

**Not to be used before 00:01 hours, 7 February 2012**

## **COMPARISON WEBSITES SHOULD ADOPT VOLUNTARY STANDARDS TO BUILD CONSUMER TRUST**

Comparison websites could help improve access to legal advice and stimulate greater competition on price and quality grounds, but they should commit to voluntary standards in order to avoid problems that have hit other markets – this is the finding of a new report released today by the Legal Services Consumer Panel.

The researchers visited 16 comparison websites posing as consumers looking to make a will and arrange conveyancing. The websites were measured against 20 good practice standards identified by the Panel. The main findings were as follows:

- 8 out of 10 search requests for a simple will made using referral websites did not get responses from lawyers; in conveyancing this was 5 out of 10 – this is likely to be because lawyers felt these cases were not worthwhile commercially;
- Encouragingly, no evidence of commercial influence on the presentation of information in ways that sought to unfairly manipulate consumer choice;
- Mixed results on transparency around ownership, funding streams and on market coverage, which we inferred from search results was often low;
- Mixed results around pricing – there was some evidence of good practice, but often websites, and sometimes different providers on the same website, priced their services in different ways making comparisons difficult; and
- Poor performance around use of personal information – users’ personal details are often being passed to third parties without consent, whilst opting out of receiving unsolicited marketing can sometimes prove impossible.

The report also looked at the barriers facing the emergence of comparison websites based on interviews with industry. One practical barrier identified is a lack of access to professional registers held by approved regulators, meaning that comparison websites cannot obtain, in a usable form, basic information about lawyers, such as their contact details and areas of specialism. The report recommends that approved regulators open up their professional registers for this and other purposes.

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

*“Comparison websites are a welcome new feature in legal services as they could make it easier for consumers to choose lawyers and boost competition. But experience in other sectors has shown there are also risks – we are calling on website operators to demonstrate their commitment to consumer protection by signing up to some common sense good practice standards.*

*“It’s staggering that so many lawyers are refusing leads generated through comparison websites. Consumers are unlikely to use these services again if they get turned away – it’s a massive own goal by the profession.*

*“There are a series of hurdles that comparison websites need to overcome before they are a major influence on consumer choice. Approved regulators could help break down these barriers by opening up their professional registers so that the websites can provide basic information to consumers about the different services offered by law firms.”*

**-ends-**

**For more information, contact Steve Brooker, Consumer Panel Manager, on 020 7271 0077.**

### **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. The report examined four types of comparison website:
  - Directories – listings of providers who may pay a basic fee to be listed or a larger fee for an enhanced listing;
  - Feedback websites – allow previous clients to provide feedback on their experience for others to read, often incorporating a scoring mechanism such as a star rating;
  - Referral websites – the website collects basic information about the consumer’s needs and passes the lead to one or more subscribing providers; and
  - Price comparison websites – allow consumers to instantly compare and make a choice between subscribing providers against defined search criteria such as price and quality.
3. The research involved interviews with website operators and other industry participants, plus a small mystery shopping exercise to test the draft standards.
4. The report and draft standards are published on our website here:  
[http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/publications/research\\_and\\_reports/index.html](http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/publications/research_and_reports/index.html).