15. History of Public Loss Assessing in Ireland

By Eamonn Downey, Owens McCarthy Ltd

The need to verify insurance claims has existed since Insurance began in the 1800’s – initially to deal with claims arising out of marine transactions and later to deal with the demand for the management of claims relating to property and profit.

The claims emanating from the writing of these policies had to be checked and initially this work was undertaken by Church Wardens who signed off on claims in their area and the documentation was then submitted to the head office of the Insurance Company, traditionally in London at that time.

In time the need for professional Loss Adjusters became evident and for many decades they represented the means of negotiating the settlement of insurance claims.

On a more gradual basis the need for representation for the Public came about and in Ireland this business started to grow circa the 1970’s. Up to and around that time architects, engineers and surveyors had often represented the public on property claims, traditionally on larger commercial losses. Accountants had also become involved in business interruption claims and stock losses.

As the business of Public Loss Assessors became more streamlined specialists evolved and the original protagonists on the Public side were firms like Balcombes in Dublin, Des Owens in Cork and Sean Cleary in Galway.

With changes in the market place and in society including changes in consumer legislation the demand for representation for the Public in both domestic and commercial losses has grown quietly significantly. This growth has been due to a number of factors including demand for specialist technical advice and negotiating skills to ensure a fair deal when a claim occurs; the demand from brokers to obtain specialist assistance on claims and to enter into managed relationships with assessors has also grown significantly in the last 10-15 years.

The industry is well served by many of the loss assessing firms who often will be the first port of call for a consumer trying to establish whether or not they have a claim. Identification of a lack of coverage at an early stage is of benefit to all concerned. In addition, advice is given in relation to sums insured across the entire spectrum of covers. The Regulator has seen the need for representation for the policy holder and actively encourages same because those involved in giving a professional service do ensure justice for the policy holder.

Presently there is no active formal Trade Association representing Public Loss Assessors in Ireland but there are professional relationships between a number of the firms and individuals operating in the market (the bulk of whom are ex-loss adjusters) and it is hoped that a professional Trade Association will be functioning in early course.

So, Public Loss Assessing is to some extent still in its infancy in Ireland but demand for the services offered and a realization by others in the industry that Assessors do have a positive role to play in the claims process will result, I am sure, in continued and further expansion.