

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Justice

ENABLING ACCESS TO JUSTICE PROGRAMME

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Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Following my previous statements, I write to provide the Assembly with an update on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme.

I launched the Programme to ensure the viability and sustainability of the justice system and more importantly, to provide better services to our citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. High-quality advice and representation are critical to achieving that objective and fair proportionate representation is critical to ensuring the availability of effective experienced representation and so I committed to early action on remuneration for public legal services. I previously advised of the Assembly of progress in that regard.

With the consultation on the fees uplift now closed, I remain on track to make rules effecting a general 16% uplift in fees for advice and representation for civil, family and criminal applications in May. I am pleased to report, following constructive engagement with the professions I will be able to introduce a number of other fee changes in the May legislation also. That includes new fees for advice and representation in applications for immigration and asylum.

The new fees for immigration and asylum applications follow positive detailed engagement with the Immigration Practitioners Group (IPG). I have been clear all along that I am committed to providing fair remuneration and to working with the professions to develop the evidence required to support changes to the fee regime. Our engagement with the IPG is evidence of that commitment in action. It has enabled me to reach decisions on new fees which address the concerns of practitioners, and I welcome the constructive positive decision of the IPG to resume work in recognition of that decision.

Legal aid is critical in ensuring rights can be exercised and protections secured, particularly for the most vulnerable in our society. The new fees are an important step in ensuring that people making applications for immigration and asylum are afforded the protection they need and deserve, through sustainable publicly funded advice and representation.

Through the Enabling Access to Justice Programme, I will also be considering specialist support for vulnerable groups, including migrants, asylum seekers and refugees as well as victims of domestic abuse and I will provide an update on the Programme Delivery Plan in due course. In the interim, I will continue to work with the professions and other stakeholders to address concerns and ensure our justice system is sustainable and support remains available for the most vulnerable.

NAOMI LONG MLA

Minister of Justice