

News from the Board

Reflections on our January Board - Anna Bradley

28 January | Anna Bradley

I was delighted to be joined by four new members

[<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/2021-press-releases/new-board-members-2021/>] for our first Board meeting of the year. Ann, Dermot, Elizabeth and Vikas all bring expertise and fresh perspectives to the table. That's very timely, as sadly lockdown 3.0 means that the new year does not quite feel like the fresh start we would all like it to be.

Unsurprisingly the pandemic was a consistent meeting theme. As ever Board was impressed with both how adaptable our teams have been, and with the support we have been able to provide to everyone. Of course, homeworking suits some better than others, but our staff have adapted with great professionalism.

We had a good discussion in our formal meeting around what the pandemic might mean for how we work long term. What will the office of the future look like when some sense of normality returns? Many organisations are thinking it will be different to the pre-2020 workplace. We are looking at how we can build on what we have learnt and capture the benefits of a more flexible approach.

Despite the obvious constraints of lockdown, we also welcomed the news that sittings of the QLTS have been able to go ahead - both this month and last year. They have run smoothly on a socially distanced basis, with positive feedback from candidates.

Events and engagement

Of course, events are another area where we have had to adapt quickly by going fully virtual. You cannot replicate the quality of conversation you get meeting face to face, but the shift has enabled us to reach far bigger audiences.

At the end of last year, we ran two events - one on the SQE and one on compliance - that have attracted more than 18,000 views. The feedback on the usefulness of the sessions and format has been positive.

How we engage in the coming year - and beyond - was part of a 'deep dive' workshop discussion into our communications work. Topics we covered included making the most of our social media and how we can best reach out to public audiences and people who are in positions of vulnerability. I

hope we will be able to get out and talk directly with people later this year, and meanwhile we are arranging some virtual sessions for Board members to hear from the profession and others.

Discussions with the Legal Services Board (LSB)

In our other Board workshop session, we welcomed Helen Phillips and Matthew Hill from the LSB to talk through their consultation on their business plan and ten-year strategy.

There is real resonance across their thinking and ours, particularly on key areas such as tackling unmet legal need and lawtech. We discussed the importance of data and the need to get under the skin of the issues we are seeing through research and agreed to identify areas where we can maximise collaborative working.

SQE fees

In our formal meeting, we approved fees in relation to the introduction of the new Solicitors Qualifying Examination. These fees relate to the process of applications for exemptions from overseas lawyers, and the people - likely low in number - who apply to have their experience recognised as equivalent to a degree. We also approved the cost of validating an individual's degree or qualification.

We agreed the fees on the basis that they will reflect the full cost of the application where possible. We will publish the details of the fees - early next month - in our Board papers.

Diversity Research

Finally, we were pleased to hear that we are starting the formal procurement process to secure independent and credible research into the two complex and sensitive diversity areas that we set out in our business plan - the underlying reasons for the attainment gap for some communities in professional assessments, and the factors driving the overrepresentation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic solicitors in our enforcement work.

As I said when we published the diversity profile of solicitors in our enforcement processes during 2018/19, back in December, we don't know what the societal and structural issues are (for us and so many other regulators) but I think it's time to find out. We will of course be reporting on this regularly.

So despite all the Covid-19 challenges, 2021 looks like a busy time - an opportunity to make a difference. And with Spring just around the corner, I hope everyone has a better year.