



Blind Justice

BLIND JUSTICE UK RESEARCH

THE WATCHDOG THAT DELETES ITS OWN WARNINGS

How the legal complaints watchdog publishes findings against law firms, removes them from public view after twelve months, and leaves consumers with an expiring record

Submitted as evidence to the OLC consultation on the publication of ombudsman decisions (open, June 2026)

The Invisible Ombudsman | A Blind Justice UK investigation

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939

decisions remaining in the entire live public record.

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poor service found where complaints were assessed in 2025/26.

**Published by the watchdog. Removed from its official public record by the watchdog.
Preserved because researchers captured it first.**

Findings at a glance

12 months	and then it is gone. Every entry in the Legal Ombudsman's published decision record is removed from public view twelve months after publication. The reactivated public-interest decisions carry the same expiry. The only independent public record of outcomes against named law firms self-deletes.
11,448	named decision entries counted directly from five expired Legal Ombudsman files retrieved from the Internet Archive, every one now removed from the live site. Observed, not modelled: entries the watchdog published and then removed.
Est. 25,000 to 29,000	named decisions estimated to have been published since April 2012, of which approximately 24,000 to 28,000 are no longer visible on the live record. This is a modelled range, not an observation; the sensitivity analysis is in the appendix.
939	named decisions in the entire current live file, against 2,889 in the 2013/14 file. The visible record has fallen by two thirds even as complaints have risen.
21	public-interest decisions the Legal Ombudsman published in 2025/26, having left the power effectively dormant for over a decade. They too are removed from the official site after twelve months.
Since 2013	the Financial Ombudsman Service has published every final decision in full, permanently and searchably. For legal services there is no comparable permanent archive of full decisions: only a rolling year of standard decision data and, since 2025, a small number of temporary public-interest summaries.
+37%	the rise in complaints to the Legal Ombudsman in 2025/26 (14,259 received, from 119,619 contacts), even as the visible published record shrinks. Poor service was found in 71.9% of cases assessed.
Open now	the OLC consultation on publishing decisions, open since June 2026, proposes fuller publication but is silent on permanent retention and on restoring the deleted historical record. This paper responds to it.

The last resort, examined

When legal service goes wrong, consumers are sent to the Legal Ombudsman. The firm's own complaints process comes first, normally eight weeks, and then the ombudsman: the statutory scheme for complaints about legal services in England and Wales, with power to require remedies where poor service is found. It is funded by a levy on the profession and overseen, through the Office for Legal Complaints, by the Legal Services Board.

Blind Justice UK has spent 2026 documenting how consumers choose and challenge lawyers: the Review Gap series showed that regulated firms publish only curated praise, that the platform closest to the regulator lets paying firms shape their profiles, and that not one of the firms with the most significant Ombudsman records discloses that history. This paper completes the picture by examining the Ombudsman's own record: what happens to the 119,619 contacts a year that reach the last resort, and what the public is permitted to know about the outcomes. The answer is that the complaints system does not merely under-publish its verdicts. It publishes a fraction, in bare rows without reasons, and then deletes them.

The scale: 119,619 contacts, 939 visible traces

Legal Ombudsman activity, 2025/26	Number
Contacts received (support, guidance, enquiries)	119,619
New complaints received (up 37% year on year)	14,259
Complaints accepted for investigation	8,412
Complaints resolved in the year	8,199
Resolved by early resolution	4,218
Resolved after investigation	3,981
Cases where service was assessed	2,320
Of those, poor service found (71.9%)	1,667
Named decisions in the entire current live public record	939

Sources: OLC Annual Report and Accounts 2025/26 (published 3 July 2026); live decision data at 15 July 2026. This is a scale comparison, not a cohort funnel: contacts, complaints resolved and decisions published in a given year do not all relate to the same cases.

Follow the numbers down. Just over half of resolved complaints, 4,218 of 8,199 (51.4%), end in early resolution: outcomes agreed between the parties that never produce any public record at all. Another slice ends in agreed outcomes after investigation, also invisible. Even where an ombudsman makes a formal final decision, what reaches the public is not the decision. It is a row in a spreadsheet: firm name, area of law, remedy band, a yes or no on poor service. No facts. No reasoning. No account of what the firm did. For every hundred people who complained, only a minority produce a formal decision at all, and of the contacts that reach the scheme, only a tiny fraction leave any trace a future client could find. The 939 named decisions in the live record stand against 119,619 contacts and 14,259 complaints in the year. This is a comparison of scale, not a claim that the 939 are drawn from that same year's cohort.

What the invisible record contains matters. Where the Ombudsman assessed complaints in 2025/26, it found evidence of poor service in 71.9% of them (1,667 of 2,320), and found the firm's own complaint handling unreasonable in almost half. In the most recent year for which the breakdown is published (2024/25), total remedies of £3.7 million were ordered, with an average emotional-distress award of £427 and fee refunds averaging £3,249; residential conveyancing generated the most complaints, followed by wills and probate and personal injury. This is exactly the information a consumer choosing a conveyancer or a probate firm would want. Almost none of it is attached to a firm's name anywhere they will look.

The twelve-month self-delete

The Legal Ombudsman does publish decision data, quarterly, naming the service provider, with the area of law, the remedy in ranges and whether poor service was found. Then, in the scheme's own words, each decision 'remains published for 12 months from publication'. After that, it is removed.^[1]

Consider what that means in practice. A decision made in January is published in the following quarter and disappears around fifteen months after the events it records. A consumer instructing a firm in 2026 cannot see its 2024 record through the Ombudsman's official live site. A journalist investigating a pattern cannot assemble one. A researcher, and Blind Justice writes from direct experience, must capture the data before the scheme erases it, because the official record will not hold it. Several hundred of the 982 entries in our dataset pre-date the current live file and are no longer available through the official live record; they survive because we captured them.

There is no equivalent in the comparable scheme next door. The Financial Ombudsman Service has published every final ombudsman decision since 1 April 2013: the full decision, with facts and reasoning, naming the business while protecting the consumer, in a permanently searchable public database containing hundreds of thousands of decisions. A consumer can read thirteen years of decisions about their bank before opening an account. By contrast, a consumer choosing a solicitor generally sees only a spreadsheet row, if the complaint ended in a formal decision and if they search within the twelve-month window. Since 2025, a small number of fuller public-interest summaries have been added, but they carry the same expiry.^[6]

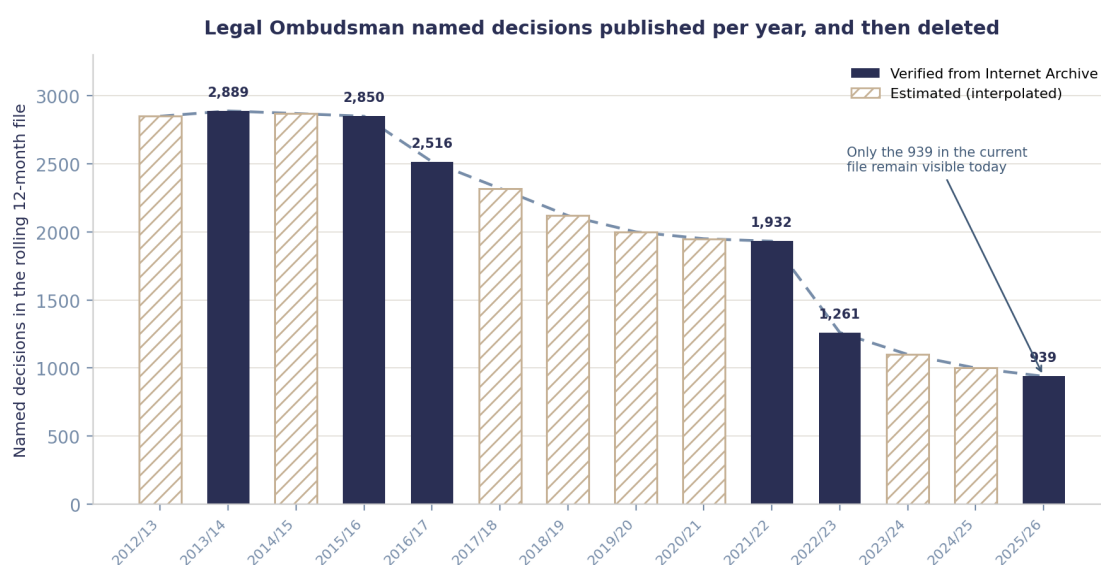
	Financial Ombudsman	Legal Ombudsman
Standard publication	Full final decision with facts and reasoning	A data row: provider, area of law, remedy band, outcome flags. Since 2025, a small number of fuller public-interest case summaries.
Business named	Yes	Yes
How long it stays public	Permanently (all decisions since 2013)	Removed after 12 months
Searchable archive	Yes, full text	No; quarterly CSV, current 12 months only
Informal resolutions visible	No	No

Comparison of publication regimes. Sources: financial-ombudsman.org.uk ombudsman decisions database; legalombudsman.org.uk ombudsman decision data pages.

The asymmetry cannot be explained by consumer protection, because the FOS regime protects consumers by anonymising them while naming the business. Nor can it be explained solely by fairness to firms: a firm that disputes a decision has rights of challenge, not a right to have the public record expire. Whatever the original policy rationale, the effect in 2026 is that the principal official outcome-based dataset in legal services cannot function as a durable consumer-choice record.

The vanishing record, counted

Publication began in April 2012. Since then, the scheme has published named data on final ombudsman decisions for twelve months before removing it from the official live site. Blind Justice has reconstructed the annual record from the Internet Archive's captures of the scheme's own decision files. The result is a documented decline and a documented removal of the historical record.



Named decisions in each rolling twelve-month publication period. Solid bars are counts verified directly from archived files; hatched bars are interpolated estimates for years not directly captured. All historical periods represented are no longer available through the official live site; only the current file remains.

Published file (rolling 12 months)	Named decisions	Providers named
Year to September 2014	2,889	1,819
Year to early 2016	2,850	1,751
Year to mid 2017	2,516	1,635
Year to Q2 2021/22	1,932	1,249
Year to September 2023	1,261	861
Current live file (1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026)	939	659

Sources: archived Legal Ombudsman decision data files (Internet Archive captures, retrieved 15 July 2026); OLC board paper 117.7.21. Each file is a rolling twelve-month window; every earlier file has been removed from the live site. [8]

Three numbers should be kept firmly apart. The first is directly observed in the files analysed: 11,448. That is the exact combined row-count of the five expired files above, every one of which the Legal Ombudsman published and has since removed from the live site. Add the current live file and six verified files hold 12,387 decision entries; strip the 939 still visible and 11,448 are no longer visible. The second number is also observed: 939, the decision entries still visible today. The third number is the fourteen-year total, and it is modelled. Because each file is a rolling twelve-month window that then expires, the cumulative production since April 2012 is the sum of the annual counts; interpolating the eight years between the six observed anchors gives an estimated 25,000 to 29,000 named decisions published since 2012, of which approximately 24,000 to 28,000 are no longer visible on the live record (the estimate necessarily includes the 939 that remain). The sensitivity analysis in the appendix sets out the conservative, central and observed-only scenarios. That range is an estimate and this paper labels it as one throughout, with the annual assumptions set out in the appendix. But the case does not rest on the estimate. It rests on 11,448 decision entries that are directly observed, counted and no longer visible, the more so because they are only final decisions, the visible tip of the 119,619 contacts and 14,259 complaints the scheme received in 2025/26 alone.

The scheme notes that older information can be requested under the Freedom of Information Act. That is to say: the public record exists, but only for the consumer who already knows a decision existed, knows to ask, and is willing to wait. For the consumer choosing a solicitor, it is not available through the Ombudsman's official live record. Blind Justice can evidence the erasure directly: our Review Gap dataset captured 982 published decision entries from late 2024 to 2025, several hundred of which pre-date the current live file: they are no longer available through the Legal Ombudsman's official live record, and have been preserved in Blind Justice UK's archive.

The power that woke up, but kept the timer

The publication policy contains a sharper instrument. Where patterns of complaints or the circumstances of a case make it in the public interest, the ombudsman can publish a full case summary naming the provider. For most of the scheme's history this power lay effectively dormant. Then, in 2025, it woke up: the Legal Ombudsman reactivated it and, across 2025/26, published 21 public-interest decisions (27 have now been approved, numbered PID-001 onward, with several awaiting publication).^[3]

This is a genuine and welcome change, and this paper credits it. But it makes the central problem sharper, not softer. Each of those 21 public-interest summaries is subject to the same policy: it remains on the website for twelve months and is then removed. The scheme has demonstrated both that it can name firms in the public interest and that it will still remove the named summary after a year. The instrument was reactivated; the deletion architecture was left untouched. A public-interest warning that disappears twelve months after publication is a warning issued and then withdrawn from the official record.

Late reform that does not undo the deletion

None of this is unexamined inside the scheme. In 2021 the OLC's own board papers acknowledged that the Legal Ombudsman was 'the only large ombudsman scheme that does not publish full decisions': the Financial Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman both do. Full publication was considered, deferred, and delayed through Covid and beyond. In June 2026, the OLC finally opened a consultation proposing that every final decision be considered for full publication, accepting that its data-only model gives consumers an incomplete picture. This paper welcomes that, and is submitted as evidence to it.^[4,5]

But acceptance in principle is not the reform consumers need, for three reasons the consultation does not yet answer. First, it proposes that decisions be considered for publication, not guaranteed publication of every final decision. Second, and decisively, it is silent on permanence: nothing in the proposals commits to ending the twelve-month deletion, and a full decision that is published and then removed after a year reproduces the exact problem this paper documents, in richer form. Third, it says nothing about restoring the tens of thousands of decisions already deleted. Full implementation is, on the OLC's own account, unlikely before 2027/28. A consumer instructing a solicitor in 2026 is still handed an expiring fragment of the record, and the record already erased stays erased.

The collapsed firms, on a timer

Sort the current live record by decision count and several providers associated with major failures appear prominently. SSB Group and Axiom Ince, both subsequently closed and associated with regulatory failures that led to Legal Services Board enforcement action against the SRA, are among them. Other providers with multiple published decisions include Irwin Mitchell, Jarmans Solicitors, Eric Smith Law, Davisons Solicitors, Steve Davies Solicitors, the practice of John McLanachan and Nigel Broadhead Mynard; their status and context are set out in the appendix. These are decision counts, not complaint rates, and they are not a league table of service quality: the Legal Ombudsman itself cautions that such counts must be read in the light of a provider's size and volume of work, and it does not publish the transaction volumes needed to calculate a fair rate. The point is not that these are the worst firms. It is that the record of some of the sector's most consequential failures is precisely the record now counting down to removal. Every entry is on the twelve-month timer. By mid-2027, on current policy, the official public trace of what the ombudsman found against these providers will be gone. When the next SSB is collapsing and journalists, researchers or the regulator's critics look for the early warnings, the official record will already have removed the last ones.

The waiting room

The scheme's defenders will say, fairly, that the Legal Ombudsman has been under-resourced against rising demand, and the recent record shows real recovery: 45% of cases were resolved within 90 days in 2024/25, whereas in 2021/22 eight in ten cases took more than 180 days and waits of 16 to 24 months were documented. Early resolution now closes cases in an average of 53 days. That progress is genuine and this paper records it.^[2]

It is also fragile, and the scheme itself says so. For 2026/27 the Office for Legal Complaints sought a materially larger budget to meet what it called unprecedented demand, driven in part by claims-management activity and car-finance commission complaints reaching legal services. It received £21.3 million, a pared-back 6.5% increase, and the Chief Ombudsman, Phil Cain, has publicly projected that waits will reach 390 days by the end of 2026/27, saying the ombudsman 'will do everything it can within the agreed budget to minimise this impact' while acknowledging that the reduced funding 'inevitably limits' its ability to hold back the backlog. A consumer harmed by a lawyer in 2026 is therefore being asked to exhaust the firm's own eight-week process, then wait more than a year for the last resort, for an outcome that will either remain private or, if published, later be removed from the official record.^[7]

Why this completes a pattern

Blind Justice's Review Gap investigation documented the other half of this information system. Regulated firms publish curated five-star testimonials, 486 out of 486 in our forensic sample. The review platform developed with the SRA allows paying firms to shape which feedback the public sees, and removed Legal Ombudsman rulings from its ranking algorithm between 2018 and 2021. Not one of the 14 active firms with five or more published Ombudsman decisions discloses that history on its website, and the SRA's own directory does not link to it.

Set this paper's findings alongside those. The firm controls its own shopfront. The platforms are structured around the firms that pay them. The regulator has taken no enforcement action on misleading review practices. And the principal official outcome-based record, the Ombudsman's decisions, reaches the public mainly as spreadsheet rows on a twelve-month timer. Whatever the intentions behind each individual policy, their combined effect is systemic: at every layer, information a consumer would need about a lawyer's conduct flows away from them.

What needs to happen

These recommendations are directed to the OLC consultation now open, and to the Legal Services Board that oversees it.

- 1. End the twelve-month removal policy. Whatever the consultation decides about full publication, it must commit to permanent retention. A decision published in full and then removed after twelve months reproduces this paper's findings in a richer form. Permanence is the single change that matters most, and it is the one the current proposals do not make.**
- 2. Restore the removed archive. The OLC holds the historic data; the marginal cost of republishing historic tabular records should be modest, subject to proportionate data-quality and privacy checks. The five verified expired files contain 11,448 decision entries, while the model suggests approximately 24,000 to 28,000 entries are no longer visible overall. These records should be returned to public view.**
- 3. Guarantee publication, not mere consideration.** The consultation proposes that decisions be considered for full publication. Consideration is not a record. Every final decision should be published in full by default, with the consumer anonymised and the firm named, as the Financial Ombudsman already does.
- 4. Link the record where consumers look.** The SRA's Solicitors Register should link each firm's entry to its published Ombudsman decisions, and comparison platforms should be required to surface them.
- 5. Report the invisible outcomes in aggregate.** Early and informal resolutions need not name firms individually, but their volumes, subject areas and remedy values should be published by firm size and segment, so the true scale of poor service is not hidden inside private settlements.
- 6. The Legal Services Board should require permanence.** The LSB, which oversees the OLC and approves its budget, should make clear in its response to the consultation that ending the deletion and restoring the archive are the tests by which it will judge the reform, and should use its Legal Services Act 2007 oversight functions if the OLC's final policy does not deliver them.
- 7. Fund the last resort like one. A projected 390-day wait is not an administrative statistic; it is a barrier to redress that falls hardest on the consumers least able to persist. The 2027/28 budget settlement should be set against the scheme's own demand evidence, so that budget restraint does not become a barrier to redress.**

Methodology and limitations

This paper is built entirely from public sources: the Office for Legal Complaints Annual Report and Accounts 2025/26; the Legal Ombudsman's 2024/25 and 2023/24 complaints publications; the June 2026 consultation on publishing decisions; the Ombudsman decision data and Public Interest Decisions pages; the Policy Statement on publishing decisions; OLC board paper 117.7.21; the live dataset downloaded on 15 July 2026 (939 entries, 659 providers); five expired decision files retrieved and row-counted from the Internet Archive; reporting of the 2026/27 budget settlement and the Chief Ombudsman's public statements; the Financial Ombudsman Service's decisions database and publication policy; and Blind Justice UK's Review Gap dataset of 982 entries captured before expiry.

Limitations are stated plainly. The analysis is anchored on six observed files: 2,889 entries in the year to September 2014; 2,850 to early 2016; 2,516 to May 2017; 1,932 to Q2 2021/22, close to the 1,957 reported in OLC board paper 117.7.21; 1,261 to September 2023; and 939 in the current live file. Together they contain 12,387 entries. The five expired files contain 11,448 entries and require no modelling. The fourteen-year estimate interpolates eight unobserved years between the anchors. The central scenario uses approximately 2,700 for 2012/13; 2,870 for 2014/15; 2,400 for 2017/18; 2,280 for 2018/19; 2,150 for 2019/20; 2,050 for 2020/21; 1,150 for 2023/24; and 1,050 for 2024/25, producing approximately 29,000 entries in total. A conservative scenario reduces the interpolated component by about 22%, producing approximately 25,400. Because each source file is a rolling twelve-month window, the method treats the annual periods as non-overlapping production; this is exact for consecutive annual files and an approximation across gaps. The full files, row-level dataset and calculations will be released alongside publication. Current-year category counts are indicative pending final verification, and reported resolution categories may overlap at the margins. The 982-entry Review Gap dataset reflects a specific capture window and cannot now be fully re-verified against the live record. Nothing in this paper alleges bad faith by the Legal Ombudsman or its staff. The criticism concerns the publication architecture and the oversight settlement that permits it.

Appendix A: Sensitivity of the cumulative estimate

The 11,448 figure is a direct row-count and requires no modelling. The cumulative fourteen-year estimate is modelled by interpolating the eight years not directly observed. Three scenarios bound it.

Scenario	Basis	Total published since 2012	No longer visible
Observed only	Five expired files plus the current live file; no modelling	12,387	11,448
Conservative	Unobserved years set well below the linear trend	approx. 25,400	approx. 24,400
Central	Linear interpolation between observed anchors	approx. 29,000	approx. 28,100

The paper states the range as 25,000 to 29,000 published, of which approximately 24,000 to 28,000 are no longer visible. The observed-only row is the floor and needs no assumptions.

Interpolated annual values (central scenario), for the years not directly observed: 2012/13 approx. 2,700; 2014/15 approx. 2,870; 2017/18 approx. 2,400; 2018/19 approx. 2,280; 2019/20 approx. 2,150; 2020/21 approx. 2,050; 2023/24 approx. 1,150; 2024/25 approx. 1,050. The conservative scenario applies a downward adjustment of roughly 22% to this interpolated component.

Appendix B: Provider status and the archived files

Status of the providers named in the collapsed-firms section, according to public regulatory records reviewed at the research cut-off: SSB Group Limited entered administration in January 2024 and was the subject of SRA and Legal Services Board action; the SRA intervened into Axiom Ince Limited in October 2023, and the Serious Fraud Office subsequently brought charges against individuals; the SRA also intervened into Jarmans Solicitors (JS) Limited, Eric Smith Law Limited and Nigel Broadhead Mynard; and the principal of the practice of John McLanachan was subsequently struck off. Irwin Mitchell LLP continues to trade as a large national firm and appears in the data by volume, illustrating why decision counts must not be read as a quality ranking. Davisons Solicitors Limited and Steve Davies Solicitors Ltd were recorded on the SRA register at the research cut-off; their inclusion reflects multiple published decisions and does not imply adverse regulatory status. Dated source records for each provider will accompany the supporting dataset.

Archived source files, with capture dates and row counts: year to September 2014 (Internet Archive capture 4 March 2015, 2,889 rows); year to early 2016 (capture 26 December 2016, 2,850); year to mid 2017 (two separate quarterly snapshots of the rolling window: the file published 31 May 2017 contains 2,516 rows, and a later file published 14 August 2017 contains 2,448; the annual series uses the earlier 2,516, and the two are different-date publications, not conflicting counts of one file); year to Q2 2021/22 (1,932); year to September 2023 (1,261); current live file (15 July 2026, 939). Row counts were taken after stripping blank lines and any repeated header row. The full files, capture URLs, row-level data and calculation workbook will be released as a supporting dataset so that the analysis is independently reproducible. The principal analysis uses the official live file downloaded on 15 July 2026 as the research cut-off; a publication-day check of the live provider and decision counts will be recorded on release, and subsequent routine updates to the live site do not alter the historical analysis.

Sources

1. Legal Ombudsman, Ombudsman decision data and Policy Statement on publishing decisions (twelve-month retention).
2. Office for Legal Complaints, Annual Report and Accounts 2025/26 (published 3 July 2026): contacts, complaints, resolution mix, poor-service findings.
3. Legal Ombudsman, Public Interest Decisions page and 2025/26 reporting (21 decisions published; reactivated 2025).
4. Office for Legal Complaints, consultation on scheme rules, case fees and the publication of ombudsman decisions (opened June 2026).
5. OLC board paper 117.7.21, publishing decisions update (the scheme is the only large ombudsman scheme not publishing full decisions).
6. Financial Ombudsman Service, published decisions database and publication policy (all final decisions since 1 April 2013).
7. Law Society Gazette, 'We'll have to make do: legal ombudsman accepts smaller budget rise but says cases will take over a year to resolve' (2026), reporting the £21.3m 2026/27 settlement and the Chief Ombudsman's 390-day projection.
8. Internet Archive captures of the Legal Ombudsman decision files listed in Appendix B, retrieved 15 July 2026. Full URLs are provided in the supporting dataset.

Live figures on the Legal Ombudsman site change as files are updated; provider and decision counts in this report reflect the record as at 15 July 2026 and will be re-verified on the day of publication.

About Blind Justice UK

Blind Justice UK (Registered Charity No. 1217562) is an access to justice charity that conducts independent research, provides direct casework support, and advocates for systemic reform in the regulation of legal services. Its research has been published as written evidence by the Justice Select Committee and covered by Joshua Rozenberg and the Law Society Gazette. The Review Gap series and this paper's underlying dataset are available at blindjustice.org.uk/research.

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