



Most of us will seek legal advice at some stage in our lives. The Law Society aims to make this process as easy and straightforward as possible. To do this, we offer access, through our website or helpline, to a database of solicitors in England and Wales and a wealth of information on legal issues. We have also published a Client's Charter, which sets out standards of service and administrative procedures for legal professionals to follow. This is with one aim: to help you get the most from your solicitor.

Janet Paraskeva
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, THE LAW SOCIETY

Choosing a solicitor

Finding a list of solicitors in your area is easy using the Law Society's helpline or website. Call 0870 606 6575 or visit www.solicitors-online.com to start your search, but think carefully about what type of service you need. Here are just some of the issues you should consider:

What sort of legal help do I need?

A firm of solicitors may offer services in a wide range of legal subjects, although more and more individual solicitors are specialising in only one or two subjects. If your usual firm of solicitors cannot help you with all your needs, they will be happy to refer you to another solicitor. Or, if you prefer, they can get the advice of a specialist on your behalf.

How can I be sure they are qualified to help me?

All solicitors in private practice must hold a practising certificate issued by the Law Society. This guarantees that the solicitor is qualified to practise and has insurance to protect you if anything goes wrong. If you want to be sure, ask to see the certificate (which should be on display in your solicitor's office) or contact the Law Society to check.

You can also ask your solicitor whether the firm has received any quality awards to prove that they have good standards of practice in place. If the firm has received the Law Society's 'Lexcel' quality award, the Law Society will be able to confirm this.

Individual solicitors might also be members of 'Quality assured panels' set up by the Law Society to cover a number of legal subjects. To be asked to join these panels, solicitors must show that they have considerable specialist knowledge. You can find a list of panel members on the Law Society's website.

Where is the firm based?

Where a firm is based is obviously an issue of convenience, particularly for elderly, sick or disabled people. Do you need to use a firm that is close to where you live? If so, this will narrow your search. Some solicitors are happy to visit you at home, so if you find travelling difficult, it's well worth asking about this.

Do they do legal aid work?

If you are on a low income or receiving benefits, you may be eligible for legal aid. You can find this out by contacting your nearest Citizens' Advice Bureau or Law Centre. As some firms do legal aid work and some do not, if you are eligible for this kind of funding, you will need to narrow your search to firms that do. There is a list of these available on the Community Legal Service website at www.justask.org.uk

Legal aid is managed by The Legal Services Commission, which makes sure that all solicitors' firms that offer legal aid meet high quality standards.



Do they work on a conditional fee basis?

For certain types of case, including personal injury, your solicitor may be prepared to work on a conditional fee basis. This is more commonly known as a 'no win, no fee' arrangement. If you win the case, your solicitor's fees will mostly be paid by the other side. If you lose, you do not have to pay your solicitor's fees. You may be asked to take out an insurance policy to pay for the other side's costs if you lose. There are various types of conditional fee arrangement, but not all solicitors firms are prepared to work on this basis.

Will they be sympathetic?

If you need to see a solicitor about a personal matter, such as a relationship breakdown, you will want to choose someone who makes you feel comfortable. Most solicitors will be sympathetic and understanding if you are distressed, but you may prefer to deal with someone who is the same sex as you. Don't be afraid to say that this is what you want.

Will they speak my language?

If English is not your first language, you should mention this when you are trying to find a solicitor. If enough warning is given, a firm can arrange for an interpreter to be present at your meetings.

Making an appointment

Once you have found a suitable firm, you need to make an appointment. Let them know if there's anyone you need to bring to the meeting with you and ask if you should bring any documents with you, such as proof of identity or income.

Be prepared

The more preparation you do before the meeting, the more you'll get out of it. Make a list of the main points you want to make or the questions you want to ask. Get together any paperwork that is relevant and put it in some kind of order so you can refer to it quickly. This will make it quicker and easier for your solicitor to understand your circumstances and give you proper advice.

At the meeting

Check how long the meeting will last so that you don't suddenly find that 'time is up' before you've made all your points. Have your notes in front of you, tick off each point as it is covered, and don't be afraid to ask if anything is said that you do not understand.

Finally, ask your solicitor to send you a letter after the meeting to summarise the advice you've been given, and confirm the following details.

- That he or she has taken on the work.
- The name of the person in the firm who will be dealing with your case day to day.
- The amount of time the firm will need to see your case through.
- An estimate of costs and any agreed spending limit.
- Any more information you need to supply.

Solicitors' charges

Legal advice, like anything else you buy, costs money, but its value can be enormous. Charges vary between solicitors, and will depend on the expertise and experience of the individual solicitor as well as how complicated the work is.

Before making a decision about which firm to use, you may want to 'shop around'. Decide on what sort of solicitor you need to speak to and get quotes from several. Many solicitors charge little or nothing for a short first interview. It is worth asking.

However, price is not the only thing you have to consider. Above all, try to find a solicitor who you are comfortable with and whose advice you feel you understand.

Fixed or hourly rate?

Solicitors don't always charge a fixed fee for a particular job. The bill will often be worked out on an hourly basis, so the longer it takes, the more it costs. A solicitor must give you a cost estimate at the outset, usually at the first interview.

If an hourly rate is quoted, you may want to agree a fixed spending limit. If the costs look likely to go over this limit your solicitor will contact you to warn you and get your agreement to continue.

Keeping in touch

Once you have appointed a solicitor, they must consult you at every important stage, to check how you want to proceed. Similarly, you need to tell your solicitor about any changes to your personal circumstances which could affect the case. This includes any changes in your financial position which could alter your eligibility for legal aid.

Customer service

Everyone is entitled to expect a certain standard of service from their solicitor. This is why the Law Society has produced 'the Client's Charter' - a set of principles of customer care for solicitors. You can get a copy of this by visiting the Law Society's website at www.lawsociety.org.uk

Your guide to

using a solicitor



The Law Society

More information

This is one of a series of leaflets produced by The Law Society. Other leaflets in the series are listed below. You can get them from your solicitor or by phoning the Law Society on 0870 606 6575.

Your guide to renting out your property

Your guide to buying a home

Your guide to renting a home

Your guide to making a will

Your guide to getting a divorce

Your guide to problems at work

Your guide to setting up a business

Your guide to making a personal injury claim

Your guide to financial matters for the elderly

Your guide to setting up home with your partner

The Client's Charter: your solicitor's customer care standards

For a list of solicitors in your area, visit www.solicitors-online.com or write to:

**The Law Society
Information Services
Ipsley Court
Berrington Close
Redditch
B98 0TD**

The Law Society 113 Chancery Lane London WC2A 1PL

Phone: 020 7242 1222 www.lawsociety.org.uk

While we have made every effort to provide accurate information, the law is always changing and affects each person differently. This leaflet is no substitute for specific advice about you personally and we will not be liable to you if you rely on this leaflet.

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