

**LADY CHIEF JUSTICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND**  
**NI VICTIM SUMMIT 2026: GLOBAL INNOVATION IN VICTIM**  
**CARE AND SUPPORT**  
**“NI INNOVATION: TRANSPARENCY IN COURTS”**  
**TITANIC CENTRE, BELFAST**  
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**Introduction**

Commissioner Designate, distinguished international guests, colleagues and friends, thank you for inviting me to contribute to this conference.

I am especially pleased that the organisers have chosen to begin both parts of today’s programme with an example of justice innovation from Northern Ireland. That framing is welcome. It signals, first, that we have a duty to learn from others - including from international experience and from colleagues across the UK and Ireland - and, secondly, that we also have a responsibility to share what we are doing here, candidly and constructively, so that others can learn from us.

Your invitation letter captures the purpose of this conference particularly well: to highlight best practice in the support and services available to victims of crime; to bring together leading voices from across the world; and to recognise the excellent work already being undertaken here in Northern Ireland. The breadth of experience represented among those contributing to the conference - from international perspectives, including colleagues from Canada to voices from across these islands - reflects a thoughtful and inclusive approach. Bringing together local practice and international learning

in this way provides a strong and constructive basis for engaging with a subject that is both complex and deeply human: the experience of victims within our justice systems.

I come to this discussion shaped by own experiences as a family law barrister and then a judge. From that experience I know how important the decision made by courts are for people. In Northern Ireland we have always had a strong voluntary sector including Women's Aid, Barnardo's, NSPCC, and VOYPIC who have supported adults and children through the court process. I recognise this contribution which has gone from strength to strength.

My focus this afternoon is on a particular strand of reform: **transparency and public understanding**, especially in the family courts and how that sits alongside broader work to improve the experience of victims and vulnerable witnesses. I will also touch on specialist and problem-solving court models, because they show how process design can reduce harm, improve outcomes and strengthen confidence.

### **The Context: Trust, Understanding and Victims' Confidence**

Across many jurisdictions we see a shared challenge: sustaining confidence in justice institutions at a time when public expectations are high, information is fast and trust can be fragile.

For victims of crime, engagement with the justice system is rarely abstract. It is personal, demanding and often emotionally exhausting. Processes can feel slow and difficult to navigate. Court hearings can feel intimidating. Decisions can seem opaque, even when they are grounded in law and evidence.

From a judicial perspective, the first duty is constant: to decide cases fairly and independently and to apply the law without fear or favour. But fairness is not only a matter of outcome; it is also a matter of process. For victims,

confidence is shaped by whether proceedings are intelligible, respectful, safe and conducted in a way that avoids needless delay or unnecessary re-traumatisation.

That is why, in Northern Ireland, we have been trying to do three things in parallel. First, to improve transparency and public understanding. Secondly, to strengthen how we handle domestic abuse and related vulnerabilities in family proceedings. And thirdly, to develop specialist models in the criminal courts that are designed around the realities of victimisation and harm.

### **Transparency and Public Understanding: Media in Family Court Pilot**

I want to begin with transparency, because it underpins the relationship between courts and the communities we serve.

Many of you will know that my background at the Bar was in family law and I know from experience that family proceedings are among the most sensitive matters our courts deal with. They can involve allegations of domestic abuse, contact disputes and decisions about where a child will live or what protections are required. These are cases where the legal issues are complex, the stakes are high and the human impact is profound.

Yet family courts are also among the least understood parts of the justice system. That gap in understanding matters. When people do not know how decisions are made, distrust fills the space. It can foster misconceptions and it can leave victims - and sometimes the wider public - with a sense that outcomes are arbitrary or that the system operates behind closed doors.

One of my priorities, therefore, has been to improve transparency in the family courts, particularly in private law cases involving domestic violence and contact disputes. I know not all have had positive experiences. I listen to

the issues raised and I want to assure you that I am committed to reform and innovation.

A central part of that work is the **Media in Family Court Pilot**. The pilot aims to communicate more openly so that the public can better understand how family law decisions are made. Under the pilot, accredited journalists can apply for a **Transparency Order** to attend and report on selected Children Order cases in the High Court's Family Division. Reporting is subject to strict anonymity rules to protect families, while enabling responsible public scrutiny and minimising disruption to proceedings.

The purpose is straightforward: to build trust, support informed discussion and help identify opportunities to improve the system. This is not transparency as a slogan. It is transparency as an instrument of accountability, public confidence and institutional learning.

It is also important to be clear about what transparency is not. It is not about inviting public commentary on individual families. It is not about diminishing privacy where privacy is essential. It is about enabling responsible reporting, within strict safeguards, so that the public can see - in a measured and anonymised way - how judges approach evidence, law, risk and welfare in some of the hardest cases the courts face.

I recognise that uptake has been modest, in part because of limited media resources and the challenge of committing to hearings that may run for several days. Nonetheless, early reporting has been described as balanced, factual and sensitive, capturing both complexity and human impact.

We have begun a short process review and are engaging further with the media, the profession and relevant organisations on how best to develop the pilot. That includes considering expansion of the types of cases covered, for

example, including one-day hearings and strengthening how we support responsible reporting by updating transparency guidance and introducing short anonymised pre-hearing case summaries.

All of this is careful, incremental work. But it reflects a broader principle: justice must be capable of being understood if it is to command trust particularly among those whose lives are most affected by it.

### **Family Justice Reform and the Victim Experience**

Transparency is only one part of the picture. Another is the way in which family proceedings themselves are structured and managed - especially where domestic abuse is present.

In October 2024, I established the **Judicial Family Working Group** to explore areas for reform and improvement in the family court system in the absence of legislative change. That group has progressed the pilot I have just outlined as well as looking at practical measures focused particularly on improving consistency and responsiveness in cases involving domestic abuse and in addressing delay where possible.

In June 2025, I published **judicial guidance on family proceedings involving domestic abuse**, applicable across all court tiers. This guidance supports the judiciary in handling the complex realities of domestic abuse in family cases and sets out the court's approach where abuse is alleged, admitted or suspected - particularly in applications for contact or residence. It emphasises a consistent, child-centred and timely response.

For victims, delay is not neutral. Delay can prolong exposure to coercive control, sustain uncertainty and deepen trauma. It can also undermine confidence in the system, particularly where victims feel that the process itself

becomes part of the harm. Improving timeliness, while maintaining rigorous fairness and proper safeguards, is therefore a victim-focused reform.

That is why we have worked with the profession to develop an **Early Resolution Pilot** in the Family Care Centre – launched this month. The pilot will promote the best interests of the child, identify suitable cases early and expedite them through active case management by experienced family judges, supported by court children’s officers and the profession. The aim is to resolve disputes in a timely fashion, reducing delay and the impact of prolonged adversarial processes.

There is, however, a wider aspect about governance and cross-system commitment. The judiciary also leads the **shadow Family Justice Board**, which oversees coordination of a draft plan for implementation of family justice recommendations following the Gillen Family Justice Review. It is a multi-agency Board with representatives from the wider judiciary, departments of Justice, Health and Finance, Legal Services Agency, NI Courts and Tribunals Service, the Family Bar Association, Law Society and Children’s Court Guardian Agency.

The Board advises on priorities taking account of resources across departments and organisations. It is disappointing that there has been no progress in moving that Board to a statutory footing, which would strengthen its status and support cross-departmental commitment and resourcing. There are practical consequences: progress in areas such as specialist domestic abuse courts, a single-tier system and a more streamlined “one-stop shop” approach at early directions hearings depends on sustained cross-system support.

**Specialist and Problem-Solving Courts: Designing for Outcomes and Safety**

I want to turn now to specialist and problem-solving courts in the criminal justice system, because they show how redesigning process can improve both outcomes and the experience of victims and witnesses.

### **Substance Misuse Court**

The **Substance Misuse Court** was established as a pilot under the Department of Justice's Problem-Solving Justice initiative, with intervention services delivered by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and Addiction NI. The aim is to target defendants whose offending behaviour is driven by drug misuse, alcohol misuse or both, and provide support to help them turn their lives around. Phase 1 ran from April 2018 to June 2019 and Phase 2 ran from July 2019 to March 2021. The model includes substance testing, therapeutic intervention, access to social support and regular court attendance.

Evaluations after each phase recorded positive results. Phase 2 evaluation data included fully and partially completed entry and exit questionnaires for 33 clients and recorded significant reductions in problem scores for drug and alcohol misuse, significant reductions in risk of reoffending and significant increases in self-efficacy and wellbeing.

From a victim perspective, the relevance is not abstract. Addressing the drivers of offending is a route to safer communities and fewer repeat victims. Problem-solving approaches are not a substitute for accountability; they are, rather, one means by which the justice system can reduce the likelihood of further harm.

As a result of the pilot's success, the Substance Misuse Court has been established on a permanent, funded basis as a problem-solving court.

### **Domestic Abuse Contest Court**

The **Domestic Abuse Contest Court** illustrates how a specialist approach can improve both process and outcomes for complainants.

The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021 introduced measures aimed at supporting victims, including eligibility for special measures. In Belfast, to maximise such measures, the Presiding District Judge has piloted this specialist court where domestic abuse contests are scheduled on the same day, with, where the court considers it appropriate, complainants giving evidence from the Belfast Remote Evidence Centre.

The first Domestic Abuse Contest Court (or DACC) was listed in **December 2023**. It now runs on a scheduled court day where no other case types are listed and the court is limited to around five domestic abuse contests. The listing begins after 11am so complainants do not need to attend the remote evidence centre until 9.30am, allowing for practical realities such as school runs and enabling prosecutors to consult and prepare cases fully. There is consistency of judge and prosecutor, as well as police liaison and support organisations such as Women's Aid and Victim Support, supporting a consistent approach focused on these cases.

The DACC began quarterly, moved to two-monthly as processes bedded in, and is now listed monthly. Feedback from the first eleven courts records 51 cases listed with a conviction rate of around 90%, compared to a historic rate of around 50% for domestic abuse contest cases. That improvement is significant. But conviction rate is not the only measure. The structured support, the sense of safety and the reduction in unnecessary procedural burden are equally important for victim confidence.

### **Towards a Specialist Domestic Abuse Court**

Building on the DACC model, I wrote to the Justice Minister in July 2025 suggesting the Department consider including a bid to fund a specialist domestic abuse court which would include wraparound services being available to support those involved in the cases. The Minister's response indicated that priority currently lies with work to introduce the Domestic Abuse Protection Notice and Order pilot, while recognising that a subsequent domestic abuse court could complement those arrangements and deliver wider benefits to victims.

The judiciary, in particular the Presiding District Judge, is therefore leading interim work to develop the existing DACC arrangements and consider ways to fast-track other domestic abuse cases, including early identification, early engagement with complainants about special measures and remote evidence, fast-tracked file submission, dedicated prosecutorial handling and active case management in a separate list. The intended aim is to speed up prosecutions, tackle witness attrition and address intimate partner violence in a practical and tangible way.

### **Learning from Others, Sharing Our Own Experience**

This conference brings together international experience, including learning from Québec and from colleagues across the UK and Ireland. There is much we can learn from jurisdictions that have piloted specialist domestic and sexual abuse courts, particularly where those models are supported by sustained investment and clear victim-support pathways.

At the same time, we should be confident in what Northern Ireland can contribute. Our experience shows that judicial leadership, partnership working and careful piloting can deliver tangible improvements. It also shows that reform is rarely a single event; it is a process of testing, learning and refining.

Innovation in justice is not always dramatic. It is often incremental. Sometimes it is contested. Often it depends on relationships - between courts, prosecutors, police, support services and communities. But when those relationships work, the benefits are real: safer processes, clearer decision-making, less delay and a system that victims can engage with more confidently.

## **Conclusion**

Victims of crime engage with the justice system at moments of profound vulnerability. How we structure our courts, how we explain our decisions and how we manage proceedings all shape that experience.

The initiatives I have spoken about today - transparency in family justice, stronger approaches to domestic abuse within family proceedings and specialist court models in the criminal justice system - reflect an ongoing commitment by the judiciary in Northern Ireland to improve the experience of those who come before our courts, while remaining faithful to the principles of judicial independence and the rule of law.

We do not claim to have all the answers. But we are committed to asking the right questions, learning from others and sharing openly what we are learning here.

I welcome the discussion that this conference will generate, and I hope it will continue to advance this important dialogue - here and beyond.

Thank you.