

THE COMMISSIONER'S TARGETS FOR COMPLAINTS HANDLING BY THE LAW SOCIETY FOR THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2008 TO 31 MARCH 2009

In accordance with section 52(2)(d) and 52(2)(c) of the Access to Justice Act 1999, I am setting targets and making recommendations which will help towards the effective and efficient handling of complaints by the Law Society for the period 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009. I require the Law Society to submit a Plan for the handling of complaints about its members in England and Wales and expect that the Law Society will include these targets and address the recommendations. This Plan is due to be submitted to me by 5 March 2008 and should be directed to achieving performance levels in line with the targets and timeframes set.

This letter specifically relates to the work of the Law Society's Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA); I am writing separately in respect of the work of the Legal Complaint Service.

I am grateful to SRA for its ongoing dialogue and close working with my Office, its input during the development of the targets work and Antony Townsend's comments received on 25 January to my proposals for the targets. I am pleased that SRA has found the target areas I have proposed as appropriate and that it is broadly in agreement with the levels at which I have set them. In particular I have listened very carefully to SRA's proposals for changing the counting rules for Redress and Conduct matters to better support its business requirements. I have also listened very carefully to its proposals for its own quality measure, which unfortunately I am not able to agree to at this stage. However, there has been a lot of joint working and discussion between our two Offices on this matter and, subject to clarity on how the baseline was measured by SRA, I am willing to consider further if this would make a suitable target for 2008/09.

I have taken into consideration all the information provided to me by SRA. Where alternative proposals have been suggested, and the information accompanying them is relevant to the targets, the changes I considered necessary to reflect this information are included. The detail behind my considerations is included as an Annex to the final targets document.

On the matter of setting a timeliness target, I had a very useful meeting yesterday with Antony Townsend and colleagues from SRA. We explored the potential for improving timeliness within SRA from receipt of the complaint/information to the point at which matters of conduct are lodged with the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal. I agreed with Antony that I would await further information and proposals from him, which I expect to receive on 8 February before I finalise the scope of the timeliness target I will be setting for SRA.

I have also been interested to see the improvement initiatives information provided by SRA in its proposals. Whilst I welcome this, the information provided does not set out fully the benefits SRA expects to realise from their improvement initiatives and how these will be measured. This has been a business requirement that dates back to 2004 and why, when I made my target proposals I requested sufficient assurance that SRA had identified the benefits they expect to realise from their initiatives and that these were clearly measurable and, added value to complaints handling. Only then could I consider whether it was more appropriate to set a target specific to these. In the absence of this, I am maintaining the current target relating to the delivery of initiatives.

My key priorities for improving complaints handling for the consumer and the profession focus on improving quality and efficiency whilst further improving and sustaining timeliness. I have already said that for the complaints handling arms of the Law Society, the 1 April 2008 marks its fourth year towards achieving an improved complaints handling service. Although complaints handling is only a

part of SRA's work, with complaints it now needs to continue with improvements in the key areas I have identified. It also needs to deliver on its commitment to develop a robust cost efficiency model for 2009/10, which I welcome and look forward to seeing.

During this target development and setting process I have taken a number of stakeholder views into consideration including those of SRA. I view the targets I have set as being reasonable, realistic and achievable. I believe they will assist SRA towards delivering the complaints handling service the consumer and profession expects and I will continue in my support for the achievements of SRA against these priorities.

I look forward to receiving the Law Society's Plan on 5 March. In the meantime if there are any points you wish to discuss please do not hesitate to contact me.