



Law Society Council meeting summary: 4 and 5 July 2018

Council was back in Chancery Lane for its July meeting, Joe Egan's last as Law Society president. The Law Society's Annual General Meeting took place the following day, as did the inauguration of Christina Blacklaws as president. She is joined by vice president Simon Davis and deputy vice president David Greene. Christina paid tribute to Joe for his service during three years as an office holder. Council stood for a minute's silence in memory of Paul Marsh, a distinguished and long-serving Council member who had been president in 2008-09. Council took the opportunity to welcome the new chief executive – Paul Tennant – who has served in post as an interim since April 2017 and who was appointed permanently earlier this month after an extensive and competitive process.

Council debates access to justice

The crisis in criminal justice and the growing problem of access to civil justice were the subject of a lively debate at Council. The Law Society continues to campaign vigorously around a series of issues – including court infrastructure, failings in disclosure of evidence, housing advice deserts, and the near extinction of criminal legal aid solicitors in some parts of the country as younger members opt not to pursue this area of law. Council talked about a range of issues including accessing courts and tribunals without undue barriers, access to advice and representation in a meaningful way, and the need to inform the public about the importance of these issues to them.

Influencing for impact – Brexit

Council heard about how the Society continues to press the government to put professional services and the legal profession at the heart of a new deal with the EU27, alongside security and the rights of all our citizens. Office holders and staff have held a series of meetings with ministers and we have provided evidence on Brexit to four committees in Westminster and one committee in the European Parliament. We also have an important role to play as a convener of expert opinion and in presenting fact-based argument about the potential effects of Brexit. Council were told about our recent central part in drafting the Professional and Business Services Council's letter to Theresa May setting out the importance of professional and business services to the UK economy.

Influencing at home

It was reported to Council that the Law Society's campaign on criminal duty solicitors was mentioned in Parliament and our evidence on early advice and criminal duty solicitors being in danger of extinction was acknowledged and referenced by the Lord Chief Justice and the Justice Select Committee. So far this year the Law Society has been mentioned on 124 occasions in Parliament and has given evidence to 10 select committee inquiries, drafted 27 parliamentary questions and been cited 15 times in judicial argument or practice notes. We have secured significant media coverage for our concerns about the quality of Home Office decision-making in immigration and asylum cases and the implications of restricting applicants' right to make data protection subject-access requests for information about their cases.

Keeping members informed

Council heard about how the Society has engaged with members on the Solicitor Regulation Authority's (SRA) professional indemnity insurance consultation publishing a briefing explaining the proposals and risks to members. The Society's response to the SRA was completed for the 15 June deadline and encouraged input from as many members as possible.

Planning for the future

Council spent time at this meeting considering future plans for the Law Society – as well as some of the achievements so far which include setting the Society's purpose, vision, goals, member offer and values; the 5-year corporate plan and the new governance arrangements, plus the future vision for the Society: Shaping our Future. Priorities for the coming years include creating a seamless experience for members, a modernised and overhauled working environment, and a new spirit of collaboration – all underpinned by a transformed IT system.

Council and governance arrangements

The new Board has now got into its stride as have its new Committees covering membership and communications, and policy and regulatory affairs. The new Audit Committee is also up and running and council had the opportunity to ask questions of both the Board chair and the Audit Committee chair. This provided reassurance in relation to the signing off of the Society's report and accounts for the previous financial year (2016-17), and in relation to decisions as to the information to be provided to the Legal Services Board in support of the approval of the level of the practising fee for 2018-19.