

2019-2024



Mercy Law
Resource Centre

MLRC Strategic Plan

Mercy Law Resource Centre,
25 Cork Street,
Dublin 8

Mercy Law Resource Centre CLG is a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital, registered in Dublin, Ireland. Co.Reg No:471072. It is also a registered charity, Chy No: 18698. Directors: Anne Doyle, Catherine Dooley, Niall Farrell, Ciara McGrath, Helena O'Donoghue, Deirdre Quigley, Patrick Stagg, Liam Twohig, Gerry Whyte, Eamonn Casey

Core Objectives

- 1** To provide free legal advice and representation in an accessible way to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the areas of homelessness, social housing and related social welfare law.
- 2** To provide legal support & training to stakeholder organisations and professionals working in the field of homelessness, social housing and related social welfare law.
- 3** To effect positive policy and social change for our client group, grounded in our casework and research.
- 4** To provide a befriending service to benefit clients who are particularly without supports.

Enabling Objectives

- 5** To be a learning organisation and create a supportive working environment for MLRC staff and volunteers.
- 6** To ensure the financial stability and sustainability of the organisation and adherence to high standards of governance transparency and accountability.

**ADVICE
&
REPRESENTATION**

What?

Free legal advice and representation in homelessness, social housing and related social welfare law for those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless

Why?

To make law accessible and impactful for those who are in greatest need and to effect overall change in the law to help those who are at the margins of society

How?

Through legal advice and representation by MLRC solicitors by:

- Developing and maintaining a selection criteria/priority list for taking on new cases to include relevant issues, geographical remit and other relevant matters
- Triaging queries in line with the agreed selection criteria for taking on cases, that is available and known to all staff
- Attending legal advice clinics to meet and advise clients
- Providing legal advice following clinics and initial engagements
- Opening file for representation of client once any substantive work is commenced to include review of FOI documentation or written representations to the housing authority
- Identifying and running of strategic cases to support our strategic objective of positive overall change for our client group
- Providing high quality legal advice and representation
- Using mechanisms to ensure work flow is controlled and not excessive, including for example closure of clinics or temporary stop on opening files to ensure quality and follow through on advice cases and open files
- Actively pursuing legal costs when awarded, engaging with legal costs accountant as needed
- Developing pro bono partnerships to enhance MLRC legal service capacity and reach and related to this, agreeing partnership agreements to delineate the roles and responsibilities in such partnerships
- Developing relationships with professionals who can support our legal work with their expertise and develop and maintain a register of such professionals

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Through legal support of the MLRC Legal Secretary with support of MLRC Administrators by:

- Providing the initial point of contact for new queries
- Signposting new contacts to appropriate services when they present with issues clearly outside the MLRC remit
- Preparing list of queries for triaging by the solicitors
- Logging and recording all advice queries and opened files
- Supporting solicitors with their legal advice and representation work
- Supporting the control of work flow and quality of work through mechanisms such as 'phone free' office time

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How?

Through volunteer barristers by:

- Maintaining positive connections with barristers who have an interest and expertise in our area;
- Instructing barristers on a pro bono and 'no foal no fee' basis to support our legal cases and to advise on specific issues
- Retaining a list of volunteer barristers and maintaining regular contact with them through invitation to MLRC events and a Christmas thank you

Through MLRC volunteer solicitors by:

- Maintaining positive connections with barristers who have an interest and expertise in our area;
- Instructing barristers on a pro bono and 'no foal no fee' basis to support our legal cases and to advise on specific issues
- Ensuring MLRC benefits from the particular expertise of each volunteer solicitor to enhance MLRC casework and policy work, together with MLRC capacity and reach

Through interns by:

- Recruiting suitably qualified interns and clearly stating their role and facilitating a broad experience to any interns supporting MLRC work
- Preparing a timetable of interns as agreed with Trinity FLAC, Boston College and any other academic institution that is an appropriate partner for referral of interns

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How?

- Facilitating interns to support the case work of MLRC solicitors under the overall direction and supervision of the Managing Solicitor
- Supporting the recruitment of interns where capacity and space allows to support particular research projects

Through clinics and partnerships by:

- Maintaining and fostering a positive and supportive relationship with A&L Goodbody solicitors
- Supporting the legal input of A&L Goodbody and to ensure smooth running of the Focus Ireland clinic, every Wednesday
- Regular attendance by MLRC Solicitors at Crosscare and Liberties CIC clinics and any further clinics as developed
- Piloting a new clinic on the basis of a partnership agreement with Exchange House, monthly, for a six month period, to meet the needs of the Traveller Community, and clearly document and review the progress and outcomes of the clinic
- Attending regular focus groups with organisations working in the field of homelessness to information share and identify legal issues arising. Focus groups to be held with stakeholder organisations (Crosscare, Liberties CIC and any other organisations we partner with for clinics) on a regular basis of approximately every 8 to 12 weeks
- Exploring how best to support other partner organisations where we previously held clinics and develop new models of providing accessible legal advice to individuals in hostels in Dublin or refuges, on the basis of unmet need

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How?

- Considering further clinic pilots with other partner organisations to meet groups with particular need and to meet our mission of accessible legal advice

Through referrals and relationships with other organisations and professionals by:

- Taking referrals of cases from organisations and professionals nationwide and taking on new cases strictly in line with our selection criteria
- By sharing information with organisations and professionals working with individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness about our services on a formal and informal basis so as to support appropriate referrals
- Networking with partner organisations to information share on our services and learning

To maintain the quality and full follow through on advice files and open files by:

- Full and contemporaneous completion of advice forms
- Use of standard file opening and file closing letters, authority, terms and conditions and contract of engagement
- Two weekly casework meetings to review the progress of files, review workflow, check critical dates and to identify priority referrals
- Compliance with MLRC policies in accordance with Legal Quality mark standard including an audit every 3 years.

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How?

Through review and feedback mechanisms, by:

- Developing our client feedback form so at the point of a file closure we are able to assess the client's experience of our service and make any relevant improvements
- Eliciting and responding to feedback from all clients on our legal service
- Collating accurate data from the advice forms to identify trends in the casework and to identify groups in particular need
- Providing the Board at each meeting with a summary of the casework and an update in relation to partnerships and new connections established
- Collating appropriate statistics, case studies and other legal information for use in our Annual Report and other reports

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POLICY

What?

To effect positive policy and social change to benefit those who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness.

Why?

To raise awareness and improve the policies, laws and attitudes for the benefit of our client group

How?

Through policy submissions, specifically:

- Research, draft and publish a report or reports on barriers to accessing adequate housing faced by particularly vulnerable minority groups, to include migrants and Travellers, and to include recommendations in relation to the public sector duty
- Prepare submissions on any other issues arising and identified in our casework, research and publish a report on the same

Through ongoing advocacy:

- To continue advocacy on the right to housing, relying on MLRC trilogy of reports on the issue and when appropriate, to work in partnership with Home for Good and other groups to amplify our voice
- To continue advocacy on issues arising in emergency homeless accommodation
- To advocate for the voice of the child to be heard and the best interests of the child to be considered in respect of housing and homeless matters

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How?

Through research:

- Undertake legal research on issues relevant to policy work, including in particular barriers to accessing housing supports as faced by vulnerable minority groups including migrants and Travellers
- Undertake legal research on the scope of the public sector duty and its possible application in relation to housing to address discrimination and promote equality of access
- Identify relevant legal issues from our casework and undertake relevant and related legal research to inform MLRC policy submissions

Through strategic litigation, specifically:

- Maintain a selection criteria for cases that reflects key deficiencies in the legal framework that may be addressed through strategic litigation
- Identify and run cases that address these deficiencies
- Information share where possible on outcomes from strategic litigation to ensure broader impact
- Explore alternative legal remedies that may be suitable to address key deficiencies as identified
- Draft and submit a collective complaint specifically to address issues affecting children in emergency accommodation

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How?

Through partnerships including:

- Continue our partnership and participation with 'Home for Good', the right to housing steering group to amplify and focus our advocacy on Constitutional protection of the right to housing
- Develop our partnership with the Child Rights Alliance specifically in relation to a collective complaint to address issues affecting children in emergency accommodation
- Develop our partnership with FEANTSA, European housing policy network, or an alternative INGO, to support our collective complaint and to identify any other areas of mutual concern and interest
- To collaborate with the Homeless Policy Group to strengthen our advocacy on migrant access to adequate housing and homeless supports
- To consider other partnerships, in discussion with the Policy Committee, that may strengthen our advocacy

Through communications:

- Develop a communications strategy to guide how MLRC communicates its policy work and policy positions, to include social media

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How?

Through clear roles and relying on review mechanisms, specifically:

- Regular meetings of the Policy Committee, with Directors Patrick Stagg and Gerry Whyte – meetings approximately every 8 weeks to discuss and guide all policy work, policy submissions and advocacy subject to policy committee approval
- To develop and operationalise a communication strategy to guide and strengthen messaging on policy submissions
- Each solicitor to identify an area of particular policy area of focus, to prepare an advocacy plan in relation to that area and to take the lead on that area
- Each solicitor to ensure all lobbying is properly declared in line with the Lobbying Act 2015 obligations
- Interns to conduct research on specific policy issues and to support the advocacy work through research and drafting, under the supervision of the Managing Solicitor
- Board to be appraised of progress on policy matters and to be reported to in relation to progress on the plan

VOLUNTEER SERVICE

What?

Through the Befriending Service volunteer befrienders befriend clients in order to accompany them and provide them with emotional and practical support as they go through the difficult process of trying to assert their rights.

Why?

The legal system can be alienating and difficult and frustrating to negotiate. MLRC aims to provide our clients with a service that is friendly, holistic and easy to access. The Befriending Service is a crucial part of this.

How?

Through the Befriender Service, specifically:

- Recruitment of a Volunteer Befriender Coordinator to have overall responsibility for the service under the supervision of the Managing Solicitor
- To complete a full review of the current Befriender Service and related induction and training materials and overall structure and effectiveness
- To recruit and advertise new befrienders through appropriate forums ensuring befrienders have sufficient time and life experience to support clients with non-legal issues
- To liaise with the solicitors and staff to identify client needs and potential referrals
- To prepare an induction programme and induct and train befrienders at the outset and on an ongoing basis
- To prepare clear terms of reference for the role of the befriender including when the role of the volunteer befriender comes to an end
- Ensure all befrienders are Garda vetted and appropriate checks in relation to their suitability are conducted, in line with MLRC child protection and safeguarding policy
- To assign befrienders and set up initial meeting between befriender and befriende

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How?

- Befriender, following Garda vetting, induction and training, to provide emotional and practical support to the clients/befriender and to regularly feedback to the Volunteer Coordinator
 - Particular consideration to be given to MLRC confidentiality policy, to empowering clients and an emphasis on companionship and a listening ear
 - To supervise befrienders and make arrangements for external supervision, where needed
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- To provide ongoing support to befrienders by email, telephone and through face to face meetings
 - To monitor and record outcomes and to ensure evaluation of the service by befrienderes and befrienders
 - To keep and develop contact with any potential befriender to establish their understanding of what is being offered and to outline the role of the befriender

What?

A volunteer service to capitalise on specific skills and expertise available from volunteers to further professionalise and enhance MLRC services

Why?

To enhance the legal and policy work of MLRC and to increase MLRC efficiency

How?

- To develop and expand the Befriending Service into a Volunteer Service to provide befrienders and to develop and promote other volunteering opportunities to strengthen the legal and policy work of MLRC and to support MLRC clients more generally.
- To identify a funding stream and apply for funding for the new role of Volunteer Coordinator; to fund and maintain the new position so as to facilitate and coordinate expansion of the volunteer service.

To develop a Volunteer Service by:

- Seeking funding for a new role of Volunteer Coordinator to expand the volunteer programme and to manage the Befriending Service.
- Once funded, creating role of Volunteer Coordinator to: advertise for and recruit volunteers, to liaise with staff in relation to the specific needs, to process and support Garda vetting, to manage induction and training of new volunteers at the outset and ongoing to manage all volunteers and have regular meetings with volunteers, to conduct regular evaluation, review and assessment of the service, to apply for further funding to continue the service.
- With the work of the Volunteer Coordinator, by expanding the Befriending Service into a Volunteer Service that includes: volunteering in respect of befriending, fundraising, solicitor and legal support, translators and interpreters, social workers and medical specialists, interns, administration, accountant/auditor and other professionals.

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How?

Through fundraising and awareness raising, by:

- Responding positively with queries into the office from individuals seeking volunteer opportunities
- In our external engagements, promoting MLRC volunteering opportunities
- Developing a register of volunteers and past volunteers who are available to support MLRC with events or fundraising activities specifically
- Ensuring all volunteers on the register are fully briefed in relation to ethos of MLRC, the work of the organisation, and the Statement for Guiding Principles of Fundraising
- Arranging Garda vetting of volunteers where required and ensuring they are aware of MLRC's child protection and safeguarding policy;
- Coordinating volunteers to support fundraising and external events under the supervision of a Volunteer Coordinator, if appointed, or the Managing Solicitor, and in conjunction with the Administrator responsible for events and/or fundraising.

Through professional volunteers, by:

- Identifying what professional skills are needed to support the services of MLRC, including in relation to any language skills needed and pro bono services
- Conducting targeted advertising or networking to source professional volunteers and recruit appropriate professionals as volunteers
- Developing and maintaining a register of professional volunteers

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How?

- Ensuring all professional volunteers on the register are suitably qualified and trained and are fully briefed in relation to ethos of MLRC, the work of the organisation, MLRC confidentiality policy and that they are familiar with MLRC's child protection and safeguarding policy
- Keeping MLRC staff updated of the skills available in the pool of professional volunteers
- Agreeing clear terms of reference with professional volunteers when their expertise is sought to support the work of MLRC
- Maintaining regular contact with professional volunteers and keep them up to date on the work of MLRC and developments within the organisation.

Through interns:

- Managing Solicitor and Volunteer Coordinator to maintain links with Trinity FLAC, Trinity Law School, Boston College and any other academic institution that is an appropriate partner for referral of interns
- Maintain a register of interns who are interested and available to volunteer with MLRC
- To advertise and recruit for interns when needed
- To reply to emails from prospective interns to confirm our system of a register of interns and to confirm any possible vacancies
- To review the internship agreement and ensure it properly determines what is required of an intern and what is required from MLRC in relation to provision of an internship
- Maintain a system for payment of intern expenses on a weekly basis
- To maintain a welcome pack for incoming interns

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How?

- To maintain a feedback system so we can reflect on the interns experience and ensure improvements to the programme from any feedback
- To carefully coordinate times and dates interns are in the office and to ensure there is appropriate office space and a laptop available with connectivity to the server and email
- To recruit interns who are not legal and who have other skills including communications skills that may enhance the work of MLRC

Through the Volunteer Administrators:

- To continue our reliance where possible on Volunteer Administrators to support the day to day running of the office including in particular, data entry and responding to telephone calls and queries
- To review the volunteer role description to ensure it reflects the work of the Volunteer Administrators
- To recruit a Volunteer Administrator when needed, for a minimum period of six months
- To put in place appropriate training, support and review mechanisms for any Volunteer Administrators and include them in the development of MLRC

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How?

Through review and reporting mechanisms:

- Regular report to the Board on the progress in relation to intern, volunteer and befriender engagements
- Evaluation of the review of the Befriending Service and report on the progress of the review at each Board meeting
- Finance and Risk Committee to support applications for funding of the role and to assess the viability of a Volunteer Coordinator role
- Board to regularly review any expansion of the volunteer service and the increase in the reliance on volunteers, to ensure it is effective and controlled and beneficial to both volunteers, MLRC and our client group
- Volunteer Coordinator, when in place, to collate feedback from all volunteers to be reviewed by the Board and for relevant changes and improvements to be made to the volunteer service

**EDUCATION
&
TRAINING**

What?

To provide legal support & training to stakeholder organisations and professionals working in the field of homelessness, social housing and related social welfare law.

Why?

The law relating to housing and related social welfare law can be complex and nuanced. Training on the relevant law can ensure legal issues are identified and appropriately referred for legal advice

The provision of education and training targets one of the barriers to accessing legal services, namely that people are often unaware of their rights. Second tier educational work with organisations, as distinct from the general public, is a very effective way to disseminate information about legal rights. It improves access to justice.

How?

Provision of formal training on housing law:

- MLRC solicitors to deliver half day or full day training to organisations and professionals working in the field of housing and homelessness
- MLRC to charge fees for the training and the fees to be reviewed annually by the Finance and Risk Committee
- At least yearly updating of the training manual and training presentation to include new developments in the law and to ensure it is up to date and accurate
- Two open trainings to be held yearly, for one full day of training, given by MLRC solicitors, open to all professionals and organisations;
- Other training sessions to be given at the request of organisations and as feasible
- Bespoke trainings to be considered on a case by case basis and a flexible approach taken by MLRC in terms of what training can be given, while maintaining high quality and a professional approach

Provision of legal support to organisations and professionals:

- MLRC solicitors to provide legal support to organisations and professionals on individual cases in response to queries into the office
- Provision of such high quality and informed legal support to be provided in a timely and accessible manner
- MLRC solicitors to promote the formal training to organisations in their contacts with organisations and professionals when engaging on individual legal queries

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How?

- Consideration of any need for formalising relationship with larger bodies who regularly use our service, for example Citizens Information Services through affiliation and to consider any appropriate fee structure for any such affiliation.

Promotion of training provision and legal support

- MLRC website to promote the training and to include a booking/enquiry form and to highlight any upcoming open training sessions
- Advertisement of training sessions MLRC through Activelink and PILA bulletin and on any other appropriate forums
- MLRC staff to regularly promote our training service when at events and when networking with other services.

Development of the training service, by:

- Developing, through MLRC solicitors, a half day training comprising of a housing law 'update' training, to be rolled out annually from 2020
- Developing training modules, so as to allow training on specific issues designed to meet individual areas of need
- To explore different methods of delivering training, including online access and video delivery
- To consider and explore the possibility of accreditation of the training programme or possible partnering with an educational body, as a further expansion for delivering the training

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How?

- To collate feedback from the training provided and to respond to that feedback, changing the training programme where possible
- To assess development and progress at regular casework meetings, at meetings of the Managing Solicitor and the Administrator, at each Board meeting, and at office meetings.

LEARNING ORGANISATION

What?

To be a learning organisation and create a supportive working environment for MLRC staff and volunteers

To be up to date in our knowledge and practises and to raise positive awareness of MLRC's work

To facilitate the learning of our stakeholders, whilst continuously educating and transforming ourselves internally

Why?

To be recognised as an expert voice on relevant legal and policy matters and to be recognised by funders and other supporters as an established, well run, trustworthy organisation carrying out effective work benefitting our client group

How?

Internal learning:

- Focus on professional development and supervision of MLRC staff and volunteers
- Provision of training for MLRC staff, not confined to continuous professional development for MLRC solicitors
- Ensure MLRC solicitors maintain their expertise and knowledge
- Regular staff meetings and updates
- Access to mentoring for staff
- Appraisals and feedback to support staff development and learning
- Provision of educational opportunities for staff learning and opportunities within MLRC to benefit and expose certain groups to our legal service, for example, through internships, school placements
- Consideration of a trainee solicitor or secondment opportunity for a solicitor
- Collaboration with universities Clinical Legal Education Programmes and programmes related to public interest law
- Board development and training to ensure the Board is sufficiently supported, resourced and informed

External learning and promotion:

- All external communications in line with a developed communications strategy and social media policy
- Updated website with accurate, accessible and up to date content

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How?

- MLRC website updated regularly with blog, policy documents, research documents, photos etc.
- MLRC Twitter and Facebook feeds regularly updated to communicate our work, successes and share news on key developments in housing law and policy
- MLRC quarterly e-zine highlighting work and issues of interest for MLRC and stakeholders MLRC represented and/or presenting at conferences and events in public interest law/housing/societal change for the benefit of our clients
- MLRC articles in media re policy issues being highlighted by MLRC and to foster appropriate networks to facilitate such coverage
- Identify and develop relationships with particular TDs and Senators with interest in work of MLRC
- MLRC press releases on issues being highlighted by MLRC

Events

- Annual report and launch of report
- Christmas event
- Launches of any other reports as researched and published

Review mechanisms:

- The Board and relevant committees to support external communication
- Report quarterly to the Board in relation to internal learning and staff development
- Regular internal meetings to identify staff development and training needs and to support external communications

**GOVERNANCE
&
FUNDRAISING**

What?

To ensure the financial stability and sustainability of the organisation and adherence to high standards of governance, transparency and accountability

Why?

To create sustainable income for MLRC to continue in growth and development and to continue to meet the needs of our client group

How?

Fundraising as overseen by the Managing Solicitor and Administrators:

- To work towards securing running costs of MLRC in the sum of €300,000 or as needed
- To maintain MLRC independence in the pursuit and receipt of funding
- To maintain a database of funding received and acknowledge with thanks all funding received where feasible
- To maintain a database of upcoming funding opportunities and deadlines to apply and update this regularly
- Ensure compliance with reporting requirements and maintain contact with funders and donors
- To report on proposed applications and progress of applications to the Finance and Risk Committee
- Promote and arrange fundraising events where possible, relying on the support of volunteers and the support of any Volunteer Coordinator if in post

In kind and pro bono supports and other income opportunities:

- Maintain and develop relationships with corporate and pro bono partners including in particular with Mason Hayes & Curran and A&L Goodbody Solicitors
- Explore and identify possible further corporate partner to provide support for a three to five year period
- To promote and pursue training opportunities to generate income
- Timely recovery of legal costs

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How?

Oversight and support of fundraising and budgeting:

- Preparation of annual audited financial statements in accordance with the UK Statement of Recommended Practice (S.O.R.P.) for charities
- Finance and Risk committee to meet with Managing Solicitor and Administrators every 8 weeks
- Managing Solicitor to oversee and ensure compliance with reporting requirements on grants
- Compliance in all fundraising with ICTR rules and the Governance Code
- Regular review of financial position of the organisation at Finance and Risk Committee meetings, with financial report provided on cash flow and upcoming commitments
- Budgeting annually and regular oversight of budgeting throughout the year to track the costs of MLRC services against the income
- Full reporting of the financial position to the Board

Internal compliance and reporting:

- Managing Solicitor to report to Board of Directors every 6 to 8 weeks including on progress in relation to compliance with the Governance Code
- Managing Solicitor to maintain regular contact with the Chairperson of the Board
- Managing Solicitor to promote internal development of MLRC as a learning organisation
- Managing Solicitor and Administrator to work on compliance of MLRC with the Governance Code, to report on that compliance and to document and review the ongoing compliance of MLRC with the Code

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How?

Overall oversight of MLRC:

- Regular reporting by the committees to the Board on relevance areas, including finance and risk, and policy matters
- The Board to regularly ensure that the work of MLRC is promoting its charitable objective
- The Board to regularly review the financial sustainability of MLRC
- The Board to continuously evaluate composition of the Board in terms of skills sets and representation of interests in MLRC
- Full awareness of the Board of the Code and obligations under it and to monitor compliance with the Code and reporting of that compliance
- Training to be provided to Board members to support their contribution to MLRC as a Board member

