

News from the Board

Reflections on our March Board meeting - Anna Bradley

22 March 2024

Our Board this month was in Exeter, with our discussion focused on education and training.

We introduced the SQE two years ago, for two main reasons. Firstly, we wanted to make sure that everyone could be confident that those qualifying had met a consistent, high standard. With more than a hundred training providers setting and marking exams, that assurance simply wasn't possible with the old LPC route. And secondly, we wanted to make sure there weren't unnecessary barriers in the way – such as expensive training requirements - that would block talented people from qualifying.

Alongside the new SQE assessment, we introduced a requirement for qualifying work experience (QWE). The requirements for the old training contract were very prescriptive and the onus was on firms to assess whether someone was meeting the grade to become a solicitor. QWE is very different. You must get two years' experience, but its purpose is not to test competence. In short, a solicitor signing off QWE is not taking a view on whether a candidate is any good; merely that they have done legal work which has given them the opportunity to develop the competences solicitors need.

The reason we can take this more flexible approach is that the SQE is the definitive, consistent test of competence. And the benefit of enabling more flexibility around work experience is that it opens-up opportunities for candidates when compared to the old system. There are now many more training options, including on-the-job learning.

We want this to give more people a fairer shot at qualifying, while still being sure that only those who are good enough will.

Getting SQE implementation right

Regardless of the broad aims of the new arrangements, they won't be a success if we don't get the bread and butter right. That means a well-run assessment and a good understanding of the role of solicitors in signing-off QWE.

With hundreds of test centres and thousands of candidates for each sitting, across more than 40 countries, there are challenges. We reflected on how we are doing, particularly around responding to the large growth

in demand to take the assessment. Generally that's gone well. And we discussed the steps that have been taken to improve arrangements for candidates taking the SQE, including the introduction of a new booking system and a range of access measures to accommodate the diverse needs of candidates. It's also important that Welsh-speakers have a choice as to what language they take the assessment in – most parts of the SQE can be sat in Welsh, with all parts available by the end of this year.

We are not, however, complacent. We had good discussions on ideas for where we can improve, including our role in helping people understand the new arrangements and the options open to them. We will be evaluating the operation of the SQE more formally next year.

Business planning

We also considered our work programme for next year. Since publishing last year's business plan, we have launched our Consumer Protection Review. This vital programme of work is in response to shifting risks in the sector, and we want to ensure that our arrangements are fit for the future.

As the review could result in fundamental changes to how we regulate, it is important we dedicate appropriate resource to it, so we arrive at the right answers. That means we need to prioritise.

Our strategy and core priorities remain the same, as does the vast majority of our work programme. There are, however, some discrete bits of work where we think we can make some changes, while still being focused on delivering the overall impact we want – driving confidence and trust in legal services. So we will consult in the spring on our business plan, and highlight areas where we plan to make changes. As ever, we will be keen to hear your views, so we can sharpen our thinking through hearing your ideas and challenge.

And – in the same vein – as we were in Exeter we took the opportunity to talk with a range of stakeholders in the area – from the legal sector and beyond. Nothing beats the quality of the conversation you get when you have the chance to talk face-to-face. Our Board will continue to make sure we are getting out and about around the country. We look forward to more invigorating conversations at our next such Board meeting, which takes place in Cardiff over the summer.