



Law Society Council summary: 12 February 2014

The first Council meeting of 2014 was an opportunity, following the Special General Meeting (SGM) and the subsequent special Council meeting on 17 December 2013, to consider developments on criminal legal aid, and to plan the Council's response to the lessons about the need to engage more effectively with all of our members.

Ongoing work on legal aid proposals

The Council re-committed the Society in December to continue to lobby the government on legal aid, including expressing its opposition to uneconomic and inappropriate fee structures. Several meetings have been held with the Lord Chancellor and the newly appointed Minister for Legal Aid and Legal Services, and we have organised further round-table events, most recently on 11 February, for senior criminal defence practitioners to meet the Lord Chancellor. We also briefed national and trade titles on the 6 January 2014 day of action, with coverage in the *Guardian*, *Times* and *Sunday Telegraph*. We have held a programme of Legal Aid events, hosted by the Vice-President with the Head of Legal Aid, in every region of England and in Wales. Discussions are ongoing, and we will report further developments as soon as possible.

More effective engagement with the profession

The Council noted evidence from the recent SGM and other quantitative and anecdotal sources that engagement with and support for the Law Society among many members of the profession could be improved. It took the opportunity to re-assert that the objective of the Society is to be a member-focused organisation, co-ordinating services effectively and targeting what the profession really needs, to identify some short-term improvements, and to set in hand a longer-term programme of work. There will be further updates on this in subsequent Council summaries.

Conveyancing portal

The potential for a Conveyancing portal had attracted interest in the *Financial Times* and the trade media, with a comment piece explaining how it would help firms manage risk, cut costs and serve clients. Following a long process of regular engagement with the conveyancing community, plans were finalised and received approval from the Management and Membership Boards. The business plan and business case now came to the Council for approval, which was granted. This represents a significant investment in transforming residential conveyancing - which is carried out by over half of the Society's member firms - and maintaining solicitors at the heart of it. We will be forming a joint venture with a global IT company to build and operate the Portal. Further information will be provided over the coming months as the programme progresses.

Council meetings

The Council discussed whether the current number of meetings (six a year) was enough to allow it to carry out its governance, oversight and policy making functions, in particular given the often large gap between a meeting in early July and the next one in mid October. It concluded that one additional meeting, in the autumn, would help ensure that policy matters, as well as issues of communication and engagement, could be properly reviewed. It also concluded, however, that the current pattern of usually meeting within a single day was preferable to extending meetings into a second day, which would be likely to make participation more difficult for significant parts of the profession.

Working to support our members

The Council received reports on activities including the twentieth Legal Breakfast, entitled *General Counsel today: challenges and opportunities*, with an exceptional range of speakers. Other events have included a dinner for the President and CEO to discuss legal issues with a cross-party group of MPs and peers. The Brussels office organised a seminar in London, attended by approximately 50 practitioners, on the review of the EU Shareholders' Rights Directive. We have held CEO and office holder visits and anti-money-laundering and diversity and inclusion events in several regions. We have briefed on a number of pieces of high-profile legislation, including the Financial Services (Banking Reform) Bill and the Immigration Bill, and we secured a significant amendment to the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill, removing an anomaly that could have severely limited the ability of Royal Chartered bodies to engage in lobbying within one year of a general election.

Product management and service delivery

The Council heard that the product management team had been fully integrated, with all the communities, divisions and sections now supported by a single team, thus ensuring better alignment of what we offer members of each group. There has been a recent focus on enhancements to the division websites, and very positive feedback has been received from members about the division e-newsletters. The Practice Advice Centre, the outsourced Find a Solicitor service, and the Membership Services and Support Centre continued to answer high volumes of calls to satisfactory standards. A new user interface for the CPD Centre had made the site simpler and quicker for members to navigate, and at 31,965 registered users, numbers were 71 per cent up since the start of 2013.