

Message from Ms. Frances Fitzgerald T.D., Minister for Justice and Equality to the Legal Aid Board on the occasion of the Board's Annual Conference 2014.

I would like to begin by commending the Board for putting together such an interesting programme for today. The theme selected "Civil Legal Aid in a Rapidly Changing World" aptly encapsulates the challenges being faced by state agencies generally as we strive to provide services in a more cost effective manner while also delivering excellence for the citizen.

I had the pleasure of formally opening the Board's Conference in 2011 and I am very pleased to be associated with today's event. I had hoped to be in a position to address you directly, but unfortunately, I have Dáil commitments today that preclude me from doing so.

Nevertheless, be assured that I am with you in spirit as I appreciate the sterling work that the Board does in providing access to justice, and more recently family mediation, to citizens who require such services to resolve their disputes.

I welcome the Board's efforts, in recent years, to address a near doubling in demand for services from the law centre network at a time when staffing and financial resources have been restrained. I am particularly pleased with the innovative way the Board has been using its resources by introducing some specialist legal services for Personal Injury cases, dedicated childcare units and a triage service that guarantees applicants early access to a solicitor for advice on their problem. I note that this latter service is now available in most of the Board's law centres and is currently being reviewed to see how it can be improved into the future.

I also very much welcome the Board's efforts, since taking over responsibility for the Family Mediation Service, to mainstream mediation as a preferred approach to resolving family law disputes where the particular issues in dispute are clearly amenable to mediation instead of litigation.

In this connection, I am happy to continue to support the Board on the further development of this more integrated approach to service delivery along the lines of the very successful "Dolphin House Initiative". I welcome the fact that the Board has already extended the "Dolphin House Model" to some other locations in Cork, Nenagh and Naas. I also welcome the commencement, this week, of a mandatory mediation initiative for applicants for legal services in Cork, on a pilot basis. This is particularly timely, given that it is my intention to

provide a statutory framework for this type of approach, in the Mediation Bill that is under preparation in my Department. I share the Board's belief that there is huge potential for a greater focus on mediation as a means of breaking away, where feasible, from a "litigation first" approach to resolving family law disputes. From my own professional background, before entering politics, I remain acutely aware of just how traumatic overlaying a legal process on families in distress can be. Such a scenario is best avoided, if at all possible, for the sake of the vulnerable individuals who find themselves in need of a range of supports from the state, including access to suitable dispute resolution mechanisms.

I note from the Conference Programme today that speakers from other jurisdictions will be outlining developments in their countries. I look forward to hearing further from the Board about how lessons learnt elsewhere might be applied here for the benefit of our services.

One thing that I have been particularly impressed about, since taking over the Justice and Equality brief, is the very valuable contribution that the Board makes to the implementation of government policy on a range of matters within its remit. I know that when the Board is tasked with something, it delivers and this is one of the reasons why its remit is being actively expanded, including the transfer of responsibility for criminal legal aid and mental health tribunals to the organisation. I note also that the Board's work in the asylum area has changed in recent months due to new arrangements on subsidiary protection that have required a different operational response from the organisation.

The Board's traditional role of being a vehicle for government policy on social inclusion, by providing access to justice in civil matters to persons who could not otherwise afford services, will continue to evolve. It will remain a core feature of the Board's operations, within an organisation in transition, according as new responsibilities are bedded in.

My Department and I intend to build on our excellent working relationship with the Board in the years ahead. I envisage that we will continue to work cooperatively on a range of matters, including those arising from the expansion of the organisation's remit, principally in the area of criminal legal aid and mental health tribunals.

Finally, I would like to wish the Board well for today's conference. I am sure the attendees will have a stimulating and thought-provoking day. I look forward to hearing further about what will be discussed and how it might assist us in plotting a coherent path for the future of the Board, according as the policy and operational implications of the organisation's expanding remit unfolds, in the coming years.