

Changing our requirements on first-tier complaints: Equality Impact Assessment

This is our final equality impact assessment (EIA) of the changes we are proposing to our requirements on first-tier complaints. We published our draft equality impact assessment as part of our public consultation, which ran from 30 May to 1 August 2025.

This final assessment has been informed by the feedback we received from that consultation exercise and the information we gathered from the focus groups and roundtables we held with consumers, consumer groups, law firms and their representatives. As well as the research referred to in our draft assessment, we have also taken into account the findings from our [thematic review of first-tier complaints handling](#), the [data we collect on first-tier complaints](#) and the [diversity data](#) we have from law firms.

The proposed changes to our requirements on first-tier complaints

The changes we are proposing to our regulatory arrangements are set out in our consultation response and our application to the Legal Services Board (LSB) for approval. These are to:

- include the LSB's definition of a complaint in the Glossary to our Standards and Regulations
- make changes to when complaints information must be provided to a client. In addition to our current requirement to provide the information on engagement, we will also require it to be provided on conclusion of a matter, on request, and if a complaint is made during the matter
- require legal services providers' complaints information to be clear, accessible and in a prominent place on their websites, if they have one.

These changes to our Standards and Regulations will apply to all firms and will also impact the consumers of legal services. We believe that the changes, with supporting guidance, will help those we regulate to meet our requirements, and improve the experience of consumers.

Impact on consumers

Legal service users, and the public more broadly, should have confidence that they can access good quality legal services, with effective avenues to raise concerns and have them resolved. Research has shown there is generally a high level of satisfaction with legal services, but there is room for improvement in first-tier complaints handling for consumers who are dissatisfied.

Our proposed changes are designed to enhance the transparency and accessibility of the complaints process for all consumers universally, and our guidance will promote inclusive communication practices.

When considering the potential impact on consumers of legal services of our proposals, we took account of users with protected characteristics and/or who are in vulnerable circumstances.

Vulnerability

As set out in our draft EIA, research indicates there are additional barriers for some consumers. This includes those who may be vulnerable as a result of their protected characteristics and those who may be vulnerable because of their circumstances. For example, our [joint research with LeO](#) in 2017 found that people whose day-to-day activities were limited by disabilities were more likely than those who were not disabled, to say they did not understand the complaints procedure or know how to complain. And [Research by Refugee Action](#) for the Bar Standards Board identified barriers for some consumers seeking immigration advice, particularly asylum seekers. These include a lack of knowledge about the right to complain and complaint processes, and a fear that a complaint would negatively impact the outcome of their application. These barriers could adversely impact those from particular ethnic groups and those who have a particular religion or belief.

The findings from our thematic review of first-tier complaints handling showed that some firms recognised the importance of supporting vulnerable clients and had a range of measures in place, but others did not. There was agreement that more guidance on supporting vulnerable clients would be welcomed.

In our consultation and engagement, there was support for the proposal for law firms to provide complaints information more regularly, in particular from consumers and consumer groups. These groups agreed there were barriers for vulnerable consumers and felt the proposal could help people to overcome them. They also supported our proposal to adopt a consistent definition of a complaint and to require complaints information to be more prominently displayed on a firm's website. Several consumer groups also urged us to consider digital inclusion. We have addressed this and the wider issues about the accessibility of first-tier complaints information below.

It will be important to ensure that the proposed requirements are implemented by law firms in a way that will make a difference to the consumers they are intended to benefit. As well as incorporating these requirements into our Standards and Regulations, we will also provide guidance for law firms to encourage and support them to:

- tailor their approach to individual needs
- identify and provide support for vulnerable clients
- provide reasonable adjustments for disabled clients
- be inclusive in all communications with clients
- be empathetic and responsive in their approach to complaints handling.

Accessibility

The importance of accessibility was raised in our consultation and engagement, highlighting a range of challenges for some consumers in accessing complaints information and making complaints. These included language barriers, digital literacy and the need for adjustments to communication methods required by some disabled or neurodivergent people.

To make sure our proposed requirements are implemented in an inclusive way we will address these issues in our proposed guidance. This will include:

- use of plain English or Welsh
- providing multiple formats for complaints information where required (for example, written, verbal, digital)

- clear signposting to complaints information and straightforward processes
- alternative channels for submitting complaints, including non-digital options.

There was no evidence to suggest that our proposals could have an adverse impact on consumers, save for the suggestion that the cost of firms complying with the additional requirements could be passed on to consumers. This might in turn have an impact on access to justice. We have addressed this in our regulatory impact assessment and our application to the LSB for approval of the proposed changes. At this stage we did not find any evidence that this would have any adverse equality impact, but we will be monitoring whether there are any unintended consequences arising from these proposed changes.

Our conclusion in relation to the potential impact on consumers is that the proposed changes could advance equality for vulnerable consumers. And for the reasons explained above, this could engage those who may be vulnerable as a result of their characteristics and those who may be vulnerable because of their circumstances. Vulnerability by circumstances could intersect with the protected characteristics depending on the nature of those circumstances. For example, evidence from research about asylum seekers could intersect with ethnicity and religion or belief.

Impact on the profession

Effective complaints handling is a key part of providing a good service and as such it is important that law firms get this right. Recognising areas for improvement is an effective way to raise service standards and improve satisfaction for clients. This will lead to increased trust and confidence in solicitors and firms.

Firms we spoke to as part of our thematic review told us that good complaints handling can create business benefits. They recognised that clients who were satisfied with the firm's handling of the complaint were more likely to re-instruct them in the future or recommend them to others. It is also an opportunity for a law firm to learn and improve their services.

However, it is clear that complaints handling can be challenging for law firms. Through our consultation and engagement, we heard concerns from the profession, that the proposed requirement to provide complaints information to clients at the end of the process might encourage more complaints, in particular more unjustified complaints.

We are aware from our analysis of first-tier complaints data that complaint numbers have been rising over time but also that a higher proportion of complaints have been resolved. Our data also tells us that it is only the very large firms which receive proportionately fewer first-tier complaints compared to the volume of their work. These firms are also more likely to resolve complaints. The data for complaints received in 2023 suggests that small firms resolve a smaller proportion of complaints than medium, large and very large firms.

As well as the concerns that our proposed changes might increase the number of complaints, some firms raised concerns about the costs of meeting the new requirements – updating their client communications, processes and websites.

These impacts are likely to be felt more keenly by smaller firms, which have fewer resources to use towards complaints handling. It is not entirely clear that the overall impact on smaller firms will be negative, as there are also potential benefits of improved complaints handling.

However, we have in any event, considered the potential equality impact if there was an adverse impact on smaller firms. To understand this, we have used insight from our firm diversity data, which shows the diversity breakdown of law firms by different sizes. The diversity profile of solicitors working in small law firms with one to five partners is as follows:

- men are overrepresented in law firms with one partner, but not in law firms with two to five partners
- Black and Asian solicitors are overrepresented in law firms with one partner and Asian solicitors are also overrepresented in law firms with two to five partners
- solicitors aged 45 and upwards are overrepresented in law firms with one to five partners
- disabled solicitors are slightly underrepresented in law firms with one partner but not in firms with two to five partners
- gay and lesbian solicitors are slightly underrepresented in law firms with one to five partners
- Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh solicitors are overrepresented in law firms with one partner and for law firms with two to five partners, Hindu and Muslims solicitors are overrepresented
- solicitors from lower or intermediate socio-economic backgrounds are overrepresented in law firms with one to five partners.

We will be monitoring the data on first-tier complaints going forward, so we can identify if there are adverse equality impacts on those groups who are overrepresented in the smallest law firms. However, we are proposing a range of steps which we believe will mitigate the impact on all firms, in particular smaller ones.

These include our plans to provide good practice examples and guidance for solicitors and firms to support them in recognising and handling complaints and how to meet our requirements in this area. The information and good practice in our thematic review will help firms improve their complaints handling process. And we are proposing to publish further guidance which will help firms with:

- clear timelines and next steps
- inclusive communication
- monitoring and evaluation firms can undertake to assess and improve their communications.

We also have plans to improve the data we have about first-tier complaints to understand the patterns seen in these complaints. This will help us in the longer term to:

- understand more about trends of complaints by practice areas and how this may interact with the diversity of the solicitors involved
- ensure that guidance reflects the realities of these intersections
- consider what more we can do to understand the experiences of and support firms working in areas with higher complaint volumes.

Conclusions

The aim of our proposals is to improve complaints handling in a way that is inclusive, accessible and proportionate, recognising the diverse needs of consumers and legal professionals. We, and the people we engaged with in our thematic review and consultation, recognise that good complaints handling can have positive benefits for consumers and for law firms.

We have considered the potential impacts on individuals with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and have identified positive impacts for consumers and vulnerable consumers, including some who may be vulnerable as a result of their characteristics.

The changes that will be required by law firms to meet the new requirements are not extensive and there is limited evidence that any additional costs which may be required, will be passed to consumers and drive-up prices.

There are positive impacts for law firms, which will need to be balanced against the potential for adverse impact on small firms if the changes do drive up the number of complaints. We have steps in place to mitigate these potential impacts, namely our proposed resources and guidance to support firms implement these changes and improve their complaints handling.

We are mindful of the regulatory burden on small firms, and the proposals represent a proportionate approach. Our guidance will offer scalable approaches suitable for firms of different sizes and support inclusive communication. We will consider tailored support or exemptions where appropriate, and we will continue to engage with representative bodies to understand and mitigate any unintended impacts.

Monitoring and evaluation

We will monitor the impact of these proposals through stakeholder engagement, compliance monitoring and evaluation exercises, ensuring that our approach remains inclusive, proportionate and aligned with the regulatory objectives.