

## **Twenty-second Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group**

### **(Meeting 11<sup>th</sup> December 2024)**

#### Introduction

At its inaugural meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2019, it was agreed that a Progress Report summarising key decisions and activities of the Reference Group (RG) should be published following each meeting. This is the twenty - second of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2024.

#### **1. Twenty- first Progress Report**

This was considered and approved. It is to be added to the RG's website (<https://www.litigant-voice.co.uk>)

#### **2. Presentation on social workers involvement with personal litigants in family courts. (Anne Miller- Southern HSCT)**

Anne Miller of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust gave a detailed presentation on the work of Court Children's Officers (CCOs). CCOs are appointed at the direction of the Judge and their role is to represent the interests of the child. They negotiate with all parties to the proceedings and provide oral and written reports.

The presentation was followed by a Q&A during which a range of issues were raised, with RG members offering a number of suggestions for improving the experience of litigants in person. In particular, it was suggested that the promotion of the Ulster University Family Court Info and Pathfinder Tool would be very beneficial and perhaps the issues that came to light on the back of the presentation could be raised with the LCJ.

#### **3. External Engagement**

##### Meeting with the Lady Chief Justice 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2024

A number of members of the RG met with the LCJ on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2024. It was agreed that the issues facing Litigants in Person were more widely recognised now than before. In particular the Equal Treatment Bench Book (ETBB) had gained more traction and there was more of a recognition of the stress on Litigants in Person in going through the legal process.

### Themis Programme Meeting to be held on 13 December 2024

It was confirmed that so far, three members of the RG were going to be attending, this meeting. The invitation remained open to any other RG members who wished to attend. The meeting would touch on the new IT solutions to be introduced within NICTS. These would be human centred and developed in tune with the different personas that would be accessing the systems. The first such system would focus on the Small Claims process.

### LCJ Consultation on Vulnerable Parties and Witnesses

It was noted that the closing date for this consultation is 24 February 2025. The Chair requested that any feedback/comments be sent to him to enable him to draft a response from the RG.

## **4. Other developments**

### Update on Legal Services Reform

An update was provided by DoJ on the five pillars of the reform programme (the relevant documents on each having been shared with the RG previously).

It was noted that the Minister had issued a statement to the Assembly on 2 December, making it clear that she wants to enhance access to justice. It was further noted that DOJ would be issuing several consultations with the first, on the Delivery Plan, issuing w/c 9<sup>th</sup> December. It was stressed by the RG that it is important that the programme engages with bodies such as the Northwest Forum. The DoJ representative responded to say the Minister was keen to involve the whole of Northern Ireland in the process to establish what issues impacted on access to justice in each region.

It was agreed that a meeting between the RG and the Minister would be beneficial, even as a one item meeting to discuss the reform programme. It was also suggested that a Legal Need Survey would be very welcome as the last one was held in 2006.

### UU School of Law Update

It was noted that work between the Law Society and Ulster University is ongoing, and the draft charter is due to be launched in February 2025. The draft follows a human centred design model, to manage the relationship between a Litigant and Person and a solicitor representative. Following the launch feedback will be sought and the charter will be subject to review in May 2025 following evaluation. It is

intended that this will be an iterative document that will be continually reviewed and enhanced, as necessary.

### Law Society Website

An update was provided on the work to the Law Society website. A number of points had already been highlighted by the RG which had been passed on by the Law Society Representative to those working on the website development. It was also suggested that assistance and advice could be sought from Disability Action on ensuring accessible website design.