



Blind Justice

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The Silenced Canary

How a Regulator-Endorsed Review Platform
May Have Obscured Early Warning Signs in
Three Major Law Firm Collapses

The Review Gap: Phase 3

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In September 2024, clients of PM Law began noticing something was wrong. Mortgage redemptions were not being processed. Completion dates slipped. Calls went unanswered. Some left reviews online. Others complained to the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

Seventeen months later, PM Law collapsed overnight. The SRA intervened on 4 February 2026 and discovered that £39.5 million of client money was missing across 25 offices and more than 30 trading names. It was, after Axiom Ince, the second largest loss of client money in the history of the SRA's Compensation Fund.

By April 2026, 92 claims totalling £9.31 million had been paid out from the Fund, with the final bill projected at £21.5 million. The SRA described a 'sophisticated suspected fraud.'

PM Law was not the first. Axiom Ince had collapsed in October 2023, with £64 million taken from client accounts. Five individuals were charged by the Serious Fraud Office with fraud, forgery, and the destruction of documents. SSB Group, trading as SSB Law, went into administration in January 2024, leaving debts of £200 million and thousands of clients facing costs bills of up to £38,000 for cavity wall insulation claims they had been told carried no financial risk.

In each case, the SRA was later found to have missed warnings that were there to be seen. In each case, independent reviews concluded that the regulator had failed to act adequately, effectively, or in time. The SRA has been formally censured for SSB. It faces unprecedented enforcement action from the Legal Services Board over Axiom Ince. The LSB has demanded the SRA explain what it knew before PM Law's closure.

But there is another question that has not yet been asked. While clients were raising alarms, where were their reviews going?

The Platform the SRA Endorsed

ReviewSolicitors is, by its own account, the legal sector's leading review platform. It was developed in collaboration with the SRA, which endorsed it through a pilot programme and whose Executive Director of Strategy and Innovation provided a public statement of support when the platform launched a key feature in 2021. The SRA's imprimatur gave ReviewSolicitors a credibility that no competitor could match.

The platform lists every SRA-regulated firm by default. Consumers searching for a solicitor encounter it prominently. It presents itself as a transparency tool: an independent space where clients can share honest feedback about their legal experience.

What consumers do not see is the commercial architecture behind the ratings.

Blind Justice UK's Phase 2 research, published in April 2026, documented six features through which paying firms may influence how their review profiles are presented on ReviewSolicitors. The findings were based in part on forensic analysis and direct industry experience spanning over 30 years of law firm marketing. The mechanisms operate as follows.

First, selective solicitation. The platform integrates with law firm case management systems (Clio, LEAP, Tikit Partner for Windows) to send automated review invitations when a matter closes. The platform's own marketing material states: 'Not appropriate to send feedback to a client? Simply click a button.' The firm decides which clients receive an invitation to review. This is review gating by design.

Second, pre-publication delay. Negative reviews are held for up to 48 hours before publication while the firm attempts to resolve the complaint. Positive reviews are published immediately. There is no equivalent delay for favourable feedback.

Third, post-publication removal. Firms can immediately suspend any review they flag as defamatory or from a non-client. The review is removed first; investigation happens second. The reviewer then has 14 days to confirm their identity and stand by the review, or it is permanently deleted. ReviewSolicitors has stated: 'ReviewSolicitors does not get involved in the content of the review. A law firm will have a good understanding of the difference between content that is unflattering and that which is defamatory.' The party with the clearest commercial interest in removal decides whether removal is warranted.

Fourth, composition shaping. The combination of selective solicitation (inviting satisfied clients) and post-publication removal (flagging dissatisfied ones) produces review profiles that do not reflect organic consumer experience. The data confirms this.

Forensic analysis of four firms ranked as 'Top Firms' on the platform examined over 16,000 reviews. One firm recorded 2,529 consecutive reviews with zero negative feedback across 1,687 days. At a conservative base rate of 3% negative reviews, the probability of this occurring through organic review collection is on the order of 10 to the power of negative 33. For context, the five-sigma threshold used in particle physics to declare a scientific discovery corresponds to a probability of approximately 3 in 10 million. This firm's distribution is more than twenty-five orders of magnitude beyond that threshold.

Another firm's profile contained 367 reviews across 59 duplicate groups, including 104 reviews carrying the identical text 'Excellent Service' attributed to different-named reviewers on different dates.

Fifth, the algorithm. Between 2018 and 2021, ReviewSolicitors quietly changed how it ranks firms. In 2018, the platform's co-founder published the ranking algorithm's negative inputs: Legal Ombudsman rulings, Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal rulings, negative reviews, and notifications that a firm had threatened legal action against a reviewer. By 2021, these inputs had been removed. The revised algorithm rewards size, review volume, review rating, recency, and 'how the law firm has historically collected reviews.' The direction of change is uniform: away from consumer protection, toward commercial engagement.

Sixth, zero Ombudsman disclosure. Blind Justice examined 14 active firms with five or more published Legal Ombudsman decisions. Not one disclosed its complaint history on its website. Not one review platform surfaced it. The only independent, outcome-based quality indicator in the legal services market is effectively invisible to consumers.

The Canary That Could Not Sing

Now consider what this means for a firm engaging in serious misconduct, including the misappropriation of client money.

A firm stealing client money will, inevitably, produce unhappy clients. Mortgage completions will fail. Funds will not arrive. Probate matters will stall. Clients will try to leave reviews describing what happened to them.

On a platform where reviews are published as submitted, those complaints accumulate. They form a pattern. They are visible to anyone searching for the firm, including journalists, competitors, and regulators. They function as an early warning system: a canary in the mine.

On ReviewSolicitors, a firm paying for the commercial toolkit may be able to limit the visibility of that signal at multiple stages. It can choose not to invite the unhappy client to review. If the client finds the platform independently and leaves a negative review, the firm can flag it for removal. The review disappears within hours. The client has 14 days to fight for reinstatement, assuming they know the process exists. If they do not respond, the review is permanently deleted.

The question can be examined empirically. For Phase 3, Blind Justice conducted a forensic examination of archived ReviewSolicitors profiles for PM Law, SSB Law, and Axiom Ince using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine and live platform data. The findings are as follows.

PM Law: 35 Reviews Disappeared While the Firm Was Still Trading

Between 26 September 2024 and 13 December 2024, the published review count on PM Law's primary ReviewSolicitors profile dropped from 794 to 759. That is a net loss of 35 reviews in 79 days.

This requires explanation. When new reviews are added, the count increases. When older reviews fall off the front page because newer ones have arrived, the count does not change: those reviews remain on the platform, accessible on later pages. The count can only decrease if reviews are being removed. During that three-month window, more reviews were removed from the platform than were added.

The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine provides four snapshots of PM Law's primary ReviewSolicitors profile across the period for which data exists:

Date	Reviews shown	Movement
18 June 2024	535	—
26 September 2024	794	+259
13 December 2024	759	-35 ← the finding
19 July 2025	842	+83

The September-to-December step is the only time the count went backwards. Before and after, it grew normally as new reviews came in. That makes the drop difficult to dismiss as ordinary noise.

We do not know which mechanism was used to remove the 35 reviews. The platform documents three routes: the firm flagging the review using the commercial toolkit, the platform itself moderating the review under its published policy, or the reviewer choosing to withdraw it. We do not assert which route was used. The finding is limited to the observable change in published review counts over time.

While the count was falling, named reviewers were posting unmistakable warnings about PM Law's service on the same platform. Archived reviews from September 2024 describe missed completion dates, unanswered communication, and offices that had effectively stopped functioning. These warnings describe exactly the same problems that materialised at scale when PM Law collapsed on 2 February 2026. The public record had been showing PM Law in trouble for nearly a year and a half before the firm's collapse.

Following PM Law's intervention, Blind Justice compiled a list of 26 PM-Law-related ReviewSolicitors web addresses, covering PM Law Limited and its various trading names: PM Property Lawyers, WB Pennine Solicitors, Butterworths, John M Lewis & Co, Valerie Holmes Law, Gaines Wilkinsons, Proddow Mackay, and others. As of May 2026, 19 of those 26 web addresses now return 'page not found'. The missing pages include PM Law's Sheffield headquarters profile, all five branch profiles, and all four WB Pennine office profiles. The single largest profile in the missing set carried 1,048 reviews on its last archived snapshot in October 2024. Roughly 7,500 reviews are no longer reachable through their original URLs.

The history of what consumers were saying about PM Law on the platform the SRA endorsed is no longer accessible through its original URLs.

SSB Law: Frozen at 54 Reviews for Five Years

SSB Law's ReviewSolicitors profile presents the most striking finding in this investigation.

The platform lists SSB Group's Sheffield office with a published review count of 54. That number has not changed since September 2021. Every Wayback Machine snapshot across five years shows the same figure: 54 in September 2021, 54 in September 2024, 54 in January 2025, 54 in July 2025, 54 on the live page today. Through the firm's collapse, through administration in January 2024, through everything.

Blind Justice verified this by using an automated browser to click 'Show More' on the live page until the button disappeared. The page contains exactly 54 reviews, end to end.

Consider what was happening on every other channel during those same five years. The SRA received over 100 complaints from consumers about SSB Law. Clients were publicly posting warnings on Trustpilot from 2022: cases stalled for years, case handlers disappearing, sudden demands for payment on supposedly 'no win, no fee' matters. One former client described being strung along for three years on a cavity wall insulation claim, only for the firm to abandon the case as unwinnable,

leaving them facing an Interim Charging Order for £20,000 on their home. Others reported being told their cases were unsuccessful under ‘no win, no fee’ terms, then receiving demands for £11,000 payable within a month. Glassdoor reviews from staff described directors secretly engaging in unethical practices regarding the funding of litigated files, staff being assured the company’s financial status was not under threat while clients were inadequately covered by After the Event insurance, and new employees still being hired in October 2023, a month before notice to appoint an administrator was filed.

ReviewSolicitors showed nothing changing. Five years. 54 reviews. Not one more.

We do not know why the count stayed frozen. Several legitimate explanations are possible: low review submission volume, source-mix differences, branch-aggregation policy, or something else. We do not assert that this reflects suppression; only that the absence of change is inconsistent with patterns observed elsewhere. What is observable is that the number did not move while every other channel was sounding the alarm.

The SRA added SSB to an internal watchlist in 2021 but took no material regulatory steps for two more years. It acted only when a whistleblower forced its hand. The independent review commissioned by the Legal Services Board found that the SRA ‘repeatedly failed to act effectively on the warning signs.’ The SRA was formally censured, only the second time such a sanction has been issued.

Over 100 complaints to the regulator. Public warnings on Trustpilot. Internal staff describing unethical practices. And on ReviewSolicitors, the platform the SRA endorsed, a profile that had not registered a single new review in five years.

Axiom Ince: Not on the Platform at All

Blind Justice searched for Axiom Ince across every name variant (axiom-ince, axiom-dwfm, ince-co, plexus-legal) and every plausible city directory on ReviewSolicitors. We searched the live platform sitemap, which lists 17,264 firm URLs. We searched the Internet Archive’s full Wayback record. There were zero matches.

Axiom Ince was never on ReviewSolicitors. The most plausible explanation is that as a corporate and insurance firm with primarily business-to-business clients, it did not have the consumer-facing review presence that ReviewSolicitors caters to.

This does not invalidate the Axiom Ince case. The SRA received complaints about the firm over several years. An employee resigned and self-reported concerns about client money payments in June 2022. The SRA investigated in October 2022 but failed to follow its own procedures. By the time it intervened in October 2023, £64 million was gone. But the specific argument about ReviewSolicitors quietly suppressing reviews cannot be applied to Axiom Ince. The Axiom case rests on Trustpilot, Google reviews, news coverage, and regulator correspondence. The evidence in this article is PM-Law-specific with a corroborating signal on SSB.

The Regulator's Blind Spot

The SRA's relationship with ReviewSolicitors creates a structural problem that goes beyond individual firm failures.

The SRA endorsed the platform. Its senior officials provided public statements of support. The platform's 48-hour negative review delay was launched with explicit reference to 'the SRA's pilot for reviews.' When the SRA points consumers toward a platform, and that platform allows paying firms to suppress negative feedback, the regulator risks creating a situation in which part of the consumer information landscape is shaped by a commercial entity whose revenue model depends on keeping law firms happy.

The SRA does not require firms to engage with ReviewSolicitors. It does not monitor whether firms are steering clients to platforms where their profiles are more favourable. It does not audit whether the platform's removal mechanisms are being used to suppress legitimate consumer complaints. It has endorsed a platform without ensuring it produces accurate consumer information.

This matters because the SRA's own record shows that it relies heavily on external signals to trigger investigations. The Axiom Ince review found the regulator failed to act on complaints it received directly. The SSB review found it ignored over 100 consumer reports. If the SRA is not acting on complaints it receives through its own channels, the integrity of external information sources becomes critical. A review platform that allows firms to curate their public profile is not a neutral information source. It is a tool that, in the wrong hands, can risk masking patterns of behaviour that should trigger regulatory scrutiny.

The combined cost of these three collapses is staggering. Over £300 million in client losses. 1,400 redundancies at Axiom Ince alone. Thousands of SSB clients facing costs bills they were told they would never receive. PM Law clients left mid-conveyance, their house purchases collapsing, their deposits trapped. The SRA's Compensation Fund, funded by a levy on every practising solicitor in England and Wales, has already paid out £9.31 million on PM Law claims, with the projected total reaching £21.5 million. The Axiom Ince fund burden is larger still. Every solicitor paying their practising certificate renewal is subsidising the consequences of fraud that the regulator failed to detect.

All of this occurred on the SRA's watch. In each case, the SRA was later found to have missed opportunities to intervene earlier. The question that has not yet been examined is whether a platform the SRA endorsed was, through its commercial architecture, making those opportunities harder to see.

What Needs to Happen

The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 brought misleading online reviews within scope of enforcement from April 2025. Schedule 20 of the Act specifically addresses fake and misleading reviews. The Competition and Markets Authority has opened investigations in other sectors. The patterns documented in this research, including selective solicitation, differential

publication delays, post-publication removal, inflated review counts, and the systematic omission of independent complaint data, suggest the legal sector warrants urgent and equivalent scrutiny.

The Legal Services Board, which has already censured the SRA over SSB and taken enforcement action over Axiom Ince, should examine whether the SRA's endorsement of a platform with these commercial features is compatible with its statutory duty to promote the public interest and consumer protection.

ReviewSolicitors should be required to disclose which firms are using its paid commercial toolkit, so that consumers can distinguish between organic review profiles and managed ones. The platform should also be required to surface Legal Ombudsman decisions alongside firm ratings, as its own 2018 algorithm originally intended before that input was quietly removed.

The SRA should commission an independent audit of ReviewSolicitors profiles for PM Law and SSB Law, examining whether negative reviews were submitted and subsequently removed or suppressed through the platform's commercial mechanisms in the months and years before each firm's collapse. In PM Law's case, Blind Justice's own research has already established that 35 reviews were removed from the firm's primary profile during a three-month period in late 2024 while warning reviews were simultaneously being posted. The audit should establish whether those removed reviews contained information that, had it remained publicly visible, would have constituted an early warning of the misconduct that followed.

None of this will return £300 million to the clients who lost it. It will not reunite the families whose house purchases collapsed when PM Law shut its doors overnight. It will not compensate the SSB clients whose homes now carry charging orders for claims they were promised would cost them nothing. It will not undo the three years of inaction during which the SRA sat on over 100 complaints while SSB continued to take on new clients.

But if the warning signals were not visible through the platform the regulator endorsed, that is a failure that requires urgent examination.

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Blind Justice UK's research into online review practices has been informed by forensic analysis and direct industry experience spanning over 30 years of law firm marketing.