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ACTIVITY REPORT: JANUARY-MARCH 2012

Overview

We published a report on comparison websites which explored the barriers to establishing these and mystery shopped a selection of websites against good practice standards developed by us. This found a mixed picture: whilst there was no evidence of commercial influence on the presentation of information, there was often low transparency around ownership, funding and market coverage, and widespread poor practice in respect of use of personal information.

We published research on the legal needs and experience of deaf and hard of hearing consumers jointly commissioned from the Deaf Studies Trust with the SRA and Action on Hearing Loss. Consumers felt like they were in a battle for understanding with their own advisors and there was evidence of a lack of deaf awareness in the profession. The SRA is to publish new guidelines for solicitors and Action on Hearing Loss is to publish tips for consumers. The Panel has written to the EHRC to urge clarity on who should pay for sign language interpreters.

We provided advice to the LSB on the need to regulate probate and estate administration services alongside will-writing. We said that regulation was justified due to the risk of fraud and the severity of detriment that can result from overcharging and poor service.

The Panel met twice in this period. The meeting in January decided on work priorities for 2012-13, considered the deaf consumers research and agreed our response to the LSB's call for evidence on will-writing, probate and estate administration. An additional meeting was held in February to agree the final work programme document and discuss ways of working as a Panel.

Update on planned projects

Project	Activity
Comparison websites	Report published in February
Special bodies	LSB to publish consultation in April
Vulnerable consumers	Deaf consumers research findings published in March
Will-writing	Final submission to LSB call for evidence on will-writing, probate and estate administration published in March

Update on unplanned work

We made a series of consultation responses:

- Ministry of Justice call for evidence on the Triennial Reviews of the LSB and OLC (March)
- LSB call for evidence on will-writing, probate and estate administration (March)
- BSB consultation on its public access rules (February)
- SRA consultation on regulating international practice (February)
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' consultation on new EU proposals on Alternative Dispute Resolution (January)
- Legal Ombudsman's consultation on its 2012-2015 Strategy and 2012-2013 Business Plan (January)

Neil Wightman spoke at one of the LSB seminars to support the Legal Education and Training Review, in particular focusing on the need to introduce periodic revalidation for lawyers. Elisabeth Davies presented to the Law Society's Regulatory Affairs Board.

Alanna Linn left us in February to return home to Australia. A new Consumer Panel Associate, Harriet Gamper, has been appointed and will start work on 14 May.

Future activity

The Panel will start projects in its 2012-13 work programme. The focus will be on scoping projects, but an early output will be to publish the findings of the second Tracker Survey. This is an annual survey of the general population and recent users which informs the Consumer Impact Report.

Consultation activity will include responses to the LSB's consultations on: immigration advice and services; the quality assurance toolkit; regulating non-commercial bodies; and proposals for regulating will-writing, probate and estate administration services. We will also set out our expectations for the Legal Education and Training Review by responding to the call for evidence. We will respond to the Legal Ombudsman's consultation on its scheme rules and publish alongside this a discussion paper on third party complaints. We also plan to respond to the BSB's consultation on its new code of conduct.

The annual report for 2011-12 will be presented to the Board at its 30 May meeting.

Elisabeth Davies will present at the SRA's symposium on the scope of regulation and is a panellist at the LSB's final seminar in Cardiff to support the Legal Education and Training Review.

Steve Brooker
April 2012