

Not to be used before 00:01 hours, 15 October 2014

PANEL LAUNCHES GUIDE TO HELP REGULATORS TAKE ACCOUNT OF CONSUMER VULNERABILITY

The Consumer Panel is today launching a practical guide for regulators on consumer vulnerability. The guide is based on the British Standard BS18477 on Inclusive Service Provision, which we have translated into a legal services setting. It forms a companion piece to the Panel's toolkit on the Consumer Principles.

We've written the guide because addressing vulnerability is especially important in legal services. Our research shows that consumers see legal services as a special case, often dealing with life-changing events. They feel vulnerable and recognise the imbalance of knowledge and power they suffer when dealing with lawyers. Vulnerability can mean consumers do not access services or use them ineffectively.

The aim of the guide is to provide regulators with a practical framework to recognise and respond effectively to consumer vulnerability. It follows the three key elements of the regulatory journey: policy making, carrying out the core regulatory functions, and providing services to the public. Ultimately, if regulators become better at identifying and responding to consumer vulnerability, this should translate into law firms and lawyers acting in a more inclusive and accessible manner.

A draft version of the guide was tested by the Bar Standards Board staff to help make sure it is of real practice assistance to regulators.

Elisabeth Davies, Chair of the Legal Services Consumer Panel, said:

"Helping people in vulnerable circumstances goes to the heart of being a good lawyer and it follows that a good regulator must also be able to identify and respond effectively to consumer vulnerability. If legal regulators can get this right, lawyers will serve vulnerable clients better too."

"All regulators want to deliver effective protection for vulnerable consumers, but we know this is easier said than done. We hope our guide will push this issue up the agenda, giving legal services regulators practical support to successfully address consumer vulnerability throughout their work."

Amanda Thompson, Director of Strategy and Communications at the Bar Standards Board, said:

“The Bar Standards Board staff welcomed the opportunity to work with the Consumer Panel to road test the guide prior to publication. We were very happy to assist the Consumer Panel with the development of the guide. We found working with the Panel to be a very constructive experience and we also learned a lot in the process. The guide will form a useful addition to our regulatory toolkit, and the framework will be used as part of our policy development process in the future.”

Christine Heemskerk, Chairman of the British Standards Institute Consumer and Public Interest Network said:

“British Standards are widely respected, but only have a lasting impact if they are also widely used. I welcome the Panel’s new guide based on our standard to help legal services regulators identify, understand and respond effectively to consumer vulnerability. It sets out very clearly a series of practical steps, case studies and check lists which will help those regulators incorporate best practice into their everyday work.”

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For more information, contact Harriet Gamper, Consumer Panel Associate, on 020 7271 0076.

Notes to editors

1. The Legal Services Consumer Panel was established under the Legal Services Act 2007 to provide independent advice to the Legal Services Board about the interests of consumers of legal services in England and Wales. We investigate issues that affect consumers and use this information to influence decisions about the regulation of legal services.
2. One of the Panel’s core themes is addressing the needs of vulnerable consumers.
3. The guide and supporting documents can be accessed here:
<http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/ourwork/consumersriskofdisadvantage.html>