

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2022 AGM OF NEWCASTLE LAW SOCIETY INC

The opening sentences in my report for our 2021 AGM were “*This is a very different report to those of previous years! Needless to say, this year’s report about 2020’s activities is very much overshadowed by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.*”

Unfortunately we seem to have to say “same old, same old”. Damned covid!

Again in calendar year 2021, the pandemic has significantly affected our activities and revenue. Nevertheless, for the current financial year to 31 January 2022 we were in profit (and more than just marginally) and our reserves remain strong. NLS can meet its liabilities as and when they fall due. A formal report will appear soon.

We were again lucky enough to be able to present our full range of Opening of Law Term ceremonies and functions in 2021, and 3 CPDs early on (2 of which included face-to-face), and we had a very successful trivia night in June, but that was the end of things for the remainder of that calendar year. There were no other functions or events, and no CPD beyond 26 March presented by us, and only moderate revenue, at least until the new financial year’s membership subscriptions began to roll in.

As he had in 2020 too, Justice Stephen Campbell led us at the 2021 OLT morning ceremonies [*encore deja-vu*], although His Honour ceded to Judge Ellis the primary address at the ceremonial sitting. We had reasonably good numbers at the ecumenical service and the ceremonial sitting, and about 87 at the cocktail function that evening which was held at Newcastle Cruising Yacht Club (and for some elsewhere later). President Juliana Warner and CEO Sonja Stewart joined us throughout. We thank those who had a hand in the organising, chief among whom were James Bartley and Kate Thomson.

The trivia night was in June, again at Souths Leagues, and it was a sell-out, with 174 in attendance. On this occasion the night was in honour and memory of Phil Davies, and in support of the Motor Neurone Disease Unit at Macquarie University. We raised and donated \$5,500.00. The Roberts Legal team were the champions, displacing O’Brien Winter. The hard working organisers included Sally Davies and other members of Jenkins Legal, Kate Thomson, Sally Mackay, Rose Laffan, James Bartley. We thank them for their sterling efforts.

We were extremely disappointed not to be able to present our headline events in the second half of 2021, being Banter with the Bench, the annual dinner, and Coolahan Drinks. Likewise we were disappointed not to be able to present any OLT morning ceremonies in 2022. The main factor regarding 2022 OLT was the concept of jury “bubbles”, but more generally it seemed that it would be just too hard to organize, not to mention the risk of last minute cancellation. I can tell you that the Court hierarchy too was disappointed. There was a reasonably good roll up to the drinks function on the evening of 31 January 2022, and all who attended expressed the view that it was nice to be able to socialize with colleagues face-to-face once again. I will not tempt fate by again prognosticating the easing of coronavirus restrictions and things returning to something like normal operation this year, but we live in hope.

Currently we have 340 financial members (as compared with 414 at the equivalent point last year), being 294 “full” financial members, another 46 who have less than 3 years PAE and/or are government lawyers or who are students. That is a drop of about 18%. Our best guess is that it arises from a combination of covid generally, but possibly also some confusion about renewals around June/July in 2021. I re-iterate that we have a catchment of 1,000 solicitors in our region. Please do what you can to encourage your colleagues who are not currently members to join or re-join. The management committee will do likewise and continues to actively consider ways to attract more members, not least among some of the bigger firms.

The management committee continues to meet monthly, by Zoom. Apart from Sally, Rose, Kate and James, that was SVP Matthew Clarkson, new Treasurer Micah Jenkins, and Lucy Urach.

I re-iterate the obvious: this is whilst also attending to his or her own professional practice amongst other things. I record my and your sincere thanks to each of them for the work which they did in 2021.

My current understanding is that all except Matthew will stand for re-election, but I again announce that every single management committee position will be treated as vacant at this year’s AGM tonight at the Newcastle Club at 5.30pm. If you were intending to come along you should have rsvp’d by now!

On your and my behalf I thank Matthew for his time and contribution over a number of years.

Meetings of regional Presidents were again less in number in 2021 than “normal” and except for one *ad hoc* on 6 December 2021 were by video. NLS was represented at each of those meetings. I did some radio interviews, but not live.

Our good fortune continues in the sense of still having as our honorary accountant Jane Beverley of Evolution Business Advisers. We again thank Jane in particular but her firm generally. As I have suggested before, maybe you can consider referring some work her way?

Once again in 2022, Newcastle will have its own admission ceremony. This year that will be on Friday morning 25 February and presided over by the Honourable Justice Stephen Rothman AM, and held at the Conservatorium. We would appreciate some volunteers to attend outside towards the end of the ceremonies to hand out pamphlets which provide newly admitted practitioners with information about the role and function of regional law societies and how to join. Please let us know if you can help.

I am not yet aware of the date for the first meeting of regional Presidents for 2022, but I anticipate it will be face-to-face. As I have observed before, you should not underestimate the influence which that group sometimes can have. That forum is always interested to hear if there are common or systemic problems affecting practitioners, and resolutions of that forum have often generated action by Council or the President or the CEO. You can identify any such issues via our secretariat.

Penultimately but never least, we yet again thank Jen Richards for her cheerfulness, energy, patience and diligence, the more particularly so in another trying year of pandemic. I re-iterate that the judicial officers and their staff who deal with Jen speak highly of her courtesy and efficiency. It is Jen who has the major responsibility on behalf of NLS for organizing for example the OLT events. Another gold koala stamp!

To conclude on a sad note, We lost several dear colleagues in 2021 namely Paul Manion, Philip Davies, Peter Cleaves, Dick Youll and Greg Elsworthy, and they will all be sorely missed.

Gary Fox

15 February 2022