



Law Society Council summary: 14 October 2014

At the first meeting of the 2014-15 legal year, the Council was delighted to welcome a number of new members: Mary Kaye (Birmingham and District), Paulette Mastin (Black Solicitors' Network), Emma Dickinson (Junior Lawyers' Division), Deborah Prince (City of London), Allan Devine (Northumbria), Raymond Xu and Nehal Varsani (City of Westminster). Also attending his first Council meeting was Paul Coen, interim chief executive.

Budget and business plan

The most significant business of the meeting was the discussion of the business plan and budget for the Law Society Group. Council confirmed the 17 per cent reduction in the individual practising certificate (PC) fee for 2014-15 which had been agreed in July, and agreed to the detailed budgets supporting this for all parts of the Law Society Group. Of the total budget of just over £114 million, the Law Society, as the body representing solicitors, accounts for some 13.5 per cent. The business plan for the Law Society for 2014-15 is consistent with the strategic framework set for the Society three years ago, and it has been informed this year by detailed research to understand and gauge the views of our members, who have told us that they would like us to understand their needs and be more visible in representing them and protecting their interests; to communicate and engage with them; to meet their diverse needs; and to provide them with products, services, guidance and support which are valued.

In 2014-15 we will build on many achievements from the previous year, including our progress towards better communicating the value of the Law Society to members; addressing member satisfaction in some key services including the Library, the support centre, and Practice Advice; launching the new Find a Solicitor; and developing the Conveyancing Portal which is on track for launch in 2015. For 2014-15 our key priorities will include listening further to our members and acting on what they tell us, being proactive in identifying areas that matter to the profession and taking the lead in representing members' interests; enhancing current membership support and services, tailoring them to the diverse needs of our membership; and ensuring that we provide value for money for our members, reducing our overheads, and operating within our budget. Council approved the business plan.

Shaping the environment

Council heard that the Law Society is increasingly looking to marshal resources across policy, communications, relationship management, and government relations, in order to have the greatest possible impact. Examples included the Access to Justice campaign which had been launched on 8 September, with the objectives of raising public awareness of the benefits of lawyer-aided access to justice, persuading policy makers of the need to amend parts of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act, and encouraging solicitors to make their services more accessible to the public.

The Law Society has continued to be active on criminal legal aid. Following the Society's lobbying, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) delayed the start of the duty contracting process to October. The Society responded strongly to the MOJ consultation on the Otterburn and KPMG reports on how legal aid is delivered. We made clear that in our view the proposed scheme fails to meet MOJ's own objectives of ensuring that any future criminal legal aid scheme must be sustainable with sufficient numbers of solicitors doing criminal duty work, and that it could bankrupt solicitors' businesses, leaving areas of the country with no legal representation for anyone accused of a crime and depriving vulnerable members of the public from access to justice. We also made clear that the Society is extremely concerned about the scale of risk to the future availability of criminal defence services and access to justice - including for vulnerable people - if the government proceeds with the current scheme.

The Law Society had also been active at the party conference season, with events focusing on the economic and social importance of access to justice and the rule of law. We have engaged with the Home Office to obtain amendments to the Serious Crime Bill clarifying the possible penalties on solicitors whose clients are engaged in crime. On the international agenda, the second annual International Marketplace Conference had taken place in the summer, with over 120 delegates from across the world, and the international team had organised and hosted a series of seminars in Liverpool as part of the International Festival of Business.

Promoting solicitors

Council also heard about the launch of the Law Society's new consumer campaign. This aims to promote solicitors' services in the six largest practice areas: conveyancing, will writing, family law, personal injury, employment, and law for small businesses. The campaign uses PR, social media, advertising, infographics and video to highlight the value that solicitors add and to drive more clients to the Find a Solicitor website. It has attracted significant coverage and been viewed by hundreds of thousands of people. Over 800 firms have signed up to use the material to support their own marketing efforts.