Participation, Confidentiality and Attribution Rules

Thank you for participating in the forum. These rules explain how the forum will work, what we ask of everyone taking part, how what you say will be used, and how your information will be handled.

Please read them before the forum. If anything is unclear, or you have concerns, please contact Patricia O'Lynn, Head of policy and engagement via patricia.olynn@lawsoc-ni.org. We would much rather talk things through with you than have anyone feel unsure about their participation.

The forum is an evidence-gathering exercise. It will examine the wider legal and policy questions about character references and related character evidence in criminal cases. It will not consider individual cases, the conduct of any individual or the Society's internal matters. The views shared on the day will help inform the Society's thinking and any future contribution to policy development in this area.

1. Taking part

Participation is voluntary, you can choose how to take part: by attending and contributing, by attending as an observer, by making a written submission (if unable to attend), or by meeting us separately.

What we ask of everyone:

- Speak from your own professional, organisational or research perspective.
- Do not disclose confidential information belonging to anyone else.
- Do not share details that could identify a victim, survivor, defendant, witness or any other individual.
- Do not discuss individual cases, or any live or anticipated court proceedings.
- Do not use the forum to raise individual disputes, complaints or disciplinary matters, including matters relating to the Society.
- Treat others with respect, including those whose views differ from your own. Please avoid personal criticism, speculation and inflammatory language.

Personal experience

Nobody is expected to share personal experience of crime or trauma, and nobody will be asked to. If you do choose to mention something personal, please think carefully about what you share, as the protections in section 3 have limits.

2. The chair

The forum will be independently chaired by a facilitator external to the Law Society. The chair may pause, redirect or stop a contribution where necessary to protect participants, keep to the agreed scope, or avoid legal risk. This is not a judgement on anyone's view.

3. Support

We know this can be a difficult subject. A named support contact will be available throughout, and a quiet room will be available at the venue. Details will be confirmed before the event.

4. Confidentiality

The Chatham House Rule

The forum will be held under the Chatham House Rule. This means:

Participants are free to use the information received at the forum, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker, nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

In practice, you may talk about the themes and points discussed at the forum, but you should not say who said what, or which organisation they represent.

The limits of the Chatham House Rule

We want everyone to understand what the Chatham House Rule does and does not do:

- It is an agreement based on trust. It is not legally binding, and the Society cannot guarantee that every participant will keep to it.
- It protects who said something, not what was said. The content of the discussion can be used, including in our report.
- It does not override the law. If something said at the forum suggests that a person is at risk of harm, the Society may need to act on it, including by sharing information with the appropriate authorities.

For these reasons, please do not share anything at the forum that you would not be comfortable being used, even without attribution.

Forum materials

The briefing paper and other materials sent to participants are provided to support your participation. Please do not circulate them outside your organisation without our agreement.

5. How contributions will be attributed

Where	How contributions are attributed
During the forum	Speakers are introduced by name and organisation. This is covered by the Chatham House Rule, so their identity and affiliation should not be revealed outside the room.
In the Society's note of the forum	Points are recorded by type of stakeholder only, for example "a victim support organisation" or "a defence practitioner". Names are not recorded, and personal details are not noted.
In the evidence report	Points made at the forum are attributed by type of stakeholder only. Organisations are listed as participants only if they agree. Direct quotations are used only with the explicit consent of the person or organisation quoted.
Written submissions	You can choose whether your submission is attributed to your organisation by name, or by type of stakeholder only. Please tell us your preference when you submit.
Separate meetings	Points are attributed by type of stakeholder only, unless you agree otherwise.
The Society's own communications	The Society will not name participating organisations or individuals without their agreement, other than speakers who have agreed to be publicly announced.

6. Social media and the media

- Please do not post live from the forum, and do not post anything that identifies what another participant said or which organisation they represent.
- You are welcome to say publicly that your organisation took part, and to set out your own organisation's views.
- The forum is not open to media. If you are approached by a journalist about the forum, you may speak about your own organisation's views, but please do not comment on other participants' contributions. We would be grateful if you could let the Society's Communications lead Martin McAuley, know about any media approach.
- Only authorised spokespeople speak on behalf of the Society.

7. Recording and photography

- Participants may not record, film or photograph any part of the forum.
- The Society will not make an audio or video recording of the forum. A written note will be taken by a member of staff to inform the evidence report, following the attribution rules above.

- If the Society wishes to take any photographs, this will only be of people who have given their consent in advance, and never during the discussion. You can tell us your preference on the form at the end of these rules.

8. Your personal information

The Society will use the information you give us, such as your name, organisation, contact details and any accessibility or support needs, only to organise the forum, keep you safe on the day and, if you choose, keep you informed of the forum's outputs.

9. Safeguarding

If anything said at the forum, or shared with us before or after it, suggests that someone may be at risk of harm, the Society will follow its take appropriate safeguarding action. Where possible, we will speak to you first.

10. Concerns

If you have a concern about how the forum is being run, about how your contribution has been used, or about any breach of these rules, please contact the Head of Policy & Engagement (Patricia.olynn@lawsoc-ni.org). We will take every concern seriously.