

This paper will be published

Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) - Overview

Reason for paper	<p>This paper provides an overview of the operation of the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) route to qualification, just over four years after the first assessment.</p> <p>More detail on the fourth year of the delivery of the assessments is provided in a separate report.</p>
Decisions(s)	<p>The Board is asked to note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) the evidence showing the assessments are valid, reliable and fair b) the continuous improvement approach to the candidate experience, informed by stakeholder engagement c) the commitment to wider stakeholder engagement to both help support confidence in the SQE and inform further improvements d) the steps being taken to future-proof the SQE e) the development of the training market and work to help support candidates' choices.
Previous Board and committee consideration	<p>The Board considered the third year of the SQE's delivery in February 2025.</p>
Next steps	<p>The technical evaluation will run throughout the remainder of 2026 and report in early 2027.</p>

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Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) - Overview

Summary

- 1 This paper, which should be read alongside the separate report on the fourth year of the SQE and the suite of annual SQE reports, invites the Board to consider the operation of the SQE route to qualification and the evidence the assessments are valid, reliable and fair.
- 2 We recognise that confidence is not as high as it could be among some stakeholders, including candidates, particularly in relation to the assessment. In addition to improvements that are already in train we will consider additional, targeted measures to further build confidence in the SQE.
- 3 We explain work we are doing to continuously improve the candidate experience and the steps being taken to future proof the SQE. We need to take opportunities to do this, while making sure the integrity of the assessment is maintained. We also need to be mindful of longer term changes and trends in assessment and the legal market.
- 4 A key part of our work to inform any changes, and build this confidence, is through further increasing stakeholder engagement. In 2026, this includes:
 - the establishment of an employer focused stakeholder group
 - extensive engagement on the review of statement of Solicitor Competence and the Functional Legal Knowledge requirements
 - baking in stakeholder engagement to the five-year technical evaluation of the SQE.

Close collaboration and engagement with the profession, training providers and candidates is not only essential to inform any changes but help improve understanding – and therefore confidence – in the assessment and the route to qualification.

- 5 The paper also provides an update on the training market, and progress on work to help inform candidates' choices.

Background

- 6 The SQE has been available since November 2021. Our objectives, when we introduced the SQE route to qualification, were to:
 - provide greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of qualification as a solicitor, and to
 - create new and diverse pathways to qualification that:
 - respond to the changing legal services market

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- promote a more diverse profession by removing artificial and unjustifiable barriers.
- 7 The evidence shows success on both objectives. As expected, though, a new assessment and approach to qualification will take time to embed and be accepted, while issues will emerge that need to be addressed. This note highlights key areas where we will continue to engage, listen and learn about where further evolution is needed, and where there are opportunities to further build confidence in the assessment.
 - 8 Under the transitional arrangements, aspiring solicitors who were already committed to the previous route to qualification when we introduced the SQE are able, until 2032, to qualify under that route, if they wish. However, the SQE is now the main route to qualification.
 - 9 Candidate numbers have increased significantly since the SQE's early sittings. They have been successfully accommodated on both SQE1 and SQE2.

The assessments are performing well

- 10 The SQE Independent Reviewer has again confirmed the assessments are fair and performing well.
- 11 Internationally used measures show the assessments are reliable.
- 12 The growing volume of data on candidate characteristics and candidate performance has enabled new analyses. These have provided evidence that the assessments are fair and accessible, for example, disabled candidates, including neurodivergent candidates, are performing well in the assessments. Likewise apprentices.
- 13 A multivariate analysis has also been undertaken to inform understanding of the impact of candidate backgrounds and characteristics on their performance and how variance between candidate scores might be explained. This shows that most difference between candidate performance cannot be explained by the data held on candidate background or characteristics. Of the differences that can be explained, most is associated with prior attainment.
- 14 We have also been able to show how the make-up of a candidate cohort can have an impact on the pass rate (the percentage who pass) that assessment.
- 15 We are pleased with these strong measures of assessment quality and that these have been present throughout the lifecycle of the SQE so far. We are also pleased that analyses made possible by a standard data set are reassuring in terms of fairness for candidates.
- 16 When we introduced the SQE we committed to a ten-year evaluation framework, which we are following.

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- 17 We have appointed ETS to undertake the first technical review of the assessments. ETS is a large US based educational testing and measurement organisation, with a strong research record. It operates on an international basis. ETS has an established approach to evaluating assessments. We expect the review to be completed in early 2027. This will provide further evidence on the performance of the assessments. We will learn from the evaluation and make changes where they are needed.

Continuously improving the delivery of the assessments

- 18 We review the delivery of every assessment. We consider feedback from candidates on their experience and identify any lessons to learn.
- 19 This informs a programme of continuous improvement to the candidate experience. The taking of a demanding, high stakes, licence to practise qualification is unlikely to be an enjoyable experience for candidates. But their feedback on how the SQE is delivered and on arrangements in assessment centres has notably improved since the early years of the SQE's delivery.
- 20 We will continue to listen to candidates and to make further improvements to the candidate experience, that do not undermine the integrity of the assessment.

Wider stakeholder engagement

- 21 Building on our work to date, we want to bolster engagement with stakeholders. This is essential to both building confidence in the SQE and identifying areas where we can address issue and improve.
- 22 This year we are setting up an employer focused SQE stakeholder group with nominees from established groups.
- 23 In December 2025, we published the [report on perceptions of the SQE](#) we commissioned from IFF a market research agency. IFF surveyed candidates, employers and training providers to find out their thoughts and experiences of the SQE and of qualifying work experience. Feedback was mixed, with employers and training providers giving more positive feedback than candidates. It showed that whereas positivity in qualifying work experience is on the rise, candidates' confidence overall in the assessment had decreased. This is separate to the evidence, cited in paragraph 19, of improved feedback on the operational delivery of the assessment.
- 24 We will continue to work with stakeholders to understand how we can further build confidence in the SQE. We will also do more to help stakeholders develop their assessment literacy so that there is greater understanding and this might help to inform discussions about the SQE.

CLASSIFICATION – PUBLIC**Future proofing the SQE**

- 25 In line with our evaluation plan, we have started to review the Statement of Solicitor Competence, from which the content assessed on the SQE is derived. We are running focus groups with representatives of the profession both on the Statement and on the Functioning Legal Knowledge on which SQE candidates are assessed. We will consult on any proposed changes later in the year.
- 26 The review is an opportunity to consider whether any changes in law, legal practice and/or technology should change the competences we expect of solicitors, both at the point of qualification and throughout their practising careers.
- 27 In contrast to some other assessments, the integrity of the SQE is not being challenged by AI. The SQE is taken under strictly controlled conditions, ensuring the authenticity of candidates' work.
- 28 Increasing numbers of candidates are using a growing range of assistive technology in their assessments. Our Assistive Technology Forum helps us anticipate development in the use assistive technology, both in education and in the practice.
- 29 We also learn from developments in assessment design and delivery in other sectors and in other countries.
- 30 Finally, we also recognise that we will need to consider longer term trends in assessment and in the legal market – for instance AI could transform how legal services are delivered and the make-up of the profession. We will continue to monitor these trends, engaging closely with stakeholders, to consider implications for the SQE over the longer term.

The SQE training market

- 31 When we introduced the SQE we were keen to see innovation and choice for candidates. The training market has responded well, providing many options for candidates. We know some candidates are working with more than one provider as they prepare for their assessments. We provide a range of information for candidates on how they might decide how to prepare for their assessments, including candidate case studies.
- 32 In January 2026, in response to feedback from candidates, we introduced a [new training and course finder tool on our website](#). This enables candidates to search for courses with different characteristics and to make comparisons between them.
- 33 We have changed the point in the candidate journey at which candidates tell us how they prepared. Rather than telling us before they sit an assessment they now tell us after they have taken an assessment and before they receive their results. This will provide better quality information.

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- 34 As we explained in the [statement we published in December 2025](#), we do not believe publishing data that simply provides pass rates by training provider and/or course will be helpful for candidates or support the development of a healthy market. As highlighted in paragraph 31 above, we think it is important to have a suite of information to help candidates and support the provision of good quality training. We have, for example, published case studies illustrating the different ways by which candidates study and Kaplan has delivered workshops for training providers and publishers to support them in developing good materials for candidates. We are continuing to explore what else could be added to these materials over time, including whether information that would be useful for candidates can be extracted from performance data.
- 35 We are in close dialogue with the Legal Services Board on our work in this area.

Qualifying Work experience

- 36 Most of the discussion about the SQE route to qualification focuses on the assessments. However, Qualifying Work Experience (QWE) is an essential part of the qualification journey, enabling candidates to become familiar with the realities of legal practice and develop the skills that cannot be assessed in the SQE but are, nevertheless, essential for successful practice.
- 37 The IFF research, mentioned above, found growing confidence in QWE and familiarity with it – both from candidates and employers. However, we recognise there is still further work to do to increase knowledge and awareness around QWE, and how it works, with some firms.

Recommendations: the Board is asked to note:

- a) the evidence showing the assessments are valid, reliable and fair**
- b) the continuous improvement approach to the candidate experience, informed by stakeholder engagement**
- c) the commitment to wider stakeholder engagement to both help support confidence in the SQE and inform further improvements**
- d) the steps being taken to future-proof the SQE**
- e) the development of the training market and work to help support candidates' choices.**

Supporting information

Links to the Corporate Strategy and/or Business Plan and impact on strategic and mid-tier risks

- 38 The SQE was introduced to make sure all solicitors were assessed against the same high standard before being admitted to the profession, in line with our strategic priority to set and maintain high standards for the profession.

How the issues support the regulatory objectives and best regulatory practice

- 39 When we introduced the SQE we removed unnecessary regulatory barriers to qualification and placed our regulatory focus on making sure solicitors had demonstrated their competence before they qualified, rather than on prescribing the education and training route they had to follow.

Public/Consumer impact

- 40 The SQE provides an assurance to the public that all newly qualified solicitors have demonstrated their competence to practise.

What engagement approach has been used to inform the work and what further communication and engagement is needed?

- 41 We regularly engage with stakeholders and consider their feedback. For example, candidates are invited to complete a survey when they have taken their assessments. There are also opportunities for them to participate in regular focus groups. We meet with training providers. We also join meetings of the Solicitor Apprenticeship Trailblazer Group.

What equality and diversity considerations relate to this issue?

- 42 The troubling gap in outcomes between candidates of different ethnicities that was seen in the legacy qualification arrangements, as well as in other sectors and different stages of education, in the UK and internationally, has continued on the SQE. We are taking action to address some of the causes of differential outcomes by ethnicity, to the extent these are within our influence. Our actions are informed by the research we commissioned from the University of Exeter. The results do not flag concerns with regard to the relative outcomes of males and females or the relative outcomes of candidates with or without a disability.

How the work will be evaluated

- 43 We have a ten-year evaluation framework that we are following.