

Going from strength to strength

The VAS team is working hard to raise awareness of the Scheme among both potential clients and fellow barristers.



Libby Charlton BL

In March of this year, I was lucky enough to be chosen as Diane Duggan BL's successor in the role of Co-ordinator of the Voluntary Assistance Scheme (VAS). I officially began on April 4, and with the patient guidance of Diane and our Director of Communications & Policy, Shirley Coulter, I have settled in. There are four branches of the Scheme that we are currently working on. The first branch, and the everyday work of the VAS, is considering requests that we receive from charities, NGOs and civic organisations seeking *pro bono* assistance for themselves and their clients. Since my coming on board, the VAS has facilitated *pro bono* advice on issues as diverse as company law and legal opinion on the proposed Parole Bill 2016. The organisations that benefited were most grateful to, and impressed by, the barristers who so selflessly gave up their time. It really is a privilege to witness the generosity of my colleagues first hand. In my three months at the helm, no barrister has passed up an opportunity to help. In conjunction with this work, I have also been meeting with various civic organisations and NGOs to ascertain if there are ways that we can be of more assistance to the vulnerable in need of legal assistance.

Publicity

The second branch we are working on is publicising the VAS service to those who could benefit from it, but are perhaps unaware of it. To this end, on May 25, Diane, Shirley and I attended the Wheel's Annual Conference & Expo in the Conference Centre in Croke Park. The Wheel is Ireland's largest annual gathering for community, voluntary and charity organisations, and VAS exhibited a stand at the Conference (you may have noticed a very fetching photograph of us at

said stand in the June edition of *The Bar Review*). This was a huge event and the chorus of those that visited us was that they had not previously heard of the Scheme. Our brochures disappeared quickly, and almost everyone who visited the stand exchanged cards and email addresses with us. We exchanged information with in excess of 50 charitable organisations that day.

Speaking for ourselves

This leads us seamlessly into the third branch of the Scheme. In the past, the VAS has co-ordinated and facilitated the 'Speaking for Ourselves' seminar, where The Bar of Ireland provides *pro bono* oral and written advocacy training to charities and NGOs. Exceptionally qualified barristers

run workshops for representatives chosen by these organisations on all the elements of effective advocacy.

During the Wheel's Annual Conference & Expo, we invited applications for this invaluable seminar. There was profound interest and places were in high demand. It is expected that to cope with the level of interest, we will conduct

two 'Speaking for Ourselves' seminars a year, with each seminar training twice the number of participants we had previously. The next seminar is planned to take place early in the new legal year.

Database

The fourth and final branch of our workload is to update and improve the current barrister database. Barristers email vas@lawlibrary.ie daily offering their services and many colleagues signed up at the VAS stand at the 'Trial by Media' conference in Kilkenny, but we can never have enough talent. I would like to implore our more junior colleagues to sign up. It is my suspicion that they don't sign up as much as they could because they think that their lack of experience limits what they can offer. Nothing could be further from the truth; their dedication and enthusiasm often outshines any lack of experience. Please feel free to email me with your details and area of practice if you are interested in helping. So what do I think of my new position? I think Carlsberg don't do jobs at the Bar, but if they did, it would be the VAS Co-ordinator.

