



Consumer Panel Briefing – Online self-help tools

What is the issue?

The Panel's starting point is that DIY law is a growing reality and we wanted to find out more about the experiences of people who handle legal problems alone. We chose divorce as the case study area for this project because online divorce services are well established in the market, there is a wealth of official data on wider trends in divorce in which to contextualise findings, and legal needs survey data provides a rich picture of how people use legal services for divorce. By using divorce as case study, and a research method to control for outcome bias, the research provides a picture of these issues from the consumer perspective.

What new information did this research provide?

Working in partnership with the Legal Services Board, we commissioned BDRC Continental to carry out two separate, but linked, research approaches. The first used a longitudinal survey methodology called 'Tracktion'. This allowed engagement with consumers as they were actually experiencing service delivery, rather than waiting until the end. The second approach comprised a traditional post-event survey to provide an additional perspective of how it was for the petitioner (the person who applies for divorce) at the end of the process.

The research provided a picture of the experiences of consumers who petitioned for a divorce, based on four groups:

- 1) Petitioners who had completed a divorce using an online service
- 2) Petitioners who had completed a divorce using a face to face service
- 3) Petitioners who were starting the divorce process using an online service
- 4) Petitioners who were starting the divorce process using a face to face service

While sample sizes were small, and the amicability of the divorce is likely to have been a key influence on factors such as speed and cost, the research allowed some comparisons between the different groups in terms of their experience of the service.

We found:

- No fundamental issues with the service delivery provided by either online or face to face providers; in fact, there were good levels of satisfaction across all providers
- There appears to be a high degree of self-selection with consumers making rational choices about choosing the online route. For example, people consciously make the online choice thinking it's the best option for them and most online divorces are amicable, follow a period of separation and are less likely to involve mediation

- Cost savings is the primary reason for choosing online providers, whereas reputation is the key factor behind using face to face providers
- Online applicants went through the process faster than those seeking face-to-face advice – on average 83% of online petitioners received their decree nisi within eight weeks compared to 65% of face-to-face divorces. These users also reported that things progressed more quickly than they had initially expected
- Users felt the online process was easier than they had anticipated. Also, online users reported ‘lower effort’ scores than did users of face to face providers. And over 50% of online users would recommend the process to a friend or family member compared with 38% using face to face services
- In terms of selecting a provider, 72% of online petitioners used the internet whereas those using a face to face provider were more likely to rely upon advice or recommendations from friends or family (44%)
- Online divorces, perhaps because they are likely to be more straightforward, were cheaper and more likely to be quoted on a fixed fee basis

What next?

The report findings will help the LSCP define a consumer agenda and inform the debate on the benefits and risks of technology in legal services.

For more information:

[BDRC Continental, Comparing methods of service delivery: a case study on divorce, March 2015](#)

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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Legal Services Board
Victoria House
Southampton Row
London WC1B 4AD

T 020 7271 0076

www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk