

News from the Board

Reflections on our Cardiff Board meeting

03 May 2022

The pandemic means that it is three years since our Board last met in Wales. So I was delighted to be able to return to Cardiff this month.

The real value of getting out of the Boardroom – physical or virtual – is the opportunity to meet people and hear what matters to them and why. With this in mind we hosted two events, including one in the wonderful setting of the Senedd. There was a clear appetite for face-to-face networking; many attendees said it was their first event for many months. As a result we spoke to more than 50 organisations – from Welsh Government to consumer groups; local charities to universities; solicitors to members of the Senedd.

One thing came through loudly and clearly - things are set to change at a rapid pace in Wales. There are a variety of Welsh Government and other initiatives looking at the future and the divergence of Welsh and English law is clearly set to become greater over time. This is clearly something the SRA need to keep front of mind as we develop our regulatory framework.

Awareness of the Welsh law is one of two key areas for the recently instigated Law Council of Wales, and it was good to talk to Council members. We are keen to work with them as they develop their thinking.

Overall the SRA has been increasing the work that we do in Wales and this was clearly appreciated. Earlier this month, the first SQE2 assessments took place, with sittings in Cardiff and Swansea. Candidates had the option to take the written part in Welsh, and by 2024 the SQE will be fully available in Welsh. But if people want to take the SQE in Welsh, it's important that they can prepare for it in Welsh. We are having some good conversations with universities in Wales about doing this.

The impacts of Covid – and now the cost of living squeeze – are bringing into even sharper focus the challenges around access to justice. This is of course a problem throughout the UK, but we heard about the particular challenges in Wales, including the higher proportion of people living in rural areas and the large number of smaller firms.

Technology could help with this, enabling some people to more easily and affordably access expert help, without the need to travel. But one size does not fit all, as our research in this area has shown. We have been working with Swansea University and charities such as Disability Wales, Citizens

Advice and Shelter Cymru. We will publish our final conclusions in the summer, followed up by further research with consumers.

The Board very much enjoyed our trip and have taken away lots of ideas, but the pace of change means it is vital that we engage on an ongoing basis. With Liz Withers, our first Head of Welsh Affairs, in post in Cardiff, we are in a better place to do this. I look forward to continuing the conversation.