

From the Chief Executive



Mr Matthew Hill
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Sent by email only to: matthew.hill@legalservicesboard.org.uk

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Dear Matthew

Re: Legal Choices

I am writing in relation to the future development and management of the Legal Choices website. We have real confidence in the website and its potential to help individual consumers and as a sector wide contribution to public legal education. But our experience to date suggests that the current co-ownership model is neither effective nor efficient.

As you are aware, we run the website on behalf of the joint regulators and manage the £750,000 three-year development plan that was jointly agreed to meet the CMA recommendation on Legal Choices.

Since the development programme started in 2017/18, the regulators have worked together to deliver a new look website and three new tried and tested products into beta. One further product is held up because of delays with most regulators signing the data processing agreement that supports the product. We are now in the marketing phase of the programme.

The withdrawal of BSB in July 2019 caused significant delays in progressing the project as the other regulators considered their position. There is no agreement as yet on filling the 2019/20 £52,000 funding gap left by the BSB withdrawal, despite discussion over the last eight months. This is essential if we are to deliver to the commitments the joint regulators have made. I should add that we have been clear that we will contribute our portion of the shortfall.

The current development programme completes at the end of October 2020. In our view, and I hope this is a shared aspiration, we must continue to develop Legal Choices to meet the needs of the public and indeed the expectations of the CMA and others, such as the Solicitor General's public legal education panel. That means updating and building on products, the creation of new products and ongoing marketing. To that end, the regulators have been looking at a future funding and development model since June 2019 without reaching a decision on what should happen in a few months time.

We are continuing to press for progress on the post BSB withdrawal funding shortfall, the final product, the future funding and development of the website.

However, we are increasingly concerned that the completion of the development programme and the future of the Legal Choices website are now at risk. The fundamental issue, in the view of our Board, is the collective ownership model is no longer appropriate for managing a sector wide, high-profile digital property, which needs to be both responsive and have a clear forward programme of work.

We believe that Legal Choices needs to be run by an organisation that has sector wide reach and the powers to require the co-operation and funding needed to ensure its future, in a way that we, as one of the front-line regulators, do not.

Our preferred model is for the Legal Services Board to take ownership of Legal Choices, as the oversight regulator for the sector. That would resolve issues about the purpose, sustainability, future development, decision making and funding of the website, securing a service for the public that is, we believe, genuinely valuable and well regarded in the sector.

I would be happy to meet to discuss the future of Legal Choices.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Philip', with a stylized, cursive script.

Paul Philip
Chief Executive
Solicitors Regulation Authority