

MINUTE SLCC Consumer Panel



THURSDAY 1st MAY 2015

Venue: The Stamp Office, 10 – 14 Waterloo Place, Edinburgh, EH1 3EG

Present: Lauren Wood [Chair], Citizens Advice Scotland
Shaben Begum (SB), Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance
Carol Brennan (CB), Queen Margaret University Consumer Insight Centre
Sheila Scobie (SS), Competition & Markets Authority
Lynn Welsh (LW), Equality & Human Rights Commission

████████████████████, Head of Oversight (HoO), SLCC

In Attendance: Bill Brackenbridge, Chair, SLCC (item 1 only)

Apologies: None

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed all present to the second meeting of the Panel.

Bill Brackenbridge, the SLCC Chair, took the opportunity to introduce himself and to thank the Panel members for their contribution to this important initiative. He looked forward to working with the Panel on a number of projects in the future.

2. Apologies

No apologies were recorded.

3. Declarations of interest

No notes of interest or conflict were declared.

The Chair reminded members to complete their declarations for recording in the register of interests.

4. Minute of previous meeting

The Panel members approved the Minute of the meeting on 19 March as an accurate record of that meeting.

5. Actions

The HoO updated the Panel on progress made in relation to the previously approved actions list.

In relation to action 1, the Panel noted the position taken by Which? After discussion, it was agreed that, on the basis of her expertise in this area of consumer matters, the HoO would approach Julia Clarke to establish whether she would be interested in being a member in her new capacity before formally requesting from the SLCC Board her inclusion on the Panel.

On action 3, in relation to declaring gifts and hospitality, the Panel agreed that, as this was unlikely, there was no need to set up such a register until the need arose.

It was noted, in relation to action 6, that Steve Brooker was no longer the Manager of the Legal Consumer Panel in England & Wales and agreed that, once his successor had been appointed, the invitation would be extended afresh.

6. Consumer awareness of the SLCC

The HoO introduced this subject by outlining the SLCC's concerns about the general lack of awareness among the public of the role of the Commission and highlighted the fact that, from complainant feedback surveys, it appeared that the main means by which complainants became aware of the SLCC was via referral from the Law Society of Scotland.

The Panel agreed that, by the very nature of legal complaints, this posed a challenge for the Commission and discussed various potential means through which organisations which dealt with specific demographics might be approached. It was suggested that the most effective initial means to target a wide range of relevant organisations would be to write an article for inclusion in Third Force News (TFN).

It was agreed that the HoO would approach the editor of TFN to explore this possibility and also the costs of placing an advert or link on their website.

7. Legal consumer survey

The HoO and the Chair introduced this topic by reference to:

(a) existing research which indicated that only a small proportion of dissatisfied legal consumers complain; and

(b) planned research – jointly being commissioned by SLCC, SPSO and Citizens Advice Scotland – which will explore what happens to those whose complaints are deemed premature or out of jurisdiction but who never re-enter the formal complaints process.

In terms of overall visibility, it was questioned whether we were only seeing the tip of the iceberg.

The Panel wondered how the SLCC's statistics correlated to the percentage of the Scottish population who used a solicitor and questioned what information might be available on that. It was agreed that, if available, this would be useful data to have and it was agreed that the HoO would approach Scottish Government and the Scottish Legal Aid Board to ascertain whether this information was already available. If not, the Panel might want to consider commissioning research into this aspect, including a breakdown into subject areas and distinguishing between privately funded and legally aided services.

The Panel questioned whether similar information might also be available for England & Wales and it was agreed that CB would establish what comparative information might be available.

8. Service standards in the legal profession

The HoO introduced this topic by explaining that the adequacy of service provided by solicitors was largely gauged against the Law Society of Scotland's own service standards. The question had been asked as to how closely these reflected what today's legal consumers actually expected from their solicitor and whether there were any gaps in expectations.

The Chair advised the Panel that Citizens Advice Scotland was intending to commission some comparative research looking at service standards across a range of areas, including legal services. This work was due to be undertaken in the Autumn with the results published in early 2016.

It was agreed that the Panel should await the outcome of that research but that, in the meantime, the HoO would circulate a link to the existing Law Society of Scotland's service standards and that CB would check what the comparative standards were for solicitors in England and Wales.

9. Potential research topics

The HoO referred to the research topic already mentioned under Item 7 and advised the Panel that, in addition, the SLCC had recently commissioned research into mediation. In particular, this research would explore the perceived barriers to the take up of mediation in the hope that the SLCC could address these in its approach to consumers and practitioners alike.

10. Date of next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would be set for the end of June or beginning of July.

11. AOB

The HoO advised that he had recently met with a representative from Families Need Fathers who had offered to contribute to the Panel's debate. The Panel welcomed the offer and agreed that they would bear this in mind for future discussions.

The HoO also made reference to current guidance being prepared by the SLCC for consumers to help them avoid the most common issues which tended to lead to complaints in the area of wills, trusts and executries. He wondered if the Panel had any knowledge of consumer concerns in this area of legal work. The Chair advised that Citizens Advice had received very little contact in relation to the topic and that mostly these related to unsolicited approaches from unregulated will writers rather than about the services provided by solicitors.

There being no further business, the Chair thanked all for their attendance.