**Susan Murray – Legal Year Opening – 23 September, 2024**

Lord President, my Lords, my Ladies and honoured guests -

I am both grateful and honoured to appear before you today in my role as President of the Law Society of Scotland - representing what continues to be a thriving and diverse solicitor profession, which contributes much to Scottish society, and beyond.

May I first of all take this opportunity to pay tribute to you Lord Carloway, and to you Lady Dorrian, on this, the final ceremony for the opening of the legal year before you both retire from your judicial roles.

I thank you on behalf of The Law Society of Scotland, for your input into the constructive working relationships that the Society has enjoyed with you both, and for the enormous contribution that you have each made to Scotland’s judiciary and to the wider legal profession.

I would also like to offer the Society’s congratulations to the new King’s Counsel and Honorary King’s Counsel who have recently been appointed by His Majesty the King, on the recommendation of Mr John Swinney, First Minister of Scotland.

The Society was particularly pleased to see three solicitor advocates among those appointed – Angela Gray, Kathleen Harper and Iain Paterson – along with honorary appointments made to Professor Alan Paterson, one of the Society’s Regulatory Committee members, and Professor James Chalmers, a former member of the Society’s Criminal Law Committee.

Looking back across the last year, it has once again been an eventful one for the Scottish legal sector.

Against a backdrop of further significant political change - including a new First Minister in Holyrood and a new Prime Minister and UK Government in Westminster - we have faced a number of challenges. And - while we have made significant progress in many areas – at this point, there is still more for us to achieve.

As ever, the Law Society of Scotland stands ready to fulfil its role in providing legal expertise to the Scottish and UK parliaments, along with advocating on behalf of its solicitor members - on the issues that matter to them - and to their clients.

The Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill remains at the forefront of the Society’s legislative priorities. We have worked conscientiously with the Scottish Government - and with members of the Scottish Parliament - to ensure that this important piece of legislation will protect the public - and that public confidence in Scottish lawyers will remain high - while also supporting the Scottish legal sector to grow, prosper and support the people of Scotland, their communities and their businesses.

We remain hopeful that our advocacy – along with that of the Scottish judiciary, the Faculty of Advocates and others - including international observers such as the International Bar Association – will be successful in Scotland achieving legislation that both accords with and upholds the rule of law, while providing a long-awaited, modernised framework for the regulation of the legal profession in Scotland.

We are particularly optimistic about progress on key suggestions that we have made to strengthen the bill, such as stronger powers - to regulate practicing solicitors - to conclude complaints made against solicitors more quickly - and to place conditions on the way law firms practice.

We thank the Scottish Government for considering what we see as necessary changes in drafting, and keenly await sight of its amendments. This is a highly complex bill and it is in all of our interests to achieve legislation that is both appropriate and workable.

On a related note, last week, another important piece of legislation, the Judicial Factors Bill, passed its Stage 1 vote in the Scottish Parliament. Again, the Society will continue to play its part in modernising this important aspect of its regulatory functions.

The Society has also been pleased to see signs of positive movement on the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill.

As with the Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill, there remains considerable work to be done. Criminal justice - properly effected - requires a system of checks and balances. Any changes made to that system must bring tangible benefits without negative consequences.

The Society continues to support the intention of this bill, to improve the experience of all people involved in the criminal justice system, and we are grateful that the voices of solicitors in Scotland are being heard.

Concerningly, solicitor voices are not being heard on the long-running issue of legal aid. Last year, in this space, our President said – and I quote –

“Legal aid remains in crisis and it is the least advantaged in our communities and our legal aid practitioners who are paying the price for that inaction. Time is running out and we are concerned at the prospect of what will happen as a crisis is ignored.”

I could deliver those same words today - underfunding of support for the upholding of legal rights has long been on the Society’s agenda - and I have made the need for action in this area a key priority for my presidency this year. I can report that development work within the Society is ongoing and I am hopeful that positive progress will be reported next year. We cannot continue to see solicitors moving away from the legal aid system – or legal aid solicitors leaving the profession altogether.

I say the following not for comfort, but for context - this is not an issue in Scotland alone. Last week, at the International Bar Association’s annual conference, I attended many of its sessions which were dedicated to the issue of the availability and affordability of justice in ensuring equality before the law. Lawyers around the world are increasingly sharing their experiences - and working with their Governments - to find solutions. I certainly hope that such solutions can be found in Scotland – and soon.

On another important issue - and in the context of the recent outbreaks of violence in England – I can advise that Scottish solicitors have reported to us that they have felt exposed and potentially in danger. We are working hard to support them. All lawyers must be able to carry out their roles without fear of intimidation, threats or violence – and to expect that their own humanity will be respected.

As to the state of the solicitor profession in Scotland - the overall strong and encouraging growth of recent years is being maintained, with the legal sector contributing more than one-and-a-half billion pounds to the Scottish economy each year, along with providing more than 20-thousand high value jobs across firms – large and small – and in-house.

As is becoming tradition to report - we are on track for another record, or near record, number of solicitor traineeships registered during this practice year – around 800 - with about three-thousand traineeships having been registered in the past four years! This bodes well for the future of the legal profession in Scotland.

Finally - we look forward to continuing our work across all of our priority areas, and particularly to working with colleagues in the Faculty of Advocates and with the Scottish judiciary, all of whom share our own fundamental values of upholding the law and developing and improving legal practice in Scotland.

Thank you.