



## FLAC NEWS - Spring 2026

*A chara,*

Welcome to the Spring 2026 edition of *FLAC News* with updates on work so far this year.

2026 has already been a very busy year for FLAC and this newsletter has updates from all across the organisation: including news of a landmark disability discrimination case, our Telephone Information & Referral Line, our FLAC clinics, policy work, PILA, and staff updates.

### Civil Legal Aid

Due to the slow response to the Civil Legal Aid review, FLAC held a major Civil Legal Aid Reform conference in collaboration with the Trinity College Dublin School of Law in January. We had a stellar line up of speakers including the Minister for Justice, the Chief Justice, and the EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, Prof. Síofra O’Leary, Former President of the European Court of Human Rights. Demand to attend the conference was overwhelming and there was a palpable energy in the room and strong commitment from speakers and attendees on the need to urgently reform the civil legal aid scheme. The Chief Justice, the Hon. Mr Justice Donal O’Donnell described the pace of reform in the area of civil legal aid as “*frustratingly slow*”.



We were disappointed that the Minister could not provide any timeline or update about reform of the Civil Legal Aid system. In February, we appeared before the Oireachtas Justice Committee to set our vision for urgently needed reform in this area. We are awaiting that Committee’s report on civil legal aid and we continue to push for long-overdue progress.

### Don’t Shoot JR!

We were back in front of the Justice Committee in March to outline our grave concerns about the proposed changes to the judicial review process contained in the General Scheme of Civil Reform Bill. There has been no consultation regarding these changes and no evidence base has been provided to support them. The proposals in the General Scheme cover the rules on time limits, standing, costs, alternative remedies, appeals, the court’s discretion, and the threshold for getting permission to take a case. They would have a very negative impact on people that FLAC and other Independent Law Centres represent trying to establish and vindicate their legal and constitutional rights in relation to very basic public service like social housing, emergency accommodation, additional educational supports, and access to basic social welfare payments.

At the Committee hearing, the Department confirmed that they were dropping the proposal in the General Scheme to move many judicial review cases from the High Court to the Circuit Court. However, the remaining proposals still constitute a radical curtailment of access to judicial review

FLAC have called for the General Scheme to not proceed, and we will continue to engage with the Minister, the Department of Justice and stakeholders in the weeks and months ahead.

### Equality When?!

We are disappointed at lack of progress on the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024 during 2026. That proposed legislation was the result of the Review of the Equality Acts which FLAC campaigned for and it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to combat discrimination and create a more equal society.

The Oireachtas Committee on Children and Equality published their pre-legislative report on the bill last October and adopted many of FLAC's recommendations for strengthening the legislation. There has been no progress since then and we will be engaging with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality about how and when it will be advanced.

### Support FLAC

FLAC is an independent non-governmental organisation and all of our services are provided free of charge. This means **we need your support**. FLAC relies combination of donations from the public, grants from statutory bodies and foundations, and contributions from the legal professions. We would be very grateful if you, or your organisation would consider donating to FLAC to support our work in the year ahead.



Le meas,

**Eilis Barry**  
FLAC Chief Executive

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## Independent Law Centre

### Casework Update: Deaf man receives landmark award from WRC for disability discrimination by the National Council for Special Education

Noel O'Connell (a deaf man represented by FLAC) has succeeded in a disability discrimination complaint against the National Council for Special Education ('NCSE') under the Employment Equality Acts. The NCSE is a statutory body which was established to improve the delivery of education services to people with special educational needs.



In 2022, Noel O'Connell applied for an Irish Sign Language ('ISL') Advisor role with the NCSE. The NCSE did not shortlist him for the role because he lacked a formal qualification in ISL (despite ISL being his first and native language). A formal review by the Commission for Public Service Appointments later found that he met the requirements for the role. However, he was informed by the NCSE at that stage that the recruitment process had closed.

In a decision published in February, the WRC Adjudicator found that the NCSE's actions "*amount to indirect discrimination*" against Mr O'Connell. €13,000 is the maximum that can be awarded under the Employment Equality Acts in cases concerning access to employment. However, in a landmark move, the WRC Adjudicator went beyond the maximum compensation limit in Irish legislation and awarded Mr O'Connell €40,000 in compensation on the basis that the relevant EU Equality Directive requires sanctions in such cases to be "*effective, proportionate and dissuasive*." The decision has now been appealed to the Labour Court.

- Read FLAC's Press Release about the decision [here](#).
- The full decision of the WRC in Noel O'Connell v National Council for Special Education [ADJ-00042837] may be accessed [here](#).

## Legal Training for Roma Peer Support Workers



During 2026, FLAC's Roma Legal Clinic is running four training sessions with Cáirde (a community health development organisation which works to reduce health inequalities among minority ethnic communities in Ireland).

The training will be delivered to Roma Peer Support Workers and will cover civil legal aid, equality law, family law and the rights of victims of domestic violence. The Roma women who take part in the training will develop resources based on the training and in turn support the Roma community more broadly, particularly other women, in understanding their rights, providing guidance and linking them with relevant agencies where appropriate.

The first training took place on the 25<sup>th</sup> March and explained the work of the Legal Aid Board and the scope of the Civil Legal Aid Scheme in Ireland as well as the practicalities of applying for legal aid.

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## Policy and Campaigns

### Civil Legal Aid

A conference poster for 'Civil Legal Aid: From Review to Reform'. The poster features logos for Trinity College Dublin, flac, and the School of Dlí Law. The main title is 'CIVIL LEGAL AID : FROM REVIEW TO REFORM'. The date and time are 'Monday 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2026, 9:00AM - 5:00PM'. The location is 'Arts Building, Trinity College Dublin'. On the right side of the poster is a large image of the Lady Justice statue, holding scales and a sword.

Trinity College Dublin  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin

flac  
promoting access to justice

Scoil an | School of  
Dlí | Law

**CIVIL LEGAL AID :**  
**FROM REVIEW TO REFORM**

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

Our Civil Legal Aid: From Review to Reform conference brought together a stellar line up of Ireland's access to justice stakeholders and experts to respond to the Review and reflect on how meaningful reform can be achieved in this area.

Photographs from the conference are available to view [here](#).



**“...it is hard to believe that as a society we would tolerate this level of unmet need in the fields of health or social welfare. It is worth asking why this has been allowed to occur in the field of legal aid. One reason of course is the lack of voice of those affected... ..the attitude that we can simply continue as usual within existing constraints is wrong...”**

**Chief Justice, the Hon. Mr. Donal O’Donnell**



Speakers at the conference included the Minister for Justice, Jim O’Callaghan TD, the Chief Justice, The Hon. Mr Justice Donal O’Donnell, Prof. Siofra O’Leary, Former President of the European Court of Human Rights, and EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, Michael McGrath.

FLAC Chief Executive, **Eilís Barry**, highlighted the urgency of the current situation, noting that the civil legal aid system is failing to meet the needs of those experiencing poverty and discrimination. *"First and foremost, civil legal aid is not treated as a fundamental right, a core social service or an investment that will benefit and save money for individuals, communities, the courts and the State. It should be,"* she stated.



European Union Commissioner Michael McGrath stated that he “[*applauds*] the courage and clarity with which [*the Civil Legal Aid Minority Report*] articulates the issues to be addressed.” He called for Ireland to “seize this landmark opportunity to close the justice gap.”

In the second part of the conference, attendees participated in eight breakout sessions on the topics:

- Legal Aid, Administrative Decisions & Quasi-Judicial Tribunals – *Chaired by Christopher Bowes (Policy & Public Affairs Manager, FLAC)*
- Access to Justice for Travellers - *Chaired by Sinéad Lucey (Managing Solicitor, FLAC)*
- Legal Aid, Accessibility & Disability Justice – *Chaired by Ciarán Finley (Senior Policy/Public Affairs Advisor, National Disability Authority)*
- Access to Justice for Migrants & International Protection Applicants – *Chaired by Katie Mannion (Managing Solicitor, Irish Refugee Council)*
- Access to Justice for People in Prison – *Chaired by Niamh McCormack (Legal, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, IPRT)*
- Environmental Justice – *Chaired by Prof. Áine Ryall (UCC)*
- Access to Justice for Victims of Domestic Violence – *Chaired by Erin Brogan (Telephone Information and Referral Line Development Manager, FLAC)*
- FLAC Student Societies & the Campaign for Civil Legal Aid Reform – *Chaired by Colm O’Halloran (Campaigns & Communications Officer, FLAC)*

These sessions were highly productive and their chairs reported back a range of very valuable insights to the conference. The full list of speakers can be found [here](#).

FLAC is very grateful to all speakers, chairs and attendees at the conference for their attendance, enthusiasm and commitment. We intend to publish a report from the conference collating the papers, speeches and contributions delivered on the day.



*“The [Civil Legal Aid] Minority Report contains clear, practical and cost-effective recommendations for resolving the present crisis and creating a legal aid system which prevents and resolves the legal problems individual and communities experience as early (and efficiently) as possible. Access to justice is, and has to be regarded as, an investment. For every euro spent on access to justice there will be savings and benefits for the individual, communities, the courts and society. It needs to be regarded as a vital and essential social service akin to healthcare and education.”*

– FLAC’s Submission to the Justice Committee on Civil Legal Aid

FLAC continues to campaign for the implementation of the Civil Legal Aid Minority Report. You can read FLAC’s press release about our appearance at the Justice Committee’s hearing on civil legal aid [here](#).

- Eilis Barry’s full statement to the Joint Committee may be accessed [here](#).
- FLAC’s full written submission to the Committee may be accessed [here](#).

In advance of International Women’s Day FLAC wrote to each member of the Oireachtas to highlight recommendations in the areas of civil legal aid and non-discrimination which are particularly relevant to achieving gender equality. Positive responses were received from TDs and Senators across the political spectrum.– We have also met TDs to discuss our practical and cost-effective recommendations for reform in this area.

### ***Don’t Shoot JR! The Civil Reform Bill 2025 & Judicial Review***

FLAC appeared before the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration on 24 March for Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Civil Reform Bill 2025. The General Scheme proposes sweeping changes to the process by which people may access the courts to challenge decisions by the State and Public Bodies.



*FLAC and colleagues from the Irish Refugee Council at Leinster House to discuss the Civil Reform Bill*

In her opening statement to the Justice Committee, FLAC Chief Executive Eilis Barry emphasised that the legislation (which arises from the *Accelerating Infrastructure* plan) will impact judicial review cases *“about social welfare, social housing, and education which have nothing to do with planning and infrastructure.”*

She warned that constitutional and public interest cases (such as the recent *O’Meara* case concerning

cohabitants' access to the Widower's Pension) would be blocked by the new rules proposed in the General Scheme.

- Read FLAC's press release about the Committee hearing [here](#).
- Eilis Barry's full statement to the Committee may be accessed [here](#).
- FLAC's full written submission to the Committee may be accessed [here](#).
- FLAC's concerns about the legislation, our submission and appearance at the Committee have been covered in [The Journal](#), the [Irish Times](#), and [Irish Legal News](#).

## Human Rights & Equality

FLAC Chief Executive, Eilis Barry, and FLAC Managing Solicitor, Sinéad Lucey, both delivered papers about the equality legislation at a UCD Roundtable organised by Professor Judy Walsh on 27 February. Eilis paper dealt with redress and access to justice. Sinéad's dealt with the exceptions to the legislation which block equality cases in areas such as social housing. We welcome and look forward to Judy's work to establish an equality law network.

On 25 February, Christopher Bowes (FLAC Policy and Public Affairs Manager) spoke at an INAR event in IHREC HQ about the upcoming UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Ireland. He gave practical advice on engaging with the process effectively which drew from FLAC's experience of previous UPRs and UN review processes.

In March, FLAC made a submission to the EU Commission to inform their annual rule of law review of Ireland. The submission focussed on the ECHR, civil legal aid, access to the courts and judicial review. The submission can be accessed [here](#).

## Upcoming Event: ECHR at a Crossroads

The image is a promotional poster for an event. On the left, the text reads 'ECHR at a Crossroads: Implications of the Chişinău Process' in a purple and black font. Above this text are the logos for 'flac' (with the tagline 'promoting access to justice') and 'HUMAN RIGHTS CONSORTIUM'. On the right, there is a photograph of a large, modern, circular building with a glass facade, likely the European Court of Human Rights. Overlaid on the bottom right of the poster is a blue circular graphic containing the text '15th of April 2026' and '2pm Online'.

FLAC hosted a joint meeting with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Consortium about threats to the ECHR on 9 March. It was attended by NGOs, academics and practitioners. The meeting focussed on the political initiatives advanced by a number of Member States (including the UK and Ireland) which appear to contemplate significant changes to how the absolute prohibition on torture, inhuman or degrading treatment is understood in the context of expulsion, removal, and extradition. FLAC and the Human Rights Consortium have written to the Minister for Foreign Affairs a meeting and expressing our concerns about the ECHR proposals (particularly in the context of Ireland's commitments under the Good Friday Agreement).

We invite you to join us on Wednesday 15 April for an online discussion hosted by FLAC and the Human Rights Consortium exploring the Council of Europe's Chişinău Process and its potential implications for the European Convention on Human Rights and, in turn, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and access to Convention rights in the UK and Ireland.

With expert contributions from Professor Natasa Mavronicola University of Birmingham, Alyson Kilpatrick Chief Commissioner at the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and Professor Andrew Forde Dublin City University, we will examine emerging risks to Convention rights and what they may mean for civil society and others across these islands.

Date & Time: Wed 15 Apr 2026 2:00 PM - 3:30 PM

Location: Online, Zoom.

Register [here](#).

## TG4 Documentary Series, *Ceartas Crua - Mná v an Dlí*

The bilingual two-part TG4 Documentary Series, *Ceartas Crua - Mná v an Dlí*, explores seminal moments in Irish history where women took on the legal system: FLAC Chief Executive, Eilis Barry,

appeared in second episode which covers the case *Airey v Ireland* in which Josey Airey, unable to afford a legal separation, took a case to the European Courts of Justice to win the right to secure access to legal aid in Ireland.

You can watch both episodes on the TG4 Player [here](#).

## Podcast on the Origins of Community Law in Ireland



A new three-part podcast series exploring the past, present and future of community law in Ireland by Community Law & Mediation (CLM) and the Bar of Ireland's Voluntary Assistance Scheme (VAS).

FLAC Chief Executive, Eilis Barry, appears on the first episode with Prof Gerry Whyte. You can listen to the podcast [here](#).

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## Legal Information & Advice

### PILA NGO Training

PILA and the Pro Bono Pledge Ireland held the second instalment of their NGO Webinar Series in February. The Webinar Series consists of six online information sessions on specific areas of law which the NGO Community have signalled to be the most important to them at this time. The sessions launched in October 2025 and are due to run until Summer 2026.



Speakers at GDPR Webinar on 18 February included Sarah Dunne, Associate from DLA Piper LLP and Siobhán Power, Senior Associate from McCann FitzGerald LLP. We thank them for their very insightful and informative contributions at the webinar!

### Telephone Information & Referral Line Overwhelmed

Our Telephone Information & Referral Line continues to provide basic legal information to hundreds of people each week. In 2026, the phonenumber team have seen an increase in queries relating to housing, evictions and homelessness.

FLAC's phonenumber receives far more calls than we can answer. We remain grateful to the volunteers from four law firms - Arthur Cox, Matheson LLP, Maples Gorup and Simmons & Simmons – for their assistance in responding to calls received by the phonenumber.

### FLAC Clinics and Volunteer Team



There is a huge demand for legal advice from volunteers in FLAC Clinics, especially in the areas of employment law and family law.

Over the past few months, the FLAC clinics and volunteers team spoke at a number of events and gave an overview of our work and services.

On 30 January, FLAC spoke at an event that was part of the Bar of Ireland's New Practitioner Programme, alongside representatives from the Legal Aid Board, the Bar's Voluntary Assistance Scheme and the Criminal Legal Aid Panel, covering voluntary opportunities within our clinics and phone line and informing attendees about PILA and the Pro Bono Pledge.

FLAC also spoke to the University of Galway FLAC Society on 9 March as part of their speaker series for their members. The presentation covered "FLAC's history and the importance of students in its development as well as interesting cases it has been involved in over the years and what its main areas of work are today."



## **Staff Updates**

### **Gillian Kernan – Promotion to Chief Operating Officer**

In February 2026, Gillian Kernan was appointed the role of FLAC Chief Operating Officer. Gillian started working for FLAC in 2008 as a Research Officer and was responsible for quantitative research conducted through analysing data collected from the FLAC centres and FLAC's telephone information line, which provides up-to-date statistics on the key areas of FLAC's work.

In March 2025, she took on the role of Information Systems, Governance and Compliance Manager, overseeing the migration of FLAC's IT systems to the cloud and our compliance with the Charities Governance Code.



### **Sarah O'Malley – Solicitor**



Called to the Bar in 2018, in 2026 Sarah cross qualified as a solicitor and works on public interest litigation in FLAC's Independent Law Centre.

Sarah has previously worked on international human rights law, policy, and strategic litigation in Palestine, the Syrian Golan, Cambodia, and the Caribbean. She holds an LLB in Law and Political Science from Trinity College Dublin and an LLM in International Criminal Law from the University of Amsterdam and Columbia University, New York. In 2025 she was appointed to the Office of the Inspector of Prisons' Expert Panel for a three-year term.

### **Dylan Kennedy – Outreach and Advocacy Officer**

Dylan began working for FLAC in the Advocacy and Outreach Officer position in January 2026.

In this position, he works as part of FLAC's Independent Law Centre which undertakes public interest casework and provides targeted services for the Traveller and Roma communities.

### **Colm O'Halloran - Communications and Campaigns Officer**

Colm started working for FLAC as Communications and Campaigns Officer at the beginning of September 2025. He oversees the communications channels of FLAC and develops campaigns related to FLAC's public policy and advocacy work.



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.

#### **Maternity leave**

Sinéad Scales went on maternity leave in October 2025 and we congratulate her on the arrival of her beautiful baby girl Élise!



#### **Conall Cahill - National Clinics and Volunteers Development Manager**

Conall has been providing maternity cover in the position of National Clinics and Volunteers Development Manager. Conall joined FLAC in 2019 as Communications and Fundraising Assistant.

From 2020 he worked across both the Clinics and Volunteers and Telephone Information and Referral Line teams before taking up a position as Clinics, Volunteers and Societies Co-ordinator in 2025.



#### **Molly Byrne - Volunteers, Clinics & Societies Coordinator**



Molly is a graduate of University College Dublin (UCD), where she studied Political Science, International Relations and Social Justice. She went on to complete a Master's in Crisis and Security Management at Leiden University, specialising in War and Peace.

She is part of the Clinics & Volunteers Team, where she supports the coordination of clinics and works closely with volunteers to help ensure clinics run smoothly.

#### **Goodbye Corina**

After 15 years working with FLAC, Finance and Office Manager Corina Byrne moved on from FLAC in February 2026. Corina was a FLAC stalwart and will be familiar to many from her presence at so many FLAC events throughout the years. We thank Corina for her significant contribution to FLAC and wish her every success in the future!

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