



Consumer Panel Briefing – Open data

What is the issue?

Survey data shows that people find it hard to compare legal services providers, while much of the information consumers need to compare quality is held in different places – for example, the Legal Ombudsman has complaints data, the regulators hold information on who is regulated, while individual websites may hold information such as reviews or prices.

Opening up data is an essential step in providing consumers with the information they need so they can more easily compare providers – the Panel has pursued this since 2011. We want regulatory and complaints data to be made freely available in a reusable format so that intermediaries are able to develop services to help consumers make informed choices.

What is the Consumer Panel’s view?

Our work in this area supports Open Data and consumer empowerment strategies within government. These strategies highlight that providing consumers with the right information enables them effectively to stimulate competition and growth. We have recommended:

- That regulators recognise the economic and social value of data
- That organisations begin by publishing data they already hold
- That data is made freely available to all who wish to use it, in a reusable format

The Panel has set out the sorts of regulatory and non-regulatory data that would be useful for consumers. This includes contact details, practice areas, accreditations or other marks of specialisation, aspects of service provision that some consumers would value (e.g. gender or particular languages spoken), and complaints and disciplinary information.

We are also interested in exploring data relating to the performance of providers which may be collected by justice agencies operating outside the framework of the Legal Services Act. Examples here may include the Legal Aid Agency and Land Registry.

If the varied information held by a wide range of agencies was made available, this could really help consumers to choose the best provider for their needs and circumstances.

What is the Consumer Panel doing about it?

The Panel's work on this issue started with a report on comparison websites published in February 2012. The Legal Services Board accepted our recommendation that the regulators should open up their professional registers. However, progress was initially slow.

In March 2014 the Panel jointly hosted a roundtable with the LSB, where the regulators committed to opening up their data. Throughout 2014 the Panel Chair and the LSB Chief Executive communicated regularly with the regulators and others as part of this initiative, encouraging them to set out their plans and timescales. All of the regulators have now published a basic dataset in a reusable format except ILEX Professional Standards, who have set out a clear action plan and expect to have the data live by July 2015. In addition, the Legal Ombudsman are now publishing complaints information in a reusable format, and the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal are publishing information on sanctions.

This is good platform to build on but there is still more to do. Only very basic regulatory data has been published to date, so the LSB may shortly ask us to investigate what other data regulators hold, or could reasonably collect, which would help inform consumer choice (this is subject to the LSB's consultation on their draft strategy and business plan).

For more information:

[Consumer Panel, Comparison websites, February 2012](#)

[Consumer Panel, Letter to regulators on open data, April 2014](#)

About the Legal Services Consumer Panel

The Legal Services Consumer Panel is a central feature of a regulatory framework in England and Wales which is designed to transform the legal services market around the needs of its users. Created by the Legal Services Act 2007 we are an independent arm of the Legal Services Board. As a permanent, discrete champion for consumers we have an essential responsibility to ensure that regulators are able to consider and act on the user perspective.

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