



# Consumers feedback on quality indicators in legal services

20 July 2020

# Introduction and key findings

## Background, sample and method

The Legal Services Consumer Panel (LSCP) commissioned YouGov Qualitative to explore consumers understanding and use of quality indicators in the legal services sector. The research considered quality of service and quality of advice. YouGov conducted three 90-minute online focus groups on 25th and 26th March 2020 with consumers that either had or had not shopped around for legal services. Respondents were sourced from the YouGov panel. The full specification of the groups is outlined below.

Shopped around	Not shopped around
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16 x respondents</li> <li>All used legal services in the last 12 months</li> <li>Mix of services used (inc. probate, power of attorney, will writing, family matters, accident or injury, housing, landlord or tenant problems, debt, advice about benefits, employment disputes, no win no fee)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All shopped around for provider</li> <li>Mix of age, gender, location</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9 x respondents</li> <li>All used legal services in the last 12 months</li> <li>Mix of services used (inc. probate, power of attorney, will writing, family matters, conveyancing, employment disputes, immigration matters, any offence or criminal charges)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not shopped around for provider</li> <li>Mix of age, gender, location</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

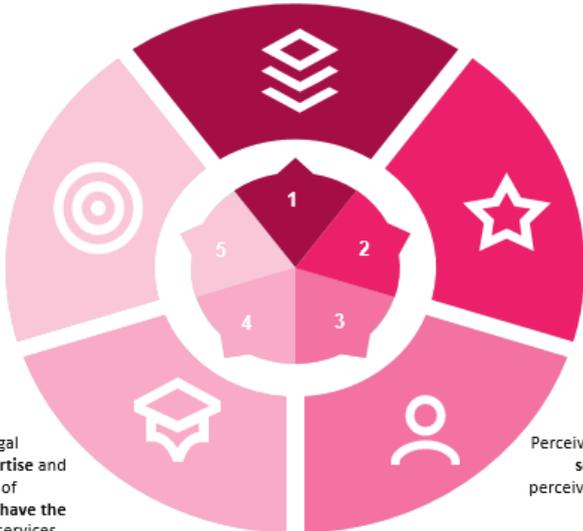
## Key findings summary

The research suggests that consumers lack the legal knowledge required to assess legal service providers effectively and as a result, may feel unconfident when faced with this task. Often, consumers rely on quality 'markers' as a proxy for quality of service and advice, rather than more concrete measures. There is no objective source on quality available at present to help consumers confidently make their selection, but there is appetite for access to impartial information in future.

With legal services so infrequently used, finding a high-quality provider can be a challenge for consumers. They do not have specialist legal knowledge, and may feel unconfident when faced with the task of seeking out a provider.

Consumers lack a single objective information source on quality. Few refer to customer testimonials, ratings or reviews to compare providers, relying more heavily on word of mouth recommendation. Many expressed the desire for more impartial information on staff experience, as well as the complaints procedure and regulation to aid the selection process.

Ease of access is key to the perception of legal service quality. Specialist knowledge / expertise and length of service are also seen as indicators of quality advice. However, consumers do not have the tools to assess the professionalism of legal services providers.



Without specialist legal knowledge, many are relying on quality 'markers' to assess quality upfront, rather than more concrete measures such as success rates and customer reviews. A single objective information source is not currently available.

Perceived customer service is often a proxy for legal service quality, with subjective factors such as perceived professionalism and empathy being linked to quality of legal service. Consumers are not equipped with the tools to assess the professionalism of legal services providers.

## The Current Experience

### *Assessing the quality of a legal service is challenging for consumers*

Seeking out a legal services provider is a rare and infrequent activity for most consumers. While some have used legal services in the past, many have not, and so most have limited experience of the process. Even those that have used a legal services provider in the past may struggle to identify a specialist if their legal issue is different from before.

Consumers lack the knowledge required to assess legal service providers effectively, and as a result, many do not feel confident when faced with this task. Most agree that time and effort is required in the early stages, especially if they have limited options (for example, if they are reliant on free services only), and so many are conducting research. Research – including web searches, word of mouth recommendations, telephone consultations – helps them create a shortlist of options during the selection process.

Without detailed legal knowledge available, when searching for providers consumers often rely on other factors such as recommendation, price, provider credentials, website content and staff interaction. Some talk of the importance of ‘gut feel’ when selecting a provider and speaking to staff can shape their views on customer service and set their expectation for the quality of service they may receive. Often their experience of customer service at this stage is used as a proxy for quality of service, regardless of the actual quality of legal advice offered.

Consumers’ comments from the research included:

*“I couldn't afford my own solicitor, so I did some research on free legal advice”  
(not shopped around)*

*“The way they came across on the phone said a lot, one or two I spoke to didn't seem to have the time and patience so I gave them a wide berth... others who were willing to spend time and listen made me feel reassured” (shopped around)*

### *Many rely on quality 'markers' to help them assess service quality*

When seeking out legal providers, many consumers are using ‘quality markers’ to help them assess service quality upfront. As they lack the legal knowledge to assess providers effectively, quality ‘markers’ are used as a proxy for service quality. Quality markers are subjective, based on individuals’ perceptions, and include factors such as ‘professional-looking’ websites and one-on-one conversations with empathetic staff. These are used in lieu of more concrete quality information. Key quality markers identified include:

- **Professional website:** a provider with a well maintained, visually appealing website is expected to provide a better-quality service than a provider with an unprofessional-looking website; website visuals also influence perceptions on quality;
- **Provider credentials:** information about specialism / experience is welcomed and valued, experience is seen as indicative of service quality;
- **Empathetic and engaged staff:** especially for those facing sensitive legal issues, empathetic staff are important, as are staff that are interested and engaged with the service user's issue; perceived customer service is often a proxy for service quality.

While consumers may rely on quality markers to help them judge quality, all agree that service quality is very hard to assess without experiencing it directly. Regardless of any research consumers undertake, it is only when they are working with a provider that they can truly assess service quality through the professionalism and expertise demonstrated and the communication received. Consumers expressed a desire for more information about service quality at the research and selection stages (e.g. provider credentials, staff curriculum vitae, customer testimonials) to help consumers without specialist legal knowledge to make decisions more confidently.

Consumers' comments from the research included:

*“A well-maintained website suggests professionalism and attention to detail which is part of service quality” (not shopped around)*

*“It is not easy to tell if the service is going to be good but if one has problems with initial contact, for example, that suggests that service may be poor” (not shopped around)*

#### *Several service elements are at the core of quality service perceptions*

When assessing the quality of their own provider, many consumers talk about professionalism, empathy and accessibility as central to their perception of quality. These elements are currently perceived as strong 'quality indicators' – in lieu of more concrete service quality information – that shape their views and experiences:

- **Professionalism** – characterised by knowledge and experience – is perceived as a key part of service quality at present. Customer service feeds into perceptions of professionalism with timeliness, efficiency and delivery of relevant information all considered to be key. Professionalism also extends to support staff, so a well-briefed team is important. However, it should be noted that consumers do not have the legal knowledge to assess how competent their provider is nor how up to date their legal knowledge is. A consumer that shopped around said during the research that *“technical knowledge is assumed for the firms I approached for business”*.
- **Empathy** is key in this context, especially for those with sensitive and emotive issues, e.g. divorce or domestic violence. Empathy – linked to basic customer service – involves sensitive communication, being listened to and communicating a genuine desire to help.
- **Accessibility** – in terms of location and communications channels – also feeds into current perceptions of service quality. Proximity is important to many as it means that they can 'drop in' if needed and attend scheduled meetings: convenience is important. The ability to make appointments via a range of channels – in person, via the telephone and via email – is key, as is having access to online tools to make appointments and share information.

Ultimately, consumers are looking for their case to be managed efficiently and effectively, progressing in a timely manner with regular updates: the smoother the process, the more satisfied they are with the quality of the service received.

### Case study 1 – Female, 37, shopped around for a legal provider

Having suffered domestic violence she reached out to Women’s Aid for help and support, and they helped her to get pro bono legal support from a University. Over the last 3 years she has raised non-molestation orders, prohibited steps orders, child arrangement orders and divorce proceedings. She needed urgent help as she was in a ‘dire mess’. She was looking for a family law specialist that she felt comfortable with, well-priced, reassuring and empathetic: *“I felt she genuinely cared about what had happened to us and went out of her way to help us fix it.”*

#### *Experience and time in role are seen as indicators of quality of advice*

Many refer to knowledge and expertise, accuracy and time in role when assessing the quality of advice received. These elements are perceived as strong ‘quality indicators’ in lieu of more tangible information on the quality of advice given, such as proportion of cases won or independent reviewer ratings:

- **Knowledge and expertise** – are closely linked and seen to correlate with quality of advice. Consumers rely on claimed specialist knowledge and experience at present, when assessing the quality of advice from a provider. However, consumers are not equipped with the legal knowledge to assess the knowledge and expertise of their provider, and there is little information available to guide them on this.
- **Accuracy** – for many, this is tied to perceptions of quality advice and well-written documents, free from grammatical or factual errors are regarded as key. It is important to note that the accuracy of legal content is not something that consumers feel they can assess themselves as they are not legal experts. A consumer that shopped around shared during the research that providers *“are claiming their advice is top notch, that may or may not be accurate”*.
- **Longevity** – time in the industry is currently seen as a good indicator by many. Senior staff are expected to have built up experience over the course of their careers and are expected to offer quality legal advice as a result. Consumers do not question whether legal professionals that qualified a long time ago have the same knowledge as those who have qualified more recently and so may be more familiar with recent legal thinking.

For consumers, the legal system is seen as complex and challenging – they are not legal experts and they often lack confidence in this area. Consumers are reliant on the information given to them by their providers and assume that this will be correct. Whilst knowledge, experience and longevity are currently used as quality indicators, they do not help consumers assess the technical quality of advice provided.

### **Case study 2 – Female, 31, not shopped around for a legal provider**

She wanted to pursue an unfair dismissal claim, but did not know where to go for advice and support. After doing some research on free legal services she realised her Trade Union offered free legal services for employment disputes, and so went to them and they assigned her a provider. For her, cost, knowledge and expertise were crucial. She wanted to be sure that her provider would be able to support her with her claim: ***“I did some digging around their website to see if they had any information about similar cases (e.g. likelihood of success).”***

#### *Quality of service and / or advice is not always linked to outcome*

Those consumers who reported getting the desired outcome, on time and on budget, were positive about the service they received. A minority who received a positive outcome felt the slow service they received undermined their perception of quality delivered. For the small number of consumers that did not get a positive outcome they said this was largely due to the complexity of the case rather than the quality of service received: the advice itself was correct. Perceptions of quality of service and advice are not always dependent on outcome.

## **Gaps in quality of service, advice and information**

#### *More information about legal professionals is required*

Most consumers gather information on providers during the research process via Internet searches, provider websites and conversations with staff (to build up a picture of their knowledge, experience, and specialism) and friends and family (seeking word of mouth recommendations). However, consumers lack a single objective source of information on quality. Few refer to reviews and testimonials to compare providers, relying more heavily on word of mouth recommendation.

Many consumers expressed the desire for more information on staff experience including: their time in service, time with the firm, key areas of expertise and curriculum vitae (for individuals) to help them assess service quality upfront. More extensive information on Partners was desirable for some on more complicated legal issues where a more experienced professional is required.

Consumers’ comments from the research included:

***“Reviews would have been good as well as information on their Partners for more complicated situations” (shopped around)***

***“More information about the solicitor and years of experience on the company website” (shopped around)***

### *Mixed awareness of regulatory information and the complaints process*

Awareness of regulatory information is mixed. A small number of consumers recall receiving regulatory information from their provider in letters, service level agreements or during a face-to-face meeting. Others recall receiving regulatory content but cannot recall the specifics. Many assume that their provider is regulated. Providers have the opportunity to highlight regulatory information more at key touch points.

Consumers' comments from the research included:

***“From memory I checked if the practice and solicitor were regulated and then in the first meeting, she told us which UK regulations she worked under” (shopped around)***

***“Yes, regulation and success rate... regulation assumed” (shopped around)***

While consumers can recall the complaints process information more strongly than regulatory information, there are still some gaps that are reported. For those that received details of the complaints process in their contract, leaflet, other paperwork or discussed it face-to-face, this information was welcomed, albeit few say they reviewed it in detail.

Other consumers have limited recall of the complaints process: some say they did not (or did not recall) receiving any information, or that they knew they had the right to complain but did not know where they had learned this.

Very few consumers pursued the complaints process, and for most, this was something they would do in extreme circumstances only. This suggests a need to promote the complaints process more actively.

Consumers' comments from the research included:

***“Make sure the complaints and regulation information is routinely given and actually brought to the customers attention rather than being hidden” (shopped around)***

***“We complained but got absolutely nowhere... about 2 weeks after our written complaint we had a written apology which we felt was just platitude” (not shopped around)***

### *Customer reviews are key, success rates and independent ratings are underused*

While some do take customer reviews into consideration when searching for a provider, success rates and independent ratings are rarely used. Consumers are wary of online reviews, preferring word-of-mouth recommendations as more candid or credible. There is clear scope to make more use of customer reviews. Consumers appear to consider that reviews on generic independent comparison websites are not appropriate for legal services providers and would prefer a specialist independent website, where they could find impartial information on such factors as success rate.

Consumers' comments from the research included:

***“Yes, regulation and success rate... success rate didn't check” (shopped around)***

## Final thoughts

### *More accessible, quality information could help in future*

There is scope for more information to be made available to consumers to help them assess quality upfront. Consumers often rely on quality 'markers' as they do not possess the legal knowledge required to assess providers effectively. Giving consumers access to impartial information – on independent websites – would allow them to compare providers, aiding the selection process. Potential information to include:

- **Provider staff credentials:** information including their time in service, time with the firm, areas of expertise and curriculum vitae;
- **Customer testimonials and reviews:** given the importance of trust and impartiality, customer testimonials and reviews on an independent site;
- **Ratings and success rates:** on independent and provider websites;
- **Regulatory information:** visible and accessible at key points;
- **Complaints process:** complaints process details including the role of regulators.

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