

News from the Board

Reflections on September Board - Anna Bradley

18 September | Anna Bradley

It is now six months since lockdown measures were first introduced as a result of Covid-19. We have all had to adapt and evolve the way we work and the Board had a useful discussion about both the impact of the pandemic on our operational work and on the profession and sector more widely. We know that the fuller implications of Covid-19 will take time to understand for us and for everyone.

In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the performance of our Contact Centre. We introduced new telephony early in the lockdown which has helped us to provide a full customer service, but we know that the move to home working has caused real difficulties, not only for us but for these types of services across many organisations. Looking ahead to the October Practising Certificate Renewal Exercise, Board welcomed plans to increase resources for the Contact Centre by deploying expert staff from across the organisation. We know that this in turn will impact on our forward performance, including in areas where constraints on law firms have already meant delays in engaging with us on authorisation and enforcement matters. We have more to do tackle the challenges and will be hearing about our work on that at future meetings.

Key questions for the wider sector came up in our workshop discussion - how severe will the economic impact be? Will more people need to access legal services but struggle to do so? Will the pandemic accelerate demand for digital services? And can the sector change to meet the changing times?

I am pleased to see that the Legal Choices website - which we run on behalf of a group of the legal regulators - has really come into its own. Dedicated Covid-19 related articles on issues such as knowing your consumer rights, and moving home during the pandemic have attracted hundreds of thousands of views.

Of course, change is not just been driven by the pandemic. Another issue the Board discussed in detail was anti-money laundering, an area on which we already know that changes are coming which place new or amended requirements on firms, regulators and the wider sector.

Ahead of this we will shortly be publishing our latest review of AML issues in the legal sector, as well as new guidance to help those who work in trust

or company service provision and tax advice to understand how new AML regulations now apply to them.

Our 2020-21 Business Plan

At the Board meeting we formally agreed our 2020-21 Business Plan, which describes our priorities for the coming year, the initial year of our new Corporate Strategy 2020-23.

We publicly consulted on this annual plan for the first time this year against the backdrop of the pandemic, so there was a far greater focus on digital approaches to gathering feedback. More than 10,000 people had their say through mechanisms such as attending virtual events and taking part in online polls.

We welcomed the broad support for our work programmes, with the implementation of the SQE, responding to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and supporting the adoption of legal technology identified as the areas people saw as most important.

The plan reminds us that change is not just been driven by the pandemic. Whether it's Brexit, technology or new and emerging legislation, it's a dynamic landscape. We need to be alive to the potential opportunities while giving law firms greater flexibility and getting out of the way where we can, so the profession can develop and adapt quickly to change, offering people the services they need.

Finally, we reviewed our latest report on diversity in our own workforce, which we will be publishing shortly. Like many organisations, we have made good progress but have more to do. The Black Lives Matter movement has of course rightly drawn our attention to race equality and as part of our wider work on this, I am very much looking forward to hosting a webinar on race and class on 7 October.

I will be joined by guest speakers from two leading equalities organisations, Aspiring Solicitors and Rare Recruitment, to discuss the ways in which inequality and structural racism affect access and progression into the legal profession. We will also focus on how socio-economic factors and class play into inequality and what law firms can do to enable change. I very much hope as many of you as possible can join us.