

**LEGAL SERVICES COMPLAINTS COMMISSIONER AND THE LAW SOCIETY
ANNOUNCE AGREEMENT OF A PLAN AND TARGETS**

In May, the Legal Services Complaints Commissioner, Zahida Manzoor CBE, announced that she would be levying a penalty of a quarter of a million pounds on the Law Society. This was because the Law Society had submitted a plan that was inadequate for securing improvements to its complaints handling services for 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007.

Today, the Commissioner reported that a new plan for 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 had been agreed with the Law Society. The Commissioner said:

“Following productive discussions between myself and the Law Society, I am pleased to announce that we have today agreed a new plan aimed at bringing about improvements to the Law Society’s complaints handling service. If implemented, this will mean a better complaints handling service for consumers and the legal profession alike. The Law Society has moved on a number of the targets it felt unable to include in its original plan, and achievement of these revised targets should ensure that complaints are handled more quickly and to a higher quality. I recognise the work of the Consumer Complaints Board in making this happen.”

In particular, the Commissioner noted that the Law Society had agreed to work to a target that consumers will receive a substantive response to their complaint within 55 days with immediate effect. This was a great improvement on the Law Society’s earlier position, which would have seen it aim for 58 days by the end of March 2007. She said:

“In recognition of the Law Society’s positive approach to discussions with me and its submission of this revised plan, I have decided to reduce the penalty I levied earlier this year by £30,000.”

Also today, the Commissioner announced her decision on the Law Society’s performance against its Plan for 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006. Ms Manzoor announced that the Law

Society has failed to handle complaints in accordance with its Plan, but that she will not be levying a penalty for this failure. She said:

“Of the three targets the Law Society did meet, it exceeded them, and on six of the seven targets, the Law Society has improved compared to last year. For example, over 1,000 more consumers had their complaint closed within six months compared to last year. Its complaints handling operation is, in parts, a more efficient and better performing operation since my office was created and progress was certainly made this last year.”

Professor Shamit Saggur, Chair of the Consumer Complaints Board said:

“It is gratifying that the Legal Services Complaints Commissioner has recognised the achievements of the last year against what was for the Law Society an ambitious plan. Her office has further encouraged the Consumer Complaints Service to build upon the service improvements it has achieved during recent years.

“The Consumer Complaints Service met a number of its targets and improved in every area of its business. The Consumer Complaints Board and the Commissioner are collaborating closely and agreement of a stretching plan for 2006/07 is an excellent basis for the CCS to build on the improvements of the past.

“We also thank her for recognising the achievements of the Consumer Complaints Board in steering the Consumer Complaints Service towards delivering a truly consumer-centric service. This is an excellent start to preparing for the establishment of the Office for Legal Complaints. We look forward to continuing to work constructively with the Commissioner to deliver a better service to consumers comparable with the best organisations in the complaints handling field.”

Fiona Woolf, Law Society President, said:

"I am pleased that Zahida Manzoor and the Consumer Complaints Service have agreed a plan for the next twelve months. A constructive relationship can only contribute to the delivery of exemplary levels of service for consumers making the most of the Law Society's significant investment in complaints handling."

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. Ms Manzoor CBE was appointed Legal Services Complaints Commissioner in February 2004 in addition to her role as Legal Services Ombudsman (LSO). The Commissioner only has powers in relation to the Law Society of England and Wales. Ms Manzoor was reappointed as both Commissioner and LSO for a period of three years in March 2006.
2. The roles of the LSO and the Commissioner are distinct. The LSO examines the handling of individual complaints by the legal professional bodies on behalf of members of the public. The Commissioner examines the Law Society's capability to handle complaints made about its members efficiently and effectively.
3. The Commissioner has the power under section 52 of the Access to Justice Act 1999 to require the Law Society to provide information on how it deals with complaints, to make recommendations about the complaints system, to set targets for complaints handling, and require the Law Society to submit a plan for improved complaints handling. In addition, the Commissioner has the power to levy a penalty on the Law Society if it fails to deliver an adequate plan or fails in the delivery of that plan.
4. The targets set by the Commissioner and contained in the Law Society's Plan for the period 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006 included the following:

Improving timeliness – to close at least:

- 53% of complaints within 3 months – the Law Society achieved 55%
- 75% of complaints within 6 months – the Law Society achieved 77%
- 85% of complaints within 9 months – the Law Society achieved 86%
- 92% of complaints within 12 months – the Law Society achieved 91%
- 98% of complaints within 18 months – the Law Society achieved 95%

Improving customer satisfaction (with service)

- 68% or more complainants to be satisfied with the handling of their complaint by the Law Society. The Law Society achieved 61%.

Improving the quality of decisions

- 70% or more of referrals to the Legal Services Ombudsman result in the Law Society's handling of the case being upheld. The Law Society achieved 67%.
5. On 30 September 2005 the Commissioner formally requested a plan from the Law Society, setting out how it would deliver improvements in its complaints handling service in the period 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007. The Commissioner also set targets covering the areas: quality of decisions, timeliness and implementation of its Plan.
 6. The Law Society's final plan for the period 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 submitted to the Commissioner on 10 March 2006, did not include all of the targets which the Commissioner set. On 31 March 2006 the Commissioner declared that this plan was inadequate and as a result that she would be considering whether to impose a penalty, and if so, in what sum. The maximum penalty that can be imposed is the lower of £1 million and 1% of the annual income of the Law Society. Following Law Society representation on this issue the Commissioner announced that she would be levying a penalty of a quarter of a million pounds.

7. On 27 July 2006 the Law Society provided the Commissioner with a new plan for 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007. This plan featured revised targets from the plan originally submitted by the Law Society, including those listed below.

Improving the speed with which complaints are handled by the Law Society

In its original plan the Law Society included a target that by the end of March 2007, it would have no more than 350 cases in its caseload that have been open for 15 months or more. In its new plan the Law Society has revised this to 65 cases.

Improving the quality of complaints handling by the Law Society

The Law Society has agreed a more stretching target for sending out letters to consumers setting out the main points of their complaint. It has agreed to send out these responses to consumers more quickly, and to do this from now rather than by the end of the year as it had originally proposed. In its original plan, the Law Society included a target that by the end of the financial year, March 2007, 80% of the cases audited by the Commissioner's Office should have received a substantive response within 58 calendar days of receipt of the complaint. In its new plan, the Law Society revised this to 80% of substantive responses sent between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007 should be received within 55 days.

Clearing older cases

In its original plan the Law Society included a target to clear 92% of its cases within 12 months. It has now revised this to ensure that 94% of people who lodged their complaint a year ago will have had it concluded.

8. Additional background information on the Commissioner's decisions, and text from the letters notifying the Law Society, will be available on the Commissioner's website shortly, www.olsc.gov.uk.
9. For enquiries please contact Marie Craven, tel: 0113 2615446.

ENDS