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Dear Dianne

Consumer perspectives on quality

I am writing on behalf of the Board to request the Consumer Panel's advice about consumer perspectives on quality in the provision of legal services.

As you know, the Legal Services Act 2007 requires the Board to assist in the maintenance and development of standards in relation to the regulation, education and training of authorised persons. In addition, appropriate quality assurance mechanisms support a number of the regulatory objectives – not least protecting and promoting the interests of consumers. We are currently working with the Joint Advocacy Group and others on the development of Quality Assurance for Advocates. However, the Board is keen to explore more broadly, with approved regulators and wider stakeholders, the future development of quality assurance mechanisms and their relationship with regulatory requirements

As a first step in this work on quality assurance, we would like to build a greater understanding about the interests and needs of consumers in relation to quality assurance. In particular, we would like advice about:

- The way that consumers perceive and judge the quality of legal services (both in selecting providers and retrospectively once they have received the service).
- Consumers' perceptions of the validity and utility of existing or potential future quality marks (for example Law Society accreditation schemes or Queen's Counsel) in assisting in the selection of legal services providers – both in relation to "traditional" face-to-face services and through online or other new access to justice routes.

- How consumers might want to see such schemes develop in future and how they think quality assurance schemes should relate to regulation (for example should some be mandatory for those undertaking particular types of work).

To support the provision of this advice we would like to fund some independent qualitative research to inform the Panel's advice. Whilst it will be for the Panel to reflect on the scope of the research once it has had time to consider the request, our initial thoughts were that it might be designed to capture three broad themes:

- What consumers understand and assume about the quality of legal service providers, and how this is factored into their choice of legal adviser.
- How consumers judge the quality of legal services and the value of specific quality marks as part of this process.
- Whether consumers find it important and/or desirable to have specific quality signals in relation to legal advisers, or whether they expect or prefer 'others', such as regulators, to be checking quality for them.

We are aware that although research generally finds that consumers welcome more information, in practice the provision of such information is found to have little impact on consumer decision making. Therefore, in examining these questions, we are interested in getting beyond typical consumer responses that the provision of more information is desirable in order to really understand what consumers assume about the quality of the legal service providers and the most useful ways of assisting them in making future choices in legal service providers.

I know that Steve and Alanna have already been working informally with Alex Roy on a research specification, so we would hope that it should be possible to appoint a researcher during July. It would be helpful to have the Panel's advice by the end of November 2010.

Thank you in anticipation for the Panel's input to this important project.

Yours sincerely



Chris Kenny
Chief Executive

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