



Law Society Council meeting summary: 7 February 2018

Council met on 7 February in the Council chamber in 113 Chancery Lane. Council's next meeting in March will be in Manchester, recognising that the Society represents solicitors across England and Wales.

Changes to governance for 2018

Having in December passed amendments to the General Regulations giving effect to the agreed new governance structure, Council in February agreed further General Regulation amendments to bring an end to the existing four Law Society Boards. A further consolidation of changes is planned for March 2018.

Council also approved the appointment of the four external members of the Board: Penelope Warne and Vickie Lockie (solicitors), and Bill Butler and Judy Craske (lay members). The Board's first meeting will be on 20 February. This programme of change marks the Society's determination to organise its governance in a way that is as effective and efficient as possible. A further aspect of this is the planned Council strategic planning weekend in April, to enable Council to discuss the Society's strategy ahead of the budgeting process and the new Presidential year.

Council also approved the change in status of the Technology and Law Reference Group which would now be designated as a full 'Committee' recognising the increasing importance of its remit.

Lobbying on Brexit

The Society's ongoing work on Brexit was reported to Council. This included regular meetings with ministers and officials, the submission of written evidence to two of the key select committees, and a number of one-to-one meetings with relevant backbench MPs. The Society was also briefing MPs and peers on three key bills including the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, and was closely involved in the work of the Brexit Law Committee and the Professional Business Services Council's Mutual Market Access Group.

Rule of law

Council has recently, at each meeting, been having a general debate around an important issue. This time, Council discussed the Law Society's work on the rule of law internationally, which involves ensuring the governments exercise their authority in line with a legal framework that assure individual freedoms and is based on clear objective laws and a diverse, competent and independent legal profession. This includes a number of programmes, including lawyers at risk, business and human rights, professional capacity-building, women and the law, and governance (anti-corruption). In discussion, Council members re-affirmed their commitment to this vital area of work as a striking example of the Society bringing together the expertise of our members and standing in solidarity with lawyers across the world.

Legal aid

Council heard about the Society's campaign calling for the re-introduction of legal aid for early advice, which has attracted substantial media coverage as well as support from all parties, including a commitment from the Labour front bench to re-introduce legal aid for early advice in family law cases as a direct result of the Society's campaign. The Society had also been working closely with the Ministry of Justice to broaden the range of evidence that can be used in domestic abuse cases and ensure that victims of abuse can access legal aid.

Wales

It was reported that the Law Society had been referenced in two evidence sessions of the National Assembly Finance Committee on the progress of devolution of fiscal powers, with praise from the Wales Audit Office for the quality of engagement between the Welsh Government and the Law Society.

International engagement

Council noted that the Society had been represented at the World Trade Organisation ministerial conference in Buenos Aires as part of an International Bar Association delegation on international trade in legal services, and that a number of meetings and briefings had taken place with officials from governments of several key countries. We had also been represented at the Opening of the Legal Year in Hong Kong, and at the first UK Ministry of Justice international legal services working group meeting of 2018, following which we met with Ministry of Justice officials to discuss the Society's campaign to promote the law of England and Wales as an international jurisdiction of choice for dispute resolution.

Regulation

Council had the opportunity to note and discuss the Society's response to the Legal Services Board's consultation on the Internal Governance Rules, which focused on the need for greater clarity so as to help approved regulators and front-line regulators carry out their respective duties effectively and make it easier for the public to understand what they do. Council also noted the Society's response to an SRA consultation on price and service transparency, which included consumer research which suggested that simply making more information available was unlikely to improve client choice. On the consultation on the SRA's handbook reform, Council was pleased to note that the Society was maintaining its position that flexibility for practitioners should not come at the expense of clients.