**Meeting of External Consultative Panel**

**30th November, 2023**

**Via Zoom Video Conference**

Attendance:

Emily Sherlock, Director of Internal Service Delivery (Civil), Legal Aid Board

Catherine Fahy, Regional Manager, Legal Aid Board

Aoife Kelly Desmond, Mercy Law

Julia Hull, Managing Solicitor, Legal Aid Board

Caroline Counihan, Safe Ireland

Christopher McCann, Managing Solicitor, Legal Aid Board

Donna Parau, RCNI

Geralyn McGarry, Citizens Information Board

Karen Kiernan, One Family

Pamela Benson, Child and Family Agency

Paul Dornan, Ballymun Community Law Centre

Ronan Deegan, Assistant Director, Legal Aid Board

Fiona McAuslan, Director of Family Mediation, Legal Aid Board

Gayle Smith, Treoir

Cormac Quinlan, Tusla

Chanju Kondowe, Solicitor from Malawi

Niamh McGuinness, HEO, Previous Secretary to the Panel, Legal Aid Board

Kevin Rogers, Secretary to the Panel, Legal Aid Board

Apologies:

Joan Crawford, CEO Legal Aid Board

Joanne Condon, National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities

Marcella Stakem, SVP

Rose Wall, Community Law and Mediation

Jacinta Brack, Irish Traveller Movement

Mary Henderson, Immigrant Council of Ireland

Monica Hynds, Barnardos

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|  | Item for discussion | Person responsible | Discussions | Actions/Decisions |
| 1. | Membership update of the External Consultative Panel | ES/LAB | All attendees were welcomed. ES also informed the panel that KR will be taking over from NMcG as the secretary to the panel.  ES introduced Ms Kondowe who is attending the meeting today. Ms Kondowe is an advocate from Malawi who is seconded to LAB for a week as part of an access to justice programme operated by the Irish Rule of Law. |  |
| 2. | Draft minutes of meeting of 27th July 2023 and matters arising | ES/Secretary | ES/LAB: invited members to approve the draft minutes of the meeting of the 27th July 2023 and noted that the minutes would be regarded as approved unless any member reverted to the Secretary within 7 days of today’s meeting. The minutes will then be published on the LAB website. All actions from July’s meeting were carried out. |  |
| 3. | Sub Group on domestic violence | CF/LAB | CF/LAB: mentioned that her first meeting with the Sub Group took place on 10th October 2023. It was noted at the previous meeting the ToR were reviewed and have since been circulated to the members of the Sub Group. There was a discussion about the ‘in camera’ rule and that this has been seen as an issue and it was suggested there is a need to lobby for change. Research regarding Domestic Violence is seen as a critical component and this will be looked at.  KK/One Family: Noted that another group called Civil Society Group had been formed during Covid-19 to deal primarily with children and gender based domestic violence. It was also said that a discussion should take place regularly between all groups in order to reduce the duplication of work. |  |
| 4. | Update on service delivery issues (combined with Tour de Table) to include:   * International Protection; * Abhaile related services; * The Assisted Decision Making Act (as amended) * Family mediation services * General legal services; * Initiative to better support the legal needs of Travellers |  | JH/LAB: The number of international protection applicants is still very high despite the fact that the IPO have said their figures have dropped by 6.8%. This is still a huge amount of applications and has put significant pressure on the law centres providing services in terms of in-house representation and referrals to private practitioners. It was noted that there is still a huge delay in the IPO with applicants that applied in 2022 still to be offered an interview date. The new shortened application procedure for applicants from safe countries is having a big effect on applicants as they are not getting legal advice when completing their questionnaire. It was noted that the DOJ are no longer sending a representative to appeal hearings and that this will cause challenges down the line once decisions are issued. DOJ are looking into whether Nigeria and Algeria should be considered safe countries. The law centre in Cork is relying heavily on Private Practitioners from Dublin as there is a limit availability of solicitors based in the Munster area. This law centre has also been piloting clinics in direct provision centres in Co. Waterford and Co. Kerry as an initial meeting with potential clients.  RD/LAB: The demand for solicitor consultation is down 27% from October 2022. Numbers for a duty solicitor service remains in line with 2022 numbers. Personal Insolvency numbers are down by 28% from October 2022 to October 2023. It was noted that there has been a fall in numbers every year for the last three years. Creditors are settling more cases and this could be the reason for the decrease in numbers. The scheme has been extended until 31st December, 2027  GMcG/CIB: MABS have seen the impact of the EPC rating affecting more and more people. MABS are to report next week on the increases in interest rates. This is a local report.  RD/LAB: It’s been seven months since this has been implemented and the demand for services is still light. It was noted that 24 cases have been discharged from wardship which is a cause for concern. 149 private practitioners are now on the panel.  GMcG/CIB: Do cases come directly to LAB or do they come from DSS?  RD/LAB: Cases don’t come from DSS. Cases come from family members, help care providers, NGO’s etc.  PD/BCLC: Have LAB been involved in the promotion of the new act?  RD/LAB: LAB has not particularly been involved in the promotion of the act.  ES/LAB: There is ongoing contact with all agencies and NGO’s. It is likely that applications will increase.  ES/LAB: Updated the panel regarding family mediation services generally. There are now five managing mediators. Child inclusive mediation was mentioned and how we can be better at including the children. Co-Location was also mentioned. We are now at the end of a three year cycle and entering into a new cycle from 2024. We are continuing to engage with Judges and Private Practitioners which will help reduce any waiting list. We now have a family mediation presence in Co. Longford and Mullingar. A letter is to be sent by the Family Mediation Council regarding the regulation. Any update on this will be passed onto the panel members.  ES/LAB: Waiting times have remained static. Some have increased due to the difficulty in recruitment of staff, especially solicitors. New interviews have taken place recently in the hope to employ more staff in all areas. Issues are also arising in certain parts of the country where there is a lack of availability of private practitioners. Potential remedies for this are being explored including moving someareas of work outside ofDublin.  CC/Safe Ireland: Is there any update on the Civil Legal Aid Review, in particular fees being paid to Private Practitioners?  ES/LAB: No update on fees being paid to Private Practitioners. Numerous submissions have been made regarding this. Civil Legal Aid Review was to be published by Christmas 2023 but as of yet it has not been published.  AKD/Mercy Law: At a recent Law Society meeting it was mentioned that the Civil Legal Aid Review will most likely be published at the end of Q1 2024.  CMcC/LAB: Provided an overview of the various case types the service is currently handling; there currently 52 active cases. Potential applicants can now apply directly to this unit through our website. Previously applicants had to apply to a specific Law Centre and that Law Centre would transfer the application to the service. It is the intention of the unit to undertake outreach work. A survey is to be put forward shortly for approval to advocates within the community to assess the awareness of the service and to learn more about the legal issues they are seeing affecting the community. |  |
| 8. | AOB |  |  |  |
| 9. | Date of next meeting. |  | Next meeting to be in Q1. Date to be circulated to the panel members. | CEO/Secretary |