**Meeting of External Consultative Panel**

**8th May 2025**

**Via Zoom Video Conference**

Attendance:

Joan Crawford, CEO, Legal Aid Board

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

Kevin Rogers, Secretary to the Panel, Legal Aid Board

Christine Hayes, Regional Manager, Legal Aid Board

Catherine Fahy, Regional Manager, Legal Aid Board

Ronan Deegan, Assistant Director, Legal Aid Board

Eleanor Leane, Assistant Director, Legal Aid Board

Keave O'Donnell, Managing Mediator, Legal Aid Board

Peadar Browne. Managing Solicitor, Legal Aid Board

Barbara Egan, Managing Solicitor, Legal Aid Board

Catherine Ryan, Managing Solicitor, Legal Aid Board

Joanne Condon, National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities

Síun Hurley, Law Society/O’Donovan Solicitors

Eavan Ward, Women’s Aid

Kate Heffernan, Mercy Law

Erin Brogan, FLAC

Geraldine Kelly, Rainbows Ireland

Aoife Langdon, Safe Ireland

Anna Birbeck, Exchange House Ireland

Monica Hynds, Barnardos

Ella Woolfson, Community Law and Mediation

Niall Quinn, Council of the Bar of Ireland

Pamela Benson, Tusla

Rose Morris, Citizens Information Board

Sinead Lucey, FLAC

Cliona Saidlear, RCNI

Gayle Smith, Treoir

Paul Dornan, Ballymun Community Law Centre

Ger O’Brien, MABS

Jacinta Brack, Irish Traveller Movement

Olivia Crehan, Children's Rights Alliance

Apologies:

Fiona McAuslan, Director of Family Mediation, Legal Aid Board

Marcella Stakem, SVP

Jane McGowan, Law Library

Cormac Quinlan, Tusla

Andrea McDermot, Men’s Aid

Fiona Wright, Courts Service

Mary Henderson, Immigrant Council of Ireland

Karen Kiernan, One Family

Aoife Kelly Desmond, Community Law and Mediation

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|  | Item for discussion | Person responsible | Discussions | Actions/Decisions |
| 1. | Membership update of the External Consultative Panel | ES/LAB | JC/LAB: Opened the meeting by thanking all attendees for attending and outlined the reasons why this discussion is so important and the great help that the discussions at these meetings have for all.  ES/LAB: Provided an update of the panel membership and welcomed all the new members to the panel whether in attendance or not, who are, Aoife Langdon - Safe Ireland, Marissa Ryan - Cuan, Kate Fitzpatrick – MABS, Erin Brogan – FLAC, Sinead Lucey - FLAC and Geraldine Kelly - Rainbows Ireland |  |
| 2. | Draft minutes of meeting of 10th September 2024 and matters arising | ES/Secretary | ES/LAB: Invited members to approve the draft minutes of the meeting of the 10th September 2024. It was noted that an action from the last meeting was for an update to be provided on the District Court work of the Family Mediation Service by Regional Manager Noreen Fitzpatrick. Unfortunately, Noreen is not available for this meeting and that update will be provided at the next meeting. All members approved the minutes, and these will now be published on the LAB website. | Action: Minutes to be published on LAB website once approved.  Action: Update on the District Court work of the Family Mediation Service. |
| 3. | Update on service delivery issues to include:   * International Protection; * Abhaile related services; * The Assisted Decision Making Act (as amended) * Family mediation services * Initiative to better support the legal needs of Travellers * General legal services; | BE/LAB | BE/LAB: Provided an update to the panel on the demand for services in International Protection. In 2024 there was an unprecedented demand for services, within excess of 9300 applications received in the Smithfield International Protection Unit which was a sharp increase on 2023 and a very sharp increase on 2022. This does not include the applications received in the International Protection Units in our Cork and Galway offices. Year to date there have been some decrease in demand however this is not as significant as the overall number of decrease in applications to the International Protection Office. Previously challenges in case processing have been reported, but the Board are now operating on real time case processing which means, in effect, an application received is identified for referral to a Private Practitioner (PP), BL or In-House allocation within a day. This will enable the applicant to contact their legal adviser ASAP and assist with early legal advice which is key in delivering services. The BL Panel commenced in early 2023 and we now have a dedicated instructing solicitor and 2 case workers dealing with these cases. Currently there are 30 cases referred to BL’s a month which is being monitored by the instructing solicitor. In 2024 the Smithfield International Protection Unit referred 427 cases to this panel. Quality Assurance remains a challenge as we refer a high percentage of our applications to PPs. A pilot project will be commencing next month in relation to the new EU Migration Pact. There is now a staff of over 40 in the Smithfield International Protection Unit and the recruitment of solicitor staff remains a challenge. Services are expanding to the victims of trafficking which is a growing area where the numbers are on the rise. Year to date we have had the same number of applications as we had in the whole of 2024 in this area. There are currently significant backlogs at the International Protection Appeals Tribunal to process appeals which is also impacting service delivery.  RD/LAB: There have been 177 vouchers issued to date under the Solicitor Consultation Service, which provides a voucher for a person who has difficulty with their mortgage to see a solicitor and receive legal advice in relation their mortgage arrears. At the same period last year, we had 164 vouchers issued which is roughly an 8% increase. 101 vouchers have presented for payment to date. Generally, only half of the vouchers issued are presented for payment. Our Duty Solicitor Service continues to run effectively with 148 court sittings year to date compared to 157 in the previous year. 126 Legal Aid certs have been granted year to date for Legal Aid for proceedings under section 115A of the Personal Insolvency Act 2021 which is similar to that of 2024 when 124 were issued. The big development in Abhaile has been the introduction of a second voucher for the Solicitor Consultation Service, if a person has been in mortgage arrears previously, they can apply for a second voucher.  ES/LAB: Informed the panel that this will be the last update that RD will provide to the ECP. RD is moving onto a new Department and would like to thank him for all his time and expertise he has given to the panel over the years.  EL/LAB: We are now 2 years on since the Act came into force and we have seen a big increase in applications for ADMCA related matters from the first year in April 2023, which was 150, to 1141 in 2024 to 448 in the first 4 months of 2025. Part 5 Capacity and Part 6 Discharge from Wardship applications remain the main areas of work for the Board. There were 53 Legal Aid Certs granted in 2023, 833 in 2024 and 333 year to date. Part 6 applications remain low with 16 Legal Aid Certs granted in 2023, 174 granted in 2024 and 113 year to date. Ballymun Law Centre have dealt with 27% of all ADMCA applications in 2023, 50% of applications in 2024 and 48.5% year to date and is our busiest Law Centre where ADMCA work is carried out. This work is supported by a PP Panel throughout the country. The Board have been doing a huge amount of outreach work and information sessions for different organisations in the ADMCA area. The Board participated in three in person awareness days which was organised by the Wards of Court Office. Legal Aid information sessions were given to the National federation of Voluntary Service Providers. Presentations were made at HSE ADMCA events. Staff from Law Centres have attended nursing homes and residential centres to speak to people about Legal Aid. Staff have also attended at local Bar and Law Associations to give information to PPs, who may not be on our panels, on how the process for Legal Aid works. We have been in touch with the Judiciary in relation to given information sessions on how the process for Legal Aid works. A full Legal Aid Board training day that dealt with the Decision Support Service and their practices which was organised for all Law Centre solicitors and PPs and was attended by 210 people. We have members of staff who are on the Inter Departmental Steering group which comprises of Department of Children, Disability and Equality, Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Courts Service, Decision Support Service, HSE and ourselves. Presentations have been made by the National Advocacy Service at our Managing Solicitor network meetings. Main area of concern is the slow pace of discharge from wardship with only 116 wards discharged from wardship to date out of 574 applications. There are 1792 wards remaining to be discharged before April 2026.  KO’D/LAB: The Family Mediation Service (FMS) has 17 offices nationwide, a PP Panel and current mediation staff of approximately 40 mediators and 5 regional managers. Child Inclusive Mediation continues to grow and training with the Lesley Allport Dispute Resolution (LADR) has been completed by approximately half of the FMS to date with the remaining staff to be trained next month. KO’D then outlined what the training involved. The importance of hearing the child was noted as hugely beneficial. The callback facility has been received very positively and has increased our registrations. QR codes for this facility are now being sent out by all Law Centres to clients and we await to see what the uptake of this will be. We are continuing ongoing engagement with our external agencies. Our next Co-Located centre will be in Galway and the hope will be to move into that premises sometime later this year.  PB/LAB: A recent meeting has taken place between a number of Traveller groups where discussion took place on the numbers of applications we are dealing with. We currently have 59 cases predominantly broken down between housing (24) and equality matters (31). Interestingly in recent weeks we have had applications in relation to civil restraining orders. The profile of the Traveller Legal Support Service needs to be raised. The Terms of Reference for this Unit are still to be finalised and input to these have been received from various organisations and once finalised with be shared among groups. A survey was also to be compiled and is currently close to completion and will also be shared in the coming weeks. Both Assisted Decision-Making matters and Traveller Legal Support Services are dealt with in the Ballymun Law Centre and additional staffing have been received to deal with the additional work with currently 2 solicitors and 3 support staff. The official launch of the Traveller Legal Support Service is still under consideration.  EB/FLAC: We have been receiving an increase in queries in relation to Legal Aid representation in Civil Restraining Order matters and how should people make the application in order for them to be assessed before their hearing?  PB/LAB: The quickest way to apply is online and to identify that the application is time sensitive and these will be prioritised. For those who may have literacy difficulties and can’t apply online, phone the Law Centre and inform them of the Civil Restraining Order and the imminent court date and the matter will be dealt with promptly.  AB/EHI: At the last meeting I had raised if a representative of Exchange House Ireland could participate on a consultative committee which had been reactivated for the Minceir/Traveller Legal Support Service and wondered if this has been reactivated and if it was a possibility?  PB/LAB: This has been reactivated, and a meeting took place some weeks ago that was poorly attended and the intention is to have another meeting within the next few weeks and an invitation will be sent to Exchange House Ireland for that meeting.  SL/FLAC: Notified the panel that FLAC also has a dedicated Traveller Legal Service and may link in with PB regarding areas of collaboration.  NQ/BOI: Questioned the awareness of Civil Legal Aid being available for Civil restraining Orders and how widely known is this?  ES/LAB: The Legal Aid Board have received a lot of these cases recently and are not finding that people are not aware of the service, but we can work with the Communications Unit regarding this.  CF/LAB: It’s been a very busy time since the panel last met in September 2024. Our new Co-Located Law Centre and Family Mediation Service in Castlebar was opened on the 28th March 2025 and we are hoping this will deliver enhanced access to justice for clients in the Mayo region. Minister for State Niall Collins attended the opening and formally opened the Centre. Niall Collins then visited the Law Centre and Family Mediation Centre in Limerick in April. In April we also had the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration Jim O’Callaghan visit our Tralee Law Centre and Family Mediation Office. Mr. O’Callaghan is also scheduled visit our Smithfield Law Centre and to speak at our upcoming Staff Marquee Event which is scheduled for later on this month. Overall, 2024 was the busiest year for the Law Centre Network with 28050 applications to Law Centres which is a 15% increase in applications received in 2023 and a 35% increase in applications received in 2022. 6995 1st consultations took place across the network and overall, over 17500 cases were handled in 2024. In addition to the number of applications increasing, the scope of work has increased with the Assisted Decision-Making work, International Protection and the Civil Restraining Orders which came into force on 2nd September 2024. 120 applications for Legal Aid in Civil Restraining Orders have been received to date and these have been increasing monthly. These are matters which cannot be referred to Private Practitioners as there is no scheme in place for Civil matters, so this is an additional area of work for our in-house staff both in the processing of application and the provision of Legal Services. In light of the increase in number of applications and new areas of work the waiting times have increased from an average of 17 weeks to 20 weeks, this has also been affected by staffing issues.  EL/LAB: Year on year we are seeing an increase in applications for Legal Services connected with Domestic Violence. There were 3554 applications received in 2022, a 3% increase to 3649 in 2023, a further 11% increase to 4035 in 2024 and 1491 received year to date. It was noted that a small percentage of these applications are dealt with within our Law Centres, but the majority are referred to the private practitioners on our panels and all cases are dealt with as a priority.  SH/LS: Are there any stats on the number of private practitioners on the panels?  RD/LAB: Currently we have 385 private practitioners on our panels but that’s not necessarily how many are taking work. Fees are obviously an issue, and we are engaging with the Department regarding that.  EW/WA: Noted the difficulties in women being able to access legal representation which is a huge concern as access to justice is bring compromised.  ES/LAB: As mentioned by RD, we are engaging with the Department regarding the private practitioners panel and to try to increase this panel and the availability of solicitors. |  |
| 8. | AOB |  | SH/LS: Is there any indication on when the Civil legal Aid Report will be available?  ES/LAB: The Minister has received the report but no further information available.  JB/ITM: Has the Legal Aid Board made any progress on the introduction of the Ethnic Identifier into its systems?  ES/LAB: Not as yet unfortunately but it’s something that has been discussed and we continue to work towards it and consider it in relation to how or if it can be introduced. |  |
| 9. | Date of next meeting. |  | Date of next meeting to be circulated to the panel members once agreed. | CEO/Secretary |