

**Elena Whitham MSP, Minister for Community Safety**

**Law Society of Scotland Annual Dinner, 3 March 2023**

I want to start tonight by thanking all the legal professionals across Scotland for the work that they do in providing accurate, reliable and high quality legal advice, and representation, to ensure that Scotland’s citizens and communities can exercise their rights and responsibilities and have wide access to justice.

Since taking up my role as Minister for Community Safety in November 2022, I said then and I will repeat again tonight that one of the many things I want to do in my time in this office is to have a positive, constructive and collaborative working relationship with the legal profession, the legal professional bodies and the wider justice sector in Scotland.

Let me assure you that the Scottish Government acknowledges and recognises the adaptability, resilience and hard work of everyone across the legal profession and the wider justice sector – all of whom worked so hard during the pandemic and are now providing legal advice to our citizens, our businesses and our communities to mitigate the challenges of Brexit and the economic crisis.

Tonight’s event gives us all an opportunity to celebrate the past year and to think about the future years ahead for the legal profession in Scotland.

It is important that Scotland has a legal profession and judiciary that is diverse, inclusive and reflects the society in which it serves.

Shattering the glass ceiling by under represented groups such as Women, Minority Ethnic or disadvantaged groups is a key part of my aspirations and the aspirations for the Scottish Government.

Figures provided by the Law Society on the Solicitor Profession currently show that 55% of the solicitor profession are female and 45% are male.

Every person who is thinking of entering the legal profession and indeed every legal professional working in the legal profession in Scotland should have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

But we know, from a wide range of evidence, that one of the main challenges facing the legal profession at present and in the future is recruiting and retaining a diverse pool of talent.

One example of this is the difficulties in recruiting a diverse range of talent to the Criminal Defence Sector. And we know that challenges remain in retaining legal professionals within that sector.

All of these factors have a detrimental impact on the pool of experienced talent available for the BAR.

And of course that impacts detrimentally on the pool of talent available further along the career pathway for the Judiciary.

We recognise, however, that the legal pipeline has many inter-dependencies and any changes to one or more component parts will have an impact on the long career pipeline from trainee solicitor to High Court Judge.

These are issues that I have discussed recently with the Law Society and the Faculty of Advocates since taking up my Ministerial role.

I have listened to their concerns and to their proposals for the way forward. It is clear that these discussions should be extended to include the wide range of interests and perspectives across the legal and justice sector.

I am really keen that we engage productively on these issues, and that we work together in a way that is something positive, whole systems focussed, collaborative and results in positive recommendations where everyone in the sector can thrive.

We intend to convene a number of collaborative discussions with a wide range of partners, alongside the Law Society of Scotland and the Faculty of Advocates.

We realise that some changes cannot be achieved overnight and will take some time to be implemented. Structural change requires time to plan and prepare.

Nevertheless there are changes that could be made in a much shorter timescale.

The role of Government is to encourage and facilitate change.

I believe every one of us can make a difference.

No one of us has the “right answer”

But we will find solutions faster together.

Meetings will begin shortly and we will be in touch with many of you with details of these plans very soon.