

[A blog on SLC's Corporate Plan by CEO, Paula Sussex](#)

Delivering student finance in a Covid year

Managing the delivery of student finance against a backdrop of Covid-19 has been a major focus for SLC in 2020. Like many other organisations on the night of March 23rd, we had to make the organisational equivalent of a handbrake turn to transform into a home-working operation, complete with assessing and customer contact services, which we did in one month. To do this required a significant technological and logistical effort, and we also retrained and switched staff from a number of other areas of SLC to the frontline to ensure that students' applications were processed so that their finance arrived at the right time. We have this year financed a record number of new and returning students in England and Wales, having successfully paid over £7bn in maintenance loans and tuition fee loans (on behalf of students) to universities and colleges. We are very pleased that, for the vast majority of our customers, the experience of applying for student finance has been smooth. But as ever, we regret where our service has fallen short of our standards which further vindicates the case for our transformation programme.

Supporting the finances of the institutions of the higher education has also presented its challenges and has tested our ability to adapt our processes and systems to the needs of the sector, working as we do within a prescriptive policy regime. So, for example, at the request of the Department of Education and Devolved Administrations of Wales and Northern Ireland, we revised the schedule of tuition fee loan payments to Higher Education Providers for the 2020/21 Academic Year. This revision enabled education providers to access the second instalment of tuition fee payments early, while ensuring that students were not impacted by the change. In the future, our policy simplification programme will maintain this innovative focus and will support a more streamlined application process for our customers.

Realising our strategic goals

While the challenge of 2020 has undoubtedly been to manage the impact of Covid-19, we have nonetheless continued to progress the realisation of our long-term goals. Last week, we published our Corporate Plan, which sets out how we deliver those goals and our strategy over the next three years. It emphasises our central commitment to provide our customers with an outstanding customer experience and to enable them to invest in their futures.

Our transformation programme, Evolve, is already enabling SLC's ambition to improve the customer experience through digital technologies, a better use of data, reforming policy commissioning, simplifying products and making SLC a great place to work. Our strategy seeks to fundamentally change how we operate, such that the majority of our customers can self-serve, which in turn frees up more time for our colleagues to focus their attention and

expertise on helping customers with more complex needs and circumstances. Earlier this year we launched our online repayment service to provide online access to up-to-date balances – for the first time in the 30 years since SLC launched.

Key to transforming the customer and colleague experience next year will be the introduction of our new Customer Engagement Management system. This will enable us to access all of a customer's interactions with us within a single system, instead of hunting through multiple systems, often when the customer is waiting for an answer, as they do now. Crucially, this system will also allow customers to track their applications and other outstanding activities, clearly understand the next steps and any actions they are required to take, and to take those actions directly through digital services. This will significantly reduce the need for customers to call us. Where customers do need to contact us, they will be able to do so via a channel of their choice. It will also allow us to track the progress of a customer applications, something that is not possible with our current fragmented systems. That will allow us to address issues, which currently slow up or complicate the process, more quickly and effectively than we can now.

Improving the use of data is also key to our transformation. The success of our customer service and our duty to the taxpayer, to ensure that we collect every pound due on a loan, relies on the quality of our data, and it is vital that this is accurate and consistent.

Looking forward to 2021

Despite the recent positive news about the vaccine, we know that there will continue to be challenges for students, our staff and the institutions that provide higher and further education. A key theme of the past months has been to identify emerging operational risks and take swift corrective action. Next year, and working closely with our shareholders, we will continue to do the same.

I don't underestimate how much we must do to deliver on the goals set out in our corporate plan. However, our response to the challenges of the past months strengthens my confidence in SLC's ability to achieve this and, in so doing, to continue to support students and graduates to invest in their futures.

[Paula Sussex](#) is Chief Executive of the Student Loans Company

Private International Law Bill gains Royal Assent

Press release

The Private International Law Bill (2020) received royal assent today (14 December 2020) allowing the UK to implement vital agreements which protect the country's businesses and citizens across borders.



- Bill allows UK to implement its own Private International Law agreements
- 10-year strategy to capitalise on this new freedom published shortly

These agreements help to resolve a range of legal disputes – from returning children abducted by a parent, settling international business disagreements, to helping prevent a spouse living abroad dodging child maintenance obligations.

A public consultation on a 10-year strategy which seeks to capitalise on the UK's regained capability in this area of law will be published shortly.

It will provide a blueprint for maintaining Britain's status as a leading global jurisdiction for businesses to operate in, by giving them the legal certainty they need. It will also ensure that consumers and families have access to the most effective ways of resolving disputes in an ever-more globalised world.

Lord Chancellor Robert Buckland said:

These agreements provide vital protections to UK businesses, individuals and families looking to live, work, travel and trade across borders.

We can now enjoy the freedom of being able to strike and implement our own Private International Law deals, ensuring they continue to have the interests of UK citizens at heart.

Without the ability to implement these agreements in domestic law, there could be parallel court cases in different countries, leading to conflicting decisions where UK individuals, businesses and families would bear the brunt of legal costs.

The Bill also maintains three key existing agreements, known as Hague Conventions, to ensure their clear implementation at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020, and will enable the implementation of

the Lugano Convention 2007, should the UK's application to re-join it be successful.

It provides an overarching legislative framework, enabling individual private international law (PIL) agreements to be implemented via secondary legislation now the UK has left the EU.

Notes to editors

- The Private International Law Bill (2020) received Royal Assent today. It allows the UK to secure its own Private International Law (PIL) agreements now the UK has left the EU.
- PIL agreements cover aspects of civil, family and commercial law, with a real and lasting impacts on people's lives. PIL agreements could mean, for example
 - child maintenance obligations imposed in one country can be recognised and enforced in another
 - UK citizens can have confidence that if they travel, buy goods or have an accident abroad there is a way to resolve any legal disputes that may arise.
 - businesses can feel confident entering into cross-border transactions, knowing that in the event of a dispute, there is a clear framework of rules for resolving it
 - divorces can be recognised in other countries
 - children abducted by one of their parents can be returned to their home country, and
 - businesses can feel confident entering into cross-border transactions, knowing that in the event of a dispute, there is a clear framework of rules for resolving it.
- Beyond underpinning future deals, the Bill simplifies the implementation of three existing Hague Conventions at the end of the Transition Period:
 - 1996 Hague Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children: Helps resolve issues around residence and contact with children where parents live in different countries
 - 2005 Hague Convention on Choice of Court Agreements: Offers legal certainty in some cross-border contractual disputes by deciding which court should hear a case and enabling the decision to be recognised and enforced in another country
 - 2007 Hague Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and Other Forms of Family Maintenance: Guarantees international recovery of child support and other forms of family maintenance across borders.
- A public consultation on a 10-year strategy for Private International Law will be published shortly.

GAD's role in pensions consultation

News story

GAD has worked with the Northern Ireland Department of Justice by developing its response to the McCloud ruling, and provided wider pensions consultancy advice.



The Government Actuary's Department (GAD) has worked with Northern Ireland's Department of Justice (DoJ) on a consultation following a legal ruling.

Courts and consultation

The consultation, published on 14 October 2020, was on proposals to remove age discrimination from the Northern Ireland Judicial Pension Scheme.

In the [McCloud / Sargeant ruling](#), the Court of Appeal found transitional protections given to older members in the pension scheme directly discriminated against the scheme's younger members. In response, the DoJ issued a consultation on how such discrimination would be addressed.

The consultation, '[Northern Ireland Judicial Pensions: Proposed response to McCloud](#)', set out how the discrimination identified by the McCloud / Sargeant case will be removed. GAD provided input to this by estimating the potential cost of the proposed remedy.

Remedy impact

As part of this project, pensions experts in GAD prepared some detailed analysis to estimate the cost of the remedy. They also considered the impact on the cost cap mechanism, the 2020 valuation, the scheme's accounts and the scheme's factors.

GAD Actuary Ben Scutt, who advises the DoJ, said: "We have worked closely with colleagues at the Department of Justice to develop their response to the

McCloud ruling, providing actuarial costings and wider pensions consultancy advice.”

Consultation timeline

The consultation, which was open for 8 weeks, closed on 9 December 2020 and the results are due later in 2021.

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[JNCC Interim CEO appointed](#)

News story

Gemma Harper has been appointed as the Interim Chief Executive of JNCC following an open competition.



Gemma Harper has been appointed as the Interim Chief Executive of JNCC following an open competition. Currently Deputy Director for Marine Policy in core Defra, Gemma will take up her new role in March 2021 once Marcus Yeo steps down.

Earlier in 2020, Gemma co-led the Food Vulnerability Directorate for several months as part of Defra’s coronavirus response. Gemma is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, and external advisor to both the European Centre for the Environment and Human Health (ECEHH) and the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement partnership (CAPE).

A social scientist by training, Gemma spent eight years in criminal justice research at the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice prior to joining Defra in 2010. From 2010 to 2017, Gemma was Defra’s Chief Social Scientist. She has been awarded the Defra Leadership Award twice and co-led the Food Vulnerability Directorate to win a Defra Team Award and to be shortlisted in the current Civil Service Awards. Gemma is a University of Cambridge Centre

for Science and Policy Fellow and a graduate of the Civil Service Senior Leaders Scheme.

On hearing of her appointment, Gemma said:

I am delighted to be appointed as JNCC's Interim Chief Executive. It is a brilliant time to be joining JNCC given the unparalleled opportunities in 2021 to take action globally and within the UK to tackle biodiversity loss and the climate crisis. Evidence is in my DNA and I am delighted to be able to lead this world-leading science-based organisation. I bring my love of nature and passion for inclusion to JNCC. I am really looking forward to taking up this exciting role.

Permanent Secretary Tamara Finkelstein said:

Congratulations to Gemma on her appointment as JNCC's Interim CEO. Gemma has not only done outstanding work as Defra's Deputy Director of Marine Policy. She has also done a huge amount to promote equality, diversity and inclusion as Defra's Deputy Race Champion, as well as founding and co-chairing the Civil Service Network for Nature. I'd like to thank her for all her hard work and wish her all the best at JNCC on behalf of everyone here in Defra.

Director General for Environment Rural and Marine, David Hill said:

I'm delighted that Gemma will be taking up this important role at such a pivotal time, when the JNCC's work is critical to our delivery of the ambitions in the 25 Year Environment Plan and the Government's environmental aspirations at home and internationally. I'm also hugely grateful to Marcus Yeo for his service as Chief Executive and his massive contribution to the work of Defra Group.

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