

The Right Honourable Dame Siobhan Keegan

10th September 2025 via email

Re: Consultation on 'Media Access to Family Courts' pilot

Dear Lady Chief Justice,

As Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime in Northern Ireland, I warmly welcome the publication of the consultation on media access to family courts and the opportunity to respond to your proposals.

I wish to commend you and your office for your leadership in increasing transparency within our courts, through your modernisation programme in respect of media access to legal proceedings. Openness and transparency are key to victim and public confidence in justice, as well as educating the public on the realities of justice and helping foster a sense of public ownership of our justice system. I am assured that your endeavours to make the work of the courts more transparent, including through the proposed media access pilot outlined in this consultation exercise, will serve to enhance public understanding of, and confidence in, the administration of justice and contribute to the development of a truly twenty-first century legal system.

It is especially prescient that such reforms to date, including both the criminal court broadcasting pilot and these family court media access proposals, have been judicially led, and have drawn from the excellent learning of both judicial colleagues in England & Wales and groups such as the Transparency Project.

Over the course of my tenure as Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime, victims and support organisations have highlighted concerns relating to the family court, in particular how it responds to victims of domestic abuse seeking protection

for themselves and their children. These stories and experiences led to my commissioning Queen's University Belfast to conduct research on the experience of domestic abuse victims and their children when engaging with the family courts, which I hope to publish in Autumn. In February 2025, I also convened an Agenda NI roundtable of family law experts to discuss how children's voices and safety could be amplified within the family court system. The panel, which included Her Honour Judge Gaynor Lloyd, designated Family Judge for North Wales and the Right Honourable Sir John Gillen, agreed that private family court proceedings remained too adversarial and did not give sufficient voice to children. Crucially, members were in agreement that the key to improving our system is to implement a multi-agency, non-adversarial, child-focused approach along the lines of a Pathfinder-style model which has shown to be transformative in the family courts in England & Wales.

I remain convinced that the time is right for reform of the family courts in Northern Ireland, particularly in the interests of domestic abuse victims and children, and I hope the work of the Commission to build a body of evidence will be helpful in that regard. I firmly believe that a key component of such reform is improving transparency of family court processes and fostering greater public understanding and trust in the justice system. The proposed pilot, while not a panacea in itself for all the issues identified by victims and support agencies, will undoubtedly create an environment whereby the impact of reforms can be seen and felt by the public and victims of abuse.

I would note the following points about the pilot as outlined in the consultation document:

- It is welcome that the pilot will be evaluated at three-month intervals by the Judicial Family Working Group. It is a key strength of this pilot that it is judicially led and that an iterative approach can be applied to improve the workings of the pilot as it progresses.

- I note that the pilot is confined to High Court hearings initially. Whilst I understand that the pilot is intended to test how media access might function in the family court setting, I would emphasise that the goal to improve transparency and public understanding will be more truly achieved when media access opens up to the court's lower tiers. It is my hope that the parameters of media access will be considered as part of the three-monthly reviews and that there may be potential for expansion during the period of the pilot if deemed appropriate.
- I welcome the pilot's emphasis on protecting the privacy of families and children involved in proceedings. I have no doubt that some families may fear that their confidentiality and privacy may be affected by increased media access. It is therefore vital that the scope and limitations of the pilot are communicated clearly to parties and that they are assured that their confidentiality will be protected. Development of information materials such as a leaflet or web page in codesign with support agencies will be key to providing that reassurance to parties engaging with the family court process. Reassurance with regard to confidentiality will be especially important in light of the small size of this jurisdiction and the inherent risks of jigsaw identification. It would be helpful to provide specific reassurance in any communications that media reportage will be expected to take steps to avoid jigsaw identification in all court reportage under the pilot. A further source of assurance to parties would be to instruct accredited media outlets to abide by responsible reporting guidelines such as Women's Aid's [Responsible Reporting Matters](#) and Safeguarding Board NI's [guidance on reporting child cruelty responsibly](#).

- It is important that the accreditation and application process is clearly understood by media outlets seeking to report on family proceedings. I recognise the need for any reporters to be appropriately verified and trusted given the sensitivities involved with reporting family cases; however, a balance must be struck to ensure that the pilot does not arbitrarily exclude media outlets or reporters without good reason. This balance could be achieved by keeping the list under review during the pilot by reassessing it at each three-month evaluation.
- I note the exclusion of cases involving Litigants In Person (LIPs) from the pilot and would query whether this is necessary. I have met with a number of victims of domestic abuse who have disclosed being unable to obtain a solicitor for family proceedings for a range of reasons, resulting in them being forced to act as a LIP. It seems arbitrary that openness and transparency would be denied in such cases and I urge that this policy is reconsidered.
- I would query why this pilot envisages that no media reporting would be allowed until the end of a case. This proposal is at odds with the process in England & Wales whereby reporting is allowed at the end of a day's hearing. Placing restrictions on reporting until the conclusion of a case may disincline media outlets to commit resources to covering such cases, negating any benefits of the pilot. I therefore urge that consideration is given to mirroring the procedure in England & Wales, while giving Judges discretion to place a postponement on reportage until the end of a case if the circumstances of the case requires it.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to this consultation and I wish you all the best with the rollout of the pilot. I look forward to hearing about its progress and impact in the near future.

Yours sincerely,



Geraldine Hanna

Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime