# Quality indicators in legal services

A research report for the Legal Services Board

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Bringing the voices of communities into the heart of organisations



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# 1. Executive Summary

#### **Background and objectives**

- 1. Existing evidence suggests that consumers need more and better information from legal services providers to help them compare the quality of providers and choose one to meet their legal need. The Legal Services Board (LSB) is currently working with the legal services regulators to improve information on quality of providers to support consumers in making informed choices.
- 2. The LSB commissioned Community Research to conduct qualitative research to inform this work. The purpose of the research was to understand what consumers look for in terms of quality; the information they currently use to gauge quality; and their response to initiatives to improve the transparency of quality of service.
- 3. The research involved 69 consumers in an online discussion forum; 19 of these also took part in online focus groups. The online forum lasted two weeks and involved a series of in-depth discussions along with some exercises requiring participants to search for legal service providers to help in fictitious scenarios. Participants were a diverse mix of adults from across England and Wales.

#### **Choosing legal services providers**

- 4. Participants felt choosing a provider in legal services was harder than in other sectors. This is due to a combination of factors: there is a lot at stake; they believe that legal costs will be high; they have limited knowledge and experience of what is needed; and they found there was limited readily available information and little consistency in information between providers.
- 5. Participants felt that in 'real life' their decision-making process would be affected by the stress, anxiety and worry caused by their situation, exacerbated by the difficulties of finding a provider. As a result, most felt that they would be more likely to make a rushed decision; to be swayed by more emotional factors (such as rapport with an advisor); and more likely to fall back on familiar and known providers and recommendations from friends and family.
- 6. In research exercises, participants found it easy to come up with a long list of providers, but more difficult to gauge and compare the quality of their service. This was partly because they lacked the knowledge of what they needed or how legal services worked, and partly because the information was hard to find, inconsistent or non-existent.
- 7. Participants did not talk explicitly about 'quality', but when pushed to consider what 'good' looks like in legal services, they focused on:
  - **Customer experience:** This was a combination of accessibility, responsiveness, timeliness, and often more importantly good 'rapport' with



- an advisor. They tended to rely on personal recommendations, reviews, and 'gut feel' from conversations with providers to judge customer experience.
- **Outcomes:** Participants wanted a provider who would get a good result for them. However, they struggled to know how to judge this. Most said that they would rely on customer reviews to gauge whether a firm had achieved good outcomes for others.
- Technical skills and knowledge: Participants found it hard to know whether
  a provider would have good technical skills. Some assumed this as a given, but
  others wanted more on individuals' qualifications and experience, or relied on
  'gut-feel' from conversations with providers.
- **Values:** Several participants sought clues as to the values of a provider, such as honesty, trustworthiness, reliability, and professionalism. Again, they relied on 'gut feel' to judge this, or on personal recommendations to assure them that a provider is reliable and trustworthy.
- Value-for-money: Few said they would choose on the basis of cost alone.
   Instead, they weighed up costs with the components of 'quality' listed above.
   Given the difficulty they had in judging 'quality', participants found it hard to gauge value-for-money from online sources. They often relied on reviews for clues about whether past clients thought the service they received was worth what they paid.

#### Response to quality indicators

- 8. Participants considered eight different types of quality indicator. Most participants found all the quality indicators helpful to some extent, particularly overall customer ratings, customer reviews and ratings on specific aspects of customer experience.
- 9. Participants valued **overall customer** (or 'star') **ratings** as an 'at a glance' overview of the experiences of real clients. Many said that though helpful they used ratings with a 'pinch of salt' as they felt ratings were not always genuine. A minority dismissed ratings as too subjective and untrustworthy.
- 10. Participants thought **customer reviews** were key to understanding more about what a provider is like to work with, whether they offer value for money, and whether they could achieve good outcomes. As with ratings, most consumers were wise to the potential pitfalls of relying on reviews. Savvy participants listed a number of checks they used to weed out 'fakes', but some avoided reviews for this reason.
- 11. Many participants valued **ratings on specific aspects of customer experience** such as likelihood to recommend, timeliness, and value-for-money. As with overall ratings and reviews, many liked that they reflect 'real' experience, but some doubted their veracity.
- 12. Few participants referenced objective information on **success rates** in their search for legal providers, and they relied on reviews instead to gauge success rates. Objective measures of success appealed in theory to participants, though they



- questioned how a simplified measure would work, given the variables and complexities that exist within legal services.
- 13. **Information about the firm and solicitors** had value to participants, particularly with regards to year established (to judge stability and to an extent competence), specialisms and location.
- 14. Participants said **complaints data** could help them judge the 'trustworthiness' of a firm. However, many felt that complaints data could be problematic in that it relies on context, could be manipulated, or could include spurious complaints.
- 15. **Quality marks and accreditations** helped to reassure participants about legitimacy and competence but were less helpful than other indicators. Few were familiar with quality marks in this sector or what they meant, and there was also a concern that a quality mark could be bought instead of earned.
- 16. Information about individual solicitors ranked considerably lower than other indicators in terms of helpfulness, and over a third of participants ranked it last. Though personality / rapport was a critical factor in choosing a legal advisor, participants preferred to judge this through a conversation with the advisor than from solicitor biographies on websites.

#### Response to options for improving transparency of quality information

- 17. Most participants used **external review sites and digital comparison tools** when making decisions about products and services in other sectors. These tools conferred some legitimacy and provide condensed comparable information in one place. However, participants believed they were not always comprehensive, that providers could pay to be featured, and that they were open to abuse.
- 18. There was low awareness and use of digital comparison and review tools that were **specific to legal services**. Most welcomed the idea of a specific tool to bring the relevant information together in a single place. However, some questioned how comparison and review tools could work in a market where price is not necessarily the deciding factor, performance is harder to describe and measure, and comparison is hard, given the variables and complexities.
- 19. Participants were enthusiastic about the idea of a **single online register** of regulated legal services providers. They felt it would offer an impartial, trustworthy 'whole market view', addressing challenges in comparing and choosing providers. Participants stressed the importance of the register becoming well-known, both to drive trust, and to help it become a familiar way of choosing legal services.
- 20. Participants were less inclined to trust **reviews embedded in providers' websites**. They had doubts as to whether they would be genuine and represent the full picture. Most preferred to visit an external review site to read reviews there.



# 2. Background and Objectives

There is widespread interest in making sure that consumers can easily compare and choose legal services providers to find one that is best for them when they encounter a legal issue.

In 2016, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published a Market Study<sup>1</sup>, looking at the availability of information to help consumers compare and choose providers in the legal sector. The CMA called for regulators to drive change in their professions to ensure greater transparency on price and quality to help consumers make informed choices. In response, legal services regulators introduced measures between December 2018 and July 2019 to improve transparency.

In its submission to the CMA's Call For Inputs to inform its progress review<sup>2</sup>, the Legal Services Board (LSB) found that, while most providers display pricing information, there has been far less progress in the provision of information on service quality.

In December 2020, the CMA published a report<sup>3</sup> assessing changes in the legal services sector since its 2016 Market Study. Their review found some positive developments but concluded that further progress is needed. As part of its recommendations, the CMA asked the LSB to co-ordinate action by regulatory bodies to improve the provision of information on quality of legal services providers to consumers. This includes actions to identify, design and implement effective quality indicators; and measures to improve engagement with customer reviews.

There is existing research into how consumers shop around<sup>4</sup> and feedback on types of quality indicator<sup>5</sup>, which provides some context. The LSB commissioned this research to explore how quality information could be provided to help consumers to compare and select providers, and specifically, to understand:

- What 'quality' means to consumers in the context of legal services;
- The online information consumers use to make their choice of provider;
- Responses to specific types of quality indicator, including ratings, reviews, success rates, information about the firm and individuals, quality marks and accreditations, and complaints data;
- Responses to various tools and initiatives aimed at improving transparency and comparability, such as digital comparison tools, external review sites, and a single online register of regulated legal services providers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Consumers feedback on quality indicators in legal services, Legal Services Consumer Panel (July 2020)



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Legal services market study: final report, CMA (December 2016)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Submission to the <u>Competition and Markets Authority's review of the legal services market study in England and Wales</u>, LSB (September 2020)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Review of the legal services market study in England and Wales, CMA (December 2020)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> <u>Tracker Survey: How consumers are choosing legal services</u>, Legal Services Consumer Panel (August 2020)

# 3. Methodology

This research took place in Autumn 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. The research therefore adopted a remote methodology to reduce risks of transmission to participants and researchers and to enable a diverse group of people to take part.

In outline, the research adopted a qualitative approach and comprised:

- An online discussion forum lasting two weeks comprising 'bulletin board' style written discussions and some polling. This included various online research exercises;
- Five online 90-minute focus groups with 3-5 participants.

In total 69 adults in England and Wales took part in the online discussion forum, and 19 of these also participated in online focus groups held via Zoom. Participants were recruited via an online panel. All participants agreed that they shopped around for products and services. Participants were recruited as a spread of consumers who were diverse in terms of:

- Gender;
- Age group;
- Region;
- Social grade;
- Legal services experienced in last 5 years;
- Ethnic background; and
- Approach to shopping around/ decision-making.

People who were potentially vulnerable in this market were also included, such as those for whom English was not their first language, disabled people (including people with a mental health difficulty, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder), people with lower literacy and people with low legal confidence<sup>6</sup>.

The technical appendices document holds fuller detail on the approach, sample (along with definitions), and materials used in the research.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Legal confidence was defined using <u>Pleasence & Balmer's General Legal Confidence scale</u>, p.6. The scale is calculated based on respondents' responses to questions on how confident they would be that they could achieve an outcome that is fair in a number of different scenarios.



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# 4. Main findings

## 4.1 Searching for legal services providers

#### **Summary**

Participants felt <u>choosing a provider in legal services was harder than in other sectors</u>. This is due to a combination of factors: there is a lot at stake, they believe that legal costs will be high, and they have limited knowledge and experience of what is needed.

After trying to look for legal services providers to advise in a fictional scenario, participants realised that this task became more difficult because there was limited information readily available and little consistency in information between providers.

Participants felt that - <u>in reality</u> - their decision-making process was likely to be affected by the stress, anxiety and worry caused by the situation (relationship breakdown, house-move, estate-planning, redundancy) and exacerbated by the difficulties of finding a provider.

As a result, most felt that in real life, they would be more likely to make a rushed decision; to be swayed by more emotional factors (such as rapport with an advisor); and more likely to fall back on familiar and known providers and recommendations from friends and family.

In research exercises, participants had to find a legal services provider to meet their needs in a fictional situation. Their <u>customer journey in the research</u> was relatively considered and logical. It must be recognised that this process does not necessarily reflect 'real life' (given that 70% of people do not shop around for legal services, and the likely impact of stress on decision-making). However, it enabled exploration of how participants used the information currently available to help consumers make decisions; to understand what they looked for and valued; and what else would help them decide between providers.

Participants started with a relatively consistent set of criteria in mind in their search for a legal service provider in the research exercise. These included specialism, being 'good to work with', the right price, and having the correct skills and experience. For some, a local firm was important too.

Most used a rough process of scoping the market through an initial online search, followed by a filtering process, and then a final selection. Most found it easy to come up with a long list of potential providers but were overwhelmed by the number of options returned by the search. From there, they found it hard to decide between the options to find the one that would be best for them.

Specifically, participants found it exceptionally hard to gauge and compare the quality of the providers they came across. This was partly because they lacked



the knowledge of what they needed or how legal services worked, and partly because the information was hard to find, inconsistent or non-existent.

Participants did not talk explicitly about 'quality', but when pushed to consider what 'good' looks like in legal services, they focused on:

- <u>Customer experience</u> was a combination of technical aspects of client care (accessibility, responsiveness, timeliness) and – often more importantly – good 'rapport' with an advisor.
- Outcomes: Participants wanted a provider who would get a good result for them. However, they struggled to know how to judge this.
- <u>Technical skills and knowledge</u>: Echoing existing research, participants found it hard to know whether a provider would have good technical skills. Some assumed this as a given, but others wanted more on individuals' qualifications and experience.
- <u>Values</u>: several participants talked about information that spoke to the values of a provider, such as honesty, trustworthiness, reliability and professionalism. They found this hard to judge from an internet search but again relied on 'gut feel' either from a website or phone conversation.

<u>Value-for-money</u> was important to participants and involved weighing up costs with the component of 'quality' listed above.

# 4.1.1 Context: how is legal services different from other sectors?

Most participants felt it was far harder to choose a provider in legal services than in many other sectors, such as choosing a builder or buying a holiday. The reasons given for this were as follows:

- It is a **high-stakes** decision:
  - Often 'really big, life-changing events';
  - There is often a lot to lose (property, money, family, liberty);
  - It is hard to reverse the impacts if something goes wrong.
- The context is frequently **high stress**, sensitive and emotional.
- **The high costs** involved.
- Consumers' low knowledge of:
  - The legal issues, the law, their rights;
  - The process and what to expect;
  - The market;
  - Consumer protections in place (such as regulators, accreditations and guarantees).
- Consumers' lack of experience of legal issues, the law and using lawyers
  - Either in the form of direct personal experience;
  - But also amongst friends and family meaning it is harder to get trusted recommendations.



As a result, most participants said the process of searching would be harder for legal services than other sectors because:

- They do not know what to look out for;
- There are more variables to compare;
- There is perceived to be **limited consistency** between firms in providing information;
- There are few obvious/ well-known and / or trusted digital comparison tools<sup>7</sup>.

A minority felt it would be relatively easy to choose a legal services provider, either because they knew people they could ask, or because they felt that legal services providers were trustworthy on the whole (compared to, for example, providers in the building trade).

Some participants also pointed out the difficulty of making the choice depends on the complexity of the legal issue in question. Choosing a provider to help with selling a property, they argued, would be more straightforward than looking for representation in a difficult custody case, for example.

# 4.1.2 Context: choosing providers in real life vs. in this research

Existing research<sup>8</sup> shows that, in reality, most people do not shop around for legal services providers. On average, only 30% of people shop around for legal services<sup>9</sup>, though the proportion who do shop around has increased progressively since 2012.

The purpose of this research was to explore the value of different types of information and tools in facilitating the comparison and selection of legal services providers. As a result, in this research we explicitly asked people to 'shop around' for legal services (even though they may not all necessarily do so in reality) to understand how different types of information helped them to gauge quality and make a choice.

We know from behavioural science that people often behave differently, in real life situations, from the answers they give when asked what they would do or should do, hypothetically. In research, they are more likely to report a rational and logical approach to decision-making, whereas in practice, emotional and subconscious factors might have a stronger influence. We therefore sought to explore the impact of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> There are also some differences: consumers of legal advice on immigration matters and conveyancing are more likely to shop around, and younger consumers are more likely than older consumers to shop around.



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> These are online tools that enable consumers to search for providers and compare the results using a number of different factors (such as location, price, and service). Examples participants used in other markets include Comparethemarket, Moneysupermarket, USwitch and GoCompare.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> <u>Legal Services Consumer Panel Tracker Survey 2020: How consumers are choosing legal services;</u> August 2020

participants' likely emotional state when looking for legal services providers and explicitly ask people to think about how their search and selection process would differ 'in real life'.

Participants started by considering how they would **feel** if faced with having to find a legal professional to advise them on a legal issue (looking at a list of issues most commonly faced by consumers). They each picked three words to describe their feelings. The word cloud in Figure 1 shows the words they chose. The larger the word, the more frequently it came up, showing that worry, stress, anxiety and confusion were the most common emotions. This was partly due to the situation they imagine themselves in, which in itself is likely to be stressful, worrying and emotional. It was also down to the challenges of choosing a legal services provider that are described above in section 4.1.1.

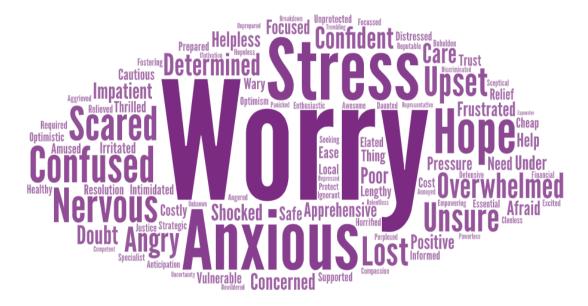


Figure 1: Word cloud showing responses to the online forum question: Imagine you had to find some legal support to help you with one of these [common legal] issues. What 3 words sum up how you would feel in that situation?

Participants mostly took a considered and methodical approach to researching legal services providers in the research. However, many felt that 'in real life' their situation and emotional state could have various potential impacts on their decision-making process when appointing a legal advisor. The differences they suggested were as follows:

- Being more likely to be in a rush to sort the situation out and appoint a provider as soon as possible;
- Being more influenced by 'human' factors such as perceived approachability, and a caring and listening attitude;
- Preferring to fall back on the familiar, i.e. people they know giving recommendations, and recognised or known firms (either through experience, having seen their offices locally, or familiarity through advertising);



Geographical proximity is also likely to become more appealing, because of
the familiarity, convenience, ability to have face-to-face contact (more 'human' and
reassuring) and because participants felt they would be able to hold them account
more easily (by walking into their offices) if things went wrong.

"[In reality] I wouldn't think, I would just go straight to the ones that I know from the top of my head... I would just want to get it over and done with and sorted." Female, 35-54, North of England, High legal confidence

"When people are stressed and they need to make a rushed decision, I think they'd want to talk to a person. So in this [research] exercise, I've said I'd Google, I'd do research, but I think in this situation people would go to CAB or one of those types of organisations and say, 'Look, I need a solicitor'. Or just contacting the first person you've thought about, like someone you heard on the radio or saw in an advert." Female, 18-24, North of England, High legal confidence

In contrast, there were some participants who said that they would react to the stressful situation by applying a structured approach to researching their options. These respondents (mostly men) said that this was their default response to difficult decisions, and for some it was a learnt response through work, i.e. to take a step back and review the options in a methodical and rational manner.

"I think I would take more time searching and I would just stick to the basics and stick to what I usually do. The mental pressure would be different, but my overall way of researching and trying to find a service tailored to my needs would be the same." Male, 25-34, South of England, High legal confidence

"My professional life kicks in there... I agree there'd be anxiety, worry and pressure, but the way I deal with all those things is to have a firm plan and that dates back to how I would have done it in work... do the research, find the right firm, agree the costs... I use a lot of the same techniques in my personal life as I learnt in my work... I try and keep more professional." Male, 55-74, Wales, Medium legal confidence

In the research exercise, most participants took a relatively logical and ordered approach to researching legal services providers in relation to the fictional scenarios they were presented with. It should be noted, however, that when faced with the reality of these decisions many consumers admitted that they may not take such a logical approach.



## 4.1.3 The customer journey: comparing providers in the research

#### Research approach

Participants considered one of four fictional scenarios<sup>10</sup> (divorce, redundancy, moving home, making a will) and were asked to find the best legal services provider to help them in that scenario. They were encouraged to replicate what they would do in real life, for example, searching online, asking friends, and asking on social media. They reported back how they went about searching and choosing legal services providers.

Participants then repeated the process but using mocked up web-pages of four fictional law firms and with a comparison list of 10 fictional firms. The mocked-up information included the various quality indicators being tested in this research.

Participants discussed the process they went through and the types of information that helped in their search and selection.

There were common themes in the criteria participants looked for when they searched for a legal services provider to advise in the fictitious scenarios. These included:

- Specialism in the legal issue in question (i.e.: divorce, redundancy, moving home, making a will);
- Assessment of being good to work with;
- The right price;
- Being local (this was important for a sizeable minority);
- **Skills and experience** 'they would know what they're doing'.

<u>Figure 2</u> below summarises the general process that participants took in the research exercise, along with the considerations they had at each stage of the process and any types of information/ indicators they used at each stage.

There are several points to bear in mind when looking at these findings.

- Firstly, there were variations in approaches between participants. Most went through a rough process of scoping the market through an initial online search; then a more focused approach of filtering by considering a few options in more detail, before making a final selection. Some opted for asking people they knew (especially those with relevant experience to their fictional scenario) for recommendations, and so had a shorter process. Younger participants appeared more likely to research online using a variety of sources.
- Secondly, as discussed above in <u>section 4.1.2</u>, the search and selection process is likely to be less neat and less rational in reality.
- Thirdly, the process can differ dependent on the type and complexity of the matter and on the consumer's experience and general approach to making such choices. This is discussed in greater detail in <a href="mailto:section4.1.8">section 4.1.8</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See Technical Appendices for the Scenarios.



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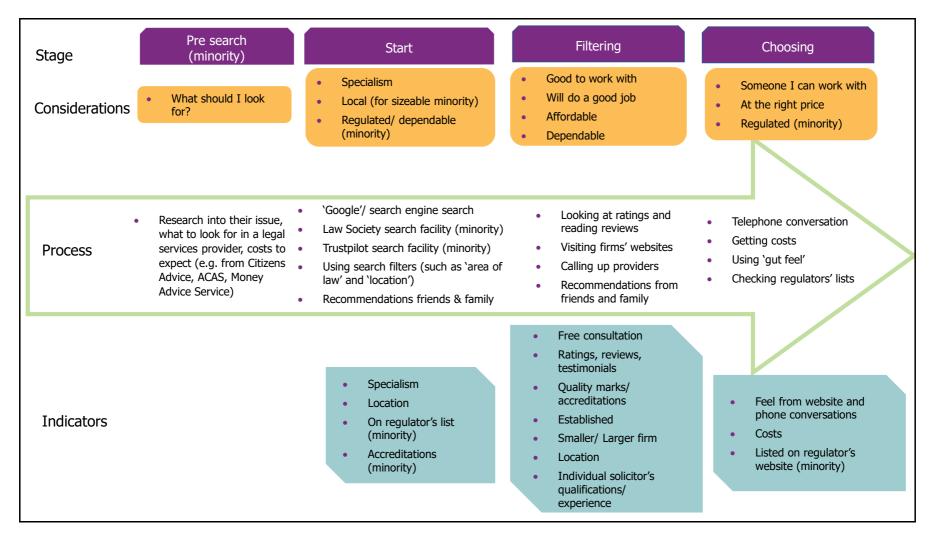


Figure 2: Participants' spontaneous approach to finding legal services providers to help in a fictitious scenario in the context of a research exercise



Most found it easy to find providers offering the services they needed at the start of the process. However, participants commented on the overwhelming amount of information that came back at the start of their search, and how hard they found it to narrow it down and choose a provider that was best for them.

"A quick Google search brought up a vast amount of solicitors dealing with divorce, in fact it was hard to know exactly if any were better/worse or quicker/cheaper." Female, 35-54, North of England, Medium legal confidence

"I found it fairly easy to find information regarding a legal provider. Did a Google search and was inundated with information and so many legal providers to choose from and then I found it difficult because there was too much information." Female, 55-74, Wales, High legal confidence

"It was easy to find plenty of solicitors on Google to help. However the confusing part was figuring out who is best. They all offer similar advice on the websites, but it is very hard to pick who would be the right one, even with reading about their company." Female, 25-34, North of England, Low legal confidence

There was also a sense that the information participants needed to assess and compare providers was not readily available:

"You would have to contact them directly for more information or prices, which I thought is a little scary if you're new to this. Plus doing it that way makes it much harder to compare lawyers." Female, 25-34, South of England, Medium legal confidence

# 4.1.4 Gauging 'quality'

Few participants specifically talked about 'quality' in the context of their search for legal services providers in the research exercise. Instead, participants spontaneously listed several factors that were important to them that imply 'quality', namely:

- Being 'good to work with' approachable, interested, responsive and friendly;
- Having experience in the relevant legal issue;
- Being 'genuine'/ established/ reputable.

Participants said that gauging quality was exceptionally hard when comparing and choosing a legal services provider. There were two main reasons for this:

- 1. They lack the knowledge, skills or confidence in how to choose legal services providers (particularly in higher stakes and more complex issues); and
- 2. The information they need to ascertain quality is hard to find, inconsistent between providers, or does not exist.

"I think that the combination of my own inexperience in the field, a potential lack of understanding of jargon being used and needing trust in their complete



professionalism and formality would make it one of the most challenging service providers I could select." Female, 18-24, South of England, Low legal confidence

Most felt that – even once a selection is made – if you are choosing a provider that has not been used before, it is still 'act of faith' or a 'leap in the dark'. Prior to having direct experience, it is not possible to judge whether they are 'good'.

"If I was to actually do this in real life I think I would always have a nagging itch that, 'Have I done this right?'... Until you've come to the end, I think you always have that doubt, 'Are you the right one?" Female, 25-34, North of England, High legal confidence

"You never truly know if you would get a good service and the solicitor chosen is competent until it's all over, so you just hope you made the right choice." Female, 35-54, North of England, Medium legal confidence

Towards the end of the research process, participants were directed to consider explicitly what 'good' looks like in legal services, and how to judge this when selecting a provider. Their criteria fell into the following categories:

- Client care/ customer experience.
- Outcomes.
- Technical skills and knowledge.
- Values.
- Value for money.

"Good' in my opinion... is customer experience... A good legal firm is one that can be trusted, one that can deliver outcomes, one that is price conscious and one that can truly say they have the best legal representatives for their price range." Female, 18-24, North of England, High legal confidence

Participants discussed what these criteria look like, how they could be identified in theory, and the tools they could use to ascertain them, and each factor is discussed in greater depth below and <u>Table 1</u> below summarises the main points.



Category	Criteria	How they try to ascertain this
Customer experience	<ul> <li>Good rapport between client and advisor</li> <li>Understanding/ caring/ sympathetic/ supportive</li> <li>Good communication skills; explains things well</li> <li>Available and accessible when you need them</li> <li>Responsive</li> <li>Manages expectations re: process and likely outcomes</li> <li>Efficient and punctual</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Word of mouth/ recommendations</li> <li>Reviews – others say they are good to work with</li> <li>Phone or face-to-face conversation</li> <li>Website 'feel'</li> <li>'Gut feel'</li> <li>Location</li> </ul>
Outcomes	<ul> <li>They have a good track record</li> <li>They sort out your issue</li> <li>They win</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Success rates</li> <li>Reviews – others say they have had good outcomes</li> </ul>
Technical skills and knowledge	<ul> <li>Specialist</li> <li>Has relevant qualifications</li> <li>Experienced in similar cases</li> <li>Accredited by professional body</li> <li>`Knows their job'</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>CV-style information</li> <li>Accreditations</li> <li>Phone or face-to-face conversation (they sound as though they know what they're talking about)</li> </ul>
Values	<ul> <li>Honest</li> <li>Trustworthy</li> <li>Reliable</li> <li>Professional</li> <li>Collaborative ('teamwork')</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Website 'feel'</li> <li>Phone or face-to-face conversation</li> <li>'Gut feel'</li> </ul>
Value for money	<ul> <li>Comparable price to others offering similar services</li> <li>Worth the money</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Pricing information</li> <li>Reviews – others say they were worth the money</li> </ul>

Table 1: What 'good' looks like in legal services providers



#### **Customer experience**

Whilst participants prioritised the technical aspects of client care (such as accessibility, responsiveness, turnaround and timeliness), for most, the more intangible quality of 'rapport' with an advisor was a key aspect of the customer experience. It was important that the chosen provider would understand and show empathy for their issue (particularly in emotional and high-stakes situations, such as divorce, employment and criminal issues). Participants also wanted to know that the legal advisor they chose would 'be on their side', would listen and would use language that was easy to understand.

"I also looked for a company that seemed reassuring and sympathetic to those of us who lack confidence and experience in this area and are not sure about the whole process. I was looking for a company that seemed able to explain every important detail to me step by step and not use too much confusing jargon. I searched for a company that had a friendly yet formal tone to their website." Female, 18-24, South of England, Low legal confidence

For most, the best way of gauging the likely customer experience is to find out from other people who have used the provider's services. This is why personal recommendations, word-of-mouth and reviews are valued.

Meeting the provider and having a conversation with them was also important to many. Participants felt that a conversation (either face-to-face or over the phone) gave them a good feel for how the provider would be to work with, whether they listened, were friendly, and 'on my side'.

Many talked about the importance of 'gut feel' in judging these factors, often via the telephone conversation, but sometimes also from the feel of a firm's website.

"For me, the phone call – actually speaking to the person – is the key thing. If I feel we have a slight bit of rapport and they're not patronising, I think that's good enough. And I think one of the reasons is that I'm not sure I have the ability or the knowledge to sift through and make a decision based on anything other than a feeling. I don't have that lawyer nous, so you do end up going on gut feeling." Female, 35-54, South of England Medium legal confidence

"Without doubt, a phone call to the solicitor and speaking to the partner or person who would carry out the work would be the most important factor in deciding which one to go with - you have to feel as though you have a personal relationship with them." Male, 55-74, Wales, Medium legal confidence

Location came up frequently as a factor that was important to participants – many participants said they would automatically search for providers in their area. This ties in with the customer experience, in the following ways:

 Reassurance – participants anticipate wanting a face-to-face relationship and a more personal touch, particularly where issues are more sensitive and emotive;



- **Accessibility** they anticipate needing face-to-face meetings, so want a firm that is easy to get to;
- **Speed and convenience** being able to drop into the office is more efficient than relying on post for getting documents signed.

In focus groups, participants were directed to consider the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on their attitudes towards the importance of a local provider and willingness to deal with providers remotely. Participants felt that they still prioritised a local provider and preferred the option of dealing with providers in-person because of the importance of establishing a good relationship with a legal services provider. Many still found comfort in the idea of being able to meet face to face, even though they had been forced online for so many other aspects of life during 2020.

#### **Outcomes**

Participants wanted to find someone who would get them a good outcome. Many talked about 'success rates', 'a good track record' and 'winning their cases' as a measure of good outcomes. However, few said they had found specific information in their internet searches to help them judge this, and few were able to describe what information they would look for.

Instead, participants said they would rely on past customers' reviews, looking for hints of a successful outcome.

A small number of participants noted that measuring outcomes and success in legal services is not always straightforward. Many factors affect which way a contentious case goes, some of which are outside of a legal advisor's control. Therefore, it was possible for a client to still have had a good experience (and recommend a provider) even if the case did not go their way, or someone might win their case, but still have a poor experience and not recommend their provider.

"A firm could have a large number of cases won, but when you read their customer reviews you might see that the process has been for example frustrating for the clients. They might have won the case eventually, but they may haven't been always approachable and it has taken the client to constantly chase them up for them to deal with your case." Female, 25-34, South of England, Medium legal confidence

As a result, outcome alone could not be used to judge 'quality' – customer experience was a more important determinant.



## Technical skills and knowledge

As found in previous research<sup>11</sup>, members of the public find it hard to assess technical quality (or quality of advice). For some, this is assumed or taken for granted – as they are part of a profession, their technical expertise is a given.

A minority wanted more than this, and wanted more information on individuals' qualifications and experience, for example, via case studies or CV-style information. A few thought they would glean some indication of technical skills and knowledge from reading reviews, rather than any objective information. Some also felt that talking to providers would give them an impression of their technical expertise, if, for example, they talked confidently about the subject, and the process.

"[I was looking for] a transparent way of working, having the confidence the provider knew what they were doing, basically. Really formed this opinion by speaking directly to several providers and having a gut feel from their response. They needed to show they had an understanding of the services I required and how they came across in terms of communication." Male, 55-74, North of England, High legal confidence

#### **Values**

A number of participants said they were looking for some inherent values in their legal advisor and firm. Some of these were personal values, such as honesty, trustworthiness, and reliability. Others were work-based values, such as professionalism and a collaborative approach.

Again, these characteristics were hard to judge from an internet search. Participants said they would rely primarily on meeting an individual or talking to them via phone to gain a 'gut feel' of a provider's honesty and trustworthiness. They also said reviews from other customers help. Some also used the 'feel' of a website to give a sense of professionalism.

"I also (probably shouldn't have) judged them on how good their website was... If it was modern, updated and clear – I was guite impressed because I felt they'd be guite organised with a case... or cared about public perception of their firm." Female, 25-34, Wales, Low legal confidence

Participants felt more confident and comfortable going on word-of-mouth and recommendations from people they know, as they acted as more dependable shortcuts to confirming reliability, honesty and trustworthiness.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Legal Services Consumer Panel: Consumers feedback on quality indicators in legal services; July 2020 20



# 4.1.5 Gauging value-for-money

Value-for-money was one of the criteria participants looked for in a 'good' legal services provider. However, only a few participants said that they found pricing information on providers' websites, and many said they did not know what to expect in terms of legal costs. Many said they were wary about costs of legal services, for the following reasons:

- They know legal services are expensive, but since these are infrequently used services, they do not know how much to expect to pay;
- They do not understand how providers calculate and make charges;
- They are concerned about hidden charges and open-ended/ spiralling costs.

For most, judging value-for-money would involve weighing up costs with the likely quality of the services (i.e. competence, relevant experience, good to work with). However, given that both cost and quality were hard to gauge on the available information, participants felt they would find it hard to judge the value-for-money offered by different providers.

"It's easy enough to find legal service providers but compared to other sectors I feel it's harder to choose. The main reason being lack of showing potential costs which I feel is one of the most important factors." Male, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence

Many said that they would look at the range of quotes and aim for a provider in the middle. They said they would be wary of the cheapest provider, as this might imply lower quality. In contrast, the high cost of legal services meant they would avoid the most expensive.

"In other cases I might just look for the cheapest but for legal services I want to make sure it will be good value for money." Female, 18-24, North of England, High legal confidence

However, there were some participants who took a different view:

- Some said they would pick the cheapest option, and that price was their top consideration.
- Some considered price less or more depending on the complexity and type of legal issue – the more complex and contentious, the more they would be willing to go with a more expensive provider.
- For more commoditised areas (e.g. conveyancing), some assumed the service would be similar, so they were more prepared to risk a cheaper option.

In terms of the types of information and indicators participants used to judge valuefor-money, many relied heavily on reviews. They used reviews both for clues about quality (to weigh up with quotes/ pricing information) and for direct comments about whether former clients thought the service was worth what they had paid.



"Choosing a legal services provider indeed requires more time and evaluation, because the fees are usually high and you want to make sure that you get the best value (in case of a legal issue, the best potential outcome) for the money you are paying them." Female, 25-34, South of England, Medium legal confidence

"Before you sign up with anyone, you can't tell by yourself if it is good value for money - I can only determine this after services received and by then it is too late, so again I'd like to hear experiences from people." Female, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence

"Often it is sensitive information you are dealing with when accessing legal services so not only does the cost of the product matter but also the wider rapport, trustworthiness, efficiency and so on." Female, 18-24, North of England, High legal confidence

Price sensitivity and concern over cost of legal services meant that many participants were drawn to offers of free legal advice (e.g. a free initial consultation) and no-winno-fee services, and these were a factor in their decision-making.

## 4.1.6 Impact of legal issue on search and selection approach

The majority of participants said they would take the same approach to researching and choosing a legal provider, regardless of their legal issue. The only criterion they would change would be the specialism they searched for.

However, some said the issue would affect what they were looking for in a provider, for example:

- In divorce and employment situations, they would seek a provider who offers softskills such as empathy and understanding;
- In conveyancing, they were more likely to prioritise speed and efficiency;
- In higher stakes cases (e.g. divorce, employment, personal injury), they might be more likely to scrutinise success rates and reputation;
- In higher stakes cases they would spend more time and effort in researching providers;
- The more complex the case (regardless of the area of law), the more focus they would have on quality (both technical quality and customer service).

"For more emotional issues, such as getting divorced, I would also need to feel that the lawyer I chose was able to understand and respect my feelings, to be 'on my side' as it were. For something fairly straightforward like making a will or moving house I would be less worried about this and more concerned about getting the job done quickly." Female, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence



"When I went through a messy divorce I hired the best solicitor in the area, as children, house and money were involved. However, when I moved house I felt I didn't need to have the 'best' solicitor around. They were very good but the emotions and 'fight' wasn't the same as for the divorce." Female, 35-54, South of England, High legal confidence

Some also said they would seek advice from other sources, such as their union or Citizens Advice for some issues (e.g. employment, divorce).

However, a number of participants said that if they had had a good experience with a provider previously, they would go to them for advice on a range of issues, without carrying out further research. This underlines the importance of rapport and trust, both of which participants found hard to judge from information about unknown firms.



## 4.2 Quality indicators in detail

#### **Summary**

Participants considered eight different types of quality indicator. They ranked them in order of helpfulness and discussed the value of each one. Most participants found all the quality indicators helpful to some extent, indicated by the fact that there was no clear leader at the top of the ranking. Views on the indicators, ranked in overall order of 'helpfulness' (% of points from the ranking exercise appear in brackets) were as follows:

Overall 'star' ratings (15%): Although this tops the list by a narrow margin, there was a spread of views over the value of 'star' ratings. Many participants valued ratings as an 'at a glance' overview of the experiences of 'real' clients. Some used ratings, but took them with a 'pinch of salt'. A minority dismissed ratings as too subjective and untrustworthy.

<u>Customer reviews</u> (14%): The discussion of narrative reviews echoed the responses to ratings. Many used reviews regularly to make decisions in various aspects of their lives. In legal services, participants thought reviews would be key to understanding more about a provider. As with ratings, most consumers were wise to the potential pitfalls of relying on reviews.

Specific ratings on different elements of customer experience (14%): Many participants valued ratings on specific components such as likelihood to recommend, timeliness, and value-for-money. The attitudes towards specific ratings echoed those on reviews and overall ratings – many liked that they reflect 'real' experience, but some doubt their veracity.

<u>Success rates</u> (13%): Few participants referenced objective information on success rates in their search for legal providers, and they relied on reviews instead to gauge success rates. An objective measure of success therefore appealed to participants. However, they questioned how easy or dependable information on success rates would be in practice.

<u>Information about the firm and solicitors</u> (12%) had value to participants, particularly with regards to year established (to judge stability and – to an extent – competence), specialisms and location.

<u>Complaints information</u> (12%) rarely came up spontaneously in participants' discussion of what they looked for. However, when prompted, they said it could add value in that they would be more likely to trust a firm with low numbers of complaints.

Quality marks and accreditations (11%) came lower than other indicators, and there was little mention of these in participants' spontaneous searches for legal providers. Many thought quality marks and accreditations could confer legitimacy and reassure about professionalism and proficiency. However, there were questions over how dependable quality marks are, particularly as few participants were familiar with quality marks in this sector.



<u>Information about individual solicitors, such as biographies and 'About us' information on websites</u> (9%): ranked considerably lower than other indicators in terms of helpfulness, and over a third of participants ranked it last.

Each participant<sup>12</sup> ranked eight different types of indicator in order of most to least helpful. There were no clear forerunners in the ranking, with overall customer ratings, customer reviews and specific customer experience ratings all close to the top. Information about individual solicitors was clearly at the bottom of the list with the least number of 'points'<sup>13</sup>. Table 2 below shows the results of the ranking exercise:

Ranked position	Information type	% of total points
1	<b>Customer ratings</b> (overall 'star' ratings) from independent review website	15%
2	Customer reviews (narrative reviews)	14%
3	<b>Specific ratings</b> on different elements of customer experience e.g. value for money, client care, timeliness, communication	14%
4	Information on <b>success rates</b> (e.g. cases won; number of applications rejected)	13%
5	Information about the <b>firm and solicitors</b> (e.g. date established; Size of firm)	12%
6	Complaints information	12%
7	Quality marks/ kitemarks or accreditations	11%
8	Information about <b>individual solicitors</b> (e.g. biographies/ 'About us')	9%

Table 2: Ranking of quality indicators on the basis of helpfulness (base = 64 participants)

Participants discussed each quality indicator in more detail, as explored below.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> How we calculated points: we allocated 8 points to an indicator for every time it was ranked first, 7 points every time it was ranked second etc. Every time an indicator was ranked 8<sup>th</sup> (last) it received 1 point). We added up all the points each information type received, and divided them by the total amount of points allocated to get a percentage.



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Of 69 participants 5 did not complete this process and are therefore not included in the results.

## 4.2.1 Overall 'star' ratings

Figure 3 shows that, whilst it received marginally more 'points' than the other indicators, there was a spread of opinions regarding how helpful overall customer 'star' ratings are. The same number of people ranked 'customer ratings' fifth most helpful as ranked it most helpful (13 in each case).

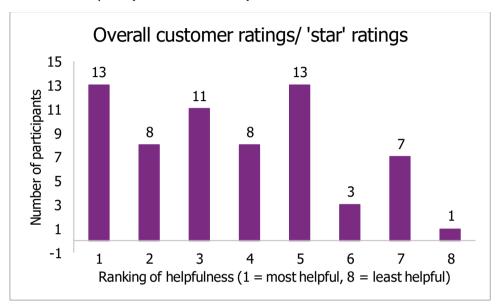


Figure 3: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Ratings' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

In online discussions about ratings, participants fell into three broad camps:

- Ratings are highly influential in decision-making;
- 2. Use ratings, but with a 'pinch of salt';
- 3. Dismiss ratings.

Those who value ratings highly saw them as a quick and easy shortcut to others' experiences and the capabilities and trustworthiness of a provider. Many valued ratings as an overview of the 'real experiences' of clients like them, particularly on service elements.

"Star' ratings are like reviews without words. When the average rating of something is quite close to the top score, you feel more confident when choosing it, knowing that other people have been happy using that product/service." Female, 25-34, South of England, Medium legal confidence

"A higher 'star' rating equates to more capability so in turn more trust in a provider, so yes 'star' ratings are super important when making an informed decision regarding choosing a provider." Male, 25-34, South of England, High legal confidence



Many in this camp also welcomed the simplicity of ratings, which helps them to compare and filter providers at a glance.

For some, ratings were the strongest influence and the indicator they relied on the most. Nonetheless, most of those who were enthusiastic about ratings said they know they cannot always fully trust a ratings score, and used it instead in collaboration with other indicators, most notably reviews.

Participants who used ratings, but with 'a pinch of salt' were happy to take ratings on board in their decision-making, but had more doubts over whether reviews were genuine. They looked more actively for added reassurance such as:

- Ensuring the source was trustworthy (familiar, well-known, an external source);
- Relying more on other indicators;
- Looking for large numbers of ratings as the basis for the overall score;
- Checking if ratings are verified.

"Star' ratings are a quick measure and easy to refer to as a comparison - but my concern over how genuine this is does plague how useful they would be for me." Female, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence

A smaller group of participants dismissed ratings completely. They either found them untrustworthy (because they believed that companies could easily manipulate ratings) or too subjective (because different people have different interpretations and thresholds for ratings). They also found ratings too simplistic, lacking the depth of reviews, for example.

"I don't really look at a 'star' rating. I think it can be easily manipulated." Male, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence

#### 4.2.2 Customer reviews

Overall, narrative customer reviews were rated highly in their helpfulness. 27 out of 64 participants ranked reviews in the top two most helpful pieces of information, as shown in Figure 4.



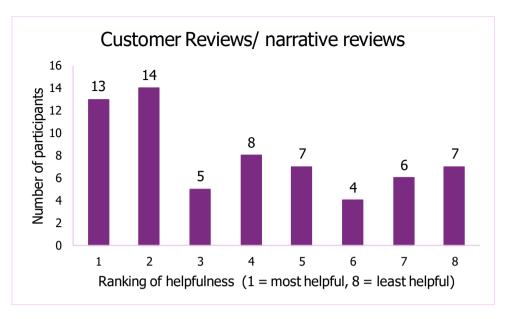


Figure 4: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Reviews' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

Discussion about reviews echoed the range of views on overall ratings. Most participants found them helpful (as suggested by the ranking chart above). Again, however, a minority dismissed customer reviews and were distrustful of them.

Many said that they use reviews routinely for making decisions about products and services across sectors. The majority valued the fact that customer reviews came from 'everyday people' like them giving honest views of a provider's service from experience. Customer reviews therefore provide a counterpoint to a provider's 'sell'. With regards to legal services, they felt that reviews serve a number of purposes:

- They indicate weight and credibility: a company which has reviews has some standing, especially if reviews appear on an independent source (e.g. Trustpilot, Google);
- They enable consumers to weed out poor providers: firms with several bad reviews (or reviews that consistently mention the same shortcoming) can be filtered out;
- They provide an insight into aspects of 'quality' that they value, such as customer service (what the provider is like to work with; how they treat you), costs and outcomes.

"The information that helped me decide was mainly the reviews on previous cases they had dealt with. The reviews usually say it all... for me, it is the opinion of their clients that really tell you how good they are." Female, 25-34, South of England, High legal confidence

"I looked for reviews to determine the reliability of the individual companies." Male, 18-24, North of England, Medium legal confidence

"These are really helpful as, to me, they show everyday people like myself have been using them and it gives me a sense of security and shows me what I can



expect from that provider and also tells me which ones to avoid or the ones that would not be a good fit for me." Female, 25-34, Midlands, High legal confidence

"Reviews are super-helpful as I like to see testimonies from past clients to see whether the provider can be trusted and whether they can do a good job. I can also try to relate to the reviews and see whether people were in similar situations to me, then I can trust the provider more as I've seen they can handle my issue as they have done so in the past." Male, 25-34, South of England, High legal confidence

Some participants were prepared to take customer reviews at face value as the trustworthy views of their fellow consumers. However, most of those who used and valued reviews treated them with a dose of scepticism – aware that the review process can be manipulated in a provider's favour. Many described a 'savvy consumer' approach to using reviews, approaching reviews with caution, and using a range of techniques to establish the veracity and dependability of reviews, such as:

- Checking the 'sample size' how many people have left reviews?
- Looking for specific details about the service;
- Looking for positive and negative points in reviews wholly positive reviews are more likely to be doubted;
- Using independent sources of reviews (e.g. Trustpilot, Google);
- Using a range of sources to check reviews (especially if reviews appear on the providers' websites);
- Looking for consistency between reviews;
- Noting companies' responses to reviews, especially negative reviews this suggested that a review was genuine.

These more 'savvy' consumers were confident they could spot fake reviews, but also made sure that they did not base their decisions solely on reviews – they would use reviews in conjunction with more objective information too.

"There is one thing I always check, and that is if there is a verified mark next to the review or rating. I know of companies who use their own employees or pay for influencers to leave fake reviews. I am very wary of knowing where to draw the line with fake and genuine reviews. I think you have to use your common sense and gut feeling when comparing reviews and ratings. Read them thoroughly and research the reviews if you have time. Quite often you can tell them apart." Female, 35-54, Wales, Low legal confidence

"Customer reviews are definitely something I rely on. However it is beginning to get increasingly more difficult to figure out what's a real review and what's the staff or a false review. Unless it says something like "verified review" then I'm almost half hearted, yet I still rely on them based on how truthful I feel they are. Very hard to figure it all out." Female, 25-34, North of England, Low legal confidence



A small number of participants claimed not to pay any attention to reviews in their decision-making process, for the same reasons as they dismissed ratings, i.e.:

- They cannot trust reviews as they know that some reviews are made up, some
  can be left by paid influencers, family members or friends, and firms are likely to
  cherry-pick any genuine reviews if they include them on their website;
- Reviews describe situations that may not be comparable to their own situation

   they represent a particular moment in time, and depend on the variables of an individual case;
- **Reviews are subjective** the reviewer's standards and expectations might be very different to their own. There is also a question over whether there is a certain type of person who is more likely to leave a review, and whether this means that reviewers are not representative of consumers more generally.

Notably, some of these 'review sceptics' said they would put trust in the recommendation of someone they know. It is less the fact that a review is opinion-based that makes them dismiss it, and more that they do not know the reviewer, and so cannot rely on or judge their opinion.

## 4.2.3 Specific ratings on different elements of customer experience

Participants generally ranked ratings on specific customer experience elements of middling value in decision-making.



Figure 5: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Specific ratings on e.g. value for money, client care, timeliness, communication' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

A number of participants talked explicitly about the importance of specific ratings, especially likelihood to recommend, customer care and value-for-money. While some participants took these into consideration when reviewing the mocked up comparison



list and webpages, the mostly frequently picked fictitious firm was chosen primarily due to other factors (including its overall customer rating). However, the second most frequently chosen fictitious firm was picked largely based on its high ratings on specific criteria, such as client service.

#### 4.2.4 Information on success rates

While competence and success were important factors for participants, there was limited reference to information on success rates in the 'real world' research exercise (where participants researched real providers to advise them in a fictional scenario). Participants instead used other indicators, primarily customer reviews, to get an idea of providers' success rates.

When asked explicitly about the value of information on success rates<sup>14</sup>, participants mostly ranked it in the middle: almost half of participants ranked 'success rates' between third and fifth out of eight indicators.

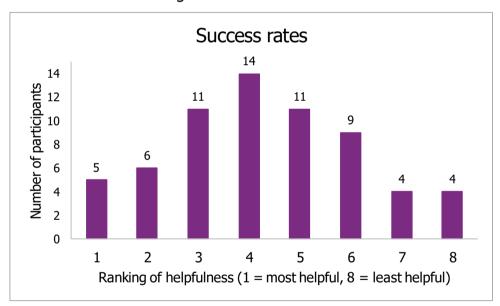


Figure 6: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Success Rates' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

On the face of it, an indicator on success rates was very appealing to many participants. They liked the fact that this was an objective measure (not dependent on former clients' opinions or a firm's marketing spiel). They also felt that success rates should allow for easy comparison between providers.

"This would be fantastic and very helpful in helping me decide on which provider to use and which one would be best for me. I would like to see the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> 'Success rates' vary between legal matters depending on, for example, whether the matter is contentious or transactional. Examples provided to participants included number of cases won and number of Land Registry applications rejected for conveyancing firms.



number of cases won etc , and number cases lost so I can make a decision that is right for me." Female, 25-34, Midlands, High legal confidence

One of the mocked-up examples of a legal services provider webpage (Hawthorn Law, shown right) included an example of success rates. In spite of their enthusiasm for an indicator of success rates in theory, only a few participants who chose this firm mentioned success rates as their main reason for doing so (the free consultation offered was more influential).



Figure 7: Mocked up webpages of fictitious legal services provider (Hawthorn Law), showing success rates.

In addition, most participants quickly identified challenges and limitations with success rates as an indicator, asking questions such as:

- What's the 'sample size'? What's the norm for the sector? Over what time period?
- Might push firms to only take on cases they are likely to win?
- With lots of variation between cases/ matters are success rates really comparable?
- Do some cases/ matters have a lower chance of success from the start?
- How far does a firm's overall success rate reflect the competence of individual solicitors?

Participants also raised the point that even when a provider 'loses' a case, they still might have done an excellent job and have a satisfied client. Some participants also had low trust in these measures, suspecting that providers would still be able to manipulate the statistics to present a more positive picture.

In order to be helpful, participants felt that success rates had to be provided by an independent source; be clear in terms of how they are calculated; and be easily comparable across providers.

#### 4.2.5 Information about the firm and solicitors

'Information about the firm and solicitors' ranked fifth out of eight indicators in terms of the overall points it received in the ranking exercise. The spread of rankings shown in Figure 8 shows that just over half of participants (37 out of 64) ranked it fifth or lower.





Figure 8: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Information about the firm and solicitors' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

Most participants felt that this information had some value taken alongside other information. Most of the information about the firm and individuals was seen as 'nice-to-have' rather than a deciding factor in choosing a provider. However, some pieces of information were higher up participants' list of priorities when choosing a law firm, for example:

Year established: this was the most frequently mentioned factor in the prompted exercise (when participants were explicitly asked which information about a firm/ individual they valued). Length in service was seen as a proxy for reputation, dependability, and stability. Some also saw length of service as an indication of competence and good customer service — they felt that a firm would not remain in business for long, if it did not achieve good results or treat customers well.

"Knowing how long a company has been established is useful, I think you'd have more faith in a long standing company especially alongside positive reviews." Female, 35-54, North of England, Medium legal confidence

- **Specialism/ expertise:** relevant for both the firm ('deals with my matter') and the individual advisor (has expertise indicated by experience, qualifications and success rates);
- **Location:** many participants wanted a local firm and said that this was one of their key criteria, as discussed in <u>section 4.1.4</u>.

Some participants also looked at the size of a firm, but this was less of a determining factor for most. Many of those who considered size said they preferred a smaller firm, believing that they would get a more personalised service, though one participant felt it was more nuanced and, depending on your matter, a larger firm might bring the weight and experience needed in a more complex case.



"If it's for conveyancing, the firm with an office above the estate agent might be fine but you might not want that sort/size of firm for major employment/injury claim. Similarly, a firm with offices in the snazziest office block in town might be a bit OTT for your house move or a simple will." Male, 55-74, Wales, Medium legal confidence

Some said they valued information about the firm and individuals working there, to get a feel for the ethos and values of the firm.

## 4.2.6 Complaints information

Overall, complaints information ranked of mid-low helpfulness in choosing legal services providers compared to other indicators, though nearly a third of participants placed it in their top three most helpful indicators. Rankings for this indicator are shown in Figure 9.

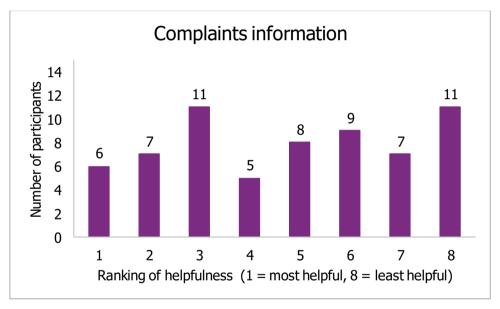


Figure 9: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Complaints information' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

There was a mix of views on the value of complaints information in selecting legal services provider. A few participants did use the complaints information in the mocked-up information, to make their decision. For them, complaints data helped them judge trustworthiness — both in the sense that publishing this data suggests transparency (or 'honesty'), and in that low numbers of complaints help them to trust a firm more.

"I used this information also when deciding. The less complaints the better the company. I also like those upheld by the Ombudsman this makes it more trustworthy." Female, 35-54, Wales, High legal confidence

"Seeing a company that has had few complaints made and none upheld is pleasing and would make me much more inclined to choose them... [Complaints information is] about a company's professionalism and good reputation." Female, 18-24, South of England, Low legal confidence



However, most participants felt that raw complaints data was not very helpful on its own, for the following reasons:

- Complaints may be spurious, and some people are quick to complain;
- It is hard to judge whether the complaint is relevant to your own situation it may be regarding a process or issue that does not affect your case, or relate to a historic issue that has since been fixed;
- Complaints may be against an individual, rather than your potential advisor or the firm as a whole;
- Some questioned whether they could trust complaints data, or whether this could be manipulated to paint a positive picture (much like ratings).

Most participants wanted more information about specific complaints to be able to judge whether they were relevant to their situation. They also wanted detail on whether complaints linked to aspects of 'quality' participants deemed important, such as efficiency and customer experience. Some participants said that reviews provide this more detailed information, and are therefore more helpful, especially as they felt that most people are more likely to leave a negative review than formally complain.

There were exceptions when complaints information became more influential in the decision-making process:

- Where there are high levels of complaints over time while some said that they
  were prepared to overlook low numbers of complaints, a high number of complaints
  was a 'straight eliminator' for many;
- Where complaints are upheld by an independent body, such as the Legal Ombudsman;
- Where complaints data is used in combination with other indicators for example where higher complaints levels corroborate negative reviews;
- Where there is a response from the firm this can have a positive impact, for example, by showing customer-focus, that the firm takes responsibility, or by explaining the complaint and how they mitigate against similar issues.

"This is an important information to consider while choosing a provider, but you should look at other factors too. When a firm has a great customer rating, with mostly amazing reviews, a couple of complaints wouldn't put me off of that firm, because there can always be someone who finds something to complain about." Female, 25-34, South of England, Medium legal confidence

"I think this information is helpful to decide whether or not trust the company. I can ignore one or two complaints as some people will never be satisfied [but] I wouldn't trust a company with many complaints. It was one of the main factors I didn't choose certain companies for my case... I was happy this factor was on the list." Male, 35-54, Midlands, Medium legal confidence



"If there were lots [of complaints] I would immediately look for another company." Female, 25-34, Midlands, High legal confidence

Participants also commented on the value of a good complaints process – some were more interested in information on this from providers, rather than on raw complaints figures.

## 4.2.7 Quality marks/ kitemarks or accreditations

Quality marks and accreditations ranked as less helpful compared to other factors on participants' relative assessment of indicators - half ranked it 6 or lower out of 8.

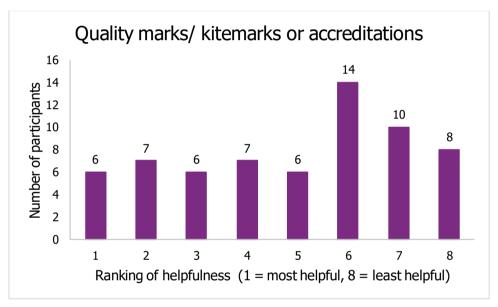


Figure 10: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Quality marks/kitemarks or accreditations' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

Some took quality marks at face value as an objective and 'officially recognised' indication of quality and trustworthiness. For this minority, quality marks were key to their decision-making. They used it as 'an entry level requirement' – they would not consider a provider without a quality mark.

"I think the quality marks are very important in making the decision of choosing which firm... This makes them seem more reliable and trustworthy. It gives the consumer more confidence." Female, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence

Many other participants also felt that a quality marks or accreditations could confer trustworthiness and provide reassurance about a provider's professionalism and proficiency. However, there were various questions and concerns over quality marks and accreditation which limited their usefulness in decision-making, including:

• Lack of familiarity with quality marks in legal services, means that, seeing quality marks/ accreditations is of little value;



• This also means that most participants did not actively look out for them in reality (although some said the research was a reminder that they should);

"They make them appear more dependable and better quality but, as I don't have much knowledge about quality marks, so they don't really mean that much to me personally." Female, 18-24, Midlands, Low legal confidence

- Several participants distinguished between accreditations/ quality marks that are 'earned' and those that are 'bought';
  - As a result, some were distrusting of quality marks and dismissed them;

"Accreditations need to be achieved by qualifications and not by subscriptions. The evaluation criteria for entry and the assurance processes that the accreditation body adopts in ensuring that member organisations are who they say that they are, and do what they say that they can do, and behave and demonstrate the values and behaviours of the quality accreditation organisation." Female, 55-74, South of England, Low legal confidence

 Accreditations/ quality marks do not necessarily tell consumers what a firm (or individual) is like to work with, which was a key consideration for many;

"Whilst [quality marks and accreditations] give the client a level of reassurance to the professionalism and trustworthiness of that company it is simply information on paper, and when working with people it means very little." Female, 18-24, North of England, High legal confidence

• Though if a consumer is aware of a particular scheme relating to softer skills (such as Investors in People<sup>15</sup>), this could provide some reassurance on this:

"If they are Investors in People accredited it indicates to me that they care about doing the right thing and this would make them more attractive." Male, 35-54, Midlands, High legal confidence

As a result, several participants said they would need to do further research into what quality marks/ accreditations mean, how they are awarded and by which body, and how they are reviewed. It is hard to say how likely they would be to do this in reality (at least without further education and awareness raising on quality marks and accreditation).

Some were more trusting of quality marks and accreditations, including some participants who had experience in accredited professions (such as healthcare) and were familiar with regulator-led schemes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Investors in People (IiP) is an independent standard for people management. Organisations can gain accreditation by going through a programme of assessment against the IiP Framework by one of their independent practitioners.



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#### 4.2.8 Information about individual solicitors

Information about individual solicitors ranked lowest overall of all indicators in terms of usefulness, and over a third of participants ranked it least helpful out of the 8 indicators (see Figure 11).

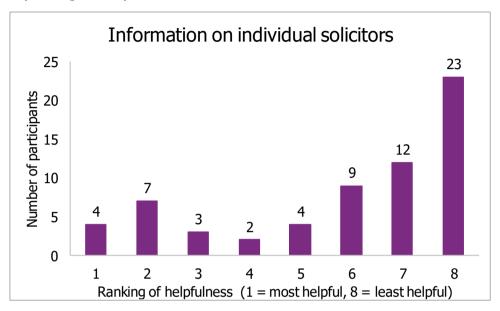


Figure 11: Chart showing how participants ranked 'Information on individual solicitors (e.g. biographies/ 'About us')' on helpfulness (Base = 64 participants)

In spontaneous discussions about what they would look for when choosing a legal advisor, personality and rapport were critical for many participants. However, biographies and information about individuals on providers' websites was polarising, suggesting this is not how most consumers gauge this critical component.

Several participants said that they liked more information about individuals, as it made providers seem more human and helped consumers gauge if they could get along with an advisor. However, others felt wider information about individuals (for example, their outside interests) was at best irrelevant, and at worst, unprofessional.

"I liked how they gave a brief profile of the solicitors including their interests which I thought was a nice touch... it shows a human side to people and not just a stuffy legal eagle." Male, 75+, Midlands, Medium legal confidence

"I'd use any personal information about the solicitors to consider if the firm seemed to have a friendly, understanding and sensitive touch". Female, 18-24, South of England, Low legal confidence

"I don't need to know the life history of a solicitor or what their interest are, they are being paid by me to do a job, not be my 'friend'." Female, 55-74, South of England, Medium legal confidence

Wider discussions suggested that participants preferred to establish whether they could work well with an advisor through a conversation.



## 4.3 Response to options for enabling easier search and selection

#### **Summary**

Participants considered a range of initiatives to make it easier for consumers to search and select legal services providers.

Most participants used <u>external review sites and digital comparison tools</u> when making decisions about products and services, though they did not always distinguish between the two, and often used review sites as comparison tools (for example, using ratings and reviews to compare). They were more familiar and at ease with digital comparison tools in some specific markets.

They felt the tools offered the benefits of scoping the market, conferring some legitimacy, and providing condensed comparable information in one place. However, they were also aware of the shortcomings, notably that they were not always comprehensive, that providers could pay to be featured, and that they were open to abuse.

There was low awareness and use of digital comparison and review tools that were <u>specific to legal services</u>. Most participants welcomed the idea of a specific tool, especially in light of the difficulty they experienced in research exercises in finding information on providers and comparing like with like. However, several participants felt that digital comparison and review sites were less well suited to professional services.

Almost all participants welcomed the idea of a <u>single online register of regulated legal services providers</u>. They felt this would bring trust, a comprehensive market view and impartiality, thereby addressing some of the challenges in comparing and choosing legal services providers. Nonetheless, participants stressed the importance of the register becoming well-known and familiar, both to drive trust, and to help it become a more common way of searching for legal services providers.

Participants were less inclined to trust <u>reviews embedded in providers'</u> <u>websites</u>. Most preferred to visit an external review site to read reviews there.

Several participants regularly <u>left reviews</u> of products and services they had used, and some left reviews from time to time. They felt they were as likely to leave a review about legal services as about other services.

Participants considered the potential of various tools to make it easier for consumers to research, compare and choose legal services providers. Specifically, they looked at the role of external review sites, digital comparison tools and a single online register of registered legal services providers.



## 4.3.1 External review sites and digital comparison tools

The majority of participants used and valued comparison tools and review sites when buying products and services. Some participants were real enthusiasts, saying they used these tools for nearly everything. Others only really used them for some services and products, such as travel and leisure, insurance and financial products, utilities and energy and products (especially appliances and electrical appliances). Many felt that digital comparison tools and review sites offered several benefits, including:

- The ability to scope the market;
- Lending **legitimacy and confidence** if a provider is listed, they are more likely to be genuine; comments from other consumers adds further legitimacy;
- Providing **condensed**, **comparable information** on lots of providers in one place, thereby making the process quicker and easier.

"I love the fact that the internet has these services free of charge and helps me to make informed decisions to avoid wasted money and disappointments." Female, 25-34, Midlands, High legal confidence

"It's a useful way to be sure of the legitimacy and professionalism of a business." Female, 18-24, South of England, Low legal confidence

"Nowadays I almost always look at comparison websites as they pretty much do the homework for me and provide the best price for the service I am looking for. It saves a lot of time. It also shows 'star' review ratings and reviews that people left based on the services they had. This allows me to get a better understanding of what firm I want to consider and what firm I should avoid." Female, 25-34, South of England, Low legal confidence

However, participants also recognised some shortcomings of these tools and referred to:

- The fact that these tools **do not always show the whole market**.
- That some **providers pay to be featured** on (and at the top of) lists;
- Such tools being **open to abuse** from reviewers with a grudge, fake reviews, and manipulation by the companies featured.

"Price comparison sites are a great source of information, but they are only one step in the selection procedure. Would you trust the cheapest? Are you comparing apples with apples (are the same things included/excluded in each company's price)? Are all companies included? Did they pay to get on the list?" Female, 35-54, Wales, Low legal confidence

A small minority said they never used comparison sites or review sites. Their main reason was lack of trust in the tools for the reasons cited above. Some also preferred to rely on recommendations from people they know.



The distinction between review sites and digital comparison tools was blurred in participants' minds. In comments, many used the terms 'review site' and 'comparison site' interchangeably. Furthermore, some participants used external review sites as digital comparison tools, i.e. to scope the market and compare (usually on the basis of ratings and reviews).

There were distinctions, however, in specific markets. In energy/ utilities, insurance/ financial services, phones and some other products, participants talked more about price, and the importance of price comparison. In this context, they referred more to 'price comparison websites', such as ComparetheMarket, MoneySupermarket, GoCompare and USwitch.

In other areas of life, the customer experience was more important, for example, in holidays, restaurants and leisure. Here, participants prioritised customer ratings and reviews, and frequently mentioned Tripadvisor. In choosing products (especially high-ticket items and electrical goods), they wanted some technical input, but also to know how it performed in reality. A combination of customer reviews, expert opinion and pricing information helped here, for example, from Which?, Google and Amazon.

# 4.3.2 Legal services-specific online tools

A number of participants felt digital comparison and review sites were less well suited to professional services because:

- Price is not necessarily the driving factor;
- Performance is harder to describe and measure;
- There are many variables and complexities which make it harder to compare.

"Happy to use comparison sites for car insurance and utility costs - less so for professional services where you are not basing your selection primarily on cost." Male, 55-74, Wales, Medium legal confidence

Nonetheless, the vast majority of participants welcomed the idea of a digital comparison tool for legal services providers. Very few of them had come across a tool specific to legal services, either in 'real life' or in the context of the search and selection exercises that were part of this research.

A digital comparison tool for legal services addresses some of the difficulties they encountered in choosing providers discussed in <u>section 4.1.2</u>, such as limited knowledge and experience, few known/ trusted sources of information, and variation between information from providers. They liked the idea that a tool could bring all the information together in one place and in a consistent format.

"I would like a comparison website, it'd make what would potentially be a difficult decision a little easier." Female, 25-34, Wales, Low legal confidence



"I think it's a great idea. It would level out each provider and give you a good view of comparison across what is a largely un-benchmarked area. Some legal services are standard such as wills, conveyancing, yet the experience is so varied across providers." Female, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence

"Think this would be very good for people with little or no legal knowledge or haven't had the need to use a legal service in the past. Can be very daunting with all the companies that come up in a Google search and would save a lot of time gave information and reviews in one place." Female, 35-54, Wales, Medium legal confidence

Several participants had doubts about the idea of a comparison tool for legal services providers. They felt that legal services are too complex for a simplified comparison matrix and that the factors they wanted to consider were hard to compare in this format.

"The nature of advice services makes it difficult to enable simple comparisons between like-for-like products and the emotional nature of legal issues means that some consumers will see online selection as just too impersonal." Female, 55-74, Wales, High legal confidence

Participants also felt that it was important that the tool becomes well-known and trusted, and that searching for legal service providers in this way becomes the norm (as it has, for, example, in insurance and energy). A minority of participants felt that if it was perceived as 'niche', it might mean a specific comparison tool would feel less trustworthy and less likely to show the whole market.

# 4.3.3 Single online register of regulated legal services providers

Almost all participants supported the idea of the legal services regulators providing a tool that allows people to compare providers. The involvement of the regulators overcame several potential barriers, notably:

- Trustworthiness that the tool came from a trusted, independent source lends it legitimacy;
- **Whole market view** most assumed the tool would include all regulated providers (though some still raised doubt over whether this was the case);
- **Impartiality/ fairness** assuming that providers can't 'buy' inclusion on the list or a place at the top (though some still worry they could).

It was also felt that this type of tool could play a role in educating and informing consumers about what they need to look for in choosing legal services. The tool could achieve this either via explicit guidance and advice, or by providing information on specific factors and encouraging consumers to compare on this basis.

"I think a website such as this one could become a smooth, comfortable and easy way for anybody to be able to compare honest scores and not just on



categories they know they're searching for, but also to discover noteworthy points that they should be taking into account in their choice of solicitor, that they hadn't yet considered." Female, 18-24, South of England, Low legal confidence

"It would also be helpful if it told me WHY that item might be important to me (as a non-legal person there may be things that I didn't even know that I really should consider!)" Female, 35-54, Wales, Low legal confidence

Few participants raised concerns or questions, but those who did wondered what the criteria would be for being included on the register and whether it would distinguish between firms and individuals. Some also worried that the amount of options returned by a search might be overwhelming.

Participants felt it would be important to promote the tool so that it becomes well-known and familiar and so that consumers are aware of its independence. Some suggested requiring all firms to participate. They also stressed the importance of maintaining its accuracy and keeping it up-to-date.

"If this goes ahead it would need very good marketing and need to raise the profile of the regulatory bodies. Potential clients need to know it exists and it may not be in the interest of firms to promote it, particularly if they have poor ratings or stronger rival firms." Male, 35-54, South of England, Low legal confidence

Participants had a long 'wish-list' of the types of information they would ideally like to see in the register, including the following (listed broadly in order of the frequency of mentions):

- **Pricing/ fees information** either in the form of hourly rates or estimated fees for standard services. This should avoid any 'hidden extras';
- Services and specialisms:
  - Of the firm;
  - Of individual solicitors;
- Success rates for example as a percentage of cases won;
- **Specific customer ratings** on aspects of customer experience (timeliness; communication), value for money, and likelihood to recommend;
- Reviews or feedback although customers were mostly not clear on what this
  would look like, some suggested this could include an overall customer rating,
  number of reviews and proportion of positive to negative reviews;
- **Complaints information** for example, complaints made vs. upheld; regulatory interventions
- **Overall (e.g. 'star') ratings** for the firm (though potentially for the different departments);
- Accreditations/ membership of quality schemes particularly those awarded/ run by regulators;



- **Size** number of solicitors;
- Date established;
- Location.

Some participants suggested extra information, such as contact information, hyperlinks to websites and accessibility information (including languages spoken, wheelchair access, inclusive communication for visually impaired and Deaf people), toilets and baby-change facilities).

"There should be a table showing 'star' ratings, not just for how good they are but how satisfied their clients are with their service and they don't cost a fortune." Female, 35-54, North of England, Low legal confidence

"It would also be helpful if 'star' ratings and reviews were sorted into neat and easy to read and compare categories: customer service, ease of communications, feeling understood and cared about, punctuality and efficiency and most importantly of all, value for money." Female, 18-25, South of England, Low legal confidence

It is worth noting that participants' wish-list for the register included more narrative and subjective information, such as customer reviews. The mocked up comparison list that participants considered in the research (included in the Technical Appendices) did not include narrative data (although it did include overall 'star' ratings and specific customer experience ratings). Nonetheless, many participants commented on how useful they found the mocked up comparison list, and that they would value something similar if they needed to find a provider in real life. They felt it would help them to filter providers, and those who valued reviews in decision-making were likely to search for reviews separately.

# 4.3.4 Reviews embedded in legal services providers' websites

Participants were less inclined to trust reviews included on providers' own websites, and this plays into their doubts about reviews generally, i.e. that reviews are false, manipulated by providers, or selected on the basis of positivity. Even where reviews have been embedded from a third party review site, the shadow of doubt remains as to whether they are genuine and representative. However, where there is a mix of positive and some more negative reviews, this can act to counter the concern about partiality.

"I do not believe reviews on your own website where you can basically make them up yourself, or at least cherry-pick the best ones." Female, 35-54, Wales, Low legal confidence

"[Reviews] are a waste of time if they are ones on the company's website as they only ever show good reviews so are obviously biased." Male, 35-54, South of England, Medium legal confidence



"They publish a low rated review alongside higher ratings. So this shows they are potentially not trying to hide anything and not only showing the positives they have, Male, 25-34, Midlands, Medium legal confidence

Participants who used reviews preferred to find these on external review sites, and some even used several review websites to compare and corroborate reviews.

# 4.3.5 Leaving reviews

Several participants spontaneously talked about leaving reviews. A few were frequent reviewers — they saw it as their duty to tell other consumers the 'truth' of their lived experience to help them make decisions about products and services. Other participants left reviews from time to time, though some of these said there had to be a strong reason for them to leave a review, either very positive experience (to thank/reward the provider), or a particularly negative one (so the provider can improve their service or to warn others). Participants felt they would be as likely to leave a review about their experience of a legal services provider as would be the case for a provider in another sector.



# 5. Conclusions

- 1. Participants found it hard to choose legal providers and felt anxious with the idea of finding a provider from scratch, particularly as this is not a familiar process, the stakes are high, and legal issues are stressful in themselves.
- 2. Their search and selection process was difficult due to the limited amount of easily comparable information online, especially information relating to customer experience, which is one of the aspects of quality they wish to prioritise.
- 3. Participants were reliant on the views of past customers to help them judge quality (especially the customer experience), value for money, and outcomes.
- 4. As a result, participants fell back on the familiar either using providers they had used before or seeking recommendations from people they know or from customer ratings and reviews. They were less likely to use more objective measures of quality, such as complaints, success data, and quality marks and accreditations. However, this may be because this information is not well-known (therefore hard to trust), not well understood and not readily available.
- 5. In reality the stress and pressure of legal matters means that many consumers are less likely to adopt a considered approach using online tools. However, participants felt that of all the ideas discussed the single online register was a significant improvement on the current information available online.
- 6. They believed a single online register could be a valuable part of the decision-making process by providing a single place for an easily comparable list of data from a trustworthy source.
- 7. However, they also felt that it would be hard to present some of the aspects of quality that they value in a single online register, especially the customer experience and potential rapport with an advisor.
- 8. 'At a glance' indicators of the customer experience (such as an overall 'star' rating and ratings on specific aspects of the customer experience) would go some way to help consumers gauge this important aspect of quality. However, they would need to be standardised to facilitate comparison.
- 9. It is likely that a final decision on a legal services provider will still be heavily influenced by subjective sources of information, particularly recommendations from people consumers know, conversation with providers and (with some caution) customer reviews from familiar review sites.
- 10. The value of a single online register depends on it becoming familiar and well-known for consumers to trust it as a source of impartial information, and to encourage a more structured and considered approach to reviewing the options.

