

News from the board

Reflections on our February Board meeting

02 March 2023

Throughout the year we combine our Board meetings with opportunities to hear from stakeholders. We want to get different insights on how things are looking in the legal sector and to be challenged on areas where we could do better.

This month's meeting was in London and we had good evening discussion with members of the Legal Services Consumer Panel. They challenged us to think critically about the extent to which our approach to regulation is consumer focused and asked to consider leading more collaboration among legal regulators.

Our next strategy

The discussion was well timed. A good chunk of our meeting involved further developing our thinking around our next corporate strategy. Our current strategy comes to an end in October. Our plan is to finalise our proposals at our April Board meeting, and then to consult shortly after. We will be doing a lot of proactive engagement to make sure we understand the views of a diverse range of stakeholders. That will of course include the profession, but also consumers and their representatives.

The strategy will build on work done in the last three years, so nothing too surprising, but I would like to pick out one emerging theme. We discussed what the level of ambition might mean for our budget. As new priorities have emerged over the last few years, our Board has had a particular focus on tight budgetary control, identification of efficiencies and delivering value for money.

There is a limit, however, to how far we can continue to go on doing more for less or the same, particularly in a period of such high inflation. The future is likely to continue to bring both opportunities and new demands on our resources. So as we look ahead to developing our new strategy, we are thinking carefully about the funding we will need to make sure we can do what is necessary to build confidence in legal services, while continuing to be an efficient and effective regulator.

The Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE)

Another main topic of discussion was the SQE. In the coming weeks we will be publishing a range of analyses on how things have gone in the first year of delivery, including an annual report by Kaplan, our assessment provider, and a report by the Independent Reviewer.

All the analysis shows the SQE is a robust, fair, valid assessment and we are delighted with progress so far. As one would anticipate with such an ambitious programme, there have been some learnings from a few glitches, and we need a lot more data before we can truly assess how successful the SQE has been, but so far so good. And we are very encouraged to see that as confidence has built, demand is already greater than we originally forecast – last month saw more than 3,300 candidates take SQE1 across 59 countries.

We had a good discussion with Kaplan on their work delivering the assessment. Key topics included progress on the availability of the SQE in Welsh, meeting fast increasing demand, and steps they are taking to make sure the candidate experience is as consistent and as good as possible. We talked through lessons learned. This included how Kaplan are making sure appropriate contingencies are in place. It is vital that they work very closely with us so we can jointly respond quickly and effectively to any incidents.

Finally, we discussed the issue of difference in performance by ethnicity. Although expected, as it is a longstanding and widespread feature in examinations in the legal and other sectors, it is still troubling. In the coming year, as more candidates take the assessment, we will have better data to start drawing further insights around the gap. We will be looking at the various interlinking factors – such as previous education and social background – that may or may not account for this. On top of that, Exeter University is making good progress on the research we have commissioned on this issue. That will also help us better understand the complex factors contributing to candidate performance, so we can identify what steps we can take to address them.

If you are interested to know more on any of this, I would encourage you to come to [our annual SQE conference](https://events.sra.org.uk/sra/frontend/reg/thome.csp?pageID=149343&eventID=629&CSPCHD=001001000000iibPVbfnqmL97W3Loy_NW30EIPzPEhy6z$_kN) [\[https://events.sra.org.uk/sra/frontend/reg/thome.csp?pageID=149343&eventID=629&CSPCHD=001001000000iibPVbfnqmL97W3Loy_NW30EIPzPEhy6z\\$_kN\]](https://events.sra.org.uk/sra/frontend/reg/thome.csp?pageID=149343&eventID=629&CSPCHD=001001000000iibPVbfnqmL97W3Loy_NW30EIPzPEhy6z$_kN) on 23 March where will be sharing our insights on progress so far.