Opening Statement of Joan Crawford, Chief Executive Officer of the Legal Aid Board

Cathaoirleach, Deputies and Senators,
Thank you for the invitation to address the Committee today. I welcome the opportunity to outline the Legal Aid Board's views on the General Scheme of the Civil Reform Bill 2025.

The Legal Aid Board provides civil legal aid and advice to individuals who meet statutory financial eligibility and merits criteria. Our solicitors represent clients in a broad range of civil matters, including family law, housing, employment, and equality. We also represent applicants for International Protection and, in a small number of cases, applicants in judicial review matters.

We acknowledge and support the overarching objective of improving efficiency, proportionality and cost effectiveness in civil proceedings. We also welcome provisions that strengthen the role of mediation and other forms of Alternative Dispute Resolution. These measures have the potential to divert appropriate cases away from litigation, thereby reducing costs, delay and the adversarial burden on individuals.

However, the General Scheme also contains a number of significant reforms that warrant careful consideration.

First, the proposed restructuring of judicial review would introduce shorter time limits, higher thresholds for obtaining leave, and more front-loaded procedural duties. For many legally aided clients, who often face delays in seeking advice due to personal circumstances or pressures within the legal system, these compressed timelines may make it more difficult to prepare a sufficiently detailed grounding statement at the outset.

Second, the proposed changes would require earlier and more comprehensive production of documents, including under Head 5, which moves toward more intensive obligations at the start of litigation. While early clarity can be beneficial, given that applicants frequently seek assistance close to deadlines, these requirements risk placing additional pressure on clients and practitioners at the very earliest stages.

Third, changes to adjournments, the introduction of new case conduct principles, and envisaged penalties for noncompliance with pre-action protocols may have differing impacts across the system. Many legally aided clients experience complexity in their personal circumstances, and solicitors sometimes require additional time to gather information or engage in parallel processes. A rigid approach to adjournments could

unintentionally limit the Legal Aid Board's ability to prepare cases adequately and protect clients' interests.

Fourth, the increased resource demands should not be underestimated. While the proposals may ease pressures on the courts and judiciary, there is a risk that they could correspondingly increase workload, cost and potential delay for solicitors. Such an outcome would merely shift pressures within the system, resolving one set of challenges while creating another. If reforms are to achieve their intended benefits, it is important that all statutory bodies involved in civil justice, including the Legal Aid Board, have the resources required to discharge their obligations effectively.

Fifth, the Legal Aid Board is concerned that the General Scheme, as currently drafted, contains a high level of generality and a lack of detail in key areas. This makes it difficult to provide fully focused or definitive observations on the practical operation of several proposed reforms at this stage. A number of important concepts are not defined, and the interaction between certain provisions will only become clear once the Bill itself is published.

Chair, I would like to conclude by reaffirming that the Legal Aid Board supports reforms that improve efficiency, reduce delay and enhance the functioning of the civil courts. Our central concern is to ensure that these reforms do not inadvertently impede access to justice for the people we serve, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

We welcome continued engagement with the Committee as this legislation progresses and would be happy to assist further in any way we can.