

Engaging the commissioners

As you may know the CLSA hosted a well-attended meeting last month with the LSC at the Hop Farm in Kent. Its purpose was to engage with the commissioner with responsibility for the county, Tom Jones.

LSC chief executive Carolyn Regan also attended, along with the Commission, Neil Craig, senior project manager, Rob McCauley, local CDS manager, and regional manager Karen Stevens.

Tom Jones gave a short address in which he stressed the importance of provider reference groups. Carolyn Regan spoke of the LSC's process of managed change, of which best value tendering was a part, and stressed the LSC's aims of access to justice, quality and value for money.

She disclosed there had been 2350 applications for a contract (an increase of seven per cent) and said that there was 100% coverage of duty schemes. Best value tendering could result in an increase in prices in some areas, she said, and if that happened the LSC would ask for more money or look at scope.

She said the response to the consultation would be published this month [June]. The time scale for implementation – if it went ahead – was bids by July 2009 and first contracts in 2010. She did not rule out pilots.

Ms Regan said that the LSC supported the involvement of defence practitioners on local CJBs.

A lively debate followed with many speakers from the floor, notably Robin Murray, Dennis Clark and Jan Davies.

Robin Murray queried why suppliers should set the price – there should be an expert to deal with this, he said. He also reminded Ms Regan that in his meeting with Lord Hunt, the minister had been categorical that there would be no cuts in scope.

Dennis Clark said that PDS were supposed to inform the LSC about the true cost. This had proved to be too high for the LSC, which suggested that practitioners were already working at below market rates and were only surviving by putting in very long hours.

One delegate asked why he should continue practicing criminal law when his contemporaries in private practice were making a far better living and he could see no prospect of earning more.

Stephen Nelson said there had been a high take up as criminal practices had no choice. He felt the LSC had not been transparent in the CDS Direct tender and had been solely motivated by price. I pointed out that Bostalls were awarded a contract before they had obtained a waiver and were unable to fulfill the contract at that time.

Greg Rawle made the point that there was no forward thinking as to what happens after the first round of BVT, when many suppliers will have disappeared.

I reminded Tom Jones of his duties as a commissioner and asked why he, in common with all the 12 commissioners, hadn't replied the letter regarding BVT. It appeared the letter had not been given to him although Carolyn Regan said the documents enclosed were available for inspection at the meeting between the representative organisations and the commissioners, which only four commissioners (not including Mr Jones) had attended. I said that commissioners were there to oversee the LSC executive; it was a demanding role and one that involved being on top of the brief.

Robin Murray delivered a coup de grace to Carolyn Regan by pointing out that the LSC misused statistics, and was in his view acting as a propaganda tool of a discredited government.

The meeting generally was quite difficult for the LSC and its representatives were thanked for their attendance. They affirmed their commitment to engaging with the profession.

Following their departure Robin Murray addressed the meeting and urged support for the CLSA. A number of signed membership applications were received and more promised.

Considerable interest was expressed in setting up a local group of CLSA members to look at local issues and feed back through Robin Murray and Dennis Clark to the national committee.

Feedback from all those attending the meeting was generally positive.

More meetings are planned in the northeast, northwest and centre of the country. The purpose of these meetings remains to engage with the commissioners tasked with overseeing the Commission.

It is important that the commissioners are aware of the strength of your views and I would urge you to support these meetings.

Joy Merriam, Chair

**CLSA conference
17 October 2008
in Sheffield**

Pacemakers

The major criminal law event of the year, the CLSA annual conference, is being held in Sheffield on 17th October with optional training on the Saturday morning taking the number of CPD points on offer to 9. The conference programme will focus on the work we do as criminal lawyers. With PACE approaching its 25th birthday we'll be looking in detail at its operation over the years, the way things have been altered and the proposals for a revision of the legislation and what they may mean in practice.

The annual gala dinner in the evening will also be a special occasion and a chance for a real party.

Booking forms will be going out to all members very soon and details will be on the CLSA's website www.clsa.co.uk. Places will be limited so if you want to register your interest at this stage, please email sue@clsa.co.uk and head your email "conference earlybird".

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