

CIVIL LEGAL AID : FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

Monday 12th of January 2026
9:00AM - 5:00PM
Arts Building, Trinity College Dublin



CONFERENCE SCHEDULE AND SPEAKER BIOS

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

Time	Topic	Speaker(s)
9:30am (10 mins)	Welcome Remarks	Prof. Gerry Whyte (Academic Sponsor) Prof. Fiona Donson (Acting FLAC Chair)
9:40am (15 mins)	Minister for Justice, Home Affairs & Migration, Jim O'Callaghan TD	
9:55am (15 mins)	The Chief Justice, The Hon. Mr Justice Donal O'Donnell	
10:10am (20 mins)	Keynote Address: Prof. Síofra O'Leary (Former President of the European Court of Human Rights)	
10:30am (20 mins)	Tea & Coffee Break	
10:50am (20 mins)	Eilis Barry (FLAC Chief Executive)	
11:10am (1 hour, 15 mins)	Panel: Stakeholder Response to the Review	<p><i>Chair: His Honour Judge Colin Daly</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liam Herrick, Chief Commissioner, Irish Human Rights & Equality Commission. • Nuala Egan SC, Chair of the Legal Aid Board • Angela Denning, CEO of the Courts Service. • Seán Guerin SC, Chair of the Bar Council • Siún Hurley, Chair, Family and Child Law Committee of the Law Society of Ireland
12:25pm (35 Minutes)	The EU, the Rule of Law & Access to Justice	<p><i>Chair: Prof. Cathryn Costello (UCD)</i></p> <p>EU Commissioner Michael McGrath</p>
1:00pm (45 mins)	Lunch	
1:45pm (1 hour, 30 mins)	Panel: Academic Response to the Review	<p><i>Chair: The Hon. Ms Justice Siobhán Phelan</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prof. Gerry Whyte (TCD) • Prof. Thomas O'Malley SC • Dr Lara MacLachlan (University of Bristol) • Prof. Áine Ryall (UCC) • Prof. David Fennelly SC (TCD) • Prof. Fiona Donson (UCC)

Breakout Panel Discussions (30 mins) & Workshops (30 mins)

Room 1: Legal Aid, Administrative Decisions & Quasi-Judicial Tribunals

- *Chair: Christopher Bowes (Policy & Public Affairs Manager, FLAC)*
- Mary Heavey (Housing & Social Welfare Solicitor, Community Law & Mediation)
- Kate Heffernan (Solicitor, Mercy Law Resource Centre)
- Gwendolen Morgan (Registrar to the Workplace Relations Commission)

Room 2: Access to Justice for Travellers

- *Chair: Sinéad Lucey (Managing Solicitor, FLAC)*
- Maria Joyce (Coordinator, National Traveller Women's Forum)

Room 3: Legal Aid, Accessibility & Disability Justice

- *Chair: Ciarán Finley (Senior Policy/Public Affairs Advisor, National Disability Authority)*
- Dr Charles O'Mahony (University of Galway)
- Damien Walshe (Chief Executive, Independent Living Movement Ireland)
- Robbie Sinnott (Coordinator, Voice of Vision Impairment)

Room 4: Access to Justice for Migrants & International Protection Applicants

- *Chair: Katie Mannion (Managing Solicitor, Irish Refugee Council)*
- Catherine Cosgrave (Managing Solicitor, Immigrant Council of Ireland)
- Prof. Clíodhna Murphy (Maynooth University)
- Maria Elena Costa Sa (Human Rights and Community Development Lead, Irish Network Against Racism)

Room 5: Access to Justice for People in Prison

- *Chair: Saoirse Brady (Executive Director, Irish Penal Reform Trust)*
- Dr. Amina Adanan (Maynooth University)

Room 6: Environmental Justice

- *Chair: Prof. Áine Ryall (UCC)*
- Aoife Kelly-Desmond (CEO, Community Law & Mediation)
- Prof. Orla Kelleher (Maynooth University)
- Deirdre Duffy (CEO, Friends of the Earth)

Room 7: Access to Justice for Victims of Domestic Violence

- *Chair: Erin Brogan (Telephone Information and Referral Line Development Manager, FLAC)*
- Sarah Benson (CEO, Women's Aid)
- Keith Walsh SC (Keith Walsh Solicitors)

Room 8: FLAC Student Societies & the Campaign for Civil Legal Aid Reform

- *Chair: Colm O'Halloran (Campaigns & Communications Officer, FLAC)*

3:15pm
(1 hour)

4:15pm
(40 minutes)

4:55pm

Reports from the Chairs of the Breakout Panels & Workshops

Chair: Christopher Bowes (Policy & Public Affairs Manager, FLAC)

End of Conference

Jim O'Callaghan **Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration**

Jim O'Callaghan was appointed Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in January 2025.

He joined Fianna Fáil in 2003, and his first successful foray into electoral politics came in 2009, when he was elected to Dublin City Council to represent Pembroke-Rathmines.

O'Callaghan remained a member of Dublin City Council until his election to Dáil Éireann in 2016, when he regained a seat for Fianna Fáil in the Dublin Bay South (formerly Dublin South East) constituency.

A barrister and senior counsel, he also served as legal adviser to Fianna Fáil from 2011-2016.

He was a member of the Fianna Fáil Team that negotiated the Confidence and Supply Agreement, facilitating the election of the first minority government since 1989.

In May 2016, following his election to Dáil Éireann, he was appointed party front-bench spokesman on Justice and Equality by Fianna Fáil party leader Micheál Martin. He was re-elected in the Dublin Bay South constituency in 2020, and again in 2024.

Among the Bills he has introduced in the Dáil as a TD is the Parole Bill 2016. He drafted and secured cross-party support for the bill, which was passed by the Dáil and Seanad and became an Act in 2019. It comprehensively reformed the parole system, giving victims of crime and their families the right to be heard during the parole process.

The Oireachtas also passed the Minister's proposals to expand the powers of the Criminal Assets Bureau.

More recently, he introduced the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Bill to allow women to defer maternity leave in cases of serious illness, and the Sale of Tickets (Amendment) Bill to ban the dynamic pricing of tickets for concerts and cultural events.

The Minister lives in Ranelagh with his wife and son.

Minister O'Callaghan has a BCL degree from University College Dublin, a master's degree in law and an M.Phil. in criminology from the University of Cambridge, and a barrister-at-law degree from the King's Inns.

He qualified as a barrister in 1993, and was made a senior counsel in 2008.

Mr O'Callaghan enjoyed a high-level rugby career, beginning at University College, Dublin. He continued to play the game while studying at Cambridge University, and later represented London Irish, Wanderers, Leinster and Connacht. He was also capped for Ireland at under-21 level.

Since his appointment, Minister O'Callaghan has prioritised getting more Gardaí on our streets, tackling the scourge of domestic violence and implementing a robust immigration system.



The Chief Justice, The Hon. Mr Justice Donal O'Donnell

Mr. Justice Donal O'Donnell was appointed Chief Justice of Ireland in 2021. He was called to the Bar of Ireland in 1982, and commenced practice in 1983, called to the Bar of Northern Ireland in 1989, and became a senior counsel in 1995. He was appointed directly to the Supreme Court of Ireland in 2010.

Mr. Justice O'Donnell was educated at St Marys CBS, Belfast, UCD, King's Inns and the University of Virginia. He is a Bencher of the Honourable Society of King's Inns and an Honorary Bencher of Lincoln's Inn. He is also a Joint Patron of the Irish Legal History Society, an Honorary Member of the Society of Legal Scholars, Vice-President of UCD Law Society and holds Honorary Doctorates from both Dublin City University and University College Dublin.

He chairs the Judicial Appointments Commission and is a member of the Council of State and the Presidential Commission and in 2025 was elected President of the Network of Presidents of the Supreme Court Judicial Courts of the European Union.



KEYNOTE SPEECH: Síofra O'Leary (Former President of the European Court of Human Rights)

Síofra O'Leary is a former Judge and President of the European Court of Human Rights (2015 – 2024), where she dealt with cases ranging from the legal consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to climate change, data protection, freedom of expression and judicial independence.

Prior to joining the European Court of Human Rights, she worked for almost two decades at the Court of Justice of the European Union in both judicial and administrative capacities.

In 2025-2026, she is attending New York University (NYU) as a Hauser/Remarque Global Fellow. She is also an Adjunct Full Professor at University College Dublin (UCD) as well as a Visiting Professor at the College of Europe (Bruges) and the IE Business School (Madrid).

She is currently presiding the advisory board of a European research consortium on judicial independence and in 2026 she will participate on an international panel of experts to review Taiwan's act to implement the ICCPR.

Parallel to her work at the two European courts, Dr. O'Leary has published extensively on the protection of fundamental rights in EU law and under the ECHR, EU employment law, the free movement of persons and services in the internal market and EU citizenship.

She is an Honorary Bencher of the King's Inn and of Lincoln's Inn, an Honorary Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and in 2024 she was awarded the Ulysses Medal by her alma mater, UCD, as well as an LLD h.c. by the University of Edinburgh.

Eilis Barry, FLAC Chief Executive



Eilis Barry is the Chief Executive of FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centres), an independent legal, equality and human rights non-governmental organisation which exists to promote access to justice.

Prior to joining FLAC, Eilis was a barrister specialising in all aspects of employment law, anti-discrimination and equality. She was the legal adviser of the Equality Authority and head of its legal section from 2000 to 2009, when she resumed practice at the bar.

Eilis was the FLAC nominee on the Review of the Civil legal aid scheme, which was established by the Minister for Justice. She is the authority of the minority report of the Review, which was endorsed and supported by Professor Tom O' Malley.

She is an adjunct professor with UCC law school. She is on the board of the LSRA and is a member of the Patents and Precedents Committee. She is a member of the Chief Justice's Access to Justice Committee



Chair: His Honour Judge Colin Daly

Colin qualified as a solicitor in 1997. He was the Managing Solicitor at Northside Community Law Centre (now Community Law & Mediation) for 11 years before his appointment as a Judge of the District Court in 2012. Colin was a moveable judge of the District Court, mainly hearing public family law cases, until he was assigned to District 22 – Carlow/ Kilkenny in 2015. There he presided over all criminal, civil and family law matters in the District.

In 2019 he was appointed President of the District Court where he safely steered the jurisdiction through the pandemic in 2020/21. In 2021 he was appointed to the Circuit Court where he works across all criminal and civil matters. In 2024 Colin was assigned to the South-Western Circuit.



Liam Herrick, Chief Commissioner, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

Liam Herrick was appointed Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in November 2024, having previously served as a member of the Commission between 2013 and 2016. He has worked in the area of human rights in Ireland for over 25 years, including as the Executive Director of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) and of the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT).

He has also worked for the Irish Human Rights Commission as its first Senior Policy and Legislation Review Officer, and for the Law Reform Commission and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Between 2014 and 2016, Liam worked as Advisor to President Michael D. Higgins. He was also a member of the Minister for Justice's Strategic Review Group on Penal Policy.



Nuala Egan SC, Chair of the Legal Aid Board

Nuala is the Chairperson of the Legal Aid Board. She began practising as a barrister in 1997 and became a Senior Counsel in 2022. Her practice focusses upon aspects of constitutional, human rights and administrative law.

She was formerly a lecturer in law in Trinity College Dublin and in the University of Galway, a legal researcher in the Law Reform Commission and an advisor to Oireachtas Committees.

She has published in her legal areas of interest, including asylum and immigration law, public child law and international environmental law and development.

Angela Denning, CEO Of the Courts Service



Angela Denning is the Chief Executive of the Courts Service where she leads an ambitious modernisation programme centred around digital delivery of services so as to improve access to justice. She is a qualified barrister with over 20 years operational experience in the Courts Service including a period where she was appointed as Deputy Master of the High Court.

Prior to her appointment to her current role, Angela worked in the Reform Division of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform where she had responsibility for a range of policy areas supporting increased transparency and improved public trust in Government.

Seán Guerin SC, Chair of the Bar Council



Seán Guerin SC is Chair of the Bar of Ireland, the representative body for the barristers' profession in Ireland. Educated at St Peter's College Wexford and St Andrew's College, Dublin, he studied law at University College Dublin and Université de Nancy II (France). He qualified as a barrister at King's Inns and was called to the Bar in 1997. He also has postgraduate qualifications in law from University College Dublin (commercial law) and King's College London (European law).

He has been in practice at the Bar of Ireland since 1998 and was called to the Inner Bar and appointed Senior Counsel in 2013. Based at the Law Library in Dublin, he practices mainly in public law – including criminal, regulatory, and administrative law. He has served for many years on the Professional Practices Committee of the Bar Council and has been chair of the Criminal State Bar Committee since 2022

Siún Hurley, Chair, Family and Child Law Committee of the Law Society of Ireland



Siún Hurley, LL.B, is a solicitor at O'Donovan, Murphy & Partners LLP in Bantry, Co. Cork, where she leads the litigation department with a focus on family law. She serves on the Council of the Law Society of Ireland and chairs the Family and Child Law Committee, actively shaping policy and advancing legal practices. With extensive experience in family law and litigation, Siún is committed to shaping policy and meaningful change in the legal profession.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

THE EU, THE RULE OF LAW & ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Prof. Cathryn Costello



Cathryn Costello is Full Professor of Global Refugee and Migration Law at the Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin. She was formerly Professor of Fundamental Rights and Co-Director of the Centre for Fundamental Rights at the Hertie School (2020–2023), and Andrew W Mellon Professor of International Refugee and Migration Law at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford (2013–2023).

She is the author of *The Human Rights of Migrants and Refugees in European Law* (OUP 2015) (co-winner of the Odysseus Prize 2016) and co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of International Refugee Law* (co-editors Michelle Foster and Jane McAdam) (OUP 2021). She was the Principal Investigator of RefMig, an ERC-funded research project exploring refugee mobility, recognition and rights (2018–2024), and currently leads the Volkswagen Foundation funded AFAR (Algorithmic Fairness for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) project. She was recently awarded a ERC Consolidator grant for RefLex: Is International Refugee Law Effective? (to commence in September 2025), a large comparative study on the effectiveness of this body of law, in particular exploring the role of legal mobilisation in its impact.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

THE EU, THE RULE OF LAW & ACCESS TO JUSTICE



EU Commissioner Michael McGrath

Michael McGrath assumed the role of EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection on 1 December 2024, as a member of the European Commission under the leadership of President Ursula von der Leyen.

As a member of the College of Commissioners, Commissioner McGrath contributes to delivering on the Commission's overall political priorities, set out in the Political Guidelines underpinning the European Commission 2024 – 2029.

Commissioner McGrath has specific responsibility for upholding the rule of law, protecting democracy and fundamental rights, tackling disinformation, improving criminal justice cooperation and strengthening the rights of victims of crime, and improving EU competitiveness through the reform of company law and civil law. Commissioner McGrath has lead responsibility for consumer protection policy for almost 450 million consumers in the EU, and works to ensure full enforcement of the General Data Protection Regulation and promoting trusted data flows with international partners.

Commissioner McGrath has been appointed by President von der Leyen as Chairperson of the Commission Project Group on Democracy, and is a member of the Project Groups on Artificial Intelligence; Startups and Scaleups; European Savings and Investment Union; and European internal Security.

Prior to this, Commissioner McGrath served as Ireland's Minister for Finance from 2022 to 2024, as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform from 2020 to 2022, and was an elected member of the Irish Parliament between 2007 to 2024. As Minister for Finance, he had a key role in decisions made across government, and was Ireland's representative at the Eurogroup and Ecofin meetings of European Finance Ministers, and was Governor of a number of international bodies that Ireland is a member of, including the European Investment Bank, the IMF, the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Commissioner McGrath holds a Bachelor of Commerce from University College Cork, is a qualified Chartered Accountant and has undertaken studies with the London School of Economics and Political Science. He held senior roles in both the private and public sectors before entering politics full-time.

Chair: The Hon. Ms Justice Siobhán Phelan

Siobhán Phelan is a judge of the High Court. She was called to the Outer Bar in 1995 and the Inner Bar in 2015. She is a former director and Chairperson of FLAC. As a barrister, she practised primarily in the public law arena with a particular interest in human rights and equality law and has lectured in the area of European Human Rights law.



She acted for the Applicant in the landmark case of *Meadows v. Minister for Justice and Equality* and the Plaintiff in *Foy v. An tArd Chlaraitheoir* in which the first Declaration of Incompatibility with the ECHR was made under section 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights Act, 2003. She also acted for the Plaintiff in *PC v. Minister for Social Welfare & Ors.* in which the prohibition on the payment of the State Contributory Pension to prisoners was found to be unconstitutional.

She has previously been a member of the Mental Health Tribunal and sat on the Dispute Resolution Committee of the Residential Tenancies Board.

Prof. Gerry Whyte

Gerry Whyte is an adjunct Associate Professor at Trinity College Law School. He is the co-author, with Conor Casey, of *Social Inclusion and the Legal System: Public Interest Law in Ireland* (3rd Ed., 2025).

He is a former chairperson of Coolock Community Law Centre Ltd., (now Community Law and Mediation), a former director of Mercy Law Resource Centre and a current director of Crosscare.



Prof. David Fennelly SC

David Fennelly is an assistant professor in the School of Law, Trinity College Dublin. He is also a practising barrister specialising in public law and became a senior counsel in 2024.

David was a member of FLAC Council between 2019 and 2024m and was the Chair of FLAC from 2021 to 2024. He has also worked at the International Law Commission, the European Commission Legal Service and the Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations, New York.



Prof. Thomas O'Malley SC



Tom O'Malley is a Senior Counsel and a retired Associate Professor of Law at the University of Galway. As both academic and practitioner, he specialises mainly in criminal law, criminal justice and sentencing, and he is the author of several books in those areas.

He was a member of the Law Reform Commission from 2013 to 2020, and was also a member of Government-appointed Working Group charged with reviewing the Civil Legal Aid Scheme. He joined in the Working Group's minority report authored by Eilis Barry.

Prof. Áine Ryall (UCC)



Professor Áine Ryall is Co-Director of the Centre for Law & the Environment at University College Cork where she teaches environmental law and European Union law. A qualified barrister, she holds a PhD from the European University Institute, Florence. In December 2021, Áine was elected Chair of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee having previously served as Vice-Chair from November 2017 and a member of the Committee from 2015

Professor Ryall is a member of the Audit and Risk Committee of the Environmental Protection Agency; a Vice President of the Irish Centre for European Law (ICEL); a member of the Avosetta Group of Experts on EU Environmental Law; and a member of the Academic Panel at Francis Taylor Building, Inner Temple, London..

Dr. Lara MacLachlan

Lara MacLachlan is a lecturer in law at the University of Bristol. She holds a Bachelor of Social Science (University College Dublin), a Higher Diploma in Immigration and Asylum Law (Kings Inn, Dublin) and a Masters in Common Law (University College Dublin) and a PhD (University of Liverpool). Lara's research interests broadly relate to the relationship between social justice and law, particularly in the context of access to justice.

Her PhD research focused on the civil legal aid system in Ireland, where it explored the system from the perspective of practitioners. This work has been published in journals such as *Legal Studies* and *Social and Legal Studies*. Lara sits on the management committee of the Law Clinic at University of Bristol Law School.

She has previously worked as a Research Assistant on the project 'Supporting Online Justice' at the Centre of Socio-Legal Studies, University of Oxford and was a board member of the Social Legal Studies Association.

Dr. Fiona Donson

Dr. Fiona Donson is Senior Lecturer in Law, Vice-Dean of EDI and Co-Director, Traveller Equality and Justice Project, University College Cork School of Law. She is a socio-legal scholar with an established international profile in areas of children rights/parental imprisonment, administrative justice and access to justice.

Her research focuses on social justice and in particular the development of collaborative work with seldom heard communities engaging with law, policy and institutions to develop innovative scholarship.

Her publications include a co-edited collection *Parental Imprisonment and Children's Rights* (Routledge, 2021) (with Dr Aisling Parkes), the upcoming book *Traveller Law* (Dr Samantha Morgan-Williams), *Law and Public Administration in Ireland* (with Dr D. O'Donovan, Clarus Press, 2015) and *Legal Intimidation: A SLAPP in the Face of Democracy* (Free Association Books, 2000).

Fiona has been a member of FLAC Council since 2024 and is currently acting Chair.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

**BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
LEGAL AID, ADMINISTRATIVE DECISIONS &
QUASI-JUDICIAL TRIBUNALS**

Chair: Christopher Bowes



Christopher Bowes is Policy & Public Affairs Manager at FLAC. He studied Law and Political Science in Trinity College Dublin and was called to the Bar in 2020. He was editor-in-chief of the ninth edition of the King's Inns Law Review (KILR).

He is a member of the Steering Group of the All-Island Social Security Network (AISSN). He has worked in FLAC in various casework and policy roles since 2017. He was previously project coordinator of Equality Action – a joint project of IHREC and FLAC which aimed to strengthen civil society engagement with the review of Ireland's equality legislation.

Mary Heavey



Mary joined Community Law & Mediation (CLM) in March 2022, and specialises in the areas of social housing, homelessness and social welfare law. Prior to joining CLM, she completed her traineeship at Arthur Cox LLP and worked with the Employment Law Group at Arthur Cox post-qualification.

She holds a Bachelor of Civil Law (International) with French from NUI Galway and a Masters in Law from the University of Edinburgh, where she focused on international and human rights law.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
LEGAL AID, ADMINISTRATIVE DECISIONS &
QUASI-JUDICIAL TRIBUNALS

Kate Heffernan



Kate Heffernan is a solicitor in Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC). MLRC is an independent law centre specialising in the provision of legal advice and representation in the areas of homelessness and social housing.

Previously, Kate worked as an Associate Solicitor in the litigation department in Arthur Cox LLP. Before training as a solicitor, Kate completed the Thomas Addis Emmet Fellowship in public interest law, in conjunction with FLAC and the University of Washington.

Kate holds an LL.B from Trinity College Dublin and an LL.M from New York University. At NYU, Kate participated in a Housing Law Externship, working with the Legal Aid Society in New York.

Gwendolen Morgan



Gwendolen Morgan is Director of the Legal Division and Registrar at the WRC which involves representing the WRC in litigation, knowledge management and training, and advisory work across the WRC's areas of responsibility. She is a UK and Irish qualified solicitor, accredited mediator and member of the Employment Law Review Group. She lectures on the Law Society's judicial skills diploma on equality and human rights.

Before joining the WRC she was a senior lawyer with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission representing IHREC in amicus curiae briefs before the Superior Courts, and representing individuals in equality and human rights matters before the WRC, domestic and European Courts.

Before returning to Ireland, Gwendolen worked as a Senior Associate at Bindmans LLP in London and was a starred lawyer in UK Chambers and Legal 500 directories for public law and civil liberties.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

**BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR TRAVELLERS**

Chair: Sinéad Lucey



Sinead is the Managing Solicitor at FLAC. She studied law in UCC before going on to do a Masters in International Law in the UK. She returned to Ireland where she qualified as a solicitor in 2000. Sinead then took up a position in the national Traveller rights group, the Irish Traveller Movement, in 2003. She then went on to do further work with the Equality Authority and also provided legal representation before Mental Health Tribunals to individuals involuntarily detained under the Mental Health Act 2001.

In 2008 Sinead joined the Irish Human Rights Commission as Senior Inquiry and Legal Officer, eventually becoming part of the newly formed Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission before joining FLAC in 2016.

Maria Joyce



Maria Joyce is the Coordinator of the National Traveller Women's Forum where she is leading the organisations mission to empower Traveller Women to achieve full equality and have their identity celebrated.

Using a human rights and community development based approach, she strives to empower Traveller Women in working towards full (gender) equality, supporting them to take leadership roles within their own and the wider community.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
LEGAL AID, ACCESSIBILITY & DISABILITY JUSTICE

Chair: Ciarán Finley



Ciarán Finley is a Senior Policy & Public Affairs Advisor at the National Disability Authority. In this role, he leads the agency's policy work on justice, equality and capacity matters, political participation, and international instruments.

Ciarán has previously worked with the Permanent Missions of Ireland to the United Nations in both New York and Geneva during Ireland's most recent terms of membership of the UN Security Council and UN Human Rights Council. A qualified barrister, he has also held legal and policy roles with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC) and UNHCR Ireland.

Dr. Charles O'Mahony



Dr Charles O'Mahony is an Associate Professor at the University of Galway's School of Law, specialising in disability and mental health law and policy. His research is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), focusing on identifying legal and policy gaps and proposing reforms aligned with international human rights standards. He authored a baseline study on access to justice for disabled people and the CRPD for the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in 2024.

At the University of Galway, Charles teaches across law, nursing, and arts programmes. His modules include Introduction to Law, International & Comparative Disability Rights, Law & Ethics, and Minority Groups & the Criminal Justice System.

He has published in leading journals such as the International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, Industrial Law Journal, Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly, and the International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice. Charles served as Head of the School of Law (2017–2021). He holds a PhD from the Centre for Disability Law and Policy at the University of Galway, where his thesis examined legal responses to defendants and offenders with mental health problems and intellectual disabilities.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
LEGAL AID, ACCESSIBILITY & DISABILITY JUSTICE



Damien Walshe

Damien is the Chief Executive of Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI). He joined ILMI in October 2017 and has over 15 years experience in equality and human rights organisations, including the Irish Traveller Movement, the Equality and Rights Alliance and Aontas.

Damien is keen to bring previous experience of actively engaging and supporting people to work collectively in to ILMI to ensure that people with disabilities see ILMI as a vehicle for change to bring about equality in Irish society.



Robert Sinnott

Dr. Robert Sinnott was born blind and is neurodivergent (AuDHD). He has been a Human Rights campaigner in the area of accessibility since 2010. In 2017 He won a judicial review at the High Court to facilitate visually impaired people to be able to vote in elections and referenda. In 2019 he founded Voice of Vision Impairment (VVI), which is Ireland's Disabled Persons' Representative Organisation (DPRO) specific to the collective representation of blind and partially sighted people as per the "UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (UNCPRD).

As co-ordinator of VVI, Dr. Sinnott worked with VVI members on an ongoing basis to ensure reasonable accommodations from service providers at the earliest stage, and as a general VVI representative has worked with diverse public and private bodies, such as Diageo and the Health Services Executive (HSE) in providing for accessibility at the systems level so that requests for reasonable accommodations are less likely.

In some cases, Dr. Sinnott supports VVI members in taking reasonable accommodation and discrimination cases under the Equal Status Acts. In cases of strategic significance, this can mean referrals to the Public Interest Law Alliance (PILA) and continuing to support VVI members through all stages of a case.

Dr. Sinnott's intimate, regular and ongoing coalface experience of the engagement of visually impaired people (including those with cross-impairments) in trying to access legal processes gives him a unique and valuable expertise in the existing barriers and potential solutions regarding the upholding and vindication of the rights of disabled people in general, and visually impaired people in particular.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

**BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR MIGRANTS &
INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION APPLICANTS**

Chair: Katie Mannion



Katie Mannion is Managing Solicitor at Irish Refugee Council Independent Law Centre, where she leads a team providing direct legal representation to people seeking international protection and refugees throughout the international protection process, and in related matters such as family reunification, age assessment of age-disputed minors and reception conditions.

She addresses systemic issues impacting international protection applicants through strategic casework and litigation before the Irish High Court. This has recently included challenging the State's failure to provide for accommodation for newly arriving international protection applicants, which resulted in street homelessness and destitution, and was found to breach the Charter of Fundamental Rights. On reference, the CJEU found that Ireland could not evade its obligations to provide for individuals' basic needs.

The Irish Refugee Council advocates for access to adequately-resourced, independent, individualised, specialist legal advice and representation throughout the international protection process.

Catherine Cosgrave



Catherine Cosgrave is the Managing Solicitor at the Immigrant Council of Ireland Independent Law Centre. A specialised migration and human rights lawyer, she is author of many publications relating to family and child migration, human trafficking, and citizenship.

Catherine has held various roles including the EUDO Ireland Country Expert on Citizenship, the FRANET expert lead on Immigration and Asylum for Ireland and the country expert for the Stateless Index project of the European Network on Statelessness. She was appointed to the National Advisory Committee on Children and Young People (2018 - 2022).

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION: ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR MIGRANTS & INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION APPLICANTS

Dr. Clíodhna Murphy



Dr Clíodhna Murphy is an Associate Professor at Maynooth University's School of Law and Criminology, where she teaches modules in Migration and Human Rights and Migration in International Law. One strand of Clíodhna's research focuses on human rights in the Irish international protection process and she is currently finalising a study of the role of medical evidence of torture in the protection process.

Clíodhna qualified as a solicitor before moving to academia in 2012. She has acted as a legal expert or consultant for organisations such as the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the OSCE. She is currently a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority's section 16 education and training committee, and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Irish Refugee Council.

Maria Elena Costa Sa



Maria-Elena Costa Sa has worked in the Public Health, Disability and Equality sectors for over thirty years, both in the U.K. and in Ireland. She is a human rights activist and community development worker, prioritising work with the most marginalised and disenfranchised communities, in peer led initiatives to bring about equitable outcomes. She joined the Terrence Higgins Trust in the late 80's and remained working with people with HIV and AIDS until moving to Ireland in 2000. She worked with local and national Traveller Projects including Pavee Point, and Clondalkin Travellers Development Group for 18 years and then with people with disabilities at the CRC.

She now works with Irish Network Against Racism as their Human Rights and Community Development Lead, capacity building minority ethnic leaders, into leadership roles, or to provide EDI and anti-racism training, or to identify and take cases of institutional racism. She has degree level qualifications in Human Rights and Equality Law, Addiction Studies and Economics and Public Policy and has completed a Masters of Economic Science in Policy Analysis on Ireland's 2023 National Action Plan Against Racism with the IPA. She sits on the Council of the Free Legal Advice Centre.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

**BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
ACCESS TO JUSTICE
FOR PEOPLE IN PRISON**

Chair: Saoirse Brady



Saoirse joined the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) as Executive Director in May 2022. Prior to joining IPRT, she worked as Head of Legal, Policy and Public Affairs at the Children’s Rights Alliance and with a number of leading rights organisations, including the Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC), Front Line Defenders and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. She has also acted as an independent consultant for the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC) and CORU – the Health and Social Care Regulator.

Saoirse holds an MA in European Studies (2004) and a BCL (European Legal Studies) (2003) both from University College Dublin. In 2014, she completed a Professional Fellowship Rule of Law Exchange programme, co-sponsored by the US Department of State and Boston College, involving a placement with Boston-based Citizens for Juvenile Justice.

Dr. Amina Adanan



Dr Amina Adanan is Lecturer/ Assistant Professor in Law in the School of Law and Criminology in Maynooth University. Amina’s research areas include the application of international law in domestic legal systems and human rights in Ireland, and she researches and teaches in these areas. Amina is actively engaged in advocacy and policy work concerning human rights in Ireland, in particular concerning the rights of Mixed Race Irish and prisoner rights.

She is also a member of the Association of Mixed Race Irish’s Racial Justice Forum.

Amina is the co-author of the Irish Penal Reform Trust report on ‘Sometimes I’m Missing the Words: The rights, needs and experiences of foreign national and minority ethnic groups in the Irish penal system’ (2022) and the sole author of the 2024 report on Access to Justice: Legal Pathways to Justice for the Rights of People in Prison’ (funded by Research Ireland), which analyses public interest prison law in Ireland.

Chair: Prof. Áine Ryall



Professor Áine Ryall is Co-Director of the Centre for Law & the Environment at University College Cork where she teaches environmental law and European Union law. A qualified barrister, she holds a PhD from the European University Institute, Florence. In December 2021, Áine was elected Chair of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee having previously served as Vice-Chair from November 2017 and a member of the Committee from 2015

Professor Ryall is a member of the Audit and Risk Committee of the Environmental Protection Agency; a Vice President of the Irish Centre for European Law (ICEL); a member of the Avosetta Group of Experts on EU Environmental Law; and a member of the Academic Panel at Francis Taylor Building, Inner Temple, London..

Aoife Kelly-Desmond



Aoife Kelly-Desmond is CEO of Community Law & Mediation (CLM), an independent law centre and charity providing legal, mediation and education services to communities across Ireland. A solicitor and not-for-profit leader, she is committed to promoting access to justice and challenging inequity through the law.

Previously, Aoife was Managing Solicitor at Mercy Law Resource Centre, supporting people at risk of homelessness, and worked with A&L Goodbody and Matheson on public law, investigations, regulatory matters, and complex disputes. She chairs the Board of Plan International Ireland and is a graduate of University College Cork, with postgraduate qualifications from Queen Mary University of London and Leicester Castle Business School.

Prof. Orla Kelleher



Dr Orla Kelleher is an assistant professor at Maynooth University School of Law and Criminology. Orla's research and expertise spans climate change, environmental, and human rights law, with a particular focus on climate litigation.

Her current research focuses on environmental rights, climate litigation, climate justice and just transitions.

Prior to joining Maynooth, Orla lectured at the University of Limerick. She holds a Ph.D. from UCD, an LL.M. from the College of Europe (Bruges) and a BCL (Law and French) from UCC. Orla is also a qualified barrister, having been called to the Irish Bar in 2020.

Deirdre Duffy



Deirdre is the CEO of Friends of the Earth Ireland, Ireland's leading environmental campaigning organisation. We campaign locally, nationally and globally for environmental and social justice, respect for human rights and a world where people and nature thrive.

Formerly of Community Foundation Ireland and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Deirdre is best known for her role as Campaign Manager for Together for Yes. This campaign successfully brought together a diverse movement to work for and achieve Repeal of the 8th Amendment (reproductive rights) in 2018, proving that when people unite behind shared values, they can reshape society itself. Drawing on her background as a human rights lawyer, Deirdre's ambition is to place climate justice at the heart of environmental campaigns to protect nature and people.

At Friends of the Earth Ireland that means pushing the Irish Government to reduce polluting emissions fast enough to meet Ireland's legally binding pollution limits and fairly enough to reduce poverty and inequality.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION: ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Chair: Erin Brogan

Erin qualified as a solicitor in 2008 and has worked for a number of years in private practice specialising in family, immigration, litigation, employment and property/probate law.

Through the telephone information line, Erin offers first-stop legal information to callers on a variety of legal issues, including family law, immigration, employment law, landlord and tenant law, property disputes, wills and probate, as well as providing callers with information on other services they may avail of, such as FLAC's free legal advice clinics. Erin has also volunteered with FLAC previously in the areas of immigration and family law.

Sarah Benson

Sarah Benson is the current Chief Executive Officer of Women's Aid, Ireland.

For nine years prior to this role, Sarah was the Chief Executive Officer with Ruhama, an Irish NGO working nationally with women and people affected by prostitution including victims of sex trafficking .

In addition Sarah has previous experience as Manager of the National Domestic Violence Helpline and extensive work in the community and voluntary sector both in Ireland and abroad, working particularly with marginalized ethnic minority women and youth.

With extensive previous Board experience, Sarah is currently a Ministerial appointee to the Board of Cuan the National Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Violence Agency, and the Board of the Courts Service of Ireland.

Sarah is also Chairperson of the Family Law Courts Development Committee of the Courts Service Board, and a member of the Public Policy and Research Committee of The Wheel.

Sarah holds a Bachelor of Arts from UCD, a Master of Philosophy (Gender & Women's Studies) from Trinity College Dublin and a Master's Degree in Business Studies (MBS. Business Practice) from UCC (via the Irish Management Institute).

Throughout her career Sarah's passion for human rights, social justice and equality - in particular for women and girls - remains a constant feature.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Keith Walsh



Keith Walsh is a solicitor [2001] and Senior Counsel [2021] practising in the area of family law for over 20 years in Dublin. He is managing partner of Keith Walsh Solicitors LLP, an 8 solicitor firm. He started his legal career as a temporary law clerk in the Legal Aid Board. He is a former chair of the Law Society's Child and Family Law committee, former President of the DSBA [2013-14] and a fellow of the International Academy of Family Law.

He is author of *Divorce and Judicial Separation Proceedings in the Circuit Court: A Guide to Order 59* [2019] and co-author of *Domestic Violence: Law and Practice in Ireland* [2024] with Sonya Dixon B.L. both published by Bloomsbury Professional. He is currently the interim editor of the DSBA Parchment quarterly legal magazine and has written widely on family law, legal aid, mental health law and other topics.

He is a contributor to the Law Society's Law School and Diploma programmes. He is Junior Vice President of the Law Society 2025-26.

CIVIL LEGAL AID: FROM REVIEW TO REFORM

BREAKOUT PANEL DISCUSSION:
STUDENT SOCIETIES & THE CAMPAIGN
FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID REFORM



Chair: Colm O'Halloran

Colm is the Campaigns and Communications Officer for FLAC. He oversees the communications channels of FLAC and develops campaigns related to FLAC's public policy and advocacy work.

He was previously Vice President of the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and focused on campaigning and organising on student issues.

He has previously worked in politics in parliamentary and advisory roles, and has a special interest in human rights, access to justice, and political affairs.



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