



Justice Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 8196/8198 Fax 020 7219 0843 Email justicecom@parliament.uk
Website www.parliament.uk/justicecttee

Dr Helen Phillips
Interim Chair
Legal Services Board
One Kemble Street
London
WC2B 4AN

8 March 2018

Solicitors Qualifying Examination

We are aware that the Legal Services Board (LSB) is currently considering the application of the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) for approval of the regulatory arrangements that would empower it to introduce new admission requirements for the profession, including a single, final assessment: the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE). We are contacting you as a matter of some urgency as we understand that the LSB intends to announce its decision on the SRA's application by 9 March 2018.

It has been brought to our attention that a number of key stakeholders, including the Legal Education and Training Group which includes representatives of many leading law firms, have expressed concerns about the SRA's proposals over the course of their development, and that these remain unresolved. In particular, there are fears that the SQE framework in its current form would lead to England and Wales becoming the only jurisdiction that does not require substantive academic study of law as a precursor to qualifying as a lawyer.

While we accept that introducing a centralised assessment offers advantages such as transparency and consistency, we share the concerns that have been expressed about removing the requirement for academic study of law; applicants could instead have a degree in any subject (albeit with exceptions that would enable legal executives or apprentices who are non-graduates to continue to qualify as solicitors). We believe that the SQE model raises important public policy issues, in that if it does not contain sufficient safeguards, it may risk damaging the reputation of our legal profession and, ultimately, of the UK as a legal jurisdiction of choice.

Our predecessor Committee's report on the implications of Brexit for the justice system (Ninth Report of Session 2016-17) noted that the UK's legal services sector underpins many areas of UK economic activity; it contributes £25.7 billion to the economy, generating £3.3 billion in annual export revenue and employing some 370,000 people. The report recommended that the Government consider and promote the legal services sector within post-Brexit trade recalibration. It is not the purpose of this letter to explore the challenges that might be faced in achieving a post-Brexit settlement for UK legal services, but rather to emphasise the need to avoid any possible new reputational risk to the legal profession at this critical time.



Justice Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 8196/8198 Fax 020 7219 0843 Email justicecom@parliament.uk
Website www.parliament.uk/justicecttee

We accept that the SRA's current application does not represent the final phase of LSB approval for all aspects of the SQE approach. However, as the application itself makes it clear, the SRA has already done substantial work in developing an assessment specification, and is expecting to finalise the contract with the assessment provider by April 2018. The new provider will have to invest significant sums in the development of the SQE; the SRA's current application for approval of the underpinning regulatory requirement is designed to minimize the financial risks to the provider by clarifying these requirements before the contract is signed. Thus, our understanding is that the LSB's forthcoming decision has great significance.

In these circumstances, we would ask you to delay your decision, to enable the SRA's application to be given more careful scrutiny. The Legal Education and Training Group has suggested a deferral of six months, which we think would be a sensible approach.

Bob Neill MP
Chair
Justice Committee

cc. Paul Philip, Chief Executive, Solicitors Regulation Authority