

## News from the Board

### Reflections on our April Board workshops

14 April 2025

This week's Board meeting was a day of workshop sessions focussing on strategy, the big issues in the legal sector, and how we are advancing our mission of driving confidence and trust in legal services.

#### **Ethics is a key element**

Ethics has been the foundation stone of professional services from the very beginning and it is ethical failures that can deliver some of the most fatal blows to confidence and trust in legal services. The public rightly expect high standards. The courts agree – as was famously set out in the Bolton case, the public should be able to trust solicitors to the ‘ends of the earth.’

[The seven Principles \[https://beta.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/2023-press-releases/three-immigration-firms/1\]](https://beta.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/2023-press-releases/three-immigration-firms/1) that frame the SRA regulatory framework for individuals and firms, centre on Honesty, Integrity and Independence and together they capture the essence of the ethical standard we expect. The situations solicitors' face will be case-specific, but the Principles should be the anchor for making decisions. The Principles set out that solicitors need to consider the best interests of the client, but ultimately the principles that safeguard the public interest, such as upholding the rule of law, should weigh most heavily when making decisions.

Ethical issues of course are not always straightforward - our ethics helpline deals with more than 25,000 solicitors a year who are seeking support with, often tricky, ethical issues. And there is no doubt that recent events like the Post Office Horizon scandal have raised serious questions about whether there is a strong enough ethical compass across the profession.

#### **Driving improvements**

We have been making progress in some key areas through a combination of targeted support and action. For instance, the MeToo movement, saw a significant shift in expectations and reporting around inappropriate workplace behaviour and sexual misconduct.

Our enforcement work plays an important part in shifting the dial in the legal sector, whether by providing targeted guidance and warnings, or successfully prosecuting cases at the Tribunal. A decade-ago inappropriate behaviour in a law firm would often be swept under the carpet and was rarely reported to us. We have been encouraging



reporting to us and cultures and expectations in law firms appear to be changing as a result.

We have done a great deal of work to strengthen our guidance and support for the in-house sector and have also been busy tackling behaviours linked to SLAPPs.

## **Our future work and key questions**

The Board have had several discussions about ethics recently and asked that we review all that we had done so far with a view to creating a single programme to bring more focus to this body of work.

We are keen to use this to identify areas in which we could do one of two things:

1. Do more to ensure the regulated community understand what is expected of them in general, and in particular areas of activity
2. Develop new initiatives where we think necessary

In respect of new developments, we are keen to consider whether we can improve how we ensure aspiring solicitors understand what ethical practice means. It is vital that those entering the profession are well equipped to identify and respond to ethical challenges when they emerge. We also plan to look at how we can keep such learning fresh, particularly in the face of newly emerging ethical challenges. Finally, we are wondering what we might do to strengthen the focus of legal firms on culture and appropriate support for the ethical behaviour of their employees.

## **Keeping the conversation going**

These are big issues and questions which don't have simple solutions. In designing our work, we need to have an eye both at what we could do, and what the costs and benefits of such action would be for regulation and the sector. To get this right, we will need to work closely with the profession and other stakeholders. So we are keen to make sure we keep the conversation going.

I know from the hundreds of solicitors I have spoken to about these issues, that the profession shares our ambition here. I am confident that we all agree that we want to weed out the minority of bad actors from the profession, while providing support and creating cultures that help the majority who are committed to doing the right thing. The question is, how best to do this in today's legal sector.

I look forward to an ongoing discussion.