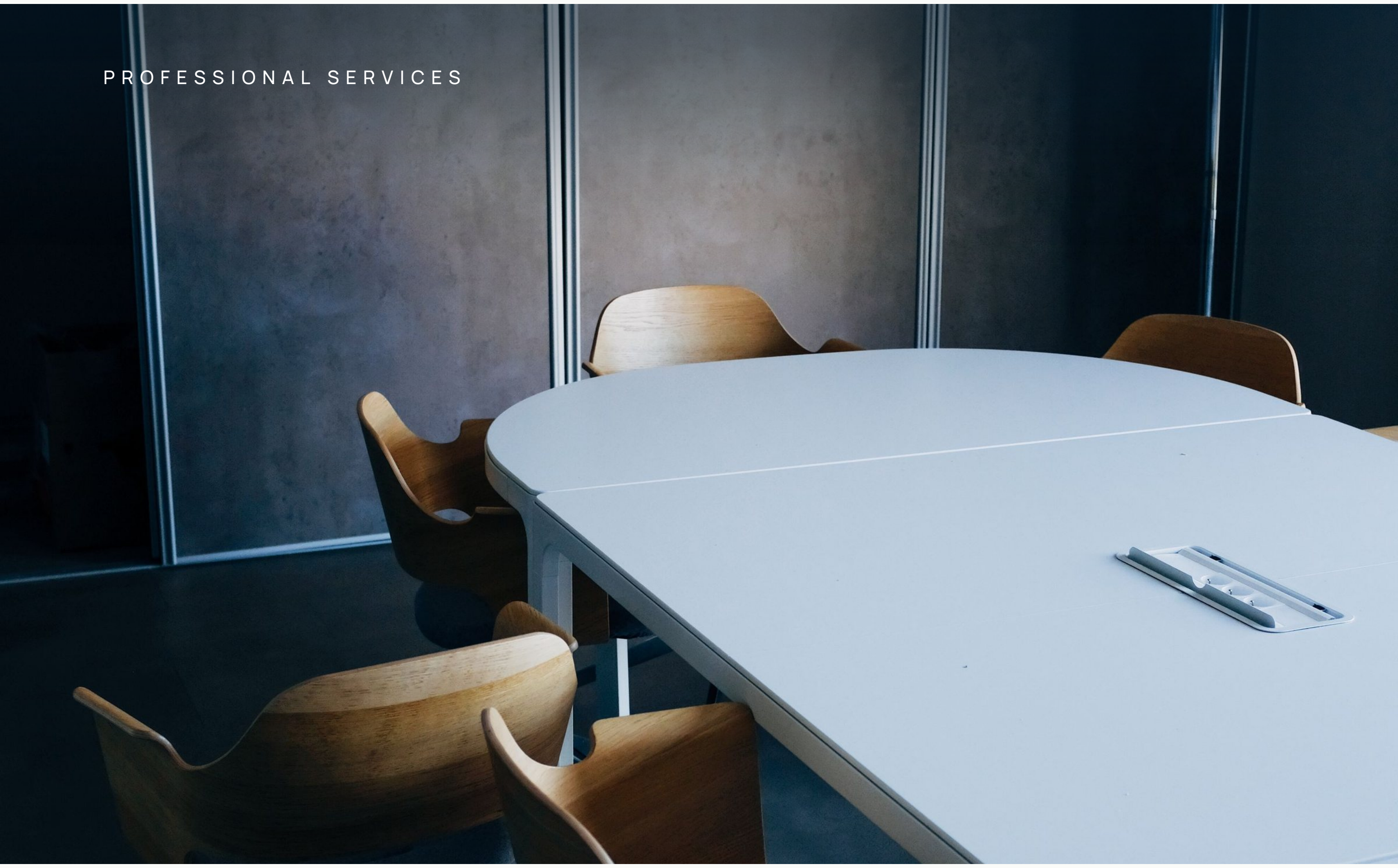
Professional services. What clients complain about is the admin.

A guide to planning software for enquiry, engagement and delivery in a professional firm, and to what the regulators have actually said about AI.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



A guide to the administration, not the advice.

Professional firms are judged on advice and complained about for administration. The ombudsman's own categories put communication and delay at nearly half of everything clients raise, and there is no category for advice that was given and was wrong.

This guide is about the workflow that produces those complaints, and about what the regulators have actually written on using AI inside it. Every figure is traced back to the body that published it.

Written for managing partners, heads of operations, and the people who choose and pay for their systems.

CONTENTS

What this guide is not

It is not professional or legal advice, and it is not a compliance checklist. It quotes what regulators and courts have published, with references, so that a reader can check them.

It is not a case study. No firm is described, named or implied, and the photographs are illustrative. Where a decision is under appeal, the guide says so.

It is not a product comparison. BespokeWorks builds software, and readers should weigh the guide accordingly. The questions on page 12 are as useful against our work as against anyone else's.

Where the complaints come from.

The Legal Ombudsman publishes what clients actually complain about. In the year to March 2026 poor communication accounted for 24.2 per cent of the issues raised, delay and failure to progress for 22.2 per cent, and failure to follow instructions for 8.4 per cent. Together that is more than half of everything, and none of it is about the quality of the advice.

The regulator reaches the same conclusion through a completely different instrument. Its review of fifty complaint files, published in October 2025, found delay in 27 of them, costs issues in 18 and communication failures in 13. Ninety-seven per cent of the firms surveyed said they issued final responses within eight weeks. Thirty per cent of the files actually examined had taken longer.

One caution on the ombudsman's figures, because they are easy to overstate. It found evidence of poor service in 71.9 per cent of cases, but that is 71.9 per cent of the 2,320 cases where it assessed service, not of the 8,199 it resolved. Against the larger number it is about a fifth.

What the ombudsman does not publish is a category for advice that was given and was wrong. Its nearest heading, failure to advise, means advice that was never given at all. Whether that absence reflects the complaints or the taxonomy is not something the published data can answer.

Accountancy is stranger still. Its institute received 1,235 conduct complaints in 2025 and publishes no breakdown by cause at all. The reason is structural rather than accidental: its own published guidance treats a one-off administrative failing as not reaching the threshold for a disciplinary matter. The data is a misconduct series, not a service quality one, and the two are not comparable.

Half the working day.

The most useful figure on where professional time goes is published by the Law Society and written by a firm of chartered accountants. It is drawn from firms' own accounting returns rather than from a software vendor's telemetry, which makes it the strongest UK evidence available on this question.

MEDIAN ACROSS 121 FIRMS, 2025

807	About half	1,000 to 1,100	£27,061
Chargeable hours recorded per fee earner in the year	Of the available workable hours, in the publisher's own words	The sector's own rule of thumb for a full-time fee earner	Median spend on support staff, per fee earner

The sample is 121 firms and 7,160 fee earners, self-selected through the Law Society's own membership section, with only five firms above thirty-five million pounds of turnover. It describes itself as a health check for smaller and mid-sized practices, and it is explicitly not the City.

The report is unusually candid about its own numerator. Not all fee earners record time fully, particularly on fixed-fee matters, and some firms require only chargeable time to be recorded at all. Its authors note the risk of blind spots where non-chargeable time is simply untracked.

> The denominator is a stipulation, not an observation. At 1,600 workable hours the same 807 is about half; at a forty-hour week it is closer to 44 per cent.

An enquiry, before it is a matter.

A blueprint earns its place when it exposes a dependency. This fictional enquiry stops at the point most firms have a gap: between wanting the work and being able to accept it. The route in copper is where the days go.

ILLUSTRATIVE SERVICE BLUEPRINT

Prospective client

Fee earner

Firm-side checks

Enquiry received

The brief as the client put it, the date, and how it arrived.

Scoped and costed

What is being asked for, on what basis, at what estimated cost.

Waiting on the client for documents

The most common stall in a professional firm, and the one least often measured. Record what was asked for, when, and when it was chased, or the delay will be attributed to the firm.

Before any work is done

Checks completed

Conflicts, identity and source of funds cleared by whoever is accountable for them.

Engagement confirmed

Scope, cost basis and the complaints route, in writing, before work begins.

Design implication

Time spent waiting on a client is still delay to the client. A system that cannot say who it is waiting for cannot answer the complaint.

What the regulators have said.

There is more published regulatory material on AI in professional work than most firms realise, and it says less than most summaries of it claim. These are the current documents and what each actually requires.

Source	What it says	What it does not say
Judicial guidance, 31 October 2025	Provided AI is used responsibly, there is no reason why a legal representative ought to refer to its use, though this depends on context. Anything entered into a public chatbot should be treated as published to all the world.	It is guidance to judges, not a rule of court or a conduct rule. It also contemplates judges reminding lawyers to confirm they have verified their citations.
Civil Justice Council, June 2026	Strong consensus that no additional formal requirements are needed for legal professionals preparing pleadings. It proposes disclosure of AI use by expert witnesses, and is exploring witness statements.	It is not a general disclosure duty. Any claim that AI use must be declared is scoped to expert evidence, and is a proposal rather than a rule.
Solicitors Regulation Authority, 17 August 2026	A warning notice to all firms and individuals it regulates: named authorities must be genuine and verifiable, client information may only be entered where contractual and technical safeguards exist, and use of AI does not transfer professional responsibility.	It does not prohibit putting client data into AI tools. It is conditional permission with conditions attached.
Bar Standards Board, May 2026	Using an AI tool amounts to outsourcing a support service under the conduct rules, whether the work is legal or administrative, so responsibility for it remains with the barrister.	It adds that free, publicly available systems are unlikely to satisfy the conditions the rule imposes.
Financial Reporting Council	Its June 2025 review found generative AI at the six largest audit firms limited to chatbots and productivity aids. Its July 2026 annual review says firms are moving beyond peripheral tasks to perform audit procedures and generate documentation.	The 2025 finding is a dated snapshot and is widely quoted as though it were current. The regulator's own later publication contradicts that reading.

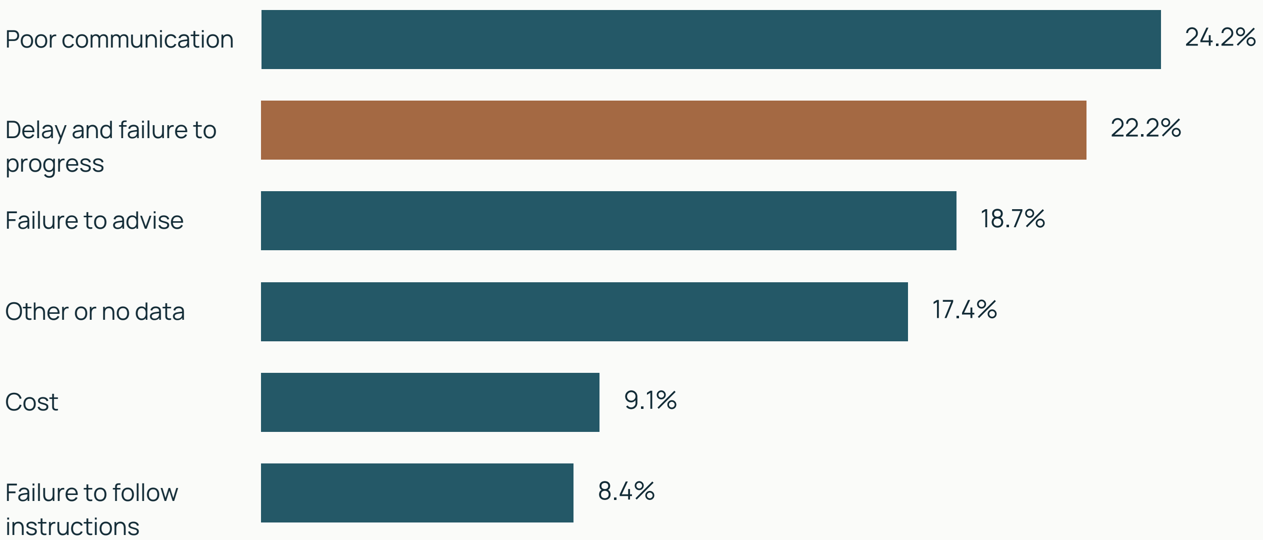
No UK regulator prohibits putting client information into an AI tool. Every one makes it conditional, on contracts, safeguards and who stays responsible.

What clients complain about.

These are the Legal Ombudsman's own categories for the issues raised with it in the year to March 2026, and they are the closest thing the sector has to an independent account of where professional service fails.

A single complaint can carry more than one issue, so this is a distribution of issues rather than of cases.

ISSUES RAISED, 2025 TO 2026



Legal Ombudsman Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26, HC 414, ordered printed 2 July 2026. The Ombudsman publishes these as percentages only; no counts by cause are published anywhere.

Communication, delay and failure to follow instructions come to 54.8 per cent between them, and every one of those is an administrative failure rather than a professional one. Adding cost takes it to 63.9 per cent.

Failure to advise is the category that decides how far that argument can be pushed, and it is not defined in the report. On the Ombudsman's usage it generally means advice that was never given, which is an omission, rather than advice that was given and was wrong. Read that way the administrative share reaches 82.6 per cent. The published data does not settle it, and any figure in that range is an interpretation rather than a statistic.

What the courts have done.

Four published outcomes, because the summaries in circulation are unreliable in both directions. Two of these are gentler than they are reported, and one is far more serious.

Case or action	What happened	What it is usually reported as
Ayinde v Haringey, June 2025	Five fabricated authorities in grounds settled by counsel. The Divisional Court held that the threshold for contempt proceedings was met, and declined to initiate them as a matter of discretion, saying expressly that the decision is not a precedent. It referred the lawyers to their regulators.	As the court declining to act. The costs orders of £2,000 each came earlier, from a different judge, and the judgment reads as a warning rather than a reprieve.
Al-Haroun, heard together	The fabricated citations originated with the client. The court held that this did not absolve the lawyer, calling it extraordinary that a lawyer relied on a client for the accuracy of legal research rather than the other way around.	As mitigation. The court treated it as an aggravation of the supervision failure.
Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal, August 2026	A registered foreign lawyer struck off the register, having used AI in his own defence and produced further fabricated citations when challenged. Dishonesty was expressly not alleged. There were two allegations, and the Tribunal said either alone would have produced the same sanction. The decision is under appeal.	As a solicitor struck off for AI use. He is not a solicitor, it was not a single-issue case, and it is not yet settled.
Reports to the regulator	Forty-two reports of potential AI misuse were made to the Solicitors Regulation Authority between July 2025 and July 2026, with investigations ongoing.	As a wave. It is the only official UK figure, and it is a small one.

The practical reading for a firm is narrow and firm. Nothing published requires a lawyer to tell a court that AI was used. Everything published requires that what is put before a court is verified, and that responsibility for it stays with the person who signed it. Those two statements are entirely compatible, and most commentary treats them as though they were in tension.

Established, and measured carefully.

Four kinds of claim circulate in this sector at once and they are not the same kind of thing. The two on this page are the ones a firm can rely on. The two overleaf are the ones to ask questions about.

Established

The regulators have published their expectations, and they are consistent with one another: verify what you put before a court, treat anything entered into a public tool as published, and keep responsibility with the person who signed the work.

Where clients' complaints come from. Communication and delay have been the top two categories for two consecutive years, at almost identical shares, and an independent file review by the regulator reached the same ordering.

Measured, with caveats

Two rigorous studies exist and both need their own qualifications carried with them. A Danish study using administrative records across eleven exposed occupations, including accountants and legal professionals, rules out effects larger than 2 per cent on earnings and hours, while adopters themselves report saving about 3 per cent of their working hours.

Its own argument is not that nothing is happening. It is that work is being restructured well before that shows up in earnings, partly because 85 per cent of users put the time they save into other tasks.

A randomised trial published in July 2025 found experienced developers were 19 per cent slower with AI. Its authors published an update in February 2026 saying that finding is now outdated. Citing the first without the second is citing a result its own authors have withdrawn.

Asserted, and sold.

The claims most often made in a sales conversation, and the ones least often accompanied by anything a buyer could check.

Not established

That agentic AI is in use in legal practice. The Law Society's own research, published in April 2026, found no evidence of adoption in UK law firms, and quotes an interviewee describing firms' announcements as a press release circus.

That AI saves a professional five hours a week. That figure is a survey in which respondents predicted what the coming year would bring. It is a forecast about the future, not a measurement of the past, and setting it against measured effects is not a comparison.

Self-reported

The widely quoted finding that lawyers bill only three hours of an eight-hour day comes from a practice management vendor's own product telemetry, covers the United States only, and measures billable time recorded in that vendor's software. It also does not say what it is usually quoted as saying: five hours unbilled is not five hours of administration, and no breakdown of the remainder is published.

Unverified is not the same as false. It is a reason to ask for the workings, and to write the measurement into the contract.

What a small pilot needs to show.

Agree the evidence before building anything. In a regulated firm a pilot has a second job: it has to produce the record a regulator or an ombudsman would ask for, and it has to do it without putting client information somewhere it should not be.

Question	What to observe	Accountable role	Release condition
Client information	Where does anything the client told us actually go, including through any AI feature?	COLP or compliance lead	A written answer for every third party, before launch.
The wait	When the firm is waiting on the client, does the system say so and since when?	Head of operations	Waiting time attributable and visible on every matter.
Verification	Where a tool drafts something, what is the step that checks it, and who does it?	Supervising fee earner	No output reaches a client or a court unreviewed.
Take-on	How long from enquiry to cleared checks, and where the time goes inside that.	Managing partner	Measured before and after, on the same definition.
Cost at rest	The second year, including licences, training and the cost of a partner's time in review.	Finance	Renewal terms agreed in writing before launch.

Keep the first release narrow enough that every drafted output can be reviewed individually, and record who reviewed it.

Questions for a first project.

These are the questions BespokeWorks would ask before proposing anything. They work as well against our work as against a supplier already in the building.

01 **Where does client information go, and what contractual and technical safeguards cover each place?**

Every UK regulator permits client information in AI tools conditionally, and the conditions are about safeguards and responsibility rather than about the technology. The barristers' regulator treats using a tool as outsourcing, which is a higher bar than most firms apply.

02 **When the firm is waiting on someone else, does anything record it?**

Delay is the second largest source of complaints and the hardest to defend after the fact. Time spent waiting on a client is still experienced as delay, and a system that cannot show who it was waiting for cannot answer the complaint.

03 **Where a tool drafts, who verifies, and is that step recorded?**

Nothing published requires telling a court that AI was used. Everything published requires that what is filed is verified and that responsibility stays with the person who signed it. The verification step is the one that has to exist in the workflow, not in the policy.

04 **What would have to be true in two years for this to have been worth it, and who is measuring it?**

The independent evidence on time saved is thin and contested, and the largest study finds most of what is saved gets reallocated rather than banked. A firm can still measure its own baseline, and that is the only evidence that will apply to it.

If a supplier cannot answer the first two without talking about their product, that is information as well.

Theo Coleman

Chief Technology Officer, BespokeWorks. September 2026

Sources and scope.

Every figure is traced to the body that published it rather than to coverage of it, and nothing about artificial intelligence predates 2025. Claims were checked a second time by a pass whose only purpose was to refute them. Several were confirmed as facts and rejected as framings, and the wording here is the corrected version. Retrieved 19 September 2026.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Guidance for Judicial Office Holders. Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 31 October 2025.

Civil Justice Council consultation on the use of AI in preparing court documents. Launched 17 February 2026, closed 14 April 2026, update published 30 June 2026.

Ayinde v London Borough of Haringey and Al-Haroun v Qatar National Bank [2025] EWHC 1383 (Admin), 6 June 2025, before the President of the King's Bench Division and Johnson J. The earlier costs orders are at [2025] EWHC 1040 (Admin), 3 April 2025.

Solicitors Regulation Authority v Kumar, Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal case 12884-2026, decision dated 25 August 2026, published 3 September 2026. Under appeal to the High Court.

Misuse of AI. Solicitors Regulation Authority warning notice, 17 August 2026, including the figure of 42 reports between July 2025 and July 2026.

Guidance on the use of Artificial Intelligence and Other Technologies. Bar Standards Board, May 2026, on outsourcing under rC86.

Certification of Automated Tools and Techniques. Financial Reporting Council thematic review, June 2025, and the Annual Review of Audit Quality, 22 July 2026.

Legal Ombudsman Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26, HC 414, ordered printed 2 July 2026, and the 2025-26 annual complaints data.

A thematic review of first-tier complaints handling. Solicitors Regulation Authority, 14 October 2025. Twenty-five firms visited and fifty complaint files reviewed.

Regulation and Conduct Annual Report 2025. Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, published May 2026, and its published complaints case studies.

Financial Benchmarking Survey 2026. The Law Society, written by Hazlewoods LLP, published 15 April 2026. 121 firms and 7,160 fee earners.

Shaping the future of agentic AI in legal practice. The Law Society, 14 April 2026.

Humlum A and Vestergaard E. Still Waters, Rapid Currents: Early Labor Market Transformation under Generative AI. NBER Working Paper 33777, issued May 2025, revised March 2026. Previously circulated under a different title.

Measuring the Impact of Early-2025 AI on Experienced Open-Source Developer Productivity. METR, July 2025, and We are Changing our Developer Productivity Experiment Design, METR, 24 February 2026.

Legal Trends Report 2025, Clio, 16 October 2025. Vendor product telemetry, United States only.

Photographs are illustrative and show no BespokeWorks client, member of staff or premises. Cover: photograph by Adrien Olichon on Pexels. Page 3: photograph by Rodeo Project Management Software on Unsplash.

What could not be established

Neither legal regulator has ever measured administrative or non-billable time; their own technology studies contain no such figure. The Legal Ombudsman publishes percentages by cause but no counts, and no split between administrative failure and quality of advice; that division is an interpretation, not a published statistic. The accountancy institute publishes no breakdown by cause at all, and its disciplinary gateway excludes one-off administrative failings by design, so its figures are not comparable with the Ombudsman's. No UK figure of any provenance was found for accountants or consultants on time use; the entire located evidence base is legal.