

# Protection on Paper?

## The Changing Use and Effectiveness of Non-Molestation Orders in Northern Ireland (2016–2024)

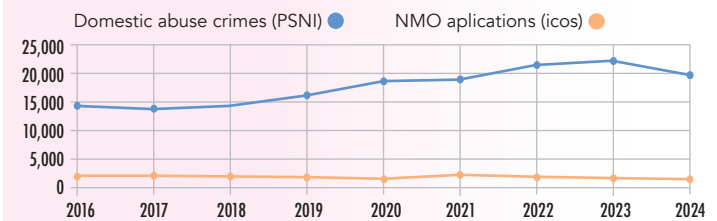


### HIGH LEVEL FINDINGS

#### Applications for NMOs are falling despite rising reports of domestic abuse

Use of NMOs has declined sharply over the last eight years, even as domestic abuse incidents and crimes continue to rise. This signals a protection gap at the point victims seek civil safeguards.

Domestic Abuse Crimes Rising vs NMO Applications Falling (2016–2024)



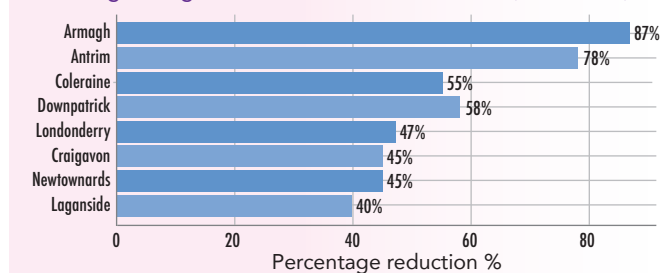
#### Grant rates are falling, while refusals and withdrawals are rising

Victims who do apply are now less likely to receive an order. Confusion around thresholds, legal aid barriers and delays contribute to more refusals and victim-led withdrawals.

#### Inconsistent practice across regions and agencies leads to unequal access to protection

Regional disparities in outcomes combined with uneven training, differing interpretations of coercive control and difficulties addressing digital abuse, creating a “postcode lottery” in protection.

Largest Regional Declines in NMOs Granted (2016–2024)



#### Breaches are under-recorded and under-enforced and the true scale is unknown

PSNI breach data show declines in enforcement, but crucially do not capture breaches reported by victims but not recorded. Many victims describe repeated breaches with no meaningful response.

#### The system places disproportionate burden on victims

Victims must navigate solicitors, legal aid, evidence gathering and repeated reporting while experiencing trauma. Inconsistent guidance and repeated hearings increase attrition and reduce confidence.

#### What creates barriers to protection?



Inconsistent thresholds



Training gaps



Legal aid barriers



Burden on victims



Generic NMO wording vs digital abuse

#### What victims experience in the NMO protocol



Delays



Complex navigation



Contradictory advice



Digital abuse challenges

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. System issues

### 1.1 Improve access routes and legal aid for victims

Simplify legal aid processes, remove financial thresholds for domestic abuse applicants, reduce administrative burden on solicitors, and enable remote attendance at NMO hearings from solicitor offices.

### 1.2 Strengthen and modernise protective measures

Invest in a broader range of protective tools, use NMO study insights to shape effective rollout of DAPOs/DAPNs, and consider enhanced technologies such as proximity-based electronic monitoring where appropriate.

### 1.3 Strengthen breach recording and data quality

Ensure all alleged breaches, including digital and indirect contact, are recorded, and align PSNI data practices with College of Policing guidance to improve oversight and accountability.

## 2. Training and awareness

### 2.1 Deliver comprehensive cross-agency training

Provide system-wide training led by domestic abuse experts, with specialised focus on coercive control, digital abuse, evidential thresholds and consistent victim guidance.

### 2.2 Provide judicial guidance on thresholds and wording

Invite the Lady Chief Justice to consider issuing a practice direction clarifying thresholds for ex parte/full orders, interpreting coercive control, and wording NMOs for digital harms.

### 2.3 Improve understanding of digital abuse and tech-facilitated harm

Deliver specialist training on digital harassment, evidential challenges and perpetrator tactics, linked to stronger recording and clearer expectations around enforcement.

## Building a stronger, safer NMO protection system



Joined-up agencies



Improved tools / DAPOs



Victim-centred access routes



Clear thresholds & wording

## What would strengthen the NMO system?



Simplified access routes



A wider range of protective tools



Improved breach data



Cross-agency training