy Inquests). Although a positive starting position, the financial cost of the increased remuneration rates will be greater in 2026-27 as more cases attract the more favourable rates and the Agency will also experience increased demand now that the Crown Court Strike has come to an end. In addition, the recently announced Accelerated Review recommendations will see further fee increases. These are all expected to put significant financial pressure on the Agency's budget. The Agency will continue to assess bills within appropriate timescales but cannot exceed its budget allocation.

A snapshot of recent opening budgets is provided below:



“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Our Strategic Objectives and Priorities

Our Pillars

The Agency's six pillars for 2025-26 to 2027-28 are outlined below.



Service Delivery

Policy
Development



People

Systems
Development



Governance and
Accountability

Communication



“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Strategic Objectives

Under each of the six pillars we have set out our strategic objectives to achieve our vision:



Service Delivery

- Make timely, clear and consistent decisions on the grant of legal aid and the assessment of bills for services provided.



Policy Development

- Provide comprehensive and insightful analysis and advice in support of policy development relating to Legal Aid.



People

- Support and equip our people to continue to improve their capacity and capability.



Systems Development

- Enhancing our IT systems.



Governance and Accountability

- Enhance governance and accountability of public funds.



Communication

- Provide timely and useful information, training and advice to users and providers of publicly funded services.

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Service Delivery

Make timely, clear and consistent decisions on the grant of legal aid and the assessment of bills for services provided.

- 1. Deciding on applications for civil legal services and criminal exceptionality within key performance indicators**
- 2. Processing properly presented bills within key performance indicators to minimise payment timescales and maximize the available budget**
- 3. Processing applications for reviews and appeals of decisions within key performance indicators**

Policy Development



Providing comprehensive and insightful analysis and advice in support of policy development relating to Legal Aid.

- 1. Undertaking bespoke analysis to inform or assist in modelling policy development**
- 2. Provide operational insight into policy development**



People

Support and equip our people to continue to improve capacity and capability.

- 1. Facilitate and enhance staff skills and knowledge and develop leadership, including cross skilling staff**
- 2. Promoting health and wellbeing**
- 3. Improve staff satisfaction and engagement**
- 4. Plan and deliver a premises move or renegotiate lease terms**

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Systems Development



Enhancing our IT systems.

1. Deliver programme of enhancements to LAMS to improve user experience and governance controls
2. Deliver system changes to support policy initiatives
3. Ensure provision of support services for our systems is in place
4. Develop and implement our Digital Strategy



Governance and Accountability

Enhance governance and accountability of public funds.

1. Measure and support in the reduction of error within the legal aid system
2. Use data analytics to detect and seek prosecutions of fraud within legal aid system
3. Comply with legislation, government guidelines and implementing independent review recommendations

Communication



Provide timely and useful information, training and advice to users and providers of publicly funded services.

1. Publish Annual Statistics to inform debate on legal aid and policy development
2. Implement our communication plan in collaboration with key stakeholders
3. Develop and deliver programme of awareness and training initiatives
4. Engage stakeholders to inform improvements to our processes and procedures

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Agency Business Plan 2026-27

Key performance indicators

Specific and measurable actions for 2026-27 we will undertake to accomplish objectives are set out below.

KPIs enable us to measure success and progress toward achieving objectives.



Service Delivery

- Make timely, clear and consistent decisions on the grant of legal aid and the assessment of bills for services provided.

APPLICATIONS ⁴		
	KPI	Target ^{1,2,3,4}
Non-emergency	Representation Higher Courts	90% in 10 weeks
	Representation Lower Courts	95% in 10 weeks
	Exceptional Funding	95% in 2 weeks
Emergency	All service levels	95% in 48 hours
Authorities	First Authority	90% in 4 weeks
	Subsequent Authority	85% in 10 weeks
Amendments	Adjudication	85% in 12 weeks
Reviews	Non-Remuneration	90% in 8 weeks
	Remuneration	85% in 12 weeks

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Service Delivery

- Make timely, clear and consistent decisions on the grant of legal aid and the assessment of bills for services provided.

APPEALS

KPI		Target ^{1,2,3,4}
Appeals	Internal Agency Appeals	95% in 8 weeks
	Independent Appeals Panel (Panel sitting cases only)	95% in 8 weeks

PAYMENTS By	30 Sep 26	31 Mar 27
Criminal – All	5 weeks	4 weeks
Civil – All RH, RL Civil	6 weeks	4 weeks
Rep Lower – Children’s Order	8 weeks	6 weeks
Taxed - All	4 weeks	4 weeks

NOTES:

1. The Agency will keep targets under review in view of demand
2. Excludes requests that have had one or more queries raised during the assessment process
3. Excludes migrated requests, including any cases that were retained within the LAMS 'bucket'
4. Excludes individual requests that have been reopened on LAMS after the initial outcome

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Service Delivery

- Make timely, clear and consistent decisions on the grant of legal aid and the assessment of bills for services provided.

OTHER KPIs

Action	Target	Date
Support profession to improve quality of applications and bills submitted.	Provide guidance and training to assist practitioners and support improved processing, including six targeted sessions.	31 March 2027
Support the independent appeals process.	To facilitate a minimum of one training session per year.	31 March 2027



Policy Development

- Provide comprehensive and insightful analysis and advice in support of policy development relating to Legal Aid.

POLICY AND LEGISLATION

Action	Target	Date
Support the development and delivery of Departmental projects, including legal aid reform and Themis in accordance with Departmental priorities and timescales.	Undertake bespoke analysis to inform or assist in modelling policy development, providing an evidence base for reform projects.	31 March 2027
	Provide operational insight into policy development.	31 March 2027
	Support development and implementation of departmental strategies and plans in relation to Sustainability and Climate Action.	31 March 2027

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



People

- Support and equip our people to continue to improve their capacity and capability.

PEOPLE

Action	Target	Date
Facilitate and enhance staff skills and knowledge and develop leadership.	Resource requirements /skills gaps identified and communicated to NICS HR.	31 March 2027
	Develop a Corporate Training Plan to enhance capability of our staff.	31 May 2026
	Deliver four Bitesize Learning Sessions to staff to enhance knowledge and develop leadership skills.	31 March 2027
	Increase capacity and capability of QLIK users.	31 October 2026
Promote health and wellbeing.	Develop and implement a Health and Wellbeing Action Plan.	31 March 2027
Increase staff satisfaction scores through addressing staff feedback.	Seek and address feedback from staff through staff sessions.	Annually
	Hold Staff Engagement Forum to allow staff members voices to be heard.	Quarterly

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Systems Development

- Enhancing our IT systems.

SYSTEM

Action	Target	Date
Deliver programme of enhancements to LAMS to improve user experience, governance controls and support policy initiatives.	Internal and external changes scoped through effective engagement, prioritised and issued to contractor for impact assessment. This includes legal aid reform changes.	31 March 2027
	Deliver priority changes and Programme of Change for 2026-27 maximising the budget allocation.	31 March 2027
Implement our Digital Strategy.	Deliver prioritised projects to enhance digital services.	31 March 2027
Ensure provision of support services for our systems is in place.	Ensure continuity of provision from December 2026 onwards.	1 December 2026



Governance and Accountability

- Enhance governance and accountability of public funds.

GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Action	Target	Date
Implement our Counter Fraud Strategy.	Use data analytics to detect error and fraud and inappropriate claiming within legal aid system, recouping funds where appropriate.	31 March 2027
	Invest to Save – build our IT and staff capacity and capability to reduce fraud and error within the legal aid system.	31 March 2027
	Implement Counter Fraud Action Plan.	31 March 2027



Governance and Accountability

- Enhance governance and accountability of public funds.

GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Action	Target	Date
Measure and reduce error within the legal aid system.	Deliver a reduction in the 2025 official error rate under the current methodology, while establishing a wider 2026 official error baseline that includes taxed expenditure.	31 March 2027
	Support in reducing practitioner error and fraud through guidance to practitioners.	Bi-Annually
	Continuing with applicant fraud and error prevention strategies: 1. Future Overpayment Prevention. 2. Develop and implement a methodology for future measurement of applicant error.	31 March 2027
Timely preparation and publication of our Annual Report and Accounts.	Annual Report and Accounts signed off within reporting deadline.	31 July 2026
Improving the estimated value of our legal aid provisions.	Continue to review and refine inactivity settings by case nature/matter/tier.	Quarterly
	Review and take final action on 95% of inactive cases within 120 days of flag.	31 March 2027
	Update methodology for estimation to take account of legal aid reform.	31 March 2027

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”



Communication

- Provide timely and useful information, training and advice to users and providers of publicly funded services.

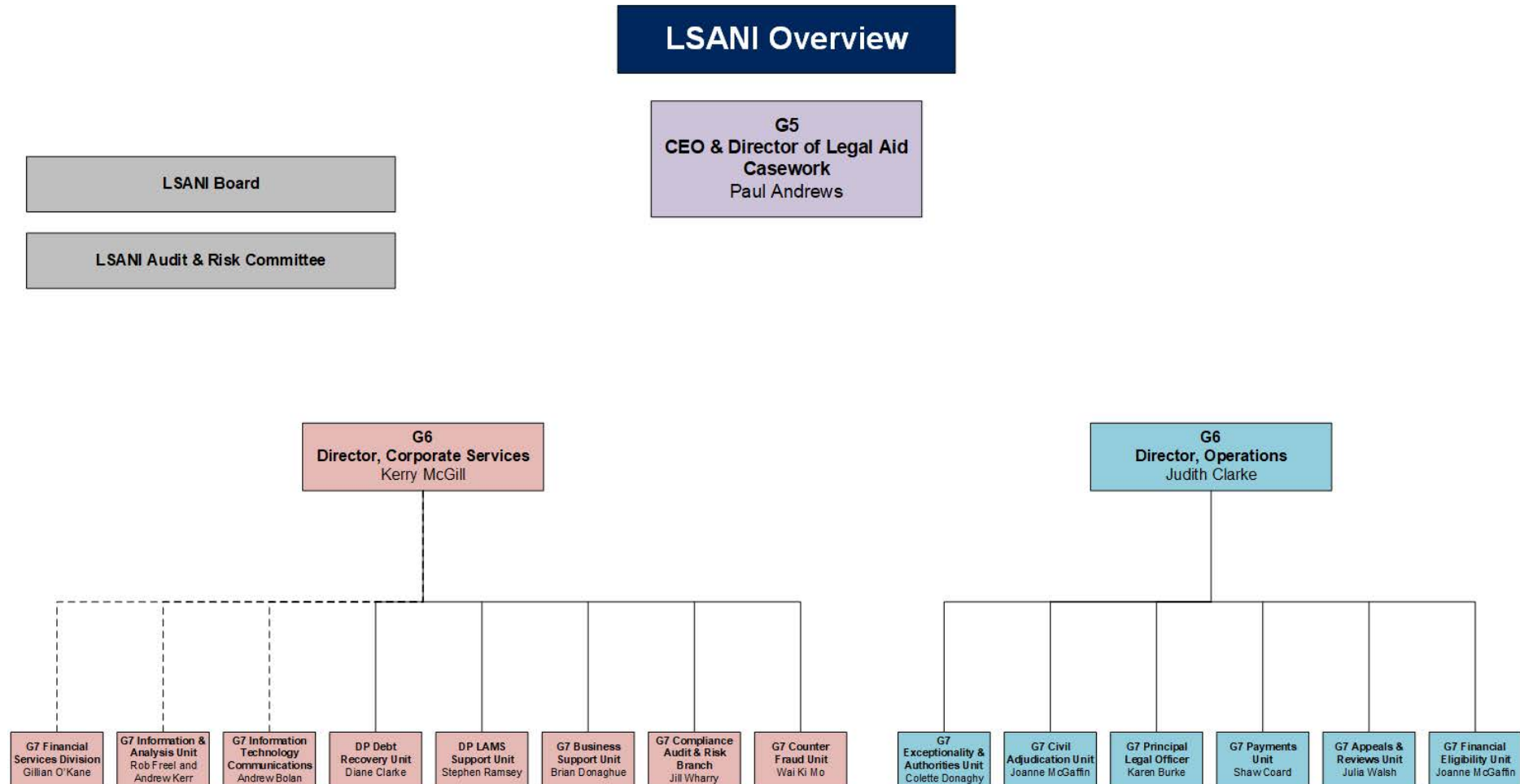
COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

Action	Target	Date
Publish Official Statistics.	High Level Annual Statistics for 2025-26 published.	31 May 2026
	Legal Aid Supplier Statistics for 2025-26 published.	30 September 2026
Delivery of Enhanced Management Information.	Automate the compilation and distribution of monthly performance reports.	Monthly
Develop and implement a Communications Strategy.	Implement Action Plan (Phase 2).	31 March 2027
Maintain effective group forums between the Agency and professional bodies.	Participation in forums and policy working groups and delivery of key outputs.	31 March 2027

“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”

Annex A Organisation Chart

Agency's work in administering publicly funded legal services is taken forward under two Directorates: Operations and Corporate Services. The structure of the Agency is set out below.



“To provide impartial and transparent access to legal aid, in support of fairness, justice and safety.”