



**Zahida Manzoor CBE**  
Commissioner

**PRESS NOTICE**

**22 NOVEMBER 2006**

## **LAW SOCIETY'S COMPLAINTS HANDLING STILL SELLING CONSUMERS SHORT**

The Legal Services Complaints Commissioner, Zahida Manzoor CBE, has today released the findings of the 2006 Annual Case File Audit of the Law Society's performance in the handling of consumer complaints about solicitors conducted by her office.

The Commissioner was pleased to see that the audit found some improvements in the Law Society's approach in some areas compared to last year's audit. Particularly in how quickly it deals with cases by reducing delay from an average of 95 days to 65 days this year, which the Commissioner said is "a move in the right direction".

However, results show that complaints handling is still falling short of what consumers should expect. The audit shows that the Law Society is not consistently adhering to its own policies and customer standards when dealing with complaints.

Four key areas were highlighted by the audit. The first of the areas show that in only 51% of cases was guidance on levels of financial redress shared with the consumer.

The Commissioner stated:

"The Law Society needs to improve this to ensure consumers are aware of the different levels of financial redress available to them in order to make an informed judgement before accepting an offer of compensation."

The Annual Casefile Audit also found that only 10% of initial letters issued to consumers contained all the information required; such as informing the consumer that their complaint will be copied to the solicitor they are complaining about.

Speaking about this, the Commissioner said:

“It is imperative that consumers have as much information as early as possible in order to make the right decisions for their case. I am disappointed to see such a poor performance in this area.”

The audit findings also show that Law Society caseworkers are not setting deadlines as often as they should when solicitors fail to respond to letters on time.

The Commissioner added:

“I am concerned that Law Society caseworkers are not sufficiently robust in their dealings with solicitors who fail to respond to letters on time. I wrote to the Law Society about this issue in September 2004 and despite assurances that it was making improvements, it is clear that my recommendations have not been implemented.

“It cannot be right that the Law Society is giving solicitors several deadlines to respond regarding the complaint made against them. This contributes to excessive delays experienced by the consumer and needs to be addressed by the Law Society.”

And finally, the handling of special payments to consumers for distress and inconvenience caused by the Law Society when it has itself failed to handle complaints in an effective and efficient manner has deteriorated. Only 69% of payments were made in line with Law Society policy in 2006 compared to 84% in 2005.

The Commissioner will be building on the findings of the Annual Casefile Audit in her discussions with the Law Society when setting its targets for improvement for 2007/08.

## Notes to Editors

1. Ms Manzoor CBE was appointed Legal Services Complaints Commissioner (the 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. In August 2006, the Commissioner's Research and Investigations team completed its 2006 Annual Case File Audit, which looks at the Law Society's performance in the handling of consumer complaints about solicitors.
4. A total of 516 casefiles were audited out of a total closed figure of 3158 and the sample was drawn from files closed in June and July 2006. Files were selected to be representative of the profile of case closures over the specified period and therefore ranged in age from a few months to a number of years. The sample of files was broken down into 287 service cases and 229 conduct cases.
5. The Law Society's internal guidelines state that the content of the opening letter to the consumer must contain:
  - Advice about who will deal with their complaint together with their full contact details;
  - Details of when their allocated caseworker can be contacted by telephone;
  - A brief explanation of the Law Society powers and processes;
  - Advice on the internal complaints procedure;
  - Advice that their complaint may be copied to the solicitor.
6. The full audit report is published on the Commissioner's website [www.olsccl.gov.uk](http://www.olsccl.gov.uk)
7. For enquiries please contact Marie Craven, tel: 0113 2615446.

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