



m.e.l  
research

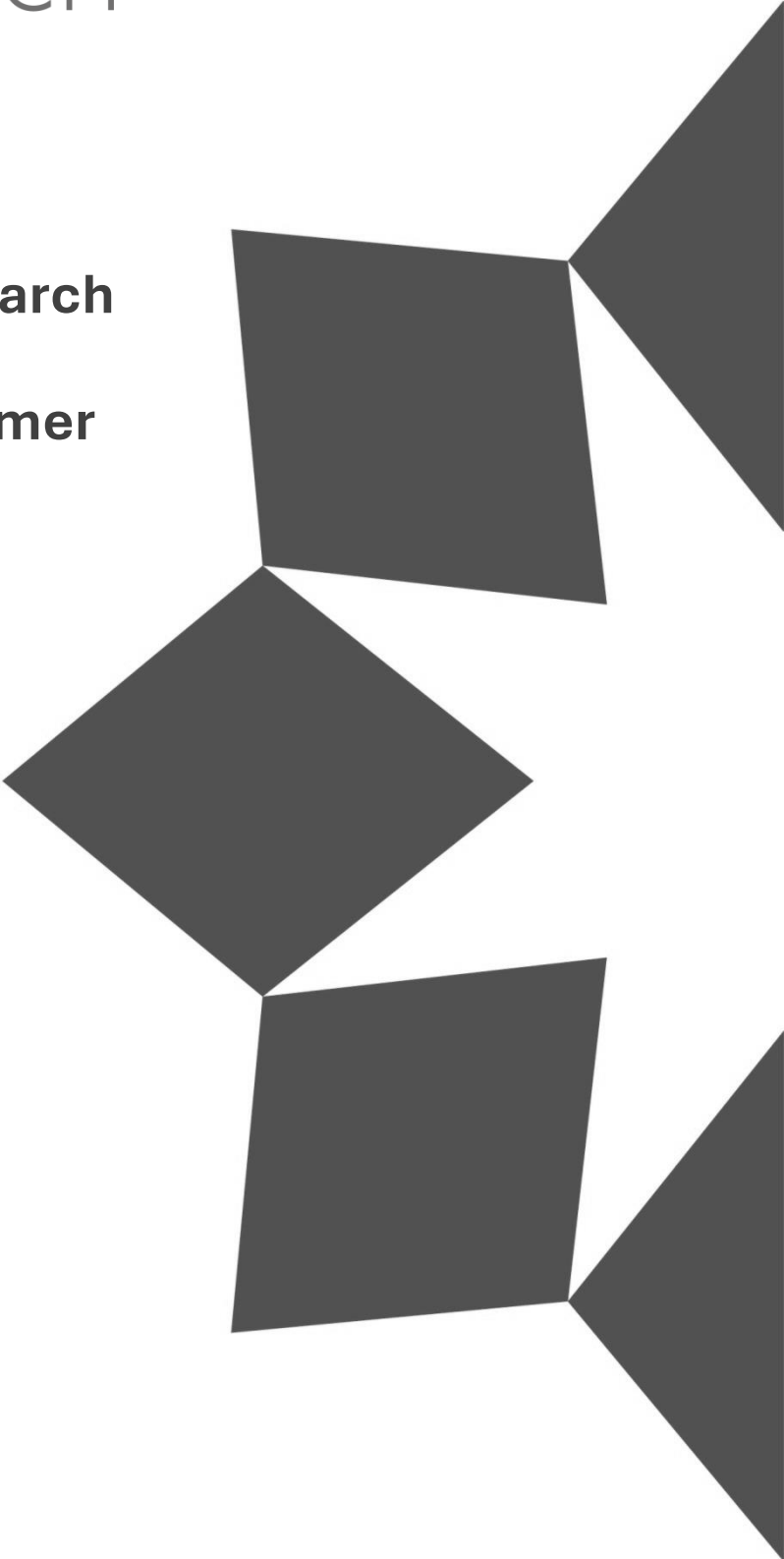
**Service Delivery Research**

**Legal Services Consumer**

**Panel**

**Service Delivery**

**Research Report**



# 1. Contents

1. Contents.....	1
2. Project Details and Acknowledgements .....	2
3. Executive Summary.....	3
4. Introduction .....	7
5. Expectations Amongst Legal Service Users .....	9
6. Challenges Experienced by Legal Service Users .....	16
7. The Role and Impact of Digital Tools in Legal Service Delivery .....	21
8. Why Human Contact Still Matters .....	32
9. Perspectives from Legal Service Providers .....	38
10. What Participants Want from Legal Service Providers .....	41

## 2. Project Details and Acknowledgements

<b>Title</b>	Service Delivery Research
<b>Client</b>	Legal Services Consumer Panel
<b>Project number</b>	24025
<b>Author</b>	Elliot Simmonds, Gayle Higginson and Sophie King

This project has been delivered to ISO 9001:2015, 20252:2019 and 27001:2013 standards.



### M·E·L Research Ltd

Somerset House, 37 Temple Street, Birmingham, B2 5DP

Email: [info@melresearch.co.uk](mailto:info@melresearch.co.uk)

Web: [www.melresearch.co.uk](http://www.melresearch.co.uk)

Tel: 0121 604 4664



## 3. Executive Summary

Legal services are often accessed during some of the most stressful moments in people's lives, after a bereavement, during a family breakdown, or when making major financial decisions such as buying a home. In these moments, clients are not just seeking legal expertise but also emotional support, clarity, and reassurance.

In recent years, digital technology has begun to reshape the way legal services are delivered. Online ID checks, digital document uploads, video calls, and client portals are increasingly common. These tools have the potential to make legal services more accessible and efficient. But they also raise important questions: Do these systems meet people's needs? What happens when human contact is replaced by automated updates or impersonal interfaces? And how can services ensure that no one is left behind?

To explore these questions, the Legal Services Consumer Panel commissioned M·E·L Research to carry out a qualitative study into legal service delivery. The research focused on three areas of law: family, probate and conveyancing. The study drew on three core data sources:

- **15 in-depth interviews** with individuals who had accessed legal services within the past two years
- **3 in-depth interviews** with legal professionals
- **An online community** involving **30 service users**, who shared detailed reflections on their expectations, preferences, and experiences

### Research findings

#### **Consumers expect traditional and digital legal services to help them feel informed, supported and respected**

Participants held clear expectations of what good legal services should provide, at the core of these expectations was a desire to feel informed, supported, and respected. Participants expected legal professionals to explain things clearly, avoid jargon, offer regular updates, and provide reassurance, particularly in moments of stress or uncertainty.

Participants also compared legal services to other sectors, such as retail or banking, where they had become accustomed to features like real-time updates, named points of contact, and accessible help channels. This reflects a wider shift in public expectation: legal services are increasingly expected to combine legal expertise with client-centred, responsive, and transparent service delivery.

### **The structure and delivery of legal services cause challenges for users**

Participants experienced challenges rooted in both the structure and delivery of legal services. Services often lacked clear entry points, step-by-step guidance, or defined timelines, leaving users unsure where they stood in the process or what would happen next. This lack of transparency led to confusion from the outset. Communication was typically reactive, with many participants reporting that they had to chase updates and felt poorly informed. This contributed to uncertainty and anxiety throughout their case.

A lack of continuity made matters worse. Clients often had to repeat their circumstances to different staff members, which was frustrating and undermined trust, especially in emotionally sensitive cases like family breakdown or bereavement. Several participants described their interactions as rushed or impersonal, and some found it difficult to access legal offices, particularly in rural areas with limited transport links.

These challenges underline the need for consistent, clear, and emotionally responsive service delivery, regardless of whether services are accessed in person or digitally.

### **Consumers currently use a wide range of digital tools across their legal journey**

Consumers now engage with a wide range of digital technology throughout their legal journey, including client portals, e-signatures, online ID checks, document uploads, and automated updates. This technology supports administrative tasks and, increasingly, client communication and case tracking. Some firms offer well-integrated systems with access to human support, while others rely on digital technology that clients find confusing or overwhelming. In many cases, digital channels are presented as the only option, for example, 43% of participants in the online community said they were not offered a choice in how to engage.

These findings point to the need for choice in legal service delivery. Digital technology can improve access to legal support, but only when paired with clear communication, human support, and alternative pathways that reflect different user needs.

Design flaws and lack of support can undermine the effectiveness of digital legal services. Poorly explained processes, complex navigation, or a lack of available help can cause confusion, missed deadlines, or total disengagement. These issues are more likely to affect people in rural areas with limited connectivity, older adults unfamiliar with technology, and those with low confidence or digital

literacy. For these users, the problem is not with digital technology, but with rigid systems that fail to offer adequate guidance, assistance, or alternatives.

### **The impact of digital services on consumers depends on their context and personal circumstances**

The impact of digital legal services is highly dependent on both the context in which the service is used and the individual's personal circumstances. Many participants appreciated the speed and convenience of online systems, particularly for simple, transactional tasks such as document submission or checking case progress. Digital legal services were especially helpful for those with mobility challenges, full-time jobs, or caring responsibilities, enabling them to manage legal tasks on their own schedule. However, when services became overly reliant on digital communication, especially in cases that were complex, emotionally charged, or required significant explanation, the benefits diminished. In these situations, respondents reported feeling isolated, confused, and emotionally unsupported.

The emotional toll was especially pronounced in family law and probate cases, where participants were already dealing with grief, conflict or anxiety. In these contexts, some participants described digital tools as impersonal, cold, or even hostile when not paired with compassionate human support.

### **Digital legal services should strike a balance between enabling and frustrating service users**

A consistent theme across participant feedback was the delicate balance that digital legal services must strike between enabling access and inadvertently creating frustration. When well-designed, supported, and flexibly delivered, digital tools empowered participants to manage legal tasks more easily, fitting them around busy lives and offering greater autonomy. However, when systems were rigid, poorly explained, or used in place of human contact at critical moments, the same tools became sources of stress and disengagement. This narrow margin between positive and negative experience underlines the importance of thoughtful service design, where user needs, emotional context, and varying levels of digital confidence are factored into how digital systems are deployed.

### **There is strong support for choice and flexibility in services that meet the needs of the user**

Across all participants, there was strong support for choice and flexibility. Most did not reject digital tools but wanted to decide how and when to use them. Preferences varied by age, geography, confidence with technology, emotional state, and the stage of the legal journey. Participants often wanted digital systems for basic updates or form submissions, but face-to-face or phone contact for key decisions, personal conversations, or moments of emotional stress.

Participants were also clear that their preferences changed over time. A system that allowed users to switch between channels and methods was seen as a marker of quality and respect.

While digital literacy and legal experience shaped how participants navigated services, expectations around clarity, choice, and support were remarkably consistent across user types. Both experienced and inexperienced technology users emphasised the value of well-designed systems, intuitive interfaces, and clear communication. Good user experience (UX) design was not seen as a tool solely for those with lower digital skills, but as a universal standard that improved service quality for everyone. Participants stressed that accessible, user-friendly platforms benefit all users, regardless of their level of familiarity with legal processes or digital technology. This underscores that designing for accessibility is not just about inclusion but about delivering a high-quality service to all.

### **Participants' understand the risks of digital service delivery and have ideas for how to mitigate these risks**

Participants raised concerns about the risks involved in digital legal service delivery, particularly those that could lead to harm, problems, or delays in their legal matter. They worried about making irreversible mistakes, missing deadlines due to unclear instructions, or misunderstanding legal documents. Several participants had already encountered these issues in practice: some missed deadlines, submitted incorrect documents, or an overly complex system led to confusion and disengagement. These issues did not stem from resistance to technology, but from poor communication and lack of support.

Consumers felt these risks could be avoided with access to clear guidance, opportunities to ask questions, and timely feedback. These forms of support helped participants feel more secure and in control, which in turn fostered trust. Trust was strongest when participants felt confident that someone was available to intervene, explain, or reassure. One participant described how their solicitor's offer to be contactable if something did not make sense made them feel that they were "in good hands" even when using digital platforms.

## 4. Introduction

Research was commissioned by the Legal Services Consumer Panel to understand consumers' experience and perception of services in family, probate and conveyancing law, and ensure the voices of consumers are reflected in ongoing discussions about legal service innovation and accessibility.

This report explores the lived experiences of, and service received by individuals who have accessed services in the past two years. Drawing on 15 in-depth interviews with service users, three in-depth interviews with legal professionals, plus insight gathered from an online community with 30 service users, the findings highlight the expectations, preferences and experiences of individuals, as well as both the positive potential and the significant challenges of digital legal service delivery as it becomes more prevalent.

### Glossary of terms

To aid clarity, this report uses the following key terms:

Term	Definition
<b>Legal service</b>	The provision of legal advice, assistance or representation in connection with the application of the law or with any form of resolution of legal disputes.
<b>Legal service provider</b>	Any individual or organisation delivering legal advice or support, including solicitors, legal executives, case handlers, or support staff.
<b>Transactional task</b>	A simple, process-based activity that does not usually require discussion or emotional support. E.g. Uploading a scanned proof of address or paying a fee online.
<b>Sensitive task</b>	A legal process or decision that is emotionally charged or personally significant. E.g. Disclosing personal or traumatic experiences to a legal adviser, negotiating sensitive arrangements with an ex-partner, possibly amid conflict or safeguarding concerns.
<b>Emotionally responsive service</b>	A service that recognises and responds to the emotional needs of the client, particularly during sensitive or distressing situations. E.g. A probate solicitor expressing sympathy and offering to talk through next steps over the phone.

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Digital technology</b>	Broad range of digital tools and systems used to help provide services, including online portals, platforms and websites, mobile Apps, chatbots and virtual assistants, video conferencing tools, digital forms and E-signatures.
<b>Digital legal services</b>	Legal services delivered or supported through digital technology as described above. Examples include managing legal documents through digital technology rather than in person or by post, using e-signatures and online ID-checks to complete conveyancing, automated case update and court hearings that take place via video link allowing the client, solicitor and judge to participate remotely.
<b>Hybrid service delivery</b>	A mix of digital tools and human interaction, allowing clients to use digital technology, but also contact staff by phone, email, or in person when needed.
<b>Traditional legal service delivery</b>	The way legal services have historically been provided, typically involving face-to-face interactions or telephone conversations between clients and legal professionals, in physical offices or court settings.
<b>Digital communication</b>	Digital communication forms part of digital legal services and refers to the interactions between clients and providers that occur via electronic means, including emails, text messages, video calls, online chat, and social media rather than in person or by post.
<b>Digital literacy</b>	The ability to confidently and effectively use digital devices, communication tools, and online platforms to access, understand, and manage information.
<b>Digital exclusion</b>	The inability to access or use digital technologies effectively due to lack of devices, internet access, skills, confidence, or support.
<b>Client portal</b>	A secure online platform where clients can access documents, track case progress, and communicate with their provider.

As noted in the glossary, email is referred to as a digitally enabled form of communication, however it has become so widely adopted and longstanding in practice that many now view it as part of traditional service delivery.

## 5. Expectations Amongst Legal Service Users

This section explores what participants expected from legal services in terms of communication, continuity, empathy, and personalisation, and how their experiences measure up. It draws on participants' reflections across different areas of law to examine the value they place on having a named point of contact, clear and proactive updates, accessible explanations, and the opportunity to ask questions. It also considers the emotional dimension of legal service delivery, including the importance of feeling listened to, respected, and supported.

Clients accessing legal services often enter the process during periods of significant stress, emotional vulnerability, or financial uncertainty. They are therefore seeking not only legal expertise, but also empathy, clarity, and a sense of personal connection with their provider. These expectations arise from the emotional, practical, and financial weight of legal matters, which then intersect with stressful life events. Clients want to feel supported, heard, and understood. They want legal services to be efficient but not impersonal, streamlined but not rushed, and technologically capable without losing the human touch.

Expectations are not limited to how services are delivered, but extend to the nature of the relationship, the quality of communication, and the degree of empathy and personalisation they receive. While the adoption of digital technology has changed the way legal services are accessed and administered, the core expectations remain rooted in trust, clarity, and human connection.

### Continuity and a named point of contact

Participants consistently expressed a desire for a clear and consistent point of contact throughout the duration of their case. They wanted to know who was responsible for managing their legal matter and to feel that this individual understood their circumstances, preferences, and concerns.

Where this expectation was met, clients described their experience in terms of trust, support, reliability, and professionalism. In contrast, those who experienced fragmented communication, with multiple staff members handling their case or anonymous communications signed off by "team" or "admin", felt overlooked and even dehumanised. They were more likely to describe the service as fragmented, frustrating, and stressful. This lack of continuity often translated into diminished trust. Clients reported feeling like a number in a system rather than an individual whose personal affairs were being handled with care and attention.

*"I used to speak to different people every time. Although I had, I can't remember what they called it now, like a case worker. Very rarely if ever I did, I could never call her. You had to*

*request a call and then they'd ring you back. But quite often it wasn't her, it was someone in her team. So, you didn't really get any continuity.”*

Participants also described how having to repeat their story to multiple staff members was exhausting, frustrating, and sometimes distressing. This was particularly significant in family law and probate matters, where emotional sensitivity was high and client relationships require greater trust and care. In these contexts, participants wanted to feel that someone was advocating for them and maintaining oversight of their case. One family law client explained that even if they did not meet their solicitor in person, they wanted to know there was someone who had oversight of the case and was advocating for them.

Even in conveyancing, which participants often viewed as involving more transactional tasks, having a named point of contact helped clients feel more secure, particularly during high-stress periods such as exchange and completion.

### **Clear, frequent, and proactive communication**

Another recurring expectation was for legal professionals to communicate clearly about the status of a case. Clients did not necessarily expect real-time updates or constant contact, but they did want to be kept informed at key milestone points, and to be reassured that their matter was progressing.

These key milestone points included:

- Initial contact and meeting with the service provider.
- Reviewing complex legal terms and documents as it allows for greater discussion and immediate clarification of any issues.
- Discussing search results (conveyancing participants) to ensure that clients fully understand any issues identified and their potential impact.
- Signing documents. While many participants were open to digital signing, some still prefer to have wet signatures on important documents.
- Completion and post-completion: Participants feel that a face-to-face or video meeting before completion would be crucial, especially for elderly or foreign clients, to ensure they are fully informed and comfortable with the decisions being made.

The absence of communication was one of the most common form of aggravation noted by participants who said that this often led to feelings of frustration, uncertainty and anxiety.

Participants described frustrations with digital channels when communication felt automated, unclear, or unresponsive. Some spoke about refreshing online portals repeatedly with no new information or about receiving cryptic status updates such as "pending", which offered no insight into what action was being taken, or when. Others noted that emails were often detached and lacked the personal touch needed to reassure them that their case was progressing appropriately. Others recounted calling or emailing multiple times without a clear response. What was missing in these interactions was the kind of contextual reassurance a conversation might have provided, for example, being told "most cases take around six weeks at this stage" or "it's normal for things to go quiet while we wait for third-party responses." Without this, participants were left uncertain about whether delays were expected, or a sign that something had gone wrong.

*"If there was something I could see without having to keep ringing them up or emailing or pestering them where they're up to... there's no point in me ringing my solicitor to get annoyed with them and chase them."*

When expectations for communication were not met, clients described feeling ignored, powerless, and disconnected from the process. For those already under emotional strain, this sense of being kept in the dark exacerbated their stress and sometimes led them to doubt whether their legal professional was acting in their best interest.

Conversely, clients who received regular, informative updates described their experience as reassuring and professional. They felt respected and included. Proactive communication, even when there were delays, made clients more patient and understanding.

### **Accessible language and clear processes**

Legal language can be intimidating, and participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of accessible, plain English explanations and step-by-step guidance, especially regarding the actions they were responsible for. Many clients, especially those unfamiliar with legal vocabulary, said they had received letters or emails filled with terminology they did not understand, which led to confusion, worry and mistakes. One participant explained how they worried about signing something they did not fully grasp or missing an important deadline because they misunderstood instructions.

*"It was about 25 pages long and it was all written in criminal terms that I didn't understand."*

When legal professionals avoided jargon, took the time to break things down, went through documents line by line, or repeated explanations without judgment, this was deeply appreciated. One

participant recounted how their solicitor sat with them and explained the probate process in simple terms, which allowed them to feel in control and confident in their decision-making.

Clarity about timelines, costs, and next steps was also essential. Participants wanted to feel that the process was transparent and that they were being kept informed.

### **The ability to ask questions and seek reassurance**

Participants expected to be able to ask questions and receive timely, tailored responses, especially when facing difficult decisions. This anticipation was particularly strong in probate and family law, where clients were often dealing with emotionally charged or unfamiliar processes. However, the expectation was sometimes left unmet in digital service delivery models that relied heavily on automated systems, generic email addresses, or chatbots.

Some participants reported being unsure whom to contact or felt discouraged from asking follow-up questions after receiving short or impersonal replies. Others worried about being a burden or asking “silly” questions, especially when they had previously been dismissed or ignored.

One probate client using a digital legal service explained that they had to guess what documents were required and when to submit them, because they could not get clear answers. Another family law client said that they needed advice and guidance at a particularly emotional time, but felt abandoned after receiving a single, impersonal email with forms to complete.

By contrast, when professionals encouraged questions, checked for understanding, or offered to talk things through, clients felt empowered.

*“She would explain step by step what the process would be. She wouldn’t just answer my question; she’d answer it and explain why or what could happen if this happens. She made me feel very reassured.”*

The ability to ask questions without fear of judgement was closely linked to confidence and trust. Participants emphasised that reassurance didn’t require constant handholding, rather, it meant knowing they could check things when needed and have the confidence to move forward without fear of error.

### **Empathy and respectful treatment**

Participants expected legal professionals to show empathy, patience, and respect, particularly during periods of grief or emotional distress. These qualities were often more important to clients than the speed or cost of the service. Consumers wanted to feel that providers recognised the weight of their situation and were willing to adapt their tone, pace, or communication accordingly.

Providers who acknowledged the emotional nature of the case, asked how participants were doing, or showed patience during difficult conversations made a lasting impression. These small acts built trust, encouraged openness, and made respondents feel respected.

*“So there was a lot of active listening, so when I addressed the issue, they didn't speak over me. They were nodding as I spoke. So I could see they were actively listening to what I said, and they stayed with interest and empathy of what I was going through.”*

Where empathy was absent, clients described feeling like “just another case” or “a number in the system.” Even efficient services were experienced as cold or distressing when they failed to account for the emotional realities of the client’s situation.

A probate client recalled being told to upload documents to a portal just days after their parent’s death, without any expression of condolence or human interaction and a family law participant described how painful it was to receive instructions about custody arrangements in the form of a standardised email with attachments and no accompanying explanation or support.

*“It was very disconnected. I felt like it was such an important thing in my life... But it was treated as nothing's really going on because I was just emailing. I didn't see anyone.”*

These interactions, while perhaps efficient for the provider, made participants feel uncared for, which in turn undermined their trust in the service provider and the legal system more broadly. In addition, participants who did not feel that they received the level of empathy they felt they deserved were markedly less satisfied with the service they received overall, irrespective of the outcome. This is important to note as clients often return to a provider they have used before and are familiar with. However, they are more likely to seek out a different provider if their experience (as opposed to outcome) is disappointing or not as expected.

### **Choice and flexibility in service delivery**

There was also an expectation that clients would be given some degree of choice in how they engaged with the legal service. This included the ability to choose between digital, traditional and hybrid modes of communication, and to opt for different levels of engagement depending on the complexity of the issue. Participants wanted to feel that their preferences and limitations were acknowledged. This was especially relevant for clients who lacked the devices, skills, or confidence to use online systems.

While most participants were happy to use digital tools for simple, administrative tasks, many expressed a clear preference for phone or face-to-face contact at key stages. This preference was

shaped by the nature of the legal matter, as well as the emotional state, confidence, and digital ability of the client.

For complex decisions, emotionally difficult conversations, or explanations of unfamiliar documents, participants preferred voice or face-to-face contact. Some preferred video calls to phone calls, especially when they needed to see the other person's reaction or wanted reassurance that they were being taken seriously.

*"I'm a bit of a hybrid. I like a lot of the aspects of digital... but I am only human at the end of it, I do want that human interaction."*

### **Consequences of poor service delivery**

When services failed to meet expectations, whether due to poor communication, lack of empathy, or unclear processes, participants described a range of negative impacts. This included stress, confusion, and in some cases, disengagement from the process altogether. Several participants felt they had made mistakes, missed deadlines, or misunderstood key steps because of unclear guidance or lack of timely support.

While these consequences were experienced acutely by clients, they also carry significant risks for providers. Poor service delivery not only undermines trust and satisfaction, it can also damage a firm's reputation, reduce client retention, and limit future recommendations. In a competitive legal services market, these are not just demand-side problems; they are supply-side challenges with commercial and regulatory implications.

Some participants described withdrawing from communication, feeling anxious about whether their case was being handled properly, or questioning whether they had chosen the right legal provider. A small number said they would not use the same firm again, even if the legal outcome had been successful, simply because they felt neglected or treated as an afterthought. Others said they had advised friends or family to avoid certain providers based on their experiences, highlighting the long-term reputational damage that can follow poor service, even when technical competence is not in question.

The consequences of poor service were particularly pronounced in emotionally complex legal matters. Participants said that feeling unsupported during these times added to their distress and made an already difficult situation harder to manage, while also shaping how they viewed the legal profession more broadly.

*“I think it got to the point when you used to go on the website, you get an email saying that you had a message from them. Then you had to log into your account, and it was just this little digital spinning wheel thing going around telling you at what stage you were at. And it was quite stressful since I see that pop up that I'd have a new message or something. I felt, what do they want to know now...”*

In contrast, when legal professionals made the effort to build rapport, communicate clearly, and offer choices, clients described a much more positive experience. Even where delays or complications occurred, the presence of a named contact, regular updates, and a sense of being listened to helped mitigate stress and preserve trust. The relationship between client and legal provider, then, is not solely defined by the efficiency of the transaction but by the quality of the interaction. It is shaped by whether the client feels respected, supported, and understood, and these factors remain critically important, regardless of whether services are delivered digitally, face-to-face, or through a hybrid model.

## 6. Challenges Experienced by Legal Service Users

While the previous section explored what participants expect from legal services, this section examines where those expectations are not met in practice. It highlights the barriers and frustrations experienced by users and identifies the service-level and systemic issues that undermine delivery, whether digital or traditional.

Across family law, probate, and conveyancing, clients face a range of practical, emotional, and informational challenges that make it difficult to access and benefit fully from legal services. These challenges are not unique to digital legal services, they are present in face-to-face services too, and often reflect deeper, systemic issues in how legal services are structured, resourced, and communicated. However, the shift towards digital technology can exacerbate these problems or make them more visible, particularly when systems are rigid, impersonal, or poorly explained. Rather than resolving underlying weaknesses, digital tools sometimes add new barriers for clients who are already navigating complex and emotionally charged situations. Understanding these experiences in depth highlights the need for both service-level improvements and broader regulatory action to ensure legal services are accessible, inclusive, and centred around the needs of the people who use them.

### Fragmented and impersonal communication

One of the challenges faced by legal service users was fragmented or inconsistent communication. Participants described difficulty establishing and maintaining meaningful contact with the person handling their case. This was exacerbated in firms with a high staff turnover, lack of clear escalation points, or firms that relied on shared inboxes with no obvious accountability.

*“I had a bit of a disaster. First, I booked the solicitor with XXX ... she was supposed to be the best rated around. And then she got took over by a junior solicitor, which wasn't the best experience. I changed solicitors then.”*

These experiences were especially problematic in family law and probate cases, where trust and continuity were crucial. Some participants described feeling like “just another file on someone's desk,” and the absence of personal contact left them feeling unseen and unimportant.

In probate matters, where users were grieving and often new to the legal process, this absence of personalisation made the experience feel transactional and cold.

*“I never saw him [the solicitor]. And I know his name. I know where they were, but I never ever saw him. I wouldn't be able to pick him out on the street or anything... There was a disconnect...I didn't feel like it was someone I could reach out to.”*

When this type of communication pattern persisted, regardless of whether it was via email, phone, or client portal, participants lost confidence. Some hesitated to ask questions, while others delayed taking action because they weren't sure who to contact or whether they would be answered.

### **Delays, inaction, and lack of transparency**

Participants acknowledged that some delays are inherent in legal processes. However, they emphasised that what caused the greatest anxiety was not the delay itself, but the lack of explanation. Several said they were left waiting for updates that never came, or that they had to follow up repeatedly only to be told something vague or inconsistent.

*“We were stuck on one spot for over two months... It took them two months [not to] respond to say if the kitchen is legal or not. So that was quite worrying.”*

Participants expressed frustration at having to prompt updates themselves and at receiving vague or inconsistent information in return. Some said they only learned that a delay had occurred after they followed up several times. Others noted that they were promised regular updates that never materialised. This sense of being kept in the dark contributed to anxiety and a lack of confidence in the provider's competence.

In family law, delays and silence were particularly difficult when child arrangements or financial settlements were involved. Participants described sleepless nights, arguments with ex-partners, and the emotional toll of uncertainty. They wanted clarity not just for their own peace of mind, but to plan their lives and make informed decisions.

### **Limited opportunities to ask questions and get clear answers**

Legal terminology, procedural steps, and decision-making processes were often difficult for participants to understand, and many found there were few reliable avenues to seek clarification. Several described feeling embarrassed about asking questions, or unsure whether their solicitor would be receptive.

Others reported that when they did ask questions, particularly via email, the responses were brief, technical, or delayed. Some received no response at all. In some cases, clients felt they had to choose between appearing ignorant or risking a mistake by staying silent.

*“There was never a conversation really over the email. It was just very, very brief.”*

This issue was more pronounced in digital legal services that relied on online client portals or forms. These tools often showed progress but did not explain what a status meant or what the user was expected to do next. Participants said they wanted reassurance from a real person, particularly when handling important or unfamiliar steps.

### **Emotional burden and lack of empathy**

The legal matters covered in this research often coincide with moments of acute personal difficulty, however some participants reported that their emotional state was sometimes not acknowledged by their legal service provider. This lack of empathy was not just a matter of poor interpersonal skills; it had direct implications for how supported and secure participants felt throughout the process.

*“I think with divorce you hit a lot of different factors. You've got the financial factor, you've got children, you've got your own emotional... And you are going to want someone to reassure you that you're doing the right thing and everything's going to be sorted. You want that confidentiality and you're going to want someone that's experienced in that field to let you know everything's going to be okay.”*

Some described receiving cold or automated emails when a personal message might have offered reassurance or recognition of the situation. In probate cases, for example, participants said that simply acknowledging their loss before requesting documentation would have made a difference.

The absence of emotional support led some to withdraw, describing how they became reluctant to contact their solicitor, and worried that their needs were being treated as unimportant.

### **Lack of clarity around costs and billing**

Cost-related concerns were another challenge. Some participants were unsure of what they would be charged, when they would be billed, and whether costs were fixed or variable. This lack of transparency caused anxiety and, in some cases, mistrust.

Probate clients expressed concern that fees were deducted from the estate without adequate explanation or itemised breakdowns. In family law, one client described running out of funds midway through a case because the cost had escalated more than anticipated.

The challenge was not always the amount charged but the lack of clarity and predictability. Participants wanted to understand what they were paying for, when payments were due, and how they could keep costs manageable. Without this information, they felt disempowered and vulnerable.

## Challenges navigating digital platforms and tools

Although many clients used digital tools regularly in other areas of life, they found some legal digital portals to be difficult to navigate. The issue was not a lack of digital skill but rather the inaccessibility of the systems themselves.

Others found it difficult to upload documents, misunderstood the instructions, or received error messages with no clear support pathway. Some described sending the same document multiple times because they were unsure whether it had been received correctly.

*“I understand why they want you to upload everything, they want you to do it to portals, as you're probably aware these days. And I find them difficult because they want you to provide it in a PDF most of the time. And it just doesn't come natural to me personally, and I'm sure I'm not on my own.”*

Others were unable to get support when the system failed or made mistakes.

## When services do not work as intended

Some of the challenges described by participants were not isolated problems, but signs that legal services are not always set up in ways that work for clients. Several people spoke about having to chase their provider repeatedly just to keep their case moving. In many cases, it felt like nothing would happen unless they took the initiative themselves, even when they didn't feel confident doing so.

For example, one participant was told they had caused a delay by failing to return a form, but it later became clear the form had never been sent in the first place. Others described not being given key information, only discovering that steps hadn't been taken when they asked directly. These situations created unnecessary stress and undermined confidence in the service.

Participants felt that their needs weren't always considered when services were designed or delivered. They wanted someone to take ownership of their case, to provide clear updates, and to acknowledge when mistakes happened. Instead, they often found themselves repeating information, waiting for updates that never came, or having to explain their situation to a different person each time they made contact.

These experiences left people feeling that they were being carried along by an internal process, rather than being supported through an important and often emotional journey. When legal services worked well, it was because someone took responsibility, responded promptly, and made sure the client felt understood and informed. When that didn't happen, the whole experience could feel distant, confusing, and even adversarial, regardless of whether the legal outcome was positive.

## Regional and age-related barriers to access

Geography and age also shaped people's experiences. Participants living in rural areas faced additional hurdles, including poor transport and unreliable internet. Even where digital legal services were offered, they weren't always practical alternatives.

Older participants were more likely to struggle with digital legal services that required frequent or complex online engagement. This wasn't due to a lack of intelligence or willingness, but because they lacked confidence, suitable equipment, or support.

*"I've got quite a few elderly neighbours and a lot of those are not happy even doing banking or buying things on Amazon online or using the phone for anything other than ringing someone. Yeah. They've got smart phones, so they've got the capabilities... I'm actually looking at Pam's house now, my next door neighbour, she's 84 and there's just no way she'll do online banking or legal help or wills or conveyancing online at all regardless of what the solicitor would do to try and help her."*

By contrast, younger participants and those more confident with digital technology tended to find online processes more convenient and efficient.

## 7. The Role and Impact of Digital Tools in Legal Service Delivery

Building on the previous section’s discussion of common challenges, this section focuses more specifically on how digital tools are shaping users’ experiences. It explores the benefits, limitations, and risks of digital service delivery, and the varying ways participants engage with technology throughout their legal journey.

### Everyday use of digital tools

Many participants described using digital tools in their lives with confidence and regularity. They were familiar with online banking, shopping apps, medical appointment booking systems, and communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom. Some had accessed government services through GOV.UK or managed bills and contracts online. This everyday use of digital technology was common even among older participants or those living in rural areas.

In the online community, participants shared screenshots of their most frequently used apps (a selection of which are shown in Figure 1). The most frequently noted tools included Google, Amazon, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Reddit.

Figure 1: Tools online community participants used during their everyday lives



*"For low value one-off transactions, I'm broadly comfortable with it and I'm thinking like just ordering bird seed off Amazon, which is what I did this morning. It's £15 for a huge bag that gets delivered to my door. It's cheaper, it's more convenient."*

### **Differentiating everyday tasks from legal engagement**

Despite this comfort with digital technology, many participants drew a clear distinction between general digital use and the use of digital tools for legal matters. Legal services were seen as complex, unfamiliar, and often emotionally or financially significant, making the stakes much higher.

*"I think, conveyancing the biggest financial thing that you always ever do, or I've ever done... So I've been nervous about completely going digital on something that has the potential to really negatively affect the rest of my life if this goes wrong financially."*

Even those with high digital literacy often described greater caution when it came to digital legal services. Concerns focused on trust, misunderstanding of information, and the need for assurance when navigating legal obligations.

### **Views on digital legal services**

Digital legal services are legal services that are delivered or supported through digital technology, such as signing contracts or legal agreements through DocuSign or Adobe Sign, court hearings that take place via video link or using online ID-checks.

Many participants acknowledged the benefits of digital legal services, particularly when it came to tasks they found simple, such as submitting identification documents, signing standard forms, or receiving updates. For some, the ability to complete these steps at a time that suited them, from the comfort of their home, was a clear advantage.

However, as soon as the process became complicated or emotionally charged, clients wanted reassurance that only a human interaction could provide.

*"But if it were to be serious issues, sensitive issues, sensitive discussions, then that's one thing I would change. No video calls, everything should be face to face."*

### **Digital technology in use**

Participants described engaging with a range of digital tools during their legal journeys, including platforms such as DocuSign, Clio, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, as well as online ID checks, client portals, secure document upload platforms, and e-signatures. These tools were often used to complete administrative tasks, submit documentation, or receive updates. ID verification, and

contract signing were commonly carried out online, especially where the provider defaulted to digital channels.

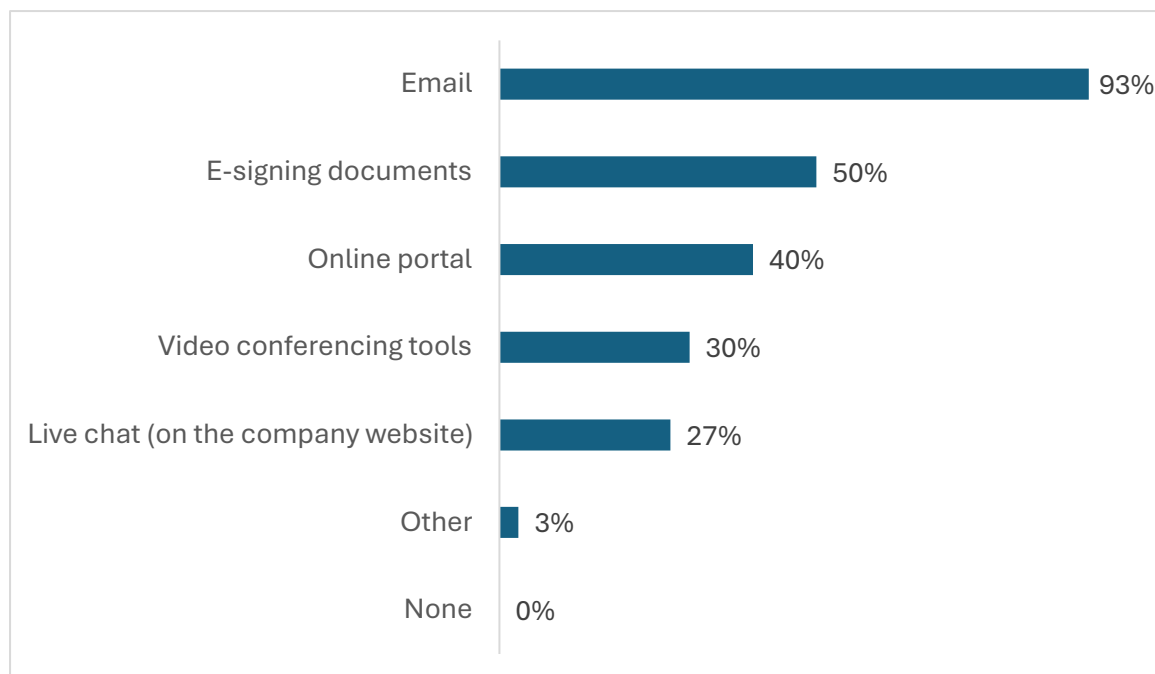
*“Digital communication was better for the initial inquiry and engagement, document submission, communication with financial institutions, probate approval, and estate distribution. These stages involve routine or administrative tasks that benefit from speed, efficiency, and security.”*

In some cases, these tools were integrated into a single service flow; in others, participants described a patchwork of separate systems, which could be confusing or inconsistent. The effectiveness of the technology often depended less on the tool itself and more on how well it was explained and supported.

In conveyancing, digital legal services were especially common, with entire transactions often completed through email, web portals, and document upload platforms.

While not always considered “innovative,” email was still central to many participants’ experiences. For participants with lower levels of digital literacy, even email could feel like a significant technological step, and its usability or limitations shaped how they experienced digital legal services.

**Figure 2: Tools online community participants used during their legal journey**



## Where digital works well

Participants acknowledged a range of benefits to digital legal service delivery, particularly for administrative or straightforward tasks. Many appreciated the speed, convenience, and flexibility that digital tools could offer.

Customers valued being able to complete legal tasks on their own terms, without needing to take time off work or travel to an office. This flexibility was especially important for those with mobility issues, caring responsibilities, or busy schedules.

*“Yeah. It'll save time. The distance, it will save my fuel. It'll save my finances. So if they are agreeing to do a video call, then I know that this is the right solicitor I'm talking to, then yes, I would prefer it.”*

The ability to engage from home and at one's own pace gave users a greater sense of control.

*“The same with email that you can schedule the time... So it wasn't like we have a meeting at 10 o'clock today, you have to go and do this, or I'm going to call you now you have to do it now. It was just like, okay, right tonight. I'll open up that email and I see what's going on. But you could schedule your own time you were going to spend on trying to get your job done. That gives you a bit of control.”*

Digital tools that allowed participants to check the status of their case, review documents, and receive updates were seen as transparent and welcomed, particularly when they were well designed and intuitive. Participants felt reassured when they could see visible progress without having to chase for updates.

*“And when it's something as important as conveying or any sort of legal, you do need to feel in control. [...] You want to also feel informed of what's going on.”*

Participants also highlighted the benefit of having written communication, which allowed them to reread instructions and avoid misunderstandings. Email correspondence and message logs within client portals were described as useful references, especially in complex or drawn-out cases.

*“I would like to be able to print off some proof of that conversation and that agreement that we've got.”*

These benefits were most commonly reported in conveyancing cases with well-defined steps and less emotional complexity. In these scenarios, digital tools helped streamline the process and reduce costs, while still allowing clients to ask for human support when needed.

Participants highlighted that the success of digital legal services often depended on how they were integrated into the overall service. When systems were accompanied by human oversight and clear guidance, they could enhance rather than hinder the client experience.

### Where digital falls short

While digital tools were appreciated for their convenience in straightforward or routine tasks, participants highlighted important limitations. These limitations emerged most clearly in emotionally charged or complex cases where digital delivery alone often failed to provide the empathy, clarity, or personal connection clients needed.

*“Just to have a general catch up rather than it just all being online and just getting emails and stuff. Just to make it feel a bit more like they care.”*

Several participants described situations where digital systems, such as client portals or email threads, left them feeling confused or unsupported. They emphasised that these were moments where human interaction mattered most, whether to explain legal language, provide reassurance, or answer nuanced questions.

*“If the other person answers my first or second question in a particular way, that's going to trigger a new different type of question. I'd be more keen to do that face-to-face or video conference [...] You can't really do that by email.”*

Participants dealing with bereavement or separation found that automated messages or portal-based communication could feel cold and emotionally disconnected. The lack of empathy during these high-stress moments intensified the emotional burden. Many felt they were being processed through a system rather than supported through a difficult or sensitive event.

Some reported that even basic digital tools became sources of anxiety when systems did not confirm receipt or failed to explain what action would follow.

*“The uploading of documents I managed to do that face-to-face because I was still up there regularly... but I know for some people it might be difficult to tell if it's gone through online.”*

Others described the design of digital systems as poorly thought-out or unintuitive. Issues included clunky interfaces, confusing instructions, or problems accessing platforms via mobile devices. Participants said that passwords were frequently forgotten, and resets were not always straightforward. Some struggled with inconsistent instructions between email updates and platform notifications. These problems undermined users' confidence and left them feeling vulnerable to error.

Digital exclusion was also a concern. Several participants reported not having the right equipment, such as a scanner, or struggled with unreliable broadband, especially in rural areas. In these cases, what was intended as a streamlined digital journey became a barrier to engagement.

A key issue was the lack of a clear fallback when things went wrong. Participants often didn't know how to get help or who to contact when systems failed. Delays mounted, uncertainty grew, and clients described feeling isolated from the process and unsure how to proceed.

These challenges were not experienced equally. Participants' ability to engage effectively with digital tools was shaped by their personal circumstances, emotional state, and the quality of support available. Those with greater digital literacy and fewer external stressors were often more successful in navigating the systems. However, even digitally literate users noted that when dealing with emotionally complex or high-stakes legal issues, they still wanted access to human support.

Insights from other sectors reinforce these findings. The Adult Social Care Survey 2023–24 found that while many users were satisfied with their support, a significant minority reported feeling lonely, highlighting the importance of emotional connection. Similarly, a review of electronic care records in adult social care emphasised that successful digital delivery depends not only on technology but also on accessible communication and human support.

In Power of Attorney services, the Office of the Public Guardian's online system aimed to simplify processes. Yet one in three attorneys faced issues registering documents with banks, often due to inconsistent procedures or undertrained staff. The Financial Conduct Authority has also found that some financial institutions failed to respond appropriately to vulnerable customers. These examples show that digital systems must be designed around people's needs, combining efficiency with empathy, clarity, and the option for personalised support.

Another concern was the inconsistency in digital legal service delivery. While some firms offered clear instructions, integrated systems, and follow-up support, others provided fragmented or poorly explained digital tools. The tone and quality of communication also varied. Some clients received supportive, human-sounding updates, while others described abrupt or robotic messages that left them unsure what to do next.

This variation was especially pronounced in rural areas. Participants living at a distance from legal offices, and without reliable internet, described how the lack of accessible in-person options combined with substandard digital infrastructure created multiple layers of disadvantage. In these situations, digital tools failed to bridge the gap and, at times, deepened existing inequalities.

Ultimately, participants were not opposed to technology itself. Many used digital tools routinely in other areas of life. What they objected to was a model of legal service delivery that relied too heavily on those tools in contexts where empathy, reassurance, and clarity were essential. Digital systems were most appreciated when they were backed by responsive human support and designed with the client experience in mind.

### **Inconsistencies**

One common frustration expressed by participants was the lack of consistency in how digital legal services were offered and supported, even within the same service provider. The experience of accessing digital legal services varied significantly depending on the firm, the specific solicitor involved, and the type of legal matter being addressed.

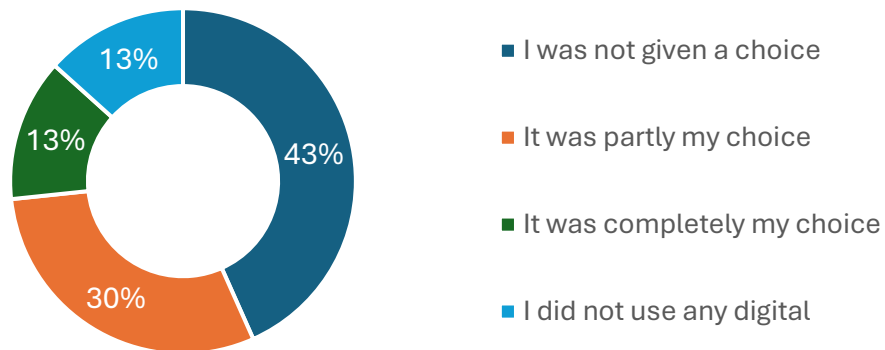
While some participants encountered well-integrated digital systems that were intuitive and accompanied by clear communication, others described poorly implemented platforms, vague instructions, and minimal support. These inconsistencies led to confusion and undermined confidence in the digital delivery of legal services.

### **Limited choice**

In some cases, digital legal services were presented as the only available option, with no opportunity for clients to request a different method of engagement. This lack of choice was particularly problematic for participants with low digital literacy or for those who found digital channels emotionally unsupportive or overly impersonal.

From the online community, 43% of participants were not given a choice as to the tools they used, it was just a part of the process they were told to follow. This lack of choice led many to feel coerced and created barriers for those who wanted or needed human interaction.

**Figure 3: Level of choice afforded to online community participants over the digital tools used during their legal journey**



Participants described a small number of instances where even simple requests for a phone call or face-to-face meeting were discouraged or ignored. This left some clients feeling that the service was being designed for the provider’s convenience, rather than around the needs and preferences of the user.

These issues also raised concerns about fairness and inclusion. For example, participants with limited access to digital tools, unstable internet connections, or accessibility needs were more likely to experience barriers. In the absence of flexible delivery models, these clients felt excluded or disadvantaged in their ability to engage fully with legal processes.

The lack of consistent service standards across providers contributed to a perception that the quality and accessibility of legal support was unpredictable. Participants called for clearer expectations around what clients should be offered and greater transparency in how services would be delivered.

### **Concerns around access, security, and errors**

Although many participants were comfortable using digital platforms in other areas of their lives, legal processes raised distinct concerns. In particular, issues around access, security, and the potential for errors were highlighted as areas where digital legal service delivery posed challenges for consumers.

Participants flagged technical limitations as a significant barrier. Some had difficulties accessing the right tools or equipment, such as scanners, printers, or compatible software, which affected their ability to engage fully with digital platforms.

Others expressed concern about being locked out of systems due to forgotten passwords or usability issues. These practical barriers caused frustration and, at times, delays in case progression.

Security concerns were also common. Several participants were anxious about sending sensitive documents or personal information via digital means, particularly where there was limited follow-up or confirmation. This concern was especially acute where participants had prior experiences of digital breaches or harassment:

*“The biggest thing is probably digital security I suppose, for example, I’ve had a situation with my ex-partner where he put the tracker on my car and was stalking me. And when I was on holiday I tried to go onto my email and it said, ‘this password has been entered too many times wrong’. I think he was trying to access my email account. So again, like if he had got my password right, he could be reading them now. He would’ve seen everything legally that’s going on. That is my biggest concern.”*

Some also noted a lack of confidence in whether documents had been properly submitted. This was especially problematic when platforms lacked clear confirmation messages, or when follow-up from the firm was delayed or absent. Repeatedly uploading documents or re-sending materials contributed to anxiety and confusion.

Additionally, participants were concerned about the rigidity of some digital systems, which did not allow users to explain their circumstances, ask follow-up questions, or seek reassurance. The lack of flexibility could leave clients feeling boxed in by a system not designed to accommodate individual needs or concerns.

### **Risk, trust, and digital-only models**

Participants reflected on the risks involved in digital legal service delivery, particularly when those services operated without meaningful opportunities for human interaction. These risks were not hypothetical. Several participants described having already experienced the negative consequences of digital-only systems, including missed deadlines, miscommunications, and a sense of emotional isolation.

Many worried about making irreversible mistakes, misunderstanding legal instructions, or failing to meet procedural requirements due to unclear guidance. While some participants were able to resolve these issues through persistence or external support, others disengaged altogether, feeling that the process was too complex or opaque to navigate confidently on their own.

Importantly, participants did not describe these challenges as evidence of resistance to technology. Instead, they pointed to a lack of clarity, support, and flexibility as the root cause. When digital legal systems functioned without the option to speak to a human or receive timely clarification, clients felt unprotected and vulnerable.

These issues also had implications for trust. Participants said they were less likely to feel confident in their provider when they couldn't make direct contact, receive consistent updates, or get personalised responses to their questions. Several expressed a reluctance to use the same provider again, not because of a negative outcome in their legal matter, but because they felt neglected or treated as an afterthought.

*“They just always seem shoddy... They can't transfer that feeling of trustworthiness. When it's just a shoddy app on a phone, it just makes it seem [unreliable] and dodgy right away.”*

This undermining of trust also had wider consequences. Some participants advised friends or family to avoid particular firms, based on their own experiences. For legal service providers, this erosion of trust represented more than a client satisfaction issue, it poses reputational and business risks.

The findings underscore that while digital tools can offer efficiency and convenience, they must be supported by clear communication, flexible options, and pathways to human contact. When these elements are missing, the risks to both clients and providers grow significantly.

### **Preferences for hybrid delivery**

Participants consistently emphasised that while digital tools could offer benefits, they did not want these to come at the expense of human interaction. Instead, they expressed a strong preference for a hybrid model that allowed digital options for routine or straightforward tasks but retained the ability to speak to a person, either in person or via phone or video, when needed.

*“Just so people maybe just have that option to think maybe I need to speak to someone first.”*

Consumers valued the flexibility that hybrid service delivery models offered. Many used digital tools such as e-signatures, document uploads, and online case trackers to manage simple or administrative steps efficiently. For these types of tasks, the ability to access services at any time and from any location was seen as a practical advantage. Some participants appreciated that digital access allowed them to manage their legal affairs alongside work or caring responsibilities, without needing to travel or take time off.

However, participants made it clear that not all stages of the legal process were equally suited to digital interaction. They wanted human contact for key decision-making points, when dealing with emotionally charged issues, or when navigating complex legal processes. For example, initial consultations, reviewing legal documents, and receiving significant updates were moments where

clients wanted to engage more personally. This was particularly important where legal matters intersected with personal grief, stress, or uncertainty.

The preference for hybrid service delivery was also shaped by the reassurance that came with being able to ask questions and receive tailored responses. Participants did not want to be left interpreting status updates or instructions without the opportunity to seek clarification. Even those confident using digital tools in everyday life said they preferred to speak to someone when they had doubts or needed reassurance.

Concerns were also raised about digital-only services being presented as the default, with limited or no choice offered. This lack of flexibility was frustrating for some and made them feel that their preferences or needs were being overlooked. Participants consistently said they wanted a choice in how to engage with their legal provider and for that choice to reflect the complexity of their situation and their personal circumstances.

This lack of flexibility is a concern echoed in wider research. A study by the Legal Services Board and Solicitors Regulation Authority found that technology is rarely considered acceptable as the sole means of access, particularly in complex or emotionally sensitive cases. Similarly, the Legal Services Consumer Panel's 2024 Tracker Survey found that while digital tools are convenient, many consumers still prefer speaking to someone by phone or face-to-face when dealing with unfamiliar or high-stakes issues.

The overwhelming view was not that digital delivery should be abandoned, but that it should be integrated in a way that remains responsive to individual needs. Participants wanted digital systems to be complemented by human interaction, not to replace it. Hybrid delivery was seen as the most inclusive and client-centred way forward.

## 8. Why Human Contact Still Matters

As Section 7 showed, digital tools can offer convenience, but they also risk losing the human touch. This section explores why direct, personal contact remains essential to many service users, particularly during emotionally charged or complex legal issues, and how it supports trust, clarity, and reassurance.

For participants, the defining feature of human contact was the opportunity to engage with a real person, someone who could listen, respond with empathy, and offer tailored support. This might happen through a face-to-face meeting in an office, a phone conversation or a video call (as long as it felt responsive and genuine).

### When human contact is most valued

Participants wanted the option to speak to someone, either in person or by phone, when dealing with more complex, sensitive, or emotionally charged issues. In particular, clients preferred human interaction when:

- Making important decisions
- Receiving bad news
- Discussing sensitive personal matters
- Clarifying legal documents or terminology
- Resolving problems or misunderstandings

Face-to-face meetings offered a sense of safety, support, and reassurance. Several participants described choosing to meet in person, even when digital options were available, because they felt more confident when they could make eye contact, ask questions in real time, and physically review documents.

Video calls were sometimes seen as a helpful compromise, allowing for non-verbal cues and a greater sense of connection. One participant chose video over email or phone because they needed to see the solicitor's reaction and judge whether their questions were being taken seriously, and to seek reassurance.

### The emotional value of being seen and heard

Participants described how legal matters often arise during stressful or life-changing events. In these contexts, participants described the value of human interaction.

*“It is crucial that legal firms remember that behind every case is a person who might be going through a stressful or life changing situation.”*

Face-to-face settings were consistently viewed as providing emotional safety. They allowed participants to share their story, seek reassurance in real time, and gauge understanding and empathy through verbal and non-verbal cues. This was described as offering a level of support that digital services could not replicate.

*“I do want someone to say to me face to face, “It's done. You've got it.” Just that bit of a personal touch... Just speak and reassure me.”*

### **Trust and relationship-building**

Participants identified face-to-face interaction as essential for building trust and rapport. Many felt unable to assess the reliability or competence of their provider without meeting them in person.

*“I'd want to be as hands-on and as alert and aware of everything as possible. I'd want to be there speaking to them. I want them to see my enthusiasm. If it's something I'm really upset about, I would want them to see me.”*

Participants frequently commented on how trust is built through subtle, interpersonal cues: eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice, and active listening. These features were seen as integral to professional service but largely absent from digital channels.

*“I will choose a video call, to be honest. Because I'm able to look at them, and see them, and sort of read their face. I know who I'm talking to, it makes me have more confidence in who I'm dealing with and who I'm giving out such sensitive information to.”*

Trust also depended on having opportunities to ask questions and receive tailored responses. Participants felt that in-person contact made it easier to confirm that legal advice was correct, and that their solicitor was genuinely acting in their best interests.

### **Clarity and understanding**

Participants valued face-to-face interaction for improving their understanding of legal language and process. They described how complex documents felt less overwhelming when reviewed in person, and how real-time explanations helped them feel informed and in control.

This was especially important for those without a legal background or for whom English was a second language. Participants said that in-person meetings helped them clarify responsibilities, avoid mistakes, and feel more confident in their decisions.

## Staged approaches and hybrid preferences

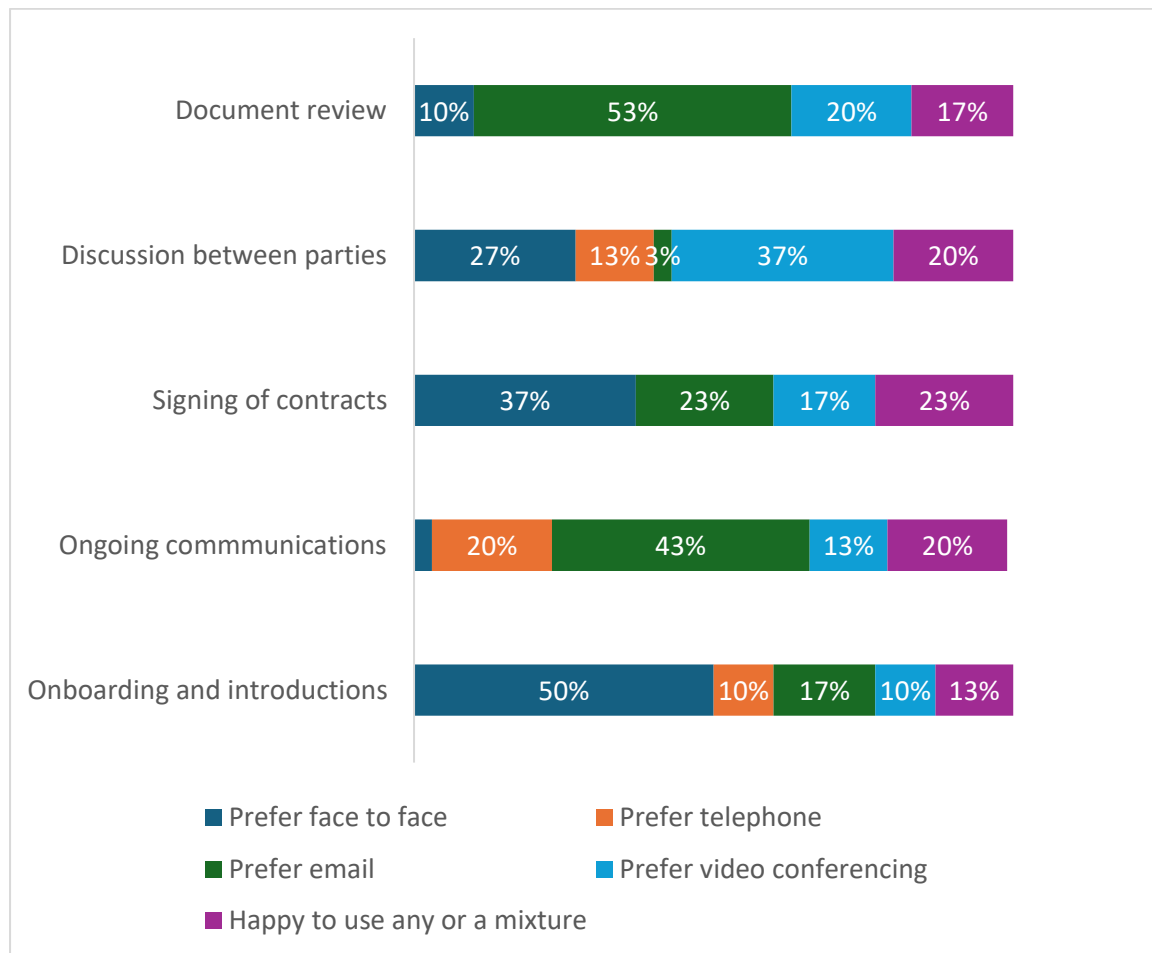
Participants noted that not every part of a legal case requires the same level of human interaction. Many endorsed a staged or hybrid approach, where face-to-face contact is available at critical moments which included the initial consultation.

*"The main stage I would say is non-negotiable, it is definitely meeting with the other party. I know nowadays they do dispute settling online as well. Well, I can't imagine that. Because just imagine where I was telling someone, or my lawyer was telling someone, "Okay. This is what my clients would demand from you. We need to do it this way," and then as we're talking, there's some network issues, and it's just breaking up and things, it just makes everything so messy. And if you were trying to apply a lot of pressure on someone who was probably going to break, that breaking transmission could make the person do a lot of rethinking."*

Clients said that face-to-face interaction at these stages helped establish expectations, clarify timelines and responsibilities, and reduce follow-up queries. The opportunity to ask questions, receive empathy, and build rapport was especially valued.

Amongst the online community, onboarding and introductions was the most popular stage at which they felt things needed to be done face-to-face, with 50% selecting this option. Signing of contracts was seen by 37% as being a face-to-face stage, with 63% happy to use emails, video conferencing, or happy to use a mixture of options. Across three of the stages shown in the following chart, one-fifth or more of participants were happy to use any or a mixture of tools, suggesting there is openness to hybrid methods.

**Figure 4: In person vs face to face preferences, for different stages of a legal process**



Probate and family law participants expressed a stronger preference for maintaining the option for face-to-face or telephone contact, especially for the initial consultation and sensitive parts of the process. They felt digital communication may be impersonal for these types of legal matters.

In contrast, conveyancing participants were more open to a digital-first approach, but still suggested that certain points in the process, such as the initial meeting and discussions around search results, would benefit from in-person or phone contact.

### The emotional weight of legal matters

The emotional burden of legal issues also played a key role in how services were experienced. Those dealing with bereavement, family conflict, or trauma described a strong need for empathetic, human interaction.

*“When it comes to something that’s sensitive like criminal or family or even like wills and probate because it’s something that’s so sensitive, it’s not something that you can be robotic about. You still need that empathy and sympathy in those situations.”*

## Case Studies

**Person 1**, navigating a family court process, was initially offered only email updates. *“I felt like I was being left behind. It wasn’t until I had a meeting in person that I really understood what was happening.”*

**Person 2**, aged 76, managing probate for his late wife’s estate, struggled with digital tools. *“I just wanted to sit down with someone and go through the forms. They said I could call, but it’s not the same.”*

**Person 3**, dealing with a shared property issue, said, *“When I saw the solicitor, I could tell she understood me. That gave me the confidence to keep going.”*

**Person 4**, a first-time buyer, did most of his conveyancing online but chose to meet in person for the final contract signing. *“It was important, it was a big life step. I wanted that moment to feel real.”*

These examples demonstrate that while digital tools offer convenience, they do not fully replace the depth of support, clarity, and assurance gained through human interaction.

## Barriers to in-person access

While the benefits of face-to-face interaction were clear, participants acknowledged the logistical and financial barriers involved. Some lived in remote areas, lacked transport, or had health conditions that made travel difficult. Others worked full-time and struggled to attend appointments during standard business hours.

Several participants suggested practical solutions. Mobile clinics, evening appointments, weekend availability, and the use of community venues like libraries or GP surgeries were all proposed as ways to improve access.

## Flexibility and the importance of choice

The strongest message from participants was not that all services must be delivered in person, but that clients should be given a choice. Hybrid service delivery models, blending digital convenience with in-person support at key moments, were widely endorsed.

Many emphasised that the format of communication should be responsive to both the case type and the individual’s needs.

*“It depends what the case was around. For example, if it was a criminal case say around sexual abuse, I would feel hesitant discussing such details online, but if it was conveyancing then I would not care.”*

Participants also wanted reassurance that face-to-face options would remain available and not become 'premium' services reserved for those who could afford them.

## 9. Perspectives from Legal Service Providers

The previous sections captured service users' views and experiences. This section turns to the perspectives of legal service providers, offering insight into how they understand and navigate the challenges of delivering services in a digital age, and how their operational context shapes what is possible.

### Understanding of digital services in legal practice

All three legal service providers showed a clear and thoughtful understanding of the impact of the increasing use of digital services and how this looks like in practice, and each acknowledged that digital services could create efficiencies and widen access for some.

*“When it does work, it's just so easy... I think it does offer that measure of streamlining. It does work from a time efficiency point of view.”*

However, providers noted that the increase in use of digital legal services is not a neutral or universally positive change. Experience has shown them that grief and stress often compound difficulties with digital legal systems and for those without internet access, digital literacy, or confidence using technology, the move to digital services risks creating significant barriers to justice.

### Operational challenges and constraints

Service providers highlighted operational challenges, including the tension between the digital systems they are required to use and the needs of clients who struggle to engage with those systems.

*“It's not something that traditionally in this profession that we would ever choose to do, it would always be the preference to meet with clients face to face. Especially with our AML requirements in the Conveyancing department... I don't think if COVID had happened, we wouldn't as an industry been so readily accepting of it. It was more necessity, I think.”*

They described how internal case management software and online identity verification platforms have become deeply embedded in legal workflows, and how limited funding may restrict their ability to provide face-to-face alternatives.

Providers also discussed the burden of “double-running” systems, maintaining both digital and paper-based processes for clients who prefer to receive hard copies of their documents, and challenges in working with third-party providers.

These constraints point to a wider structural issue: that even where legal service providers are motivated to offer inclusive services, their ability to do so is shaped by wider funding models, technological infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks.

### Strategies to support clients

A shared principle across all three interviews was the importance of tailoring legal services to the needs and abilities of each individual client. Providers did not see a one-size-fits-all approach as appropriate for legal services, particularly when dealing with vulnerable clients. They spoke of the need to adjust pace, method, and style of communication depending on each client's circumstances.

*“We look at clients very in a very individualistic way, where it is what that client wants is how we cater for them.”*

Providers shared examples of how this tailoring played out in day-to-day practice which show that tailored service is not just a principle, it is an active, deliberate process involving time, empathy, and flexibility. Providers acknowledged the effort involved, but also recognised the benefits for client satisfaction, trust, and legal outcomes.

*“If you've got a valid passport or driving licence and a mobile device or a or a tablet that can help to ID clients. But again, that's not for everyone. So, the elderly clients, we would then do standard ID. We'd say bring a copy of your passport in or a copy of your latest bill. We would adapt our measures to who they are, who we've got in front of us.”*

This commitment to flexibility was often grounded in the providers' understanding of client vulnerability. They expressed a strong professional ethic around respect, patience, and equity.

All three providers offer approaches that are tailored to the individual needs of their clients. These ranged from informal workarounds to more systematic adaptations. Some examples included:

- Offering paper-based options for key documents
- Booking telephone consultations rather than relying on emails or portals
- Allocating longer appointment slots to explain digital steps in person
- Providing basic digital guidance or involving support workers

## Wider systemic pressures

All three interviewees raised concerns about how digital transformation is unfolding across the wider legal landscape. Concerns included:

- Some official systems now require clients to interact directly with digital portals
- The need for joined-up approaches
- Limited funding to help build accessibility into processes.

Providers called for more strategic leadership from professional bodies and for cross-sector collaboration.

## 10. What Participants Want from Legal Service Providers

Drawing together the insights from previous sections, this final section outlines participants' suggestions for improving legal services. These recommendations reflect recurring themes around communication, empathy, and flexibility and highlight practical changes that would help legal processes feel more manageable and respectful.

Participants were asked to reflect on what would make legal services more inclusive and supportive. Their responses consistently highlighted four broad areas:

1. Improved Communication and Language
2. Timely and Responsive Support
3. Flexible and Hybrid Service Models
4. Emotional Sensitivity and Respect

Participants did not view these themes as independent but interconnected with gaps in one area often exacerbating issues in another. For example, poor communication could heighten emotional distress, and lack of choice in communication method could result in a reduced sense of control and influence.

### **Improved communication and language**

The most frequent and consistent suggestion related to the clarity of communication. Participants reported that legal communications, whether by letter, email, or portal, were often full of jargon, hard to follow, and lacking basic context.

Others described emails with multiple attachments and no summary or instructions.

A number of participants reported relying on others to interpret communications for them. This created privacy concerns and added emotional labour.

Participants called for:

- Plain English explanations, both written and verbal
- Headings and summaries in emails and letters
- Clear signposting to deadlines and required actions
- Short video guides or illustrated PDFs for complex forms
- Consistent terminology across platforms and documents

These suggestions were made by participants from a range of literacy and language backgrounds, highlighting that legal clarity is a universal issue. Better communication was also seen as a way to build trust, as participants were more likely to believe advice they could clearly understand.

### **Timely and responsive support**

Another recurring theme was the desire for timely support, especially when legal issues became emotionally challenging or administratively complex.

Participants understood that not every matter needed a face-to-face meeting, but they strongly advocated for having the option to speak to someone knowledgeable when needed. Generic email inboxes and unresponsive portals left many feeling abandoned.

Several participants described sending follow-up emails that went unanswered for weeks. Others said they didn't know who to contact when they had questions. This lack of personal contact created stress, especially in emotionally intense cases.

Some of the recommendations offered by participants, such as being assigned a named contact or receiving regular check-ins, are not new or unique to digital legal services. Rather, they reflect enduring expectations of good client care. In this context, participants were clear that digital systems should not erode these standards. Instead, good digital delivery was seen as an extension of good service, enhancing accessibility and responsiveness without losing the human connection.

Key recommendations included:

- Assigning each client a named case contact
- Offering optional phone or video appointments at key stages
- Ensuring live support via phone or live chat for urgent queries
- Scheduling proactive check-ins for complex cases
- Avoiding over-reliance on automated replies or portals

Participants also wanted legal staff to check whether they were coping, both practically and emotionally, particularly when handling probate or family law. This type of check-in was seen as a mark of a high-quality service that truly cared.

### **Flexible and hybrid service models**

Participants broadly supported the use of digital tools for administrative tasks, such as document uploads, appointment scheduling, and case tracking. However, they expressed frustration when these systems were rigid, poorly designed, or the only available option.

Many participants said they wanted flexibility to switch between digital and non-digital formats based on the stage of the process, their emotional state, or their technological capabilities at the time. Some noted that digital-only services felt impersonal and difficult to navigate, especially during emotionally complex matters.

Preferred formats varied by task:

- **Document review or signing:** In-person or via video call, with the opportunity to ask questions
- **Case updates:** Email or portal, with clear language
- **Initial consultation:** In-person or by phone, depending on complexity
- **Final decisions or court prep:** In-person to confirm understanding and address final queries

Participants also recommended retaining paper-based options, especially for older clients and those without reliable internet access. They stressed that flexibility wasn't just a preference, it was often a necessity.

### **Emotional sensitivity and respect**

Many participants felt that legal services failed to recognise the emotional toll of the situations they were navigating. This was especially true for family and probate matters, where participants described feeling like their distress was being ignored. Others described feeling treated like a number, rather than a person.

Participants wanted legal professionals to show empathy, listen carefully, and respond with kindness. However, several participants contrasted this with more positive experiences, where a solicitor had taken a moment to ask how they were or had explained something patiently.

The suggestions below speak to a broader vision of what participants felt all legal services should offer. These are not exclusive to digital delivery but represent fundamental elements of good service, whether delivered in person, by phone, or online. The only digital-specific recommendation was the one related to email templates, which participants felt should be handled with particular care in sensitive cases.

Key recommendations in this area included:

- Training for staff on trauma-informed and empathetic communication
- Allowing extra time in meetings for emotional or complex matters
- Avoiding abrupt, template-style emails for sensitive cases
- Checking in on wellbeing, not just case progress
- Using inclusive, respectful language at all times

These recommendations reflect participants' desire for a more human approach, one that recognises the personal, often painful, circumstances in which many legal matters arise. Whether digital or face-to-face, participants stressed that how they were treated emotionally shaped their overall experience.

### **Designing services around the client**

Participants emphasised that the best legal services are those designed around the client, not the provider. They described good services as those that adapt to different communication styles, offer meaningful support, and treat users with dignity.

Participants frequently highlighted the power imbalance they felt when accessing legal services, and how user-centred design could reduce this. Others described how user-friendly design could reduce anxiety.

Participants made a series of recommendations to preserve the availability and quality of in-person legal services including:

- Maintain the option of face-to-face consultation for all legal domains
- Provide flexible appointment times (evenings and weekends)
- Offer accessible, local venues
- Ask about communication preferences at the start of every case
- Avoid making digital the default or only option
- Design face-to-face appointments to be meaningful, not rushed or tokenistic

Participants' suggestions reflect a strong, consistent desire for legal services that are accessible, understandable, emotionally intelligent, and supportive. Their suggestions also include respect, fairness, and the right to be heard and supported during some of life's most difficult moments. Legal services are at their best when they empower users to understand and navigate processes with confidence and that requires services built on communication, empathy, and flexibility.

### **Balancing efficiency and empathy in digital design**

A central theme across both client and provider perspectives was the need to balance efficiency with empathy. While digital tools can reduce delays and streamline administration, they are not inherently empathetic. Participants on both sides of the legal process stressed that systems should be designed with emotional as well as practical considerations in mind.

Participants said they were more comfortable using digital tools when those tools felt like part of a relationship, when they were accompanied by clear guidance, human fallback options, and signals that someone was paying attention.

Providers echoed this view, suggesting that digital tools should enhance service quality, not replace it. They reported reviewing their messaging templates, redesigning workflows, or adding ‘human touchpoints’ to ensure that clients felt supported.

### **What an ideal digital legal service looks like**

Participants do not oppose digital innovation outright. Instead, they ask that systems be designed around people, not the other way around. Their experiences underline the importance of choice, empathy, and trust.

When asked to imagine their ideal digital legal service, participants focused on accessibility, support, and clarity. Suggestions included:

- Simple, visual interfaces
- Walkthrough videos and live support
- Jargon-free documents
- Secure, trackable case portals
- The option to speak to someone when needed

Several others reiterated the importance of having a named contact.

Hybrid models that offer both digital and in-person options were consistently preferred. They offer convenience without compromising dignity or understanding. Ultimately, users want systems that respect the emotional and logistical complexity of legal issues.

Participants’ suggestions were rooted in experiences where often the absence of support, clarity, and flexibility left some feeling stressed, vulnerable, and disempowered. Despite varied needs and confidence levels, there was strong agreement on the importance of human connection, clear communication, emotional sensitivity, and flexibility in service delivery. Participants did not reject digital tools; rather, they wanted systems that gave them choices, respected their circumstances, and offered support when they needed it most.

### **Preferences across legal areas**

Attitudes toward digital services varied significantly by legal domain:

- **Probate participants** preferred face-to-face contact at almost all stages, due to grief and the need for reassurance.
- **Family law participants** echoed these concerns, especially where children or trauma were involved.
- **Conveyancing participants** were more open to digital tools but still wanted phone or in-person contact for key milestones.

For example, conveyancing clients appreciated using online portals to track milestones but often expressed frustration with poor interface design or lack of response. Probate and family law clients, by contrast, wanted more interpersonal interaction throughout.