

PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2024 AGM OF NEWCASTLE LAW SOCIETY INC

Since my 2023 report things have remained somewhat unpredictable in terms of attendance at our events, with solid numbers at most but disappointingly small at others. The cathedral service this year was a stark example. Not infrequently we find ourselves needing to “bang the drum” in the week or so preceding the event.

Regardless of that, for the current financial year to 31 January 2024 we were again in profit (and more than just marginally) and our reserves remain strong. NLS continues to be able to meet its liabilities as and when they fall due. I anticipate that our Treasurer will present a report for the AGM.

Lucky us! We 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?

2023 was a particularly sad (or bad) year for deaths. In particular we lost Dennis Benson, Bryony Barber, Jeff Smith, Jeff Thomas, Patrick Hunt, Steve Churches, Geoff Gorton, Phil Young and Peter Chapman. Each of them is sorely missed.

In 2023 we presented our full range of Opening of Law Term ceremonies, but we only had about 37 at the cocktail function where we were joined by Judge Ellis and Magistrate Stone. That said we were particularly pleased to welcome about 6 attendees from Braye Cragg, about 7 from Burke Mead, and especially about 10 from Moray & Agnew. We thank those involved in the organisation.

The trivia night was in June, again at Souths Leagues, and it was another raging success, with 255 registered to attend. On this occasion the night was in support of Bowel Cancer Australia, and we raised and donated \$15,800.00. There were 23 significant donors, and a few big bidders at the end-of-night auction, notably once again Michelle Gillard who was the successful bidder for both the Gordon Hanley Dragonfly artwork and the tickets for dinner at NSW Parliament House. Michelle deserves a big vote of thanks for her ongoing generosity at this particular event. O'Brien Winter were the successful bidders for the Being More Human coaching session. Thank you to all of them. The Carl Young & Associates ODPP team were the 2023 champions, displacing Catherine Henry Lawyers in a somewhat unusual

manner. The hard-working organisers included Sally Davies, Kate Thomson, Katie Thompson, Sophie Wilson, Jen Richards and James Bartley. We thank them for their efforts, which you have seen were well rewarded.

In September we held Banter with the Bench at Rydges with about 70 in attendance, again including a number of judicial officers. A very good time appeared to be had by all. The pleasant outlook and co-incidental music by J J King were bonuses.

As from time immemorial, on the first Friday of November we presented our annual dinner, but we had been gazumped at the Newcastle Club, and so the venue was Fort Scratchley Function Centre. This event too was a big success. Professor Belinda Bennett was our “mystery” speaker. My understanding is that that was the Professor’s first “official” address since her appointment as Dean of the University of Newcastle School of Law and Justice. There were about 130 in attendance.

Coolahan Drinks were at The Clarendon on 14 December 2023 . We had only about 40 in attendance. In my view it would be a great shame if His Honour’s memory faded.

Currently we have 377 financial members (as compared with 359 at the equivalent point in 2023), being 307 “full” financial members, another 70 who have less than 3 years PAE and/or are government lawyers or who are students. 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 regularly does likewise and actively considers ways to attract more members, not least among some of the bigger firms. We have had some success in that regard for which we thank you.

Presumably consistent with the steady increase in newly admitted solicitors, many of the new applications are from what I think are now called “early career lawyers”, and we have 9 new membership applications this month chiefly from that cohort.

The management committee continues to meet monthly, in alternate months by Microsoft Teams but otherwise at the Newcastle Club. That again was James Bartley as SVP, Kate Thomson as JVP, Micah Jenkins as treasurer, Rose Laffan as secretary, and Sally Davies, Sarah Goldfinch, and Katie Thompson as “ordinary” committee members, but as I have observed in the past there is nothing “ordinary”

about the contributions which all of the committee make. It is time consuming, and can sometimes be stressful, and this is whilst also attending to one's own professional practice amongst other things. I record my and your sincere thanks to each of them for the work which they did in 2023/24. In particular we wish Katie well!

Meetings of regional Presidents were again slightly less in number in 2023 than "normal" with a mix of in-person and video. NLS was represented at each of those meetings. In 2024 the program of meetings is reverting to more or less "normal", and this at the instigation of the regional presidents. The first meeting for 2024 is scheduled for 29 February 2024. My understanding is that there will be one meeting each year in a region. 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. Perhaps the best (or worst) recent example is online probate, and I can assure that President Brett McGrath is well aware of ongoing dissatisfaction amongst the profession.

We continue to do our best to present our own CPDs and to collaborate with others doing so locally. Please do support these presentations.

Once again Newcastle had its own admissions ceremony this year, and later that day a celebratory dinner. I have reported to you separately about those events. My understanding is that Newcastle is the only regional location for admissions.

Next we yet again thank Jen Richards for her cheerfulness, energy, patience and diligence. 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. Yet another gold koala stamp!

We are in process of establishing a panel of senior local practitioners to act as mentors to their less experienced colleagues. We are most grateful to those who have already confirmed their willingness to assist. As we see it, at least initially this will be an *ad hoc* arrangement, but in so describing it I do not mean any disrespect at all to those individuals. Their names and contact details will be displayed on the website. None will be members of our committees and they will not have any sort of reporting

obligation (at least not outside any statutory obligation, if at all). We envisage this as being a way in which one-off problems (in the main) can be discussed outside the existing employer/employee relationship if that be necessary. It may well be that the nature of the mentorship develops, but that will essentially be up to the individuals involved. The constitution of the panel may well change over time; in fact that is probably to be expected. It is not intended that the mentors should be seen as some sort of unpaid Counsel to advise on the intricacies of individual cases!

Less than the whole of the current management committee will stand for re-election. I remind you that every single management committee position will be treated as vacant at this year's AGM on 20 February 2024 at the Newcastle Club at 5.30pm. If you were intending to come along you should have rsvp'd by now!

I will retire as President at this AGM. Our current SVP James Bartley will stand for that office, and he will have my vote and my enthusiastic support.

Gary Fox

17 February 2024