

News from the Board

Reflections on our January Board meeting - Anna Bradley, SRA Chair

27 January 2025

It's a new year and we were delighted to [welcome two new Board members](https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/new-board-members-2025/) [https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/new-board-members-2025/] - Simon Millhouse and Claudio Pollack. It's always good to get fresh perspectives and insights. Their expertise on areas such as effective use of data, risk identification and management, and regulatory policy, will be invaluable.

Monitoring performance

This meeting was focused on reviewing our performance over the last year. There have obviously been some big challenges! Particularly in responding to new and significant events, such as Axiom and SSB, that also reflect changing risks in the sector. As a result, we spent a great deal of time and effort managing and responding to the specific issues, but also a lot of board time thinking about the lessons learnt and the changes that need to be made.

Our 2023-26 strategy recognised the need to further develop our ability to manage data well, draw intelligence together and draw out actionable insights. But we clearly need to expedite this work, which is why we have already significantly increased our investment in technology and people.

Looking at the year in the round afforded an opportunity to reflect on the many other things that our staff have delivered during the year. This included significant improvements in the timeliness of our investigations and in levels of compliance with anti-money laundering. The big batch processing work we do, for example around annual practicing certificate renewals, is also working well.

We also considered our end of year financial position. We have finished the year with a surplus on our budget, which leaves us in a good position to invest in the activity that will help us respond to shifting risks (such as the work on data and risk, and the consultation on client money). This year the LSB will also issue directions to us following its report into Axiom Ince, and we are committed to delivering on those, driving forward the public interest. This year's business plan also needs to address some big sector issues, including the Post Office and bulk litigation.

The Post Office and a focus on ethics

With more than 20 firms and solicitors being investigated, there is no larger or more significant case than the [Post Office Horizon Scandal](https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/2024-press-releases/post-office-update-2024/1) [https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/2024-press-releases/post-office-update-2024/1] - one of the biggest miscarriages of justice in British history. The impact on the lives of hundreds of falsely accused sub-postmasters has been devastating.

The scale of the issues and documentation we are dealing with is unprecedented. Now that the public inquiry has finished hearing evidence, we are liaising closely with the inquiry to collect all the relevant evidence and with the police to understand what, if any action they may take. We will, of course, take action as soon as we can, and while we can't confirm the exact timeline, we are hopeful that we can launch prosecution action in some cases in the summer of this year.

The Post Office case isn't just about prosecutions of course. It also raises serious questions about behaviour and culture in the wider profession. In a workshop discussion we reflected on our approach to ethics and asked the executive to develop a single view of the way it is threaded through our work. This will inform a discussion about whether and where there might be more that we could do to ensure that solicitors are working to the standards the public expect.

Working with others will be key to developing our thinking, including particularly the profession and our oversight regulator, the Legal Services Board (LSB). We have already fed into the LSB's Professional Ethics and Rule of Law work programme and we will engage further when it consults early this year on its draft Policy Statement.

High volume claims

I reflected in my blog at [the end of last year](https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/sra/how-we-work/our-board/news-from-the-board/board-november-2024/1) [https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/sra/how-we-work/our-board/news-from-the-board/board-november-2024/1] that we have serious and increasing concerns in this area. We now have more than 50 open investigations, covering in excess of 150,000 claims.

We will take action where needed to protect consumers, but some of the issues are systemic and that means we need to work with others to find the mix of actions that will most benefit the public. We are building a programme, working with others to take this work forward.

In the meantime, we want to arm consumers with information to help them make informed choices. We have particular concerns about the use of 'no win, no fee' agreements. So in December [we published a guide for consumers](https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/consumers/choosing/no-win-no-fee/1) [https://upgrade.sra.org.uk/consumers/choosing/no-win-no-fee/1]. I'm pleased to say it has already been viewed more than 100,000 times. You can expect more work this year - we will be doing more to raise awareness with the public and firms about the high standards we expect.

Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE)

Finally, we looked at the SQE in workshop discussions. The Board reflected on how significant the introduction of the SQE assessment and changes to qualifying work experience (QWE), have been. The primary aim was to ensure that every solicitor was being assessed to the same high standard and we are confident that this is the case. There is also more opportunity to earn-as-you-learn, and a range of more affordable choices in the training market, which we hope will enable wider access to the profession. All of this will be thoroughly tested through our ten-year evaluation programme, the next phase of which is due this year.

There have inevitably been some teething problems on the way and so we have tried to adapt and adjust as we have moved the work forward. One key area has been the changes made in response to feedback about the candidate experience. It is important we continue to build on this.

One area where we know there is more to do is addressing the fact that Black and Asian candidates typically don't do as well as White candidates. This is not specifically an SQE issue - we saw it on the LPC. It is also by no means unique to legal assessments, but we are nonetheless trying to understand what more we could do to make a difference. We are developing an action plan with a variety of partners in response to the research we published late last year, and we hope this will deliver some improvements over time.

And so back to monitoring

We use a balanced scorecard, as part of a package of information, to track our performance during the year. This is published as part of our commitment to transparency. We reviewed the scorecard at this meeting and agreed some additional measures which will provide the Board with the right information to hold the executive to account over the next year and increase our transparency for stakeholders. It's going to be another busy year!