

Understanding consumer experiences of conveyancing legal services

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Background

Conveyancing is one of the most common legal services people use in their lifetime, with more than one million homes bought and sold every year in the UK.¹ [\[#n1\]](#)

However, there are some concerns about the conduct of some solicitors and the quality of service they are providing, with high proportions of insurance claims² [\[#n2\]](#) and complaints to the Legal Ombudsman relating to conveyancing.³ [\[#n3\]](#) There are also increasing risks for users of conveyancing services, as technology enables cybercrime and mortgage fraud.

The Government has acknowledged these problems and has committed to reforming the conveyancing process, to make it cheaper, faster and less stressful.⁴ [\[#n4\]](#) The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) also has concerns that poor transparency about price, service and quality is having a negative impact on consumer choice and competition.⁵ [\[#n5\]](#)

Open all [\[#\]](#)

Summary

We commissioned IFF Research to conduct independent research involving 1,501 people who had bought or sold a property during the previous two years. The research explored people's experiences at each stage of the process, from how they found and chose their solicitor and their satisfaction with the service, to how they thought technology could improve services in the future.

The research found that 76 percent of legal service users were satisfied with the service they received from their conveyancing solicitor. However, it has also identified several areas where improvements could be made.

One key area for improvement the research highlighted was the need to provide people with better information throughout the conveyancing legal process, from the point when they are shopping around all the way through to when the transaction is completed. This information is particularly important for first time buyers and sellers, and for transactions that need specific detailed advice, such as leasehold purchases.

Key findings

Finding and choosing their solicitor

We have found there is an appetite for shopping around, including using comparison websites, particularly among first-time buyers and sellers. But there is a lack of information on price and description of services on firm websites, as well as limited information on regulation and consumer protections.

This is currently obstructing people's ability to fully research and compare providers, so informed decision making difficult.

- 55% of people rely on recommendations to choose their solicitor, the most common being from estate agents (27%) and friends, family or colleagues (25%).
- 40% of all people surveyed were aware of comparison websites for legal services providers. Of these, approximately 1 in 3 used one to compare conveyancing providers.
- First-time buyers and sellers were more likely to have found their solicitor through recommendation (64% compared to 51% with previous experience).
- Cost (87%) and being a conveyancing specialist (81%) were the most important factors that influenced which solicitor people chose.

Previous SRA research

[<https://www.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/research/price-transparency-conveyancing-market.pdf?version=4a1ac3>] into price transparency found that the vast majority of firms do not advertise price information, and only 15 percent of people were able to obtain prices without having to contact a solicitor directly.

Information and communication

- One in five people did not think their solicitor provided a clear explanation of the legal process, a figure that rises to two out of five among first time buyers and sellers.
- One out of three of people did not remember receiving information on how to complain.

- One out of five of people who had bought a leasehold property did not remember being provided with any information on the length of lease, service charges and other payments, such as ground rent.

Quality of service

- Over three quarters of people were 'very satisfied' (46%) or 'quite satisfied' (30%) with their solicitor's service. This compared with 14% who were dissatisfied.
- People were satisfied with the service because of speed and efficiency (25%) and because their solicitor was easy to contact and kept them updated (14%).
- People were dissatisfied because their solicitor was slow and inefficient (37%), communicated poorly and did not keep them updated (22%) or made mistakes (17%). Mistakes typically related to drafting of contracts or errors in the property's title.

Complaints and redress

- 9% of all survey respondents made a complaint to the firm about their service. This equates to just over one-quarter (26%) of respondents who said they were dissatisfied. This low rate may be linked to the fact that less than a third of people recalled being given information on how to complain in the first place.
- First time buyers and sellers were more likely to complain (20% compared to 5% with previous experience).
- Mistakes made by the solicitor in legal documents or invoices and poor customer service, particularly communication, were the main reasons for complaints.
- Three quarters of people received a positive outcome to their complaint from their solicitor, including committing to progress the work (27%), an explanation to allay concerns (24%) and an apology (23%).
- 14% of those who made a complaint reported that they did not receive a response. This issue was also identified in our previous research [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/how-we-work/archive/reports/first-tier-complaints/>] into solicitors' first tier complaints processes, where 20% of complainants reported not receiving a response.
- People demonstrated poor understanding of regulation in the legal services market. Some said they were unaware if their solicitor was regulated when they chose them.

Opportunities and risk of digitisation

- People recognised the benefits of digitisation and automation for conveyancing transactions and were open to the prospect of more

technology being introduced, suggesting it could 'de-mystify' the process for first timers.

- However, they also identified several risks associated with this continued move towards digitisation, including cybercrime and fraud. Information security and protecting client money are two of our priority risks for 2017/18 that we are committed to helping law firms identify and manage going forward.

How we will use this research

Our better information, more choice

[<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/consultations/consultation-listing/ltf-better-information-consultation/>] reforms include proposals for us and firms to publish more information to help people make informed choices. This includes proposals for conveyancing firms to publish prices on their website, a description of their services and information about their regulatory status and protections. This information would be available to re-publishers such as online comparison websites, as well as to the public directly.

We will use this, and other research, to inform our decisions about our reforms and help firms respond positively to the requirements.

We will continue to hold solicitors to high service standards, and take enforcement action against those who do not adhere to these. Firms can improve their service by:

- providing better information about the legal process in an accessible format
- advising fully on the buying of a leasehold property, including length of lease, ground rents and service charges
- providing information on their complaints process
- continuing to identify ways in which technology can improve their processes while mitigating against any associated risks.

We recognise that our regulation must be up to date and fit for purpose, providing public protection without hampering the growth and innovation that drives a competitive and effective conveyancing market. Through our Looking to the Future [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/future/looking-future/>] reforms we are:

- simplifying our regulatory rules and standards - getting rid of unnecessary bureaucracy and creating shorter, clearer principles and codes with a sharp focus on high professional standards reducing cost and complexity for law firms while protecting the public.
- supporting firms to provide new services in new ways that can meet consumer needs, by removing constraints and helping new thinking though

initiatives like SRA Innovate [<https://www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/innovate/sra-innovate>].

- freeing up solicitors to work where they choose, increasing public choice and access to affordable expert services.
- reducing the costs of regulation through efficiencies - overhead cost savings that can be passed on by firms to the users of legal services.

We are aiming to introduce these reforms in early 2019.

Notes

1. National Statistics: UK Property Transaction Statistics (January 2018)
2. Reflecting on Solicitors Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII): Market trends and analysis of historic claims data, SRA (2016) [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/conveyancing-legal-services/>]
3. Legal Ombudsman Complaints Data 2016-17
4. Conservative Party Manifesto 2017 – "A Conservative Government will reform and modernise the home buying process so it is more efficient and less costly"
5. Legal services market study: Final Report, Competition and Markets Authority (2016)
[<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5887374d40f0b6593700001a/legal-services-market-study-final-report.pdf>]

Infographic - Research findings