MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SOCIETY’S LAW TECH GROUP HELD ON 24 NOVEMBER 2022 AT 13.00PM IN PERSON AND BY VIDEOCONFERENCE

PRESENT:    Kerry McCloy (Chair), Ruaidhrí Austin, Angela Brady, Jamie Donnelly, Amira Graham, Jane Hollway, Amy Jackson, Cate McQuade and Ciarán O’Kelly


IN ATTENDANCE: Jamie Warnock (Head of Policy and Engagement) Alison Grundle (Head of Member Services) and Damien McCann (Policy & Research Intern)

1. Welcome and apologies:

Apologies were noted.

Jamie Warnock notified the Group that Matt McKee has officially joined the Law Tech Group, though he unable to attend today’s meeting.

2. Minutes of last Meeting:

The Minutes of the previous meeting were duly approved.

3. Invest NI:

Jamie Warnock introduced to the Group Nick McCormack, Head of Team Legal and Business Services at Invest NI.

Nick McCormack gave a presentation on the services that Invest NI can provide to assist solicitors. Notably, this includes Training Needs Analysis Workshops and the Skills for Growth Support scheme which can cover up to 50% of eligible costs for strategic non-mandatory training though this latter option is only available to Invest NI client companies.

Invest NI can also supply specialist Innovation Advisers who can come in and discuss strategy with solicitors, define technical objectives and costs. Some level of financial assistance can be delivered through the Research and Development Project Support programmes. Additionally, Invest NI is able to support the implementation of Management Information Systems in SMEs.

The Chair thanks Nick for his presentation and asks for a bit more detail about where solicitors should begin when attempting to innovate, especially when the monetary threshold for innovation can be quite high.
Nick notes that not all Invest’s support is financial and refers her to the free information resources on the NI Business Info website. Moreover, a number of hotlines are also listed online which can signpost inquirers on to more granular areas of interest.

The Chair asks if there are any thresholds to receiving support from Invest NI. Nick answers that to become a client company requires an annual turnover of £200,000 and admits that Invest NI is export orientated and so would expect that 25% of a firm’s fee income would need to come from outside NI – this does include rest of UK and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), however.

The Chair inquires into if there are any processes around getting the skills support. Nick replies that at the outset there are no barrier to solicitors receiving the training needs analysis workshop and putting in place plans after that. Alternatively, firms could also become a client company and get one of Invest NI’s officers into talk strategy.

The Chair remarks that it would be beneficial to have this publicised to the profession at large as they may be unaware of all that Invest NI offers to solicitors in terms of support and resources. She makes particular reference to Invest NI’s webinars on Digital Transformation as something the Society’s membership should watch.

Jamie thanks Nick for his presentation and notes that he is conscious of the profession’s perception of Invest NI as overly focused on FDI at the expense of domestic providers and smaller scale services. He comments that this Group can remedy this by sharing the resources and support that Invest NI provides.

Jane Hollway recommends having highly skilled firms, with robust training programmes, work almost as a conduit for trainers and direct local practices here looking to innovate to these trainers. Nick notes that Invest NI hosts a Financial Forum with its client companies and queries could possibly be submitted to them, answered and then circulated.

Nick is invited to stay and observe the remainder of the Group’s proceedings.

4. Updates on subgroups:
   a. CPD

Jamie introduces this item and thanks the members for their contributions thus far.

Jamie recalls a meeting he had with Darren Patterson and explains the Society’s new approach to CPD event organising. In the past a CPD prospectus would have been planned out a year in advance whereas
now, with enough notice, a CPD event can be arranged as and when needed.

Jamie reviews the Draft CPD Plan endorsed by the Sub-Group. Consisting of 6 events, this curriculum includes events on those fundamental Law Tech skills that the Sub-Group wanted to see covered. Furthermore, the first and last CPD sessions on the Draft Plan are also notable.

Inaugurating the 2023 CPD calendar is an event involving Madam Justice McBride and potentially The Bar. MJ McBride wants an event which will embrace Law Tech and the Society was serendipitously able to attach itself to this. McBride’s keynote address will highlight the E-Discovery Practice Direction and some of the quirks that have arisen therefrom. Following this will be a panel session on innovation in the Commercial Hub from different perspectives. This will be an event of broad appeal at the beginning of the year.

Towards the end of the year then, the Law Society intends to organise a meet-the-buyer type event or expo which will bring Law Tech Product and Service Providers face to face with their customer base. The exact format of this event remains up for discussion and at the present there is no formal procedure for involving providers besides direct invitation.

The Group briefly discuss the rates that the Expo will charge, and the Chair will pass on to Jamie some example rates she believes vendors would expect to pay.

In relation to the first event, Angela Brady raises the Hook-Tangaza Report’s finding that 50% of firms in Northern Ireland are sole practitioners. The composition of the profession is a fact that the Judiciary ought to be cognisant of especially when it is deliberating on Practice Directions. Jamie agrees and notes that MJ McBride is herself aware of the accessibility issue here.

The Group approves the CPD Plan as drafted and the Chair commends the effort that went in thereto.

b. Web Resources:

Jamie briefly notes a number of recommendations regarding Web Resources made by Cate McQuade, though as a consequence of current time constraints these matters will be followed up in correspondence subsequently.
The Chair remarks that it may be worthwhile to approach experts and external providers to talk about their products and areas of expertise.

5. QUB Research:

Ciaran O’Kelly updated the Group on the recent progress of his research.

Ciaran had attended a workshop in Dublin and there observed the major push to digitise the courts and judiciary in ROI. Furthermore, he remarked upon how the conversation around Law Tech in the Republic of Ireland tends to revolve around efficiency and how this creates more space for human interaction between solicitors and their clients. Rather than disrupt or displace, what struck him is that Law Tech has the capacity to facilitate personal relationships by removing mundane work.

Another item discussed in Dublin was the future of small firms and why they are not innovating. Ciaran elaborated that the main reason identified was risk and many small firms also tend to view innovation as time-consuming. The popular perception is that time spent learning a new technology is time spent not making money.

Ciaran’s research going forward will focus on private regulation and the impact that insurance providers can have on the profession and their approach to technology.

Ciaran’s next steps are collaborating with colleagues in Galway to locate Law Tech hold outs i.e., those parts of the profession who are actively avoiding innovation.

Ciaran concludes that written input from his project will begin to be available to the Group in the spring.

The Chair thanks Ciaran for his update and notes that the Group is willing to assist him in putting tech-resistant solicitors into contact with him.

6. AOB:

The Chair took the opportunity to congratulate Jamie Donnelly on the publication of his article on Artificial Intelligence.

7. Date of next meeting:

The next meeting would be sometime in the new year.
APPROVED ........................