



## Consumer Panel Briefing – Accreditation schemes

### What is the issue?

Lawyers may apply to be members of accreditation schemes as a way of demonstrating to consumers that they meet specific quality standards or have specialist expertise. These are one form of ‘choice tool’ which consumers can use to help them make informed decisions about which provider to use and know exactly what they can expect from their lawyer. Accreditation schemes should deliver standards above the minimum required by regulators. They exist in areas like conveyancing, will-writing, personal injury and family law.

### What the Panel has done

In November 2011, the Panel produced a report on 13 accreditation schemes. We assessed them against ten essential characteristics schemes should demonstrate in order to have the trust and confidence of consumers. The characteristics were grouped under three headings:

- Scheme operation, such as entry requirements and ongoing competence checks
- Consumer information and feedback, such as consumer facing publications and complaints processes
- Scheme development, such as review processes and lay input.

In our assessment we found many instances of good practice, but also weaknesses in some areas. For example, many schemes performed well in relation to entry requirements and reaccreditation but there were few practical checks on competence, little lay input into the design and operation of schemes, and minimal collection and use of consumer feedback.

We were asked to revisit the issue by the Legal Services Board in 2013 and review progress. We published our progress report in April 2014.

We found much progress has been made by schemes but there is still a long way to go. The inward-facing elements of schemes (such as entry and re-accreditation requirements) which performed well in 2011 continue to be strong. The consumer-facing elements (such as an accessible complaints and feedback process, use of lay input, and incorporating consumer needs and views) were the areas which performed less well in 2011. While these areas had improved, there is still room for further improvement.

## What is the Consumer Panel doing about it?

Our 2011 report led to some immediate action by accreditation schemes to address weaknesses identified by our analysis. For example, we pointed out that the Law Society had not appeared to remove anyone from any of its accreditation schemes over the previous five years. Following publication of the report the Law Society revoked the membership of 200 members of its accreditation schemes who no longer fitted the scheme criteria.

The Legal Services Board endorsed our 10 standards and accepted the recommendations in our report. This included that accreditation schemes should carry out a self-assessment against the standards and make the necessary changes.

Our 2014 report recommends that further work is done on the consumer-facing elements of schemes. Independent validation of schemes is something which should be explored further as it may increase consumer confidence in the schemes. And we think communication between schemes and the approved regulators and the Legal Ombudsman is another area which could be further improved. The Panel will hold bilateral meetings with scheme operators on these points throughout 2014 to try to drive further improvements.

### For more information:

[Consumer Panel, Voluntary quality schemes in legal services, November 2011](#)

[Consumer Panel, Assessment of selected voluntary quality schemes, November 2011](#)

[Consumer Panel, Accreditation Schemes, Progress Report, April 2014](#)

## About the Legal Services Consumer Panel

The Legal Services Consumer Panel is a central feature of a regulatory framework in England and Wales which is designed to transform the legal services market around the needs of its users. Created by the Legal Services Act 2007 we are an independent arm of the Legal Services Board. As a permanent, discrete champion for consumers we have an essential responsibility to ensure that regulators are able to consider and act on the user perspective.

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