

Choosing a solicitor

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Every year, people like you need help or advice from a solicitor. We at the Legal Complaints Service know, from dealing with legal complaints, what can sometimes go wrong. We have produced this guide to help you choose the right solicitor at the start so that you get the service you expect and the support you need.

How do I find a solicitor?

If you need a solicitor and do not already have one, the Law Society of England and Wales can help you find one.

If you have access to the internet you can use the Law Society's online search facility to find a solicitor (www.solicitors-online.com). Or you can call the Law Society on 0870 606 6575 (this costs 8p a minute from a fixed landline but more if you call on a mobile phone). The Law Society cannot recommend firms of solicitors but it can give you information about the firms in your area which meet your needs.

You can also get the names of solicitors in your area from your local citizens advice bureau or other advice centres. You can find your local citizens advice bureau in Yellow Pages or on the website at www.citizensadvice.org.uk. Solicitors are also listed in Yellow Pages.

You might find it useful to ask friends and family if they have used a solicitor and whether they would recommend who they used.

How do I choose a solicitor?

There are a number of things to think about when choosing a solicitor. Once you have found a solicitor in your area who deals with your type of problem or with the kind of work you need help with, phone them and ask

them for a 'first interview'. Some firms may offer a first meeting or interview for free or for a fixed fee - make sure you ask them what the fee for the first interview or meeting is before you arrange it. The first meeting may be short but it should give you enough information to decide whether you want to go ahead with that particular firm or whether you need to look again.

How much will it cost?

Many people worry about how much a solicitor will cost. Every firm charges differently and the cost depends on the solicitor's experience as well as how complicated the work is. You might like to call a few firms and tell them what you need them to do to get a rough idea of what they would charge. If you have a first meeting with the firm, ask about the likely costs before you decide whether to go ahead.

You may qualify for help with legal costs - this is called legal aid. For more information, please see the section 'How do I pay for legal services?'. If you think you might qualify for financial help through the legal aid scheme, you will need to use a firm who provide legal aid.

You shouldn't decide to use a firm based only on costs - the cheapest may not always be the best. You should also consider other things like:

- where the firm is based (you might have to travel to their office for a meeting);
- whether they can meet your needs (for example, can they provide an interpreter if English is not your first language);
- their experience in the type of case you are asking them to work on for you; and
- whether you feel you will be able to get on with the solicitor.

We have given a bit more information about this below.

Where the solicitor is based

Having a solicitor who is based near to where you live is convenient, especially if you are elderly, ill or have a disability. However, using a firm near where you live may limit the number of firms you can use. Sometimes solicitors may be willing to visit you at home if you find travelling difficult - you can ask this when you phone the firms. If you are happy to deal with the firm by e-mail or in writing then you could decide to use a firm which is not based close to where you live, which will give you more choice.

The solicitor's past experience

Many solicitors offer a wide range of legal services. However, some firms specialise in particular areas of law. When you search for a solicitor, find out what each firm specialises in before you phone them.

Meeting your needs

If you have extra needs (for example, if English is not your first language), you should mention this when trying to arrange your first appointment. Sometimes, firms can provide an interpreter at meetings if you give them enough time to arrange this.

The Law Society's online search facility (www.solicitors-online.com) shows firms that have wheelchair access and who provide services in languages other than English.

The solicitor's personality

It is important to have confidence in your solicitor from the start, so you need to choose someone you can trust. You may be able to judge from the first phone call or first meeting with the solicitor whether you are satisfied

that you can work together. If you are not confident at this stage, it might be worthwhile going somewhere else.

How do I pay for legal services?

At your first meeting with the solicitor, he or she should:

- tell you how they work out their costs; and
- give you an estimate of how much they will charge to deal with your case.

You need to think about how you will pay for your case.

Free help

You might be entitled to free legal help under the legal aid scheme which is run by the Legal Services Commission (LSC). The LSC is responsible for:

- the Community Legal Service, which can help with your legal costs if you have a dispute with a person or an organisation; and
- the Criminal Defence Service which can help with costs and advice and can provide somebody to represent you if you have been charged with committing a crime.

To get this help, you must use a firm or advice agency who provide legal aid.

Do I qualify for free help in a civil case?

To get free legal advice and help in civil cases (where you have a dispute with a person or an organisation), your case needs to be covered by the legal aid scheme. Whether they will be able to help you will also depend on how much money you have and how much you earn.

The Community Legal Service's website (www.clsdirect.org.uk) has a legal aid calculator which can help you see if you would get legal aid. Or, you could call their helpline on 0845 345 4345.

Do I qualify for free help in a criminal case?

If you need legal advice and help in criminal cases (where you have been accused of committing a crime), whether you qualify will depend on how much money you have and how much you are earning.

What about 'no win, no fee' arrangements?

These arrangements are sometimes called 'conditional fee' agreements. For certain types of work, a solicitor may work on a 'no win, no fee' basis. If you win, the solicitor's fees will be paid by the other side. If you lose, you don't have to pay the solicitor's fees. However, it's important to remember that there is more to the costs of legal cases than just the solicitor's costs. If you lose you might have to pay:

- the other side's costs; and
- your own and the other side's disbursements (disbursements are other expenses that have been paid, such as expert witnesses' fees).

However, you can take out insurance to cover these payments in case you lose. Ask your solicitor to explain more about this if you are planning to have this type of agreement.

For information about what you can expect from your solicitor during the case, please read our Working with your solicitor leaflet. You can read this on our website www.legalcomplaints.org.uk or phone us on 0845 608 6565 and we will send you a copy.

Useful contacts

Legal Complaints Service

Victoria Court
8 Dormer Place
Leamington Spa
Warwickshire
CV32 5AE

Phone: 01926 820082
Helpline: 0845 608 6565
Minicom: 0845 601 1682
Fax: 01926 431435
Website: www.legalcomplaints.org.uk
E-mail: enquiries@legalcomplaints.org.uk

The Law Society of England and Wales

113 Chancery Lane
London
WC2A 1PL

Phone: 020 7242 1222
Phone (to find a solicitor): 0870 606 2555
Website: www.lawsociety.org.uk
Website (to find a solicitor):
www.solicitors-online.com

Legal Services Commission

85 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8TX

Community Legal Service Helpline: 0845 345 4345
Website: www.legalservices.gov.uk
www.clsdirect.org.uk

Citizens Advice

Myddleton House
115 to 123 Pentonville Road
London
N1 9LZ

Phone: 020 7833 2181
Website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk
www.adviceguide.org.uk

Legal Complaints Service

Victoria Court
8 Dormer Place
Leamington Spa
Warwickshire CV32 5AE
Dx 292320 Leamington Spa 4

Switchboard: 01926 820082
Helpline: 0845 608 6565
Minicom: 0845 601 1682
Fax: 01926 431435
Web: www.legalcomplaints.org.uk
Email: enquiries@legalcomplaints.org.uk