

Fourth Progress Report of the Litigants in Person Reference Group

(Meeting 10th December 2019)

Introduction

At its inaugural meeting on 12th February 2019, it was agreed that a Progress Report summarising key decisions and activities of the Reference Group should be published following each meeting. This is the fourth of those reports and relates to the meeting held on 10th December 2019

1. Third Progress Report

The draft third Progress Report was considered by the Reference Group and subject to a small number of minor amendments. It was agreed that the Progress Report should be added to the NICTS website as soon as possible

2. Reference Group LiP membership

An issue was raised about the current membership of the Reference Group and the one LiP space that is currently unfilled. The Chair indicated that the recruitment of new members would be considered in the upcoming review of the Terms of Reference (TOR) and first year (which will be the main item of business at the next meeting of the Reference Group in March 2020) with a view to getting membership to full strength and facilitating attendance as best we can.

3. Update on court visits

- The report of the Dungannon Courthouse visit which had taken place on 4th October 2019 and which had already been submitted to NICTS, was before the meeting. As Dungannon is a relatively modern court, it was suggested that a visit to an older courthouse would also be useful to give a rounded picture of court facilities outside of Belfast. Bishop Street courthouse was suggested. As had been the case with the visits to Laganside and Dungannon, it is proposed that there will be a mix of people in the visiting group including LiPs and court staff.
- In relation to progress on any of the points highlighted in the previous reports sent to NICTS, it was explained that most of the areas for improvement

identified in the “walk throughs”, will be looked at in the NICTS “Emerging Estate Strategy”, but this may take some time. However in relation to the potential “quick wins” that had been highlighted in the Reference Group’s earlier reports, NICTS and DoJ hope to be in a position to provide a written update early in the new year, which was welcomed by those present.

- It was also confirmed by NICTS that service users will be included as part of any future consultation on proposed changes or improvements.

4. Mediation Services

The Reference Group had received a request from the Shadow Family Justice Board for its views on the extent to which LiPs are aware of Mediation Services and how that level of awareness might be improved.

In response the following points were highlighted

- there are a wide range of organisations providing mediation services which is confusing for LiPs;
- as a starting point a list of mediation organisations, where they are and what they can provide, should be compiled and made easily accessible to parties involved in family law proceedings; and
- the parties to proceedings should be reminded of the availability of mediation services at an early stage in proceedings e.g. first Directions Hearing or in early correspondence, accompanied by practical information on how to access those services.

It was agreed that these suggestions would be fed back to the Shadow Family Justice Board, and that the Reference Group would be advised of any further action points on the issue.

5. Training Event 10th and 11th February 2020

At the Reference Group meeting held on 21st May 2019 there had been an agreement, that the Reference Group would host a two day training event on *Coping with Distressed Clients*, targeted mainly at lawyers and other legal advisers.

There was further discussion about the programme and it was agreed that the event should include a roundtable with the guest speakers exclusively for LiPs. This would provide a focused opportunity to exchange views and ideas on

initiatives here and in GB and on what is needed to support LiPs. It was requested by the LiP members that the roundtable should be organised late afternoon or early evening to facilitate attendance.

6. McKenzie Friends

- Following the subgroup meeting that had taken place on 5th November 2019 there was a paper before the meeting which summarised the key points to come out of those discussions.
- Given the number and scope of issues that emerged, it was agreed that the next step for the Reference Group is to decide which of those issues are a priority, the extent to which the Reference Group has the capacity to take those priority issues forward and if so, how.
- A further meeting of the sub-group is to be convened in the New Year to progress this.

7. Review

It was agreed that the Review of the last year and the existing TOR will be the main business of the next meeting of 10th March 2020.