



Blind Justice

The Review Gap

How Law Firms Control Their Public Image
While Complaint Records Stay Hidden

Phase 2 Research Briefing | April 2026

0 / 14

Firms disclosing
Ombudsman complaint
history on their website

486

Five-star testimonials
across 22 firms
(Phase 1)

9.4%

Of complaints result
in a published
Ombudsman decision

2.9 pts

Largest rating gap
between Trustpilot and
ReviewSolicitors

Blind Justice UK

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blindjustice.org.uk/research

Introduction

When a consumer searches for a solicitor online, they encounter a carefully constructed picture. Firms present curated testimonials, invite reviews on platforms they can influence, and display aggregate ratings that suggest consistent excellence. What consumers do not see is the independent complaint record held by the Legal Ombudsman, which tells a different story for some of the most prominently reviewed firms in the country.

This briefing traces that gap from source to surface. It begins with the complaint system itself and shows how little of it reaches the public. It then examines how firms control their review profiles across platforms, and how the regulator’s own endorsed review platform operates in practice. Finally, it documents the complete absence of Ombudsman complaint disclosure among the firms with the most significant complaint histories.

This is the second phase of Blind Justice UK’s research into online review practices in the legal profession. Phase 1, published on 21 April 2026 and covered by Joshua Rozenberg and the Law Society Gazette, documented how 22 regulated firms curate website testimonials: 486 reviews, every one five stars.

This phase of the research has been informed by the forensic work and direct industry experience of David Standard of Standard Consulting, a legal sector consultant with over 30 years of experience in law firm marketing, including as a Director of Marketing at firms using the platforms examined in this briefing. Mr Standard has provided key insights into the operational mechanics of review platforms and has conducted independent forensic analysis of the platform’s top-ranked firms, covering 32,577 reviews across the ten highest-ranked firms on the platform’s default ‘Top-rated law firms’ tab.

The central finding is stark: consumers are shown curated five-star testimonials while the only independent record of complaint outcomes is systematically absent from every firm’s public profile.

Part 1: The Complaint Funnel

The Legal Ombudsman received 10,447 complaints about regulated legal service providers in 2024/25. The vast majority never become public. Of those received, 7,203 were accepted for investigation. Approximately half were resolved informally, without a published decision. Just 982 complaints resulted in named, published decisions: 9.4% of all complaints received.

Complaints received	10,447
Accepted for investigation	7,203
Resolved informally (approx.)	3,600
Published decisions (named firms)	982
Unique firms with published decisions	680
Firms with 5+ decisions (this sample)	23

Source: Legal Ombudsman Annual Report 2024/25 and published decisions dataset.

This means that for every 100 complaints the Ombudsman receives, fewer than 10 produce a published, named decision. The rest are filtered out at each stage of the process. For the consumer, the practical effect is that the overwhelming majority of complaint activity is invisible. The published decisions represent the tip of a much larger iceberg, and even those published decisions are not reaching consumers at the point of decision.

Part 2: The Review Landscape

2.1 How firms control their public image

Phase 1 of this research documented how 22 regulated law firms present client reviews on their own websites. The findings were stark: 486 testimonials were examined, and every single one was rated five stars. Not one firm displayed a negative review, a mixed review, or any client feedback below the maximum rating.

This is not coincidental. Firms exercise significant control over which reviews appear on their websites. Common tactics include:

Anonymised or filtered displays. Reviews are presented without attribution, without dates, and with no way for a consumer to verify their authenticity or check whether they are representative of the firm's overall client feedback.

Selective embedding. Trustpilot and Google widgets are embedded on firm websites, but configured to display only the aggregate star rating or a curated selection of positive reviews, without linking through to the full review profile where negative reviews would be visible.

Invitation systems. Platforms like Trustpilot allow firms to send review invitations to clients. Firms can time these invitations to coincide with successful outcomes, systematically inflating their public rating by soliciting reviews from satisfied clients while allowing dissatisfied clients to drift away without being prompted.

Cherry-picking. Individual testimonials are selected and displayed on the firm's website with no indication that they have been chosen from a larger pool, or that the pool includes less favourable feedback.

The result is that a consumer visiting a firm's website encounters a uniformly positive picture. The firm's own website functions as a marketing asset, not an information source. This is not surprising in itself. But it becomes significant when considered alongside what consumers do not see.

2.2 ReviewSolicitors: the regulator's endorsed platform

The Solicitors Regulation Authority collaborated with ReviewSolicitors on a pilot project for client reviews and provides its public law firm data to the platform. ReviewSolicitors draws its firm listings directly from the SRA register, creating a directory of every SRA-regulated firm in England and Wales without the firm's consent. The SRA's own guidance encourages firms to engage with review platforms, and the SRA has published a voluntary code of conduct for digital comparison tool providers.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2021/02/18/reviewsolicitors-chosen-as-sra-launches-pilot-for-client-reviews/

ReviewSolicitors is, in effect, the review platform most closely aligned with the regulator. It is populated from the SRA's own data, was developed in collaboration with the SRA, and is designed to serve the transparency objectives that the SRA's own rules are intended to promote. By April 2022, over 75% of SRA pilot firms were using ReviewSolicitors. By June 2023, that figure had risen to almost 80%, giving a single commercial provider near-monopoly concentration within the regulator's own pilot.

Yet the platform's own CEO has publicly described ReviewSolicitors as "a reputation management tool." Michael Hanney stated: "We are a reputation management tool, and it's why we are the market-leading platform chosen by law firms."

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2022-04-05-sra-and-lsb-set-to-turn-up-the-heat-for-all-law-firms-to-collect-client-reviews/

The distinction between an independent consumer comparison tool and a reputation management tool is fundamental. The SRA's Voluntary Code requires participating tools to be independent and not controlled by parties with conflicts of interest. A platform whose CEO describes it as a reputation management tool is, by that description, not an independent comparison tool.

How the platform operates

The following is drawn from a review of articles published by ReviewSolicitors on its live UK domain between January 2016 and June 2023, cross-verified via Wayback Machine snapshots, together with the direct experience of David Standard of Standard Consulting, a legal sector consultant with over 30 years of experience

in law firm marketing, including as a Director of Marketing at firms offered the platform's commercial tools. The architecture operates as a layered pipeline in which firm-controlled interventions shape the review record at every stage from listing through to display.

Listing. Every SRA-regulated firm is listed by default, without consent. The firm's ability to respond to reviews requires signing up for a dashboard account. Listing is universal; defence is opt-in.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2020/08/03/reviewsolicitors-and-the-sra/

Selective solicitation. The platform integrates with law firm case management systems (Clio, LEAP, Tikit Partner for Windows) to send automated review invitations on matter closure. The platform's own marketing states: "Not appropriate to send feedback to a client? Simply click a button." This is review gating by design: firms choose which clients receive a review invitation.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2022-11-15 (Clio, LEAP, and Tikit integration articles)

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 with no equivalent delay. The platform launched this mechanism on 1 June 2021, and its CEO publicly attributed it to "the SRA's pilot for reviews and our engagement with the Legal Services Board." The SRA's Executive Director of Strategy and Innovation provided a supporting quote in the same announcement.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2021/06/02/what-is-the-sras-pilot-for-online-reviews-and-why-should-law-firms-get-involved/ ;
reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2021/04/30/48-hour-temporary-suspension-to-negative-reviews-on-reviewsolicitors/

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 has 14 days to confirm their identity and stand by the review, or it is permanently deleted. The platform 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 removing negative content decides whether removal is warranted.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2021/03/15/sra-pilot-how-reviewsolicitors-helps-you-remove-defamatory-content/

Composition shaping. A "Defamatory Content Highlighter" launched in January 2023 triggers visual prompts when reviewers type words such as "scam" or "dodgy," suggesting alternative wording. Firms can also pay £100 per month for custom-branded questionnaires with up to eight firm-designed questions, branded in the firm's colours, creating ambiguity about whether the reviewer is writing a public review or providing internal feedback.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2023-01-05-defamatory-content-highlighter/ ;
reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2021/09/08/add-and-amend-the-questions-asked-in-your-firms-review-questionnaire/

Display curation. The platform's "Side Widget 2.0" allows firms to choose which metrics to display, filter reviews by service area, and show different widget configurations on different pages of the firm's website. A consumer on a conveyancing page sees only conveyancing reviews and the firm's best-scoring metrics. By February 2023, over 75% of firms on the platform were using this widget.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2023-02-06-next-generation-side-widget/

What the data shows

Forensic analysis conducted by David Standard of Standard Consulting examined over 16,000 reviews across four firms identified as “Top Firms” on the platform. The analysis reveals rating distributions that are statistically incompatible with organic review collection.

Firm	Reviews	5-star %	Longest negative-free period
Ward Gethin Archer	4,389	93.1%	293 days / 517 reviews
Lyons Bowe	4,467	87.2%	1,944 days / 272 reviews
Winston Solicitors	2,530	96.7%	1,687 days / 2,529 reviews
CEL Solicitors	4,701 (of 15,860 claimed)	93.9%	223 days / 711 reviews

Table 1a: Forensic analysis of four top-ranked ReviewSolicitors firms. Data from publicly accessible review profiles.

Winston Solicitors 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^{-33} . For scale, the five-sigma threshold used in particle physics to declare a scientific discovery corresponds to a probability of approximately 3×10^{-7} . Winston Solicitors’ distribution is more than twenty-five orders of magnitude beyond that threshold.

Lyons Bowe contains 367 reviews across 59 duplicate groups that are not independent consumer assessments, including 104 reviews carrying the identical text “Excellent Service” attributed to different-named reviewers across different dates, and a further 102 carrying the identical text “Excellent Experience.”

CEL Solicitors displays a 70.4% discrepancy between the review count the platform presents to consumers (15,860) and the reviews retrievable via the platform’s own data (4,701). If the inflated count is being used to convey volume and trustworthiness, this itself warrants examination under the DMCCA 2024. The dataset also contains a review dated 8 July 2025 in which a reviewer states:

“Hello it’s sheikh here, when I first called them and told them about the scam they told me to give them a 5 star review which is odd because you should only do that after the service they have given y...”

This is the strongest form of publicly available evidence: a reviewer describing pre-emptive solicitation in their own words, on the platform itself. The review remains publicly viewable on CEL Solicitors’ ReviewSolicitors profile at the time of writing.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/merseyside/liverpool/cheshire-estate-and-legal-limited-12th-floor

Cross-platform divergence

The divergence between Trustpilot and ReviewSolicitors ratings documented in this research takes on a different significance when read alongside the forensic data above. Among the firms in this sample, several carry strikingly different ratings on the two platforms:

Firm	Trustpilot Rating	Trustpilot Reviews	ReviewSolicitors Rating	ReviewSolicitors Reviews	Gap
Optima Legal	4.0	9,000	1.1	242	-2.9
Minster Law	4.5	6,055	1.9	96	-2.6
Carpenters	3.6	5,733	1.1	72	-2.5

Table 1b: Firms with the largest rating divergence between Trustpilot and ReviewSolicitors. Only firms with 70+ ReviewSolicitors reviews.

The firms in Table 1b share a common profile: large Trustpilot review counts in the thousands, small ReviewSolicitors review counts in the hundreds, and low ReviewSolicitors ratings. These are firms that are not actively engaging with ReviewSolicitors' case management integration or paid tools. Their ReviewSolicitors profiles carry the signature of unmanaged listings: low volumes and ratings consistent with organic consumer feedback.

The variable that distinguishes the firms in Table 1a from those in Table 1b is not the client population. It is whether the firm is actively using the platform's commercial toolkit. This establishes, from within the data, what the platform looks like when it is not being actively managed: low ratings, low volumes, and distributions consistent with ordinary consumer feedback.

The practical implication for consumers is material. The reliability of ReviewSolicitors as a reference point depends entirely on whether the firm under examination is actively using the platform's paid tools, and consumers are given no indication of which category a given profile falls into. A 4.9-star "Top Firm" rating and a 1.1-star unmanaged listing appear on the same site, with identical design treatment and regulatory endorsements.

The ranking algorithm

The platform's ranking algorithm was re-specified between 2018 and 2021. In August 2018, the platform's co-founder published the algorithm's negative inputs as: Legal Ombudsman rulings against the firm, Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal rulings, negative reviews, and notifications from reviewers that the firm had threatened legal action against a review.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2018/08/20/reviewsolicitors-new-ranking-system/

By October 2021, the revised algorithm listed inputs as: size of firm, number of reviews, rating of reviews, recency of reviews, and "how the law firm has historically collected reviews." Legal Ombudsman rulings, SDT rulings, and legal-threat notifications were no longer listed.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2021/10/13/reviewsolicitors-legal-rankings-how-they-work/

The direction of change is uniform: away from consumer protection signals, toward commercial engagement rewards. The 2021 re-specification appears not to have been publicly announced by the platform; the older article remains live, the newer article is presented as a stand-alone explainer, and the two are not connected on the site.

This has a direct implication for this research. The 0-of-14 finding on Ombudsman disclosure documents that firms do not display their complaint records on their own websites. The ranking algorithm change adds a further dimension: the platform on which the regulator directs consumer traffic once weighted its rankings against Ombudsman decisions, and at some point stopped doing so. Non-display of Ombudsman data by firms is passive. Silent removal of an Ombudsman weighting from the ranking algorithm is active.

The regulator-platform relationship

The 48-hour differential delay between positive and negative reviews is, on the platform's own account, a product feature introduced as a direct result of the SRA's pilot for reviews and engagement with the Legal Services Board. The mechanism was not an independently developed platform tool that the SRA oversaw. It was attributed to the pilot and the LSB engagement as their direct result.

In January 2023, the platform's CEO participated in an SRA roundtable. The platform subsequently reported that the SRA was "currently considering the details of" a DCT accreditation scheme. No such scheme has materialised. The platform also reported that the SRA ran a Google Ads campaign directing consumers to review platforms, including ReviewSolicitors.

reviewsolicitors.co.uk/news/2023-02-06-brace-yourself-regulatory-shifts-for-reviews-are-imminent/

Whether the SRA was aware that the platform had removed Legal Ombudsman data from its ranking algorithm, whether the SRA's Google Ads campaign continued, and on what evidential basis the regulator determined the platforms it was directing traffic to were providing accurate consumer information are questions that now warrant direct inquiry.

The SRA does not require firms to engage with ReviewSolicitors, does not direct consumers to it through its own channels (beyond the reported Google Ads campaign), and does not monitor whether firms are steering clients to alternative platforms where their profiles are more favourable. The voluntary code has no enforcement mechanism. The regulator has endorsed a platform without ensuring it produces accurate consumer information.

Part 3: The Ombudsman Gap

Against this backdrop, one source of independent, outcome-based data exists: the Legal Ombudsman's published decisions. These are named, public, and freely downloadable. They record which firms were the subject of complaints, whether the complaint was upheld, what remedy was ordered, and the value of any financial penalty. For consumers, this is the closest thing to an objective quality indicator available in the legal services market.

legalombudsman.org.uk/raising-concerns/our-decisions/

This research identified 23 firms with five or more published Ombudsman decisions in the period Q4 2024 to Q3 2025. Of those, 14 remain active. For each, we examined whether the firm discloses its Ombudsman complaint history anywhere on its website.

3.1 Zero disclosure

Not a single firm in the sample discloses its Legal Ombudsman complaint history on its website. The Ombudsman publishes this data freely. Every firm omits it. Consumers are making choices on the basis of review profiles that exclude the only independent, outcome-based data available.

This is not an isolated finding. It holds across every firm in the sample regardless of size, practice area, Trustpilot rating, or the severity of its complaint record. The consistency of the pattern suggests a market-wide norm rather than individual decisions by individual firms.

Crucially, consumers have no reasonable way to discover this information for themselves. The Legal Ombudsman's published decisions exist, but they are not linked from any firm's website, not surfaced by any review platform, and not referenced in the SRA's own firm directory. A consumer would need to know the dataset exists, navigate to it independently, and cross-reference it against firm names. In practice, almost none do. The information gap is therefore not a matter of disclosure preference but of discoverability: the only source of truth is filed in a place no consumer is directed to, by any surface a consumer is likely to use.

3.2 Curation intensity and complaint severity

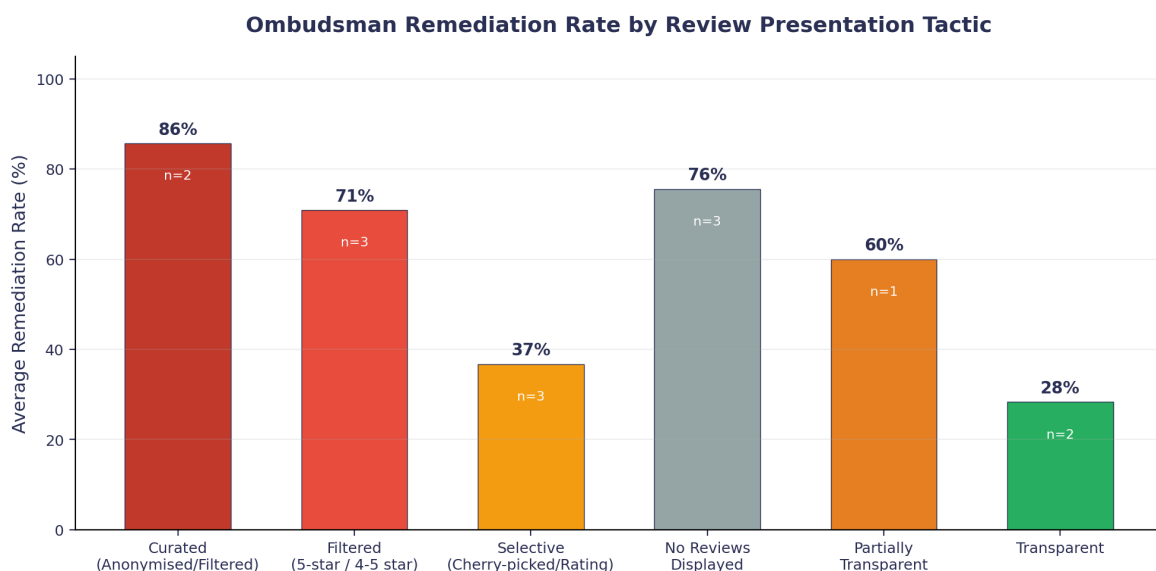


Figure 1: Average Ombudsman remediation rate by review presentation tactic category.

When firms are grouped by how they present reviews on their websites, a pattern emerges. Firms using the most curated review tactics (anonymised or filtered presentations showing only positive feedback) have an average Ombudsman remediation rate of 86%. Firms with the most transparent review practices average 28%. The pattern suggests that the intensity of curation is associated with the severity of a firm's complaint record, though the sample size means this observation should be treated with caution.

3.3 Anchor cases

Three firms illustrate how the review gap operates in practice:

	Ackroyd Legal	Irwin Mitchell	Stowe Family Law
Trustpilot Rating	3.6 / 5	4.8 / 5	4.6 / 5
Trustpilot Reviews	1,667	13,000	2,081
ReviewSolicitors Rating	3.7 / 5	4.7 / 5	4.6 / 5
LeO Decisions	6	12	6
Remediation Rate	100%	42%	17%
Highest Penalty	Up to £4,999	Over £30,000	Under £300
Review Tactic	Anonymised/Filtered	Rating Only	Mixed (Transparent)
Discloses LeO Record	No	No	No

Table 2: Three anchor cases illustrating the disconnect between public profile and complaint record.

Ackroyd Legal uses anonymised, filtered reviews on its website. The Ombudsman required remediation in every one of its six published decisions. A consumer visiting the firm's website would see curated positive feedback. They would not see that the Ombudsman has upheld complaints in 100% of cases that reached decision.

Irwin Mitchell carries a 4.8 Trustpilot rating from over 13,000 reviews and a 4.7 on ReviewSolicitors. It has 12 published Ombudsman decisions, with penalties in the highest bracket (over £30,000). Its website displays the Trustpilot rating but does not reference its Ombudsman record.

Stowe Family Law has the lowest remediation rate in the sample (17%) and the most transparent review practices. It is the closest to what informed consumer choice would require, though even Stowe does not disclose its Ombudsman record.

Implications

The findings do not demonstrate that any firm has acted dishonestly. Firms are not currently required to disclose their Ombudsman records, and selective presentation of reviews is widespread across many industries. The issue is not individual misconduct, but a market structure in which firms control visible information while independent complaint data remains effectively invisible. The result is a market in which consumers cannot make informed choices.

For consumers: Online reviews, as currently presented by law firms, do not provide a complete picture of service quality. The Legal Ombudsman's published decisions are freely available at legalombudsman.org.uk. Consumers should be aware that review platforms vary significantly in how they collect and present reviews. On some platforms, the reliability of ratings may depend on whether a firm is actively using paid review management tools, and consumers are not currently given any indication of this.

For the SRA: Paragraph 8.8 of the SRA Code of Conduct for Firms requires that any publicity is accurate and not misleading. The selective presentation of curated reviews, combined with the systematic omission of published complaint data, raises questions about whether current practices are consistent with the requirement that publicity is not misleading. The SRA's collaboration with ReviewSolicitors raises further questions: the platform's CEO describes the product as a reputation management tool; the platform's ranking algorithm was revised to remove Legal Ombudsman data as an input; and the most consequential suppression mechanism (the 48-hour differential delay) was attributed by the platform to the SRA's own pilot. The voluntary code for comparison tools has no visible enforcement mechanism.

sra.org.uk/solicitors/standards-regulations/code-conduct-firms/

For the Legal Ombudsman: Decision data is published but reaches very few consumers at the point of decision. A requirement for firms to disclose published decisions, or a direct link from review platforms to Ombudsman records, would begin to close the information gap.

For the CMA: Schedule 20 of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 brought misleading reviews within scope of enforcement from April 2025. The CMA has opened investigations in other sectors. The patterns documented here, including selective platform engagement, curated review displays, review gating through case management integrations, differential publication delays, post-publication removal mechanisms, inflated review counts, and the omission of independent complaint data, suggest the legal sector warrants equivalent scrutiny.

legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2024/13/schedule/20 ; CMA guidance CMA208, 17 March 2026:
gov.uk/government/publications/unfair-commercial-practices-cma208

Appendix: Full Data Table

All 14 active firms with 5+ published Legal Ombudsman decisions (Q4 2024 to Q3 2025), ranked by remediation rate. Trustpilot and ReviewSolicitors data verified April 2026.

Firm	LeO Dec.	Rem. Rate	TP Rating	RS Rating	Review Tactic
Ackroyd Legal	6	100%	3.6	3.7	Anonymised/Filtered
Connect2Law	5	80%	4.5	4.5	No Reviews/Awards Only
Convey Law	5	80%	4.0	1.5*	Filtered (5-star only)
DLG Legal	5	80%	4.0	2.2	No Reviews Displayed
Minster Law	11	73%	4.5	1.9	Filtered (4-5 star) + Handpicked
Carpenters	7	71%	3.6	1.1	Anonymised/Filtered
Optima Legal	6	67%	4.0	1.1	No Reviews Displayed
Simpson Millar	5	60%	4.6	4.4	Filtered (5-star only)
Taylor Rose	5	60%	4.6	4.8	Embedded (No Click-Through)
Irwin Mitchell	12	42%	4.8	4.7	Rating Only
Co-op Legal	5	40%	4.5	1.3*	External Link (Transparent)
JMW Solicitors	5	40%	4.8	4.7	Cherry-Picked
Lyons Davidson	7	29%	4.0	1.7*	Rating + Handpicked
Stowe Family Law	6	17%	4.6	4.6	Mixed (Most Transparent)

TP = Trustpilot. RS = ReviewSolicitors. Rem. = Remediation. LeO = Legal Ombudsman. * = fewer than 50 ReviewSolicitors reviews (treat with caution). Remediation rate = proportion of published decisions requiring a remedy.

Closed and Dissolved Firms

Nine firms in the full dataset are no longer trading: Axiom Ince, Beaumont ABS, Davisons Solicitors, Eric Smith Law, Jarmans Solicitors, Mr John McLanachan (disbarred), Nigel Broadhead Mynard, SSB Group (in administration), and Steve Davies Solicitors. Together these account for 80 published decisions with a remediation rate of 85.0%.

Methodological Note

This sample is constructed from firms at the upper end of the complaint spectrum. It does not include firms with fewer than five published decisions, nor firms with no Ombudsman decisions at all. Cross-platform comparisons are included where ReviewSolicitors review volumes are sufficient for meaningful analysis; firms with very low ReviewSolicitors volumes are flagged. Forensic review analysis is based on publicly accessible review data retrieved from platform profiles. The findings should not be generalised to the legal profession as a whole.



About Blind Justice UK

Blind Justice UK (Registered Charity No. 1217562) is an access to justice organisation that conducts independent research, provides direct casework support, and advocates for systemic reform in the regulation of legal services.

The full Phase 1 report, verified dataset, and supporting materials are available at blindjustice.org.uk/research.
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