



Digital Exclusion Research

Final Report

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Project details and acknowledgements

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M.E.L Research maintains the following certifications and accreditations



Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a mixed-methods study into digital exclusion and access to legal services, commissioned by the Bar Standards Board (BSB), CILEx Regulation Ltd (CRL), the Council for Licensed Conveyancers (CLC), and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW). The research combined a large-scale quantitative survey with 454 digitally excluded legal service users and in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 individuals who were specifically recruited because they faced digital exclusion when accessing legal services, and nine interviews with national and community organisations working to support people affected by digital exclusion. A profile of participants can be found in the Appendix.

The evidence demonstrates that digital exclusion can form a substantial and multi-dimensional barrier to accessing legal services. While digitisation may increase efficiency for some, it risks excluding or marginalising those without the resources, skills, or confidence to participate. For many participants, the shift towards digital-first or digital-only processes made legal services less accessible, less personal, and in some cases impossible to navigate. The findings highlight the critical importance of embedding inclusion and choice into service delivery and ensuring that efficiency does not come at the expense of equity.

Understanding Digital Exclusion in the Legal Sector

Digital exclusion rarely exists in isolation. It is often closely intertwined with wider forms of disadvantage, including poverty, disability, language barriers, caring responsibilities, low literacy, and poor health. Stakeholders described it as a “hidden” condition: many individuals do not self-identify as excluded but instead say they “don’t do tech” or “can’t trust it.” Exclusion is precarious, meaning that even those who are currently online may fall into exclusion if their device breaks, if they cannot afford data, or if they lose the support of family or neighbours.

For the purposes of this study, digital exclusion was defined through four overlapping dimensions:

- **Access** – reliable internet and devices.
- **Affordability** – the cost of connectivity, equipment, and repairs.
- **Ability** – skills and confidence to use digital tools.
- **Attitude** – levels of trust, motivation, and willingness to share sensitive information online.

Stakeholders emphasised that legal services pose a challenge to some clients because they often involve complex processes, emotionally charged circumstances, and high-stakes decisions. Even individuals who can browse the internet, message family, or use social media may feel somewhat excluded in this context. Participants themselves drew a strong distinction between casual internet use and being “digitally confident” in service settings. As one explained, “Just because I’m on Facebook doesn’t mean I can handle legal stuff online.”

Patterns of Access and Reliance

Whilst all survey respondents experienced at least some aspects of digital exclusion, 90% had some form of internet access at home. However, this headline figure masks deep inequalities in confidence,

independence, and security. Half of all respondents (50%) reported that they were not confident using the internet for complex tasks such as managing finances, healthcare, or legal issues. This lack of confidence was even more pronounced among older adults, women and those who were economically inactive.

Reliance on others was high with over half (56%) always or often depending on family, friends, or neighbours to access online services. This reliance raises serious concerns about confidentiality, autonomy, and timeliness when legal matters are involved. For many, help was available only when relatives had time, causing delays and missed deadlines. Others felt uncomfortable sharing sensitive legal information with family members but saw no alternative. As one participant put it, “I didn’t want my daughter knowing everything. But I couldn’t do it myself.”

Experiences of Digital Legal Services

Eighty-two percent of respondents were asked to complete some part of their legal service online. Yet only one in five managed this independently. Most relied on others or asked their provider for alternatives.

The promise of speed and efficiency was not realised for many. While 15% said online elements reduced the time it took to resolve their case, the majority (56%) reported that digitisation actually made the process take longer. A further 5% said they were unable to resolve their issue at all because of online requirements. This is deeply concerning, as saving time is often presented as one of the key benefits of digital service delivery. Instead, delays were common, with negative impacts both for clients and providers.

Despite these challenges, 71% of those who completed their case online felt that they had achieved a better outcome as a result. This apparent paradox highlights the uneven nature of digitalisation: when digital tools were well designed and combined with effective support, they could improve outcomes, but for others they introduced confusion, delay, or exclusion.

Barriers and Emotional Impacts

The barriers to digital engagement were multiple and overlapping. When accessing legal services online, almost half of respondents (47%) reported low confidence, 38% needed help, and over a third (38%) worried about security or privacy. Many simply preferred face-to-face interaction, particularly when dealing with sensitive or high-stakes issues.

The emotional burden of exclusion was profound. Participants described feelings of anxiety, shame, and powerlessness. Some worried about “getting it wrong” and facing legal consequences. Others felt ignored or dismissed when providers assumed digital competence or failed to offer alternatives. Several described abandoning their legal issue altogether, not because it lacked importance, but because the digital barrier felt insurmountable.

One participant explained: “I was grieving, and everything felt harder. I needed someone to just say, ‘It’s okay, here’s what to do.’ Instead, they sent me a link I couldn’t use.”

Support from Legal Service Providers

Experiences of support varied considerably. While some providers offered in-person help (reported by 39% of respondents), paper documents or other non-digital options (31%), many participants said

they were instead referred to external organisations (42%) or encouraged to rely on friends and family for assistance (40%). Only a small minority (6%) received no help at all. Crucially, just 19% of respondents said this support was offered proactively, despite most finding it valuable once provided.

Several participants reflected that they wished providers had asked directly if they needed support. They were reluctant to admit difficulties unprompted but would have welcomed an offer of help. This simple change (routinely asking about digital confidence at the outset) could make a major difference in preventing exclusion.

The inconsistency of support points to an opportunity. As the research indicates, there is a need for providers to engage more proactively with existing support networks, such as libraries, community hubs, or advice organisations, to ensure clients receive the right help at the right time. Stakeholders emphasised that many of these community services already exist but are precarious, fragmented, and under-funded. Legal providers could strengthen their capacity by building partnerships and signposting more systematically.

Consequences for Clients

For many digitally excluded clients, the consequences of exclusion extended beyond inconvenience. Processes often took longer, increased reliance on others compromised confidentiality, and frustration led to disengagement.

Crucially, participants reflected on how their experiences shaped their future willingness to seek help. A small number said they had grown more confident and would now approach legal services again if needed. But many others said they would avoid legal services in future unless absolutely necessary. This reluctance represents a significant risk of unmet legal need, with potential knock-on effects on housing, employment, family life, and financial security. As one participant put it: “It made me feel like legal stuff isn’t for people like me. I’d have to be desperate to go back.”

What Good Looks Like

Despite their difficulties, participants were clear about what they wanted from legal services. Across interviews, the qualities that mattered most were trust, respect, empathy, clarity, and responsiveness. These values were not seen as optional extras but as essential features of good service, regardless of whether it was delivered online or offline.

Choice emerged as a central theme. Participants wanted the flexibility to use digital tools when they worked well but also the reassurance of offline alternatives. Face-to-face meetings and phone calls were consistently valued for their clarity, reassurance, and emotional support. Paper documents remained important, especially for those who preferred to review information at their own pace or lacked reliable internet access.

Where providers combined digital systems with human contact, for example, offering both email and postal copies, or following up a digital form with a phone call, participants felt more supported, more respected, and more in control.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholder organisations reinforced these findings and placed them in a wider context. They described digital exclusion as one strand in a web of disadvantage, often compounding poverty, poor

health, or isolation. They highlighted the precariousness of digital access, how a lost device, an expired data plan, or a broken phone could trigger immediate exclusion.

Stakeholders expressed concern that services, including legal services, are increasingly being designed as “digital first,” without sufficient regard for the needs of excluded groups. They warned that this risks non-compliance with regulatory duties on equality and reasonable adjustment, and in some cases may amount to discrimination. As one stakeholder observed: “If a firm only provides online appointments or self-serve portals, what happens to the client who’s housebound and doesn’t have internet? That’s potentially discriminatory.”

They also stressed the importance of human contact, trusted intermediaries, and locally delivered support. National initiatives such as the Data Bank and Device Bank were praised, but most stakeholders emphasised the central role of community-based organisations in providing practical, relational support. These services, however, remain patchy, underfunded, and inconsistent across regions, creating what some described as a “postcode lottery.”

Looking forward, stakeholders identified opportunities for innovation and leadership in the legal sector. They called for inclusive service design, better training for frontline staff, and greater collaboration with community organisations. They also urged regulators to play a more proactive role in setting expectations and monitoring practice.

Implications for Providers

For legal service providers, the findings highlight several practical and affordable steps that could improve access and trust:

- **Proactively assess digital confidence** at the outset of a case and offer help without waiting for clients to ask.
- **Maintain and promote offline routes** (phone, post, and face-to-face) as standard practice, not only when requested.
- **Provide clear, jargon-free communication**, breaking down complex processes into manageable steps.
- **Work with community networks** to ensure clients can access reliable, confidential support when needed.
- **Avoid shifting responsibility** onto families or external organisations without offering direct support.

These actions are not costly but could make a profound difference to accessibility, client satisfaction, and trust.

Implications for Regulators

For regulators, the research underscores the importance of setting clear expectations around inclusivity. Participants wanted reassurance that providers would be required to offer offline alternatives, use plain language, and respond promptly. Stakeholders called for regulators to monitor accessibility in practice, not just through website audits, and to treat digital inclusion as a core component of service quality.

There was also recognition that while prescriptive one-size-fits-all standards may not be appropriate across such a diverse sector, regulators can still set consistent principles that all providers should follow: maintaining choice, ensuring accessibility, and embedding inclusion from the outset.

More broadly, stakeholders argued that regulators should advocate for a national strategy on digital inclusion, given the systemic and cross-sectoral nature of the issue. Without long-term investment and leadership, efforts will remain fragmented and inconsistent.

Conclusion

The overarching message of this research is clear: digital transformation is not inherently progressive. While digitisation can bring efficiencies, it must not come at the expense of fairness, accessibility, and trust. For many digitally excluded clients, online systems lengthen timelines, reduce autonomy, and deter them from seeking help in the future.

To ensure access to justice for all, legal service providers and regulators must commit to embedding inclusion in service design, maintaining meaningful offline routes, supporting staff to recognise and respond to exclusion, and working with community networks to strengthen capacity. Regulators, in turn, have a vital role in ensuring that these principles are applied consistently across the sector.

Digital channels can expand access only when accompanied by real-world flexibility, human contact, and proactive support. Inclusion cannot be treated as an afterthought; it must be at the core of legal service delivery. The right to access justice should never depend on someone's ability to navigate a digital form.

Introduction and Methodology

Introduction

Understanding Digital Exclusion in the Legal Sector

Digital exclusion is not a binary condition, nor is it uniform across different aspects of life. Many individuals who appear digitally connected in day-to-day activities may nonetheless struggle with digital processes in more formal or emotionally charged contexts. For instance, someone who can send a message on Facebook or shop online may still feel entirely excluded when asked to manage a legal issue digitally. The complexity, stakes, and consequences involved in legal processes make digital exclusion in this sector fundamentally different from exclusion in areas such as retail, banking, or social media.

Legal matters are often high-stress, high-stakes, and procedurally complex. Tasks such as defending oneself in a criminal case, resolving a housing dispute, administering the estate of a loved one, or navigating a divorce can be intimidating even for individuals with a reasonable level of digital proficiency. These situations require not only technical ability but also emotional readiness, trust in systems, and confidence that mistakes will not result in serious personal or legal consequences. In this context, the threshold for digital exclusion is lower: even small gaps in skill, confidence or support can render someone effectively excluded from digital legal services.

Defining Digital Exclusion

For the purposes of this study, digital exclusion was defined using four overlapping dimensions:

- **Access:** Whether individuals have reliable access to the internet and to internet-enabled devices.
- **Affordability:** Whether they can afford the necessary devices, data plans, repairs, and ongoing connectivity.
- **Ability:** Whether they possess the skills and confidence required to use digital tools, particularly for complex tasks.
- **Attitude:** Including individuals' levels of trust in digital systems, motivation to engage online, and willingness to share sensitive information through digital channels.

These dimensions often intersect and compound each other. Someone with internet access may still feel digitally excluded due to low confidence, lack of trust, or fear of making a costly mistake. For this reason, digital exclusion must be understood not simply as a lack of connectivity but as a spectrum of capability and comfort with digital tools.

Methodology

Conducting research with digitally excluded individuals presents a number of challenges, particularly when the focus is on those who have also accessed legal services in the last five years. To ensure the research captured a wide range of experiences, M.E.L Research adopted a mixed-methods approach designed to be inclusive, robust, and cost-effective.

Stakeholder Engagement

At the outset, nine stakeholder organisations were interviewed to gain insight into the broader landscape of digital exclusion, the specific challenges associated with accessing legal services online, and examples of current models of support. These interviews helped shape the overall research design and ensured the study was grounded in lived experience and professional insight.

Quantitative Survey

A survey was conducted with 454 individuals who were identified as digitally excluded and had accessed legal services in the past five years. To capture a broad spectrum of digital exclusion, three modes of fieldwork were used:

- **Online Panel (n=300):** Participants from an online panel were included to reach individuals who are digitally connected but still face exclusion due to ability, confidence, or attitude. Although these respondents have internet access and devices, they may lack the ability or comfort to complete formal legal processes online. This distinction is important because many legal services assume that if clients are online in principle, they are capable of transacting entirely online. In practice, even semi-connected individuals can struggle with essential stages of a legal journey, such as finding and contacting a provider, completing identity checks, navigating online court portals, or using e-signature tools. These semi-connected users are therefore among those vulnerable to exclusion.

Illustrative consumer journey: where digital steps arise

Digital processes are often embedded at key points in a legal service journey. At each stage, clients who appear “digitally connected” can encounter barriers in practice:

1. **Finding a provider:** searching online for local firms, checking reviews, or completing a web-based enquiry form.
2. **Initial contact:** many firms direct clients to email or online portals as the first point of entry.
3. **Onboarding and compliance:** routine checks often require the digital upload of identification documents or the use of verification apps.
4. **Case management:** documents, forms, and evidence may need to be submitted through portals or email; updates are often shared digitally.
5. **Court and tribunal systems:** in many areas, including probate and divorce, official systems expect online applications and ongoing case tracking.
6. **Transaction completion:** use of e-signatures, digital contracts, or online payment platforms.

- **Telephone Interviews (n=130):** Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) methods were used to reach individuals who may not be online at all or who use the internet only sporadically. This helped include those excluded by access, affordability, or limited ability.

- **Face-to-Face Interviews (n=24):** To include individuals with the highest levels of exclusion, face-to-face interviews were carried out through door-knocking and outreach via community organisations. These respondents often had no digital access, no suitable devices, or were entirely offline.

Participants were screened using a structured set of criteria based on the four dimensions of exclusion (Access, Affordability, Ability, and Attitude). Only those who met at least one criterion were invited to take part.

This approach ensured that the study included a wide range of digitally excluded individuals, from those with limited digital confidence to those completely disconnected from digital systems. By combining multiple methods, the research was able to reflect the real diversity of digital exclusion in legal contexts. The survey questions and a profile of participants are provided in the Appendix. Note that where discussion of the survey findings refers to ‘significant’ differences, this indicates that differences between groups were statistically significant.

Qualitative Interviews

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 service users who were specifically targeted because they experienced digital exclusion when accessing legal services to explore their lived experiences in greater depth. Of these, 10 participants were recruited from the online panel sample and 20 were recruited through the CATI survey. Participants were purposively selected to reflect diversity across key characteristics, including the type of legal issue they had encountered (such as family, housing, employment, probate), as well as age, gender, digital confidence, and support needs.

The topic guide for the interviews was developed in close collaboration with the BSB, CRL, CLC, and ICAEW and informed by emerging themes from the survey data. This allowed the qualitative research to build on and explore patterns already visible in the quantitative findings, while also providing space for new or unexpected insights to emerge. Particular attention was paid to the emotional, practical, and procedural challenges faced by participants in accessing legal services online. The interview topic guide is provided in the Appendix.

These interviews provided valuable insight into how digital exclusion affects individuals emotionally, practically, and procedurally when engaging with legal services. They also captured nuances not easily identified through survey data, such as fears around data privacy, the emotional toll of exclusion, and the impact of relying on others to navigate legal processes.

Together, these qualitative and quantitative methods form a rich evidence base that highlights the complexity of digital exclusion in the legal sector and informs the recommendations set out in this report.

Limitations

While the study brings together a broad evidence base, possible limitations should be noted and kept in mind when interpreting the findings:

- The survey relied on self-reported experiences, which may be subject to recall bias.

- Although care was taken to include participants across the spectrum of digital exclusion, some groups may remain under-represented, particularly those who are entirely disengaged from formal services.
- The qualitative sample, while rich in detail, is not statistically representative of the wider population.
- Digital exclusion is a fluid condition that may change rapidly as technology, regulation, and personal circumstances evolve.

Initial Stakeholder Interviews

During the initial stage of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders representing nine organisations working to alleviate digital poverty and exclusion across a range of settings, including both those with dedicated support for legal needs and those without.

Organisations Interviewed:

- Digital Unite
- Good Things Foundation
- Law Centres Network
- Age UK
- Law For Life
- Digital Poverty Alliance
- Justice
- Support Through Court
- LawWorks

Interviewing stakeholders added value to the research as they brought experience from national and community-level programmes, including digital training, device provision, and support for accessing online services.

The aim of the interviews was to provide insight into:

- How digital exclusion is defined and experienced
- The challenges it presents in relation to legal services
- Current models of support and where gaps remain
- Opportunities for policy and regulatory action

How Digital Exclusion Is Defined and Experienced

Digital exclusion is a complex and evolving concept. Across all interviews, there was strong consensus that digital exclusion encompasses much more than a lack of internet access or devices. Instead, it is better understood as a spectrum of barriers that include access, skills, confidence, motivation, and trust. Stakeholders emphasised that individuals rarely describe themselves as digitally excluded, which adds to the challenge of identifying and supporting those affected.

Stakeholders consistently defined digital exclusion in terms of both practical and emotional barriers. For many, it is not simply a matter of infrastructure, but of confidence, safety, and understanding.

“Digital exclusion isn’t just about having a device, it’s about knowing how to use it safely, and feeling confident that you won’t mess things up.”

“It’s not just about broadband. People might have internet but still be unable to use it in any meaningful way.”

Some described digital exclusion as a “hidden” condition, one that individuals are often reluctant to acknowledge.

“People don’t self-identify as excluded. They just say, ‘I don’t do tech,’ or ‘I don’t trust it.’ That’s digital exclusion right there.”

Stakeholders also defined digital exclusion as comprising multiple, overlapping dimensions. These include whether individuals have reliable broadband or mobile data, whether they own suitable and functional devices, whether they have the skills and confidence to use digital tools independently, and whether they trust online systems to be safe, reliable, and fair. Motivation to go online in the first place was also seen as a significant factor.

Taken together, these dimensions closely mirror the widely cited Ofcom framework, which defines digital exclusion in terms of access, skills, confidence, and motivation. Stakeholders in this study echoed that definition but emphasised two points of difference. First, they highlighted the importance of *trust* as a distinct barrier, noting that people may technically have access and skills but still feel excluded if they do not believe digital systems are safe or fair. Second, they stressed that these dimensions are rarely experienced in isolation but instead compound one another in ways that intensify exclusion.

Comparison of definitions

- **Ofcom definition:** Access, skills, confidence, motivation
- **Stakeholder definition (this study):** Access, devices, skills, confidence, trust, motivation
- **Key difference:** Stakeholders added *devices* as a separate dimension (not always captured by “access”), and placed particular emphasis on *trust* as a barrier in its own right.

As one stakeholder put it:

“There are kind of two groups that are digitally excluded. There are those that are excluded from an access perspective... and then you have skills, confidence, trust and motivation. So all of those four barriers play a role.”

Another emphasised that these barriers often overlap and reinforce one another:

“Confidence, I think, is a form of exclusion... Digital exclusion compounds and multiplies existing exclusion and makes it more complex.”

Stakeholders also agreed that digital exclusion should not be reduced to a purely technical or infrastructural issue. While broadband coverage and access to devices are fundamental, the human factors, such as trust and self-belief, are equally decisive.

Misconceptions and Hidden Exclusion

There was widespread concern about over-simplified assumptions, and stakeholders challenged common stereotypes about who is likely to be digitally excluded. While older people and those living

in poverty remain high-risk groups, organisations warned against stereotyping and overlooking other demographics.

For example, the assumption that young people are inherently digitally included because they are “digital natives” was repeatedly questioned:

“Young people might be very good on smartphones, but they’re absolutely rubbish at writing a CV... There’s a particular form of digital exclusion surfacing in younger people which needs attention as well.”

“It’s a myth that digital exclusion only affects the elderly. We see plenty of young people who are confident with phones but not with anything formal.”

Others noted that people may appear digitally confident in one setting (such as using social media) but be highly excluded in others (such as applying for benefits or using a legal service):

“They might know how to do it because they’ve done it in, I don’t know, Facebook, for example... but they’re struggling to apply that across all the areas of their life.”

Identifying Digital Exclusion

Stakeholders agreed that digital exclusion is difficult to identify using conventional data sources, particularly since many government surveys and forms are online by default, and so they also include proxy indicators such as:

- Whether someone has a broadband or mobile data connection
- Whether they own a working device
- Where they live (e.g. areas of high deprivation)

However, the most effective way to assess digital exclusion is through direct, local-level engagement:

“You can’t tell from a postcode or a form. You need to talk to people, ask the right questions, build trust.”

“It’s often the trusted face in a local place who spots exclusion, not a national database.”

Community-based organisations, law centres, libraries, and housing providers were seen as essential frontline partners for identifying those most at risk of digital exclusion, particularly because excluded individuals are unlikely to come forward or recognise their situation.

Correlates of Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion arises from an intricate mix of structural and individual factors and is rarely the result of a single factor. Rather, it tends to arise at the intersection of multiple, often compounding disadvantages. Across all interviews, stakeholders identified a consistent set of structural, social and individual-level factors that contribute to digital exclusion. These include poverty, low educational attainment, age, disability, geographic isolation, language barriers and even personal experience with trauma or bureaucracy. Most significantly, these factors rarely occur in isolation.

Digital exclusion often exists as one strand in a web of intersecting disadvantages and can, in turn, intensify existing inequalities, creating a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break.

Poverty as a Primary Driver

Poverty was universally cited as a significant cause of digital exclusion. Low incomes limit people's ability to afford devices, data, repairs, and training, and often forces individuals to prioritise more immediate needs.

"It's poverty that's the biggest determinant... We find the best predictor of populations or areas that are digitally excluded is deprivation."

"People on Universal Credit can't just splash out on a laptop when the fridge breaks down."

"We had a client with a cracked screen and no Wi-Fi, just topping up £5 at a time when she could. That's not inclusion, that's survival."

Stakeholders also highlighted the precariousness of digital access for people living in poverty. Even those who are "online" today could be excluded tomorrow due to lost devices, expired credit, or changes in housing or employment.

Even when low-cost options such as social tariffs are available, stakeholders noted that awareness and take-up are often limited, and many people are still unable to afford regular top-ups for mobile data or to replace broken devices. One stakeholder described a client who broke her phone and, as a result, lost access to her online banking. Without this, she struggled to monitor her balance, fell into arrears, and the situation escalated into formal proceedings with serious consequences for her employment.

"She broke her phone... which meant she lost access to her online banking... and as a result, she incurred some kind of legal action and lost her job."

This example illustrates the precariousness of digital access for many individuals, where a single event, such as losing a phone, can set off a chain of financial and legal difficulties. While other forms of access (such as paper statements) may exist, in practice many people rely solely on digital channels. For those living on the margins, disruption to digital access can therefore have rapid and disproportionate impacts.

Disability, Age and Health-Related Barriers

Digital exclusion is often compounded by health issues, including physical disabilities, sensory impairments, mental illness, and learning difficulties. Stakeholders spoke of the challenges faced by older adults but were quick to point out that not all older people are excluded, and not all excluded people are older.

Organisations also drew attention to people with mental health conditions, learning difficulties or chronic illnesses who may struggle to engage with digital systems that are not designed with their needs in mind.

"For people with anxiety or cognitive conditions, the online environment can feel overwhelming. Pop-ups, passwords, multi-step forms, it's too much."

Rural and Coastal Isolation

The geographic dimension of digital exclusion was raised by several stakeholders. Rural communities often experience limited broadband coverage, poor mobile signal, limited community provision, and the lack of public transport to access digital support.

“Rural communities can be isolated... they don’t have buses, they don’t have services, they don’t have banks. And again, digital is compounding their isolation.”

“There are places we work where the bus comes once a week, the library’s shut, and the post office is now just a corner of the Spar. Everything’s gone digital, but nothing’s local anymore.”

Similarly, coastal communities were mentioned as areas of concern due to their demographic makeup (older populations) and infrastructure deficits.

“Coastal towns are often overlooked, older populations, poor transport, and no local training hubs. It’s a triple whammy.”

Hidden and Overlooked Groups

Stakeholders highlighted that digital exclusion is not always visible and may be actively hidden due to stigma, pride, or a desire for independence. Several raised concerns about groups whose exclusion is overlooked because it doesn’t fit traditional stereotypes. Migrants, refugees, and people in precarious housing situations were described as particularly at risk, especially where devices have been confiscated or where individuals are unfamiliar with UK systems.

“People who may have had their devices taken away from them when they landed in the UK... or people who have just broken their device, you know, can be included one minute and excluded the next.”

For regulators, the challenge is that this form of exclusion may not appear in standard datasets or surface through complaints. Stakeholders suggested that the most reliable way to identify hidden exclusion is through trusted intermediaries who have regular, face-to-face contact with affected groups, such as community organisations, law centres, housing providers, or advice charities. Regulators may therefore not be able to identify hidden exclusion directly, but they can encourage providers to build links with these organisations and ask simple screening questions about digital access and confidence as part of routine client onboarding.

Other vulnerable groups include young carers, survivors of abuse, people who may distrust official systems and those who have experienced data insecurity or simply lack access due to life instability.

“We work with asylum seekers who had phones taken from them at the border. Their exclusion isn’t about confidence, it’s about control, trauma, and power.”

“You might have a mum who’s fleeing domestic abuse, staying in a refuge. She’s got a phone but no data, no charger, no headspace. She’s not excluded in theory, but in practice, totally cut off.”

Additionally, people with low literacy or English as a second language often face compounding challenges which is often intertwined with digital exclusion. Even where digital access is technically

available, poor comprehension of online forms or official instructions may render services effectively inaccessible.

“Some of the people we support can’t read in their first language, let alone navigate English-language websites with legal jargon.”

Challenges Digital Exclusion Presents in Relation to Legal Services

Stakeholders emphasised that digital exclusion has wide-ranging, serious and often escalating consequences, affecting individuals’ finances, health, wellbeing, and ability to access basic rights and services. These impacts are not only immediate but can also compound over time, pushing people further into disadvantage.

Stakeholders described how exclusion from the digital world leads to financial disadvantage, missed opportunities, reduced independence, and emotional stress. In the context of legal services, these effects can be particularly damaging, exposing individuals to greater risk, marginalisation, and injustice.

The legal sector was also identified as an area where the consequences of exclusion are particularly acute, given the complexity and seriousness of legal processes.

Financial Disadvantage and Poverty Traps

Stakeholders consistently highlighted the cost of being offline. Being digitally excluded often means being locked out of financial opportunities and cost savings that are readily available to online users. Organisations highlighted the “poverty premium”, the phenomenon where individuals pay more for goods and services due to lack of digital access.

Most of these examples related to everyday costs such as food, utilities, or financial services, rather than legal services directly. However, stakeholders commented that the financial strain created by the poverty premium may impact on access to justice. People who are already paying more for essentials have less disposable income to pay for legal advice, court fees, or even transport to in-person appointments.

When asked specifically about legal services, stakeholders pointed to related risks. For example, digitally excluded clients may be unable to compare providers online, miss opportunities to access pro bono or fixed-fee offers advertised digitally, or face additional costs when asked to print, post, or courier documents rather than submit them electronically. In this way, the financial disadvantage of being offline indirectly, and sometimes directly, shapes people’s ability to access and afford legal help.

“People are driven further into poverty because they are excluded. Food costs 50% more if you're not able to access it online... all of your bills are more expensive if you're not able to operate online.”

“Food, energy, insurance, everything is cheaper online. Being offline costs money people don’t have.”

Tasks that can be completed quickly and efficiently online, such as comparing utility providers, managing bank accounts, or booking appointments, are far more time-consuming offline. This “time

poverty” was identified as a major barrier to stability and progress, particularly for people in insecure work or with caring responsibilities.

Reliance on Others and Data Privacy Risks

Digitally excluded individuals often rely on family members, friends, service providers or informal networks to help them complete forms, manage accounts and access services. While this can provide short-term solutions, organisations warned that it raises significant issues around autonomy, confidentiality, and security, particularly in contexts involving legal or financial information.

“There is a real risk with the workarounds that people put in place... They may not want to share certain bits of information... or that person may not be trustworthy.”

“Relying on someone else means giving up privacy. Imagine sharing your legal issues with your son-in-law or a neighbour. Most people won’t.”

“It’s not just about trust. Sometimes people don’t want to burden their families or feel ashamed. So they just don’t engage with services at all.”

In some cases, reliance on others can lead to further disadvantage, such as missed information, misuse of personal data, or control by abusive individuals.

“We’ve seen cases where carers or partners took over digital accounts and accessed things without consent. Vulnerable clients can lose control of their own lives.”

For individuals facing legal issues the need for private and secure communication is paramount. Reliance on others may deter people from engaging with services at all, or result in mistakes, omissions, or delays.

Psychological and Emotional Impacts

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised the emotional toll of digital exclusion. Those digitally excluded describe feeling overwhelmed, inadequate, anxious, or simply “left behind” by systems that assume a level of digital competence.

Fear of failure is also common among individuals who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with online platforms, particularly when the task at hand involves formal or official matters.

“There’s a lot of shame tied up in it, people who’ve worked all their lives now feel like they’re failing because they can’t book a GP appointment online.”

“There is a real fear attached to the risk of getting it wrong... especially if they are accessing legal services... there could be consequences down the line.”

This anxiety is exacerbated when people feel they are being treated unfairly due to their inability to engage digitally. For some, this sense of exclusion reinforces a broader lack of trust in institutions, including legal bodies.

“We’ve had people in tears trying to complete online forms. They feel stupid, scared of clicking the wrong thing.”

“It’s a freighted [loaded or burdened] environment... people being worried about getting something wrong in terms of their legal affairs or their money.”

This psychological burden is particularly intense when the stakes are high, such as applying for benefits, managing debt, or dealing with legal processes.

“Legal stuff is intimidating anyway, add tech to it, and people just freeze. They’d rather do nothing than risk doing it wrong.”

Missed Opportunities and Legal Risks

Stakeholders noted that in parts of the legal system, particularly where government processes are involved, services are increasingly “digital by default.” Examples include probate applications, tax processes, and powers of attorney, all of which now require or strongly encourage online submission. In these areas, people who are digitally excluded often do not even begin to engage, leading to missed entitlements or unresolved problems.

By contrast, most high street legal providers are not fully digital by default, and stakeholders acknowledged that instructing a firm can often help to alleviate digital barriers. Providers can submit forms, manage online portals, and track cases on behalf of their clients. However, this support is not universal. Some clients still face initial digital hurdles in finding and contacting a provider, while others report that firms expect them to complete online elements independently, such as scanning and sending documents or communicating by email. The result is a patchwork: while engaging a firm may reduce some barriers, digital exclusion continues to shape how and whether people can access legal services in the first place.

Several provided examples of how digital exclusion can directly impact people’s ability to resolve legal issues or access justice. This includes missing deadlines for submitting forms, being unaware of entitlements, or failing to comply with procedural requirements, each of which can carry serious consequences.

“People are missing deadlines, not understanding paperwork, not knowing what help they could get. It’s access to justice by broadband, and they don’t have broadband.”

“The easiest option for them is not to do it... and the consequences of not doing it could potentially be significant.”

In some cases, digital exclusion may even lead to legal issues that would not have arisen otherwise. For example, an inability to manage personal finances or communicate with service providers may result in debt, eviction, or penalties, each of which could escalate into legal disputes.

Current Models of Support and Where Gaps Remain

These stakeholders are actively working to support excluded individuals and communities across the UK, and the interviews revealed diverse approaches to addressing digital exclusion, from community-based initiatives to nationwide programmes. These models differ in scope and structure but share a common goal: to empower people with the access, skills, and confidence they need to participate in an increasingly digital society, including accessing legal services. Another common thread was the importance of local, trusted, and relational support.

However, some noted the precariousness and fragmentation of current provision, and the pressing need for coordinated, sustained action.

Community-Based Delivery

A recurring theme across all interviews was the importance of community-based delivery. Community organisations were seen as central to effective digital inclusion. Libraries, housing associations, children's centres, and voluntary sector hubs provide not only access to Wi-Fi and devices, but also the patient, personal support that digitally excluded individuals need to build skills and confidence.

Stakeholders emphasised that digital support is most effective when it is embedded within these trusted local settings.

"They operate a model of being a trusted face in a local space... many of them provide that wraparound support and reassurance to help people take their first steps into the online world."

These services often rely on staff and volunteers who are already part of the community, and who can provide culturally competent, language-sensitive support. This personalised, patient, and non-judgemental support meets people where they are, both literally and metaphorically. For digitally excluded individuals, these spaces often serve as essential lifelines.

"Digital inclusion works best when it's embedded in places people already go, like a food bank, a housing office, or a GP practice."

"If someone doesn't know how to use a smartphone, a chatbot won't help. They need a person, someone patient and local, who they trust."

The Digital Champion Model

One effective and scalable model mentioned by multiple stakeholders was the Digital Champion approach, where trained individuals support others in building digital confidence within existing services. Champions can be frontline staff, volunteers, or even service users (depending on the setting), helping reduce stigma and build peer-led support.

"Their job is to recruit those champions internally... and then we supply the training and the support and the networking to build that champion cohort up."

"We trained housing officers and social workers as digital champions... It means support is there when people need it, not in a separate building miles away."

"Digital Champions don't need to be tech experts, they need empathy, patience, and the ability to say 'let's figure it out together'."

This model is being used across a wide range of sectors, including:

- Social housing (e.g. housing officers helping tenants pay rent online)
- Health and social care (e.g. community health workers supporting patients to use the NHS app)
- Libraries (e.g. staff assisting with digital literacy and access)
- Corporate customer service teams (e.g. equipping staff to assist digitally excluded customers)

The model's strength lies in its flexibility and scalability, enabling organisations to embed digital inclusion into existing services without relying solely on external support.

National Programmes and Infrastructure

Access to affordable devices and data remains a critical barrier, and a range of national-level initiatives were praised by organisations, including:

- The National Digital Inclusion Network (5,000 community organisations)
- The National Data Bank, which provides free mobile data to people who need it
- The National Device Bank, offering refurbished devices to those without access
- An online platform offering bite-sized digital skills training

“Without data, it doesn’t matter how good your digital skills are. The Data Bank is a lifeline for many of our clients.”

These programmes help address access and affordability while building foundational skills and confidence. However, it was acknowledged that even these broader programmes rely heavily on local organisations (who often have limited funding) to deliver the support in practice.

“That kind of ability to reduce the risk for them... is really key to that local community support.”

“We run a laptop loan scheme for tenants. It’s basic but effective. People just need a starting point.”

However, demand regularly outstrips supply. Many projects are ad hoc or reliant on short-term grants, making sustainability a major challenge.

Support from Government and Public Sector Bodies

Stakeholders highlighted successful collaborations with courts, councils, and government departments to improve digital access to their services and support digital inclusion. For example, partnerships with HMCTS and HMRC enabled community organisations to support people engaging with online legal or tax systems.

“We piloted an HMRC hub in our community centre. People could get help filling out forms or accessing tax credits. It worked, but funding ran out.”

Stakeholders acknowledged the value of such support but warned that many of these schemes are underfunded, short-term, geographically limited and at risk of disappearing without ongoing investment.

“There’s no single map of who’s doing what. Services pop up, do great work, then vanish when the funding ends.”

The Role of Law Centres and Legal Charities

Law centres and legal advice charities are increasingly recognising the role they can play in supporting digital access, not just to their own services, but to public and social entitlements more broadly.

“We’ve started offering in-person digital sessions. People bring in their paperwork, and we sit with them to help upload evidence or apply for things online.”

Some are also embedding digital triage within their reception teams, or working with libraries and housing partners to provide digital access points linked to legal help.

However, legal organisations are often under-resourced and stretched. While many are committed to inclusion, organisations stressed that they need funding, training, and digital infrastructure to meet demand effectively.

Fragmented and Uneven Provision

While many support mechanisms exist, organisations described provision as patchy, precarious, and often unsustainable. There is no centralised or comprehensive map of where digital support is available, and service availability varies significantly depending on local authority funding, charitable resources, and community capacity.

“There are lots of little local things and ad hoc and unofficial and community-based support networks... but there’s a lot of churn in that.”

“That kind of funding model... it doesn’t last forever. Change of government, austerity... these things are easily cut.”

This fragmentation makes it difficult for digitally excluded people to know where to turn, and for legal service providers to reliably signpost to support.

Opportunities for Policy and Regulatory Action

There was broad agreement among stakeholders that neither the public nor private sector has fully grasped the scale or seriousness of digital exclusion, particularly in contexts like legal services, where exclusion can directly affect people’s rights, finances, and wellbeing.

Lack of National Strategy and Policy Leadership

One theme across the stakeholder interviews was the absence of a joined-up national strategy on digital inclusion. Organisations described a policy landscape in which digital exclusion is everyone’s problem, and no one’s responsibility.

“There’s no dedicated unit for digital inclusion in central government... It’s split across departments, and no one really owns it.”

“We’ve had pilot schemes and patchwork funding, but nothing joined up. Digital inclusion needs to be treated like public health or education.”

Without long-term investment and leadership, stakeholders feared that promising initiatives, especially those embedded in community organisations, will struggle to scale or survive.

“We need infrastructure, not just innovation. That means funding the community hubs that already do the work, not asking them to do more for less.”

Inconsistency Across Local Authorities and Regions

Several stakeholders spoke of regional inequality in provision. Some local authorities invest heavily in digital support, while others rely almost entirely on overstretched third-sector providers.

“It’s a postcode lottery. Some councils have inclusion strategies, digital leads, partnerships. Others don’t even acknowledge the issue.”

“We’re lucky to have funding for digital drop-ins. But a few miles away, there’s nothing. Same issues, totally different resources.”

This inconsistency creates confusion for both service users and legal professionals trying to signpost clients to help.

The Role of the Private Sector

While the private sector has a role to play, especially in areas like data access, device affordability, and service design, organisations were cautious about over-relying on corporate solutions.

“The National Data Bank is a great step, but it shouldn’t be left to telecoms companies to fix structural exclusion.”

Some expressed concern that commercial interests may not align with the needs of the most excluded users, particularly when it comes to safeguarding, accessibility, or long-term affordability.

Others, however, saw opportunities for collaboration:

“We’ve had success working with banks, supermarkets, and broadband providers. They have reach and resources, we just need shared values and co-design.”

Legal Sector Awareness and Responsibility

When it came to the legal sector specifically, organisations saw a significant opportunity, and responsibility, for regulators, firms, and advice services to act.

“Legal services aren’t like shopping or travel, you can’t just wait until someone learns how to use the system. If they can’t access it, they can’t get justice.”

Some described a lack of awareness among legal professionals of how digital exclusion operates, and how it intersects with legal vulnerability.

“Some lawyers assume ‘everyone’s online’, but the people who need their help most often aren’t.”

Participants felt that law firms, courts, and regulators have a duty to ensure that digital transformation does not create new barriers for the people who most need support.

“It’s not just about putting services online. It’s about how you design those services, who they’re for, and what’s available if someone can’t use them.”

Implications for the Legal Sector

Stakeholders expressed concern that as more elements of the legal system move online, there is a growing risk that those who are digitally excluded may struggle to access justice. They pointed particularly to processes such as probate applications, divorce and family court paperwork, housing benefit appeals, and immigration systems, all of which increasingly rely on digital forms or portals. While many high street legal providers still offer in-person or telephone routes, stakeholders worried that the shift to digital-by-default in certain government-managed legal processes risks excluding those already at the margins. These reflections are based on stakeholder experience and underline the importance of monitoring how digitalisation is affecting access to justice in practice.

Digital-by-Default Is Not Inclusive by Default

Stakeholders warned that many legal processes now assume a baseline level of digital access and competence that is not shared by all users, particularly those in crisis.

“Online portals for things like probate or debt relief are fine in theory, but they’re completely inaccessible for anyone without a computer, a printer, or digital confidence.”

“We’ve had people miss hearings because they couldn’t get into a Zoom link or thought an automated letter was a scam.”

This shift to “digital-by-default” risks excluding those who already face structural disadvantage. Without alternative routes, these individuals may never begin a legal process, or may fail to complete it.

Human Contact Remains Essential

Legal issues are often complex, emotionally charged, and highly consequential. Organisations were unanimous in calling for tailored hybrid service models that retain human contact, whether face-to-face, by phone, or via trusted intermediaries.

“Digital systems should support people, not replace them. Sometimes what someone needs is a calm voice on the phone, not a chatbot.”

Several stakeholders highlighted the potential role of trusted intermediaries, such as housing officers, social workers, or library staff, in bridging the gap between legal systems and excluded individuals. These intermediaries are often well placed to identify when someone is struggling with digital systems and to provide basic assistance, such as helping them get online, access information, or make initial contact with a legal provider. However, stakeholders stressed that this support should be limited to signposting and facilitating access, not providing legal advice.

For this reason, the emphasis was less on legal providers training intermediaries directly, and more on ensuring that intermediaries have clear referral routes, accessible information, and confidence in how to connect clients with qualified legal support. In practice, this means collaboration with community-based organisations (such as Citizens Advice) and making sure that guidance on digital access is straightforward and available in multiple formats.

Risk of Regulatory Non-Compliance Amongst Legal Service Providers

Some stakeholders pointed out that if legal service providers fail to account for digital exclusion, they may be inadvertently breaching regulatory duties, particularly those relating to equality, reasonable adjustments, and access to justice.

“If a firm only provides online appointments or self-serve portals, what happens to the client who’s housebound and doesn’t have internet? That’s potentially discriminatory.”

Stakeholders argued that regulators have an important role in setting expectations and monitoring practice, for example by offering clear guidance on inclusive service design and checking whether access routes are genuinely open to all.

Ethical and Professional Responsibilities (Legal Service Providers)

Legal professionals were encouraged to take a proactive role in identifying and responding to digital exclusion in day-to-day practice. This includes not only adapting service delivery but also recognising exclusion as an underlying issue affecting client behaviour or case progression

“If a client doesn’t respond to emails, it might not be neglect, it might be exclusion. We need to stop blaming clients for being shut out.”

Stakeholders suggested that legal service providers could:

- Ask clients about digital access and confidence at the outset
- Offer paper-based or telephone options where needed
- Avoid assumptions about literacy or tech use
- Work with community organisations to provide digital support or signposting

Wider System Roles (Government and Charities)

Stakeholders also noted that broader support is required beyond the legal sector. Government departments, local authorities, and charities were seen as key to sustaining digital inclusion programmes, funding community hubs, and supporting trusted intermediaries who can help clients engage with legal processes.

Opportunities for Innovation and Leadership (All Actors)

While much of the focus was on challenges, stakeholders also highlighted opportunities for the legal sector to lead in inclusive digital innovation. This includes:

- Designing forms and websites with user testing from excluded groups
- Funding digital support roles within legal charities or courts
- Offering drop-in sessions or advice clinics in community venues
- Partnering with digital inclusion organisations to co-deliver services

“The legal profession has a chance to lead, not just to catch up. But inclusion has to be part of the design brief from day one.”

Quantitative Survey Findings

Background and Circumstances

Insights from the stakeholder interviews directly shaped both the survey methodology and the recruitment strategy. Stakeholders emphasised that digital exclusion is not just about access, but also includes issues such as affordability, limited digital skills, and low confidence or trust in online systems. In response, the survey used a mixed-method approach that combined online, telephone and face-to-face interviews, and applied screening criteria that reflected this broader understanding. Participants were eligible if they had accessed a legal service in the past five years and faced digital challenges related to cost, skills or confidence, even if they had some level of internet access.

Defining Digital Exclusion for the Purpose of Recruitment

For the purpose of the survey four separate causes of digital exclusion were used: access, affordability, ability and attitude.

Each potential survey participant went through a screening process to ensure that they could be described as 'digitally excluded' according to these definitions. Individuals were recognised as digitally excluded if they met one or more of the following criteria:

- They had no internet access at home (access, affordability and attitude)
- Used the internet infrequently (access and attitude)
- Were less confident using the internet to access more complicated services (ability and attitude)
- Relied on others to help them access online services (ability and access)

Only those who met at least one of these criteria were invited to take part in the survey.

Figure 1: Q2. Do you have access to the internet at home? Q3. Roughly how often do you use the internet? Q6. How confident do you feel using the internet to access some of the more complicated services? Q8. How often do you rely on others to access online services for you? Base n=454

Subgroup Analysis

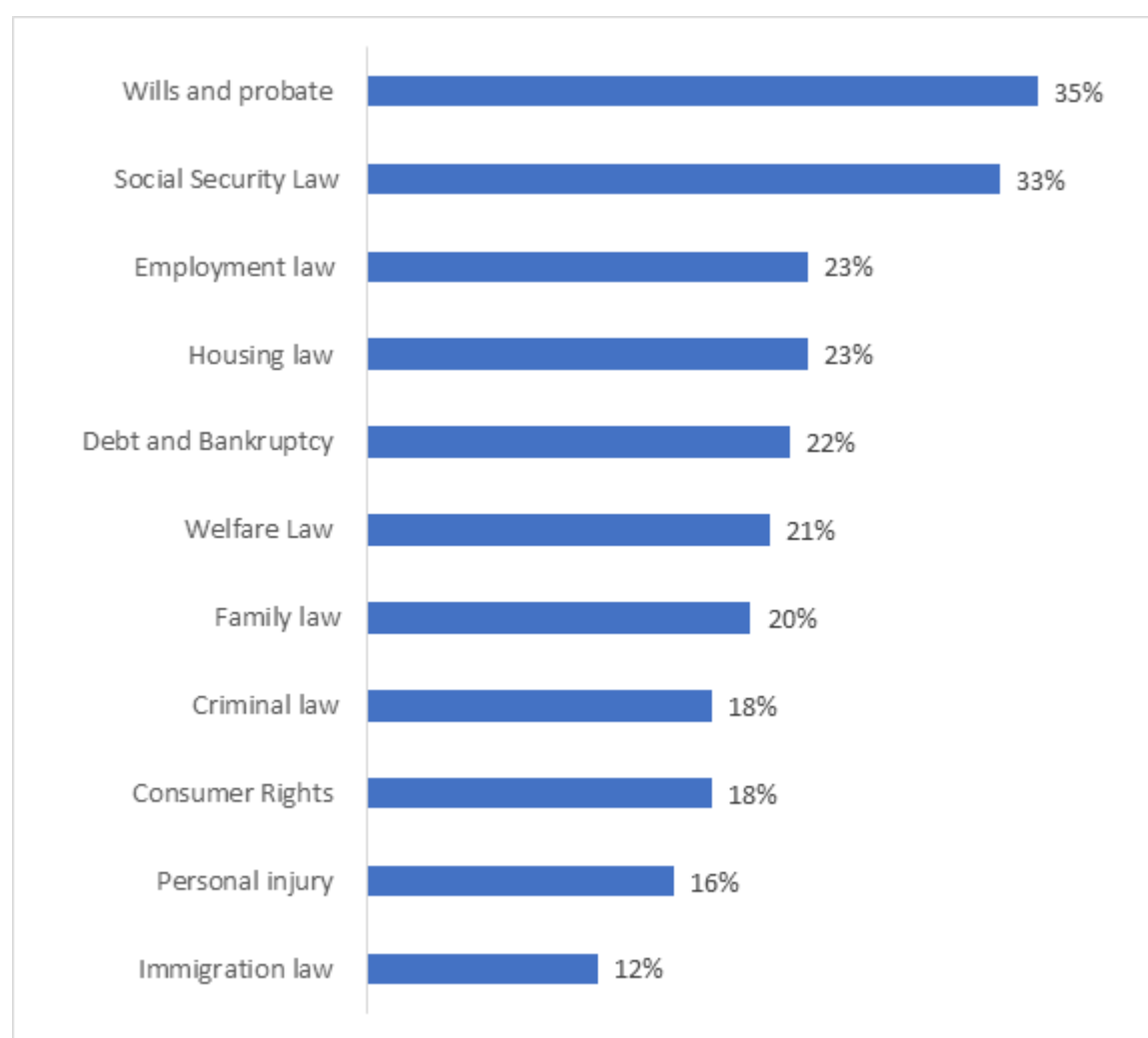
To support the analysis, data tables were produced containing cross-tabulations by key demographic and situational variables, including age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, and the type of legal issue accessed. These cross breaks were used to explore whether particular groups experienced digital exclusion differently or faced specific barriers to accessing legal services online.

Areas of Law Accessed by Respondents

Participants were asked which areas of law they had used in the last five years. In most cases this meant instructing a legal professional or firm for help, but it could also include situations where individuals attempted to engage with a legal service independently, for example by starting an application online or seeking initial advice, with examples provided to help them identify the most appropriate category. The survey script, including these definitions, is available in the appendix.

It should be noted that the survey did not ask respondents to specify the type of legal professional or firm they engaged (for example, whether they used a solicitor, barrister, or another regulated professional). This was a deliberate design choice, as the study focused on individuals' overall experiences of accessing legal services rather than on the specific provider type. However, it is recognised that experiences of digital exclusion may vary depending on both the area of law and the route through which clients engage legal professionals. For instance, the challenges faced by those accessing barristers directly may differ from those whose engagement occurs through referral by a solicitor. These contextual factors are important to bear in mind when interpreting the findings.

Figure 2: Q8. Have you used any of these legal services in the last five years? Base n=454 ¹



- **Wills and Probate (35%)** – The most frequently noted area of legal support.

Those aged over 55 were significantly more likely than average to have accessed wills and probate services (54% compared to 35% across the sample as a whole), which may be linked to age-related life events such as retirement, bereavement, or estate planning. This age group was also less likely to have internet access at home, with 23% reporting no access compared to the overall average of 9%, adding to the challenge of delivering these legal services digitally.

- **Social Security Law (33%)** – The second most frequently noted area of legal support.

Participants aged 16–35 were significantly more likely than average to have accessed social security law (43% compared to 33%), likely reflecting higher levels of financial insecurity, unemployment, or reliance on welfare benefits among younger adults.

The relatively high proportion accessing social security, employment, debt and bankruptcy, housing, and welfare law reflects the intersection between digital exclusion and wider social and economic vulnerability.

¹ Note that respondents could select more than one legal service and so the % figures add to more than 100%

Alongside the types of legal services accessed, it is important to consider participants' general experiences of using digital tools, since these shaped how they engaged with providers.

General Views on Digital Services

Internet Access and Usage Patterns

Overall, 90% of respondents had access to the internet at home, either through broadband or mobile data. Whilst this appears high, it is important to consider the quality and nature of that access. Among the cohort:

- A high proportion of these (93%) relied on others to access online services most of the time. This is particularly significant in the context of legal services, which are often private, personal and sensitive. The need to involve others not only compromises confidentiality but may also discourage individuals from engaging with legal processes altogether.
- Those who were economically active were significantly more likely than those who were inactive to have access to the internet (98% compared with 77%).

Both findings highlight that digital exclusion is not solely about having an internet connection. It also includes limited digital skills, low confidence, affordability issues, and the ability to use devices independently. Many individuals may technically have internet access at home, often shared with others (for example, in HMOs), but still face barriers to accessing services such as legal advice and representation. These barriers include lack of support, difficulty navigating online processes, intermittent access, data poverty, and outdated or unsuitable devices. Together, these factors can result in exclusion, even when internet access is present.

Frequency of Internet Use

Respondents were asked to say how often they accessed the internet at home.

- **62%** of respondents use the internet daily
- **16%** use it a few times a week
- **6%** once a week
- **7%** monthly
- **2%** less than once a month
- **7%** never

Daily use was significantly **lower** than the average of 62% amongst:

- Respondents who do not have access to the internet at home (2%)
- Those who do not feel confident using the internet for more complicated tasks (45%)
- Respondents aged 55+ (45%)
- Female participants (57%)
- Those who are economically inactive (42%)
- Those who completed the telephone or face-to-face survey (27%)

Using Everyday Online Tools

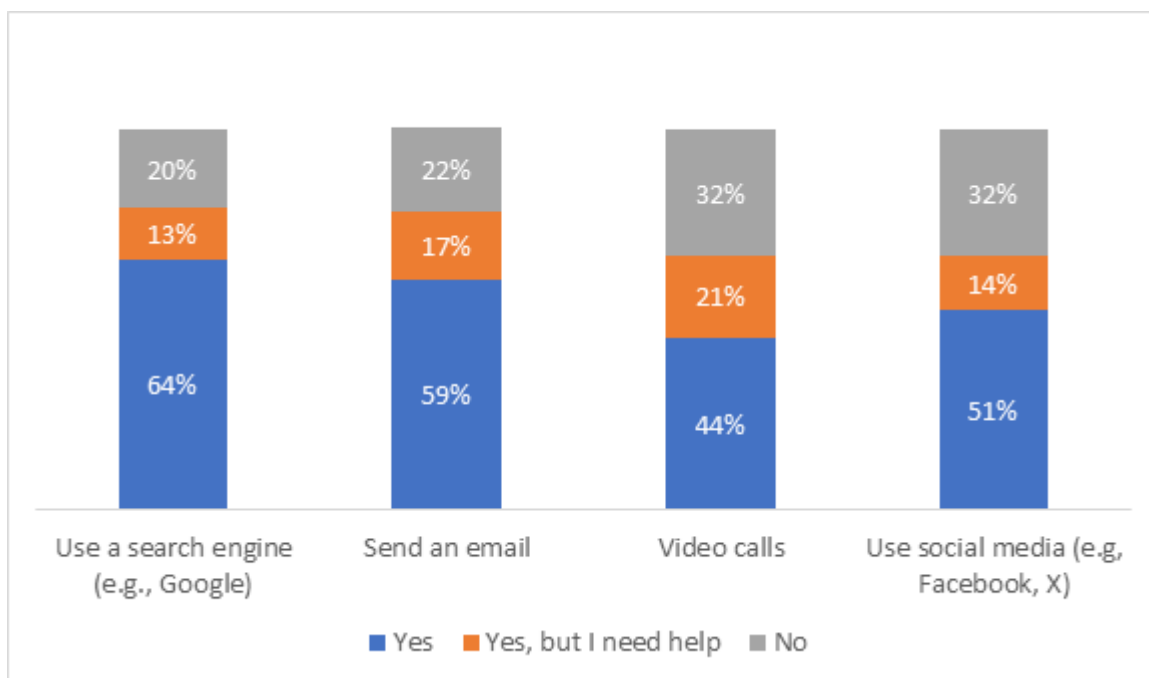
Participants were asked whether they could complete four popular online tasks: sending emails, using a search engine, making video calls, and using social media. The results show some variation in independence across these tasks.

Using a search engine was the most commonly completed task, with 64% saying they could do this without help, while 13% needed support and 20% could not do it at all. Similarly, 59% were able to send emails independently, but nearly one in five (17%) required help and 22% said they could not do it.

Ability dropped for video calls and social media. Only 44% said they could make a video call without help, while 21% needed assistance and 32% could not do it at all. Use of social media showed a similar pattern, with just over half (51%) able to access platforms like Facebook or X independently, 14% needing help, and nearly a third (32%) unable to use them at all.

These findings show that while some of the simpler digital tasks are accessible to a majority, a notable proportion of respondents still require assistance or are entirely unable to complete even everyday online activities, reinforcing the need for inclusive legal service design that does not assume digital self-sufficiency.

Figure 3: Q6. Do you personally do any of the following tasks online? Base n=454



Use of each online tool was significantly **lower** than the average amongst:

- Respondents who do not have access to the internet at home
 - Use a search engine: 16%
 - Send emails: 7%
 - Video calls: 7%
 - Use social media: 12%

- Those who do not feel confident using the internet for more complicated tasks
 - Use a search engine: 55%
 - Send emails: 46%
 - Video calls: 26%
 - Use social media: 38%
- Respondents aged 55+
 - Use a search engine: 57%
 - Send emails: 49%
 - Video calls: 31%
 - Use social media: 38%
- Those who are economically inactive
 - Use a search engine: 53%
 - Send emails: 47%
 - Video calls: 27%
 - Use social media: 37%

Confidence Accessing More Complicated Online Services

When asked to assess their level of confidence using the internet to access more complicated services, such as healthcare, utilities, legal or financial services:

- **24%** of respondents felt very confident
- **24%** quite confident
- **32%** not very confident
- **18%** not at all confident
- **49%** Summary Confident
- **50%** Summary Not confident

Half (50%) of all respondents did not feel confident using the internet for more complicated tasks, this figure is significantly higher amongst:

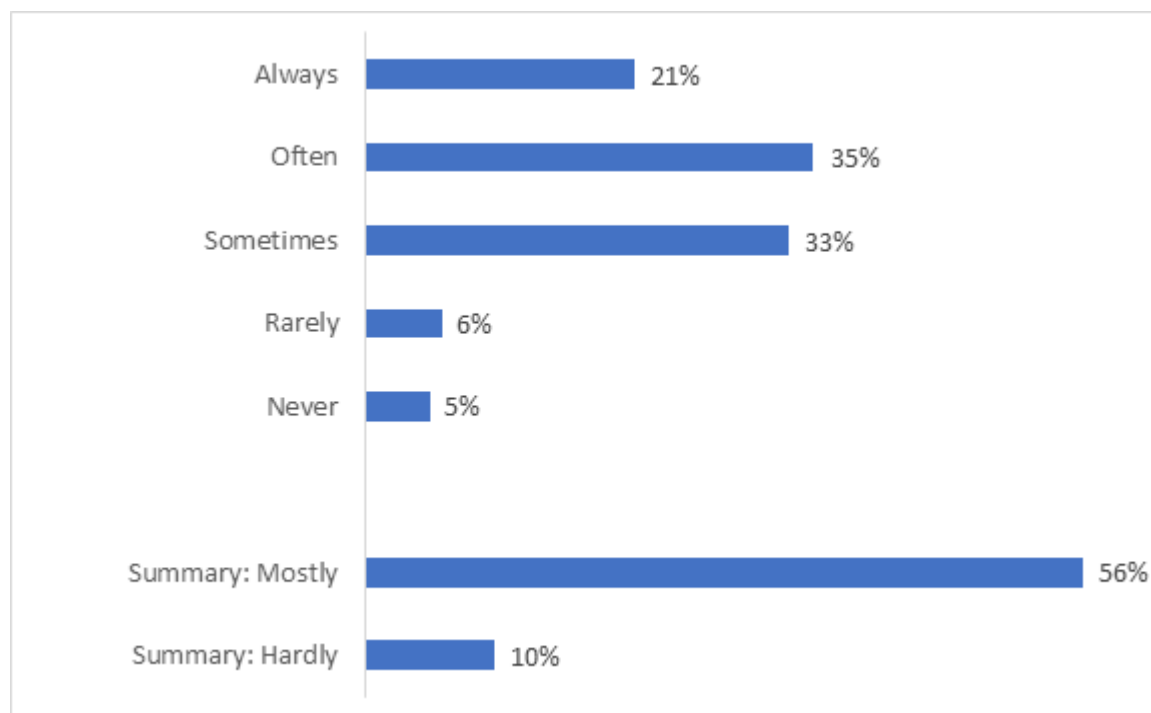
- Respondents who do not have access to the internet at home (91%)
- Those who never use the internet (94%)
- Respondents aged 55+ (77%)
- Female participants (57%)
- Those who are economically inactive (76%)
- Those who completed the telephone or face-to-face survey (92%)

This underscores the importance of considering digital confidence, not just access, when assessing digital exclusion. For the legal sector, this indicates a pressing need to maintain offline routes to information and support, and to ensure services are accessible to those with low digital confidence.

Reliance on Others

Participants were asked how often they rely on others to access online services on their behalf. Over half (56%) said that they always or often relied on others to access online services for them.

Figure 4: Q7. How often do you rely on others to access online services for you? Base n=454



Reliance on family, friends, or community members to access online services is common even amongst those who responded via the online panel (47%), suggesting that even those with some level of digital confidence may lack the self-belief or skills to act independently. This dependence can lead to delays in taking action, feelings of embarrassment or stigma, and significant privacy concerns, particularly when dealing with sensitive legal issues.

These findings underscore an important aspect of digital exclusion: having internet access or basic digital skills does not necessarily mean someone can navigate digital services on their own. For legal services, this reliance raises critical issues around confidentiality, informed consent, and the ability to fully understand or participate in legal processes. It highlights the need for legal providers to ensure alternative, supported access routes are available that do not assume digital independence.

Given that many legal services involve complex and sensitive tasks, such as submitting documents, providing evidence, and communicating with legal professionals, low confidence and reliance on others present serious barriers. Service users may be reluctant to engage with online legal services due to fears of making mistakes, misunderstanding instructions, or not fully grasping the legal implications of their actions.

These patterns of access and reliance provide essential context for understanding how people approach the task of finding and choosing a legal service provider.

Choosing a Service Provider

Most Important vs. Hardest Aspects of Accessing Legal Services Online

Respondents were shown a list of aspects relating to the use of online legal services and asked to select the three they found most important and the three they found most difficult based on their recent experiences of engaging legal service providers.

Figure 5: Q13/1. Please rank these aspects in terms of how important they are to you when using legal services. Q14/1. From the same list, please choose the three that you think are the hardest to do online when using legal services online. Base n=454

Most Important Aspects		Hardest Aspects to Do Online
1	Finding information Participants value the ability to find relevant legal information online, such as guides, templates, or explanations of legal processes. Knowing that the process is secure Security is also a priority, indicating that participants are highly concerned about the confidentiality of their data and the protection of sensitive information during the legal process.	Submitting documents Submitting documents is seen as difficult. This may stem from issues like file size limitations, technical problems, or difficulties in understanding document submission procedures.
2	Communicating with legal professionals Clear communication with professionals is a crucial part of any legal process, as it ensures that clients can share information, ask questions, and receive guidance effectively.	Finding information Although participants deem finding information as the most important task, it is also one of the hardest to do online. This could be due to difficulties in navigating legal websites or finding the right information easily.
3	Knowing that the process is private Privacy concerns are lower than security concerns with participants focusing less on the assurance that their interactions and data remain confidential throughout the legal process	Communicating with legal professionals Communication with legal professionals, while considered an important aspect, is also viewed as difficult online. This may point to challenges such as lack of face-to-face interaction, technical issues with communication tools, or delays in response.

	Most Important Aspects	Hardest Aspects to Do Online
4	Submitting documents The ability to easily upload and submit documents online is also important, showing that participants want convenience and efficiency in the process.	Submitting a defence via an online form For a small but notable proportion of respondents the process of submitting a defence through an online form is also viewed as difficult, which may indicate a lack of user-friendly forms or unclear instructions for submission. Online hearings Online hearings are considered difficult by those who may experience technical issues (e.g., connectivity problems) or the impersonal nature of virtual hearings compared to in-person ones.
5	Finding a potential provider Participants care about finding a legal service provider, but it ranks lower in comparison to the core aspects of communication, security, and information.	Finding a potential provider Finding a legal service provider online is ranked as less difficult, however some respondents do experience challenges in evaluating or choosing between providers in the digital space.
6	Comparing potential providers A lower ranking aspect, indicating that participants might prefer to focus on essential services first, like communication and security, before worrying about provider comparisons.	Comparing potential providers Comparing different providers is seen as difficult by the smallest proportion of respondents, however there are still those for whom there is a lack of transparency or tools that make comparison straightforward. Knowing that the process is secure and private Privacy and security are less of a challenge than other named aspects.
7	Attending online hearings Online hearings rank low, which may suggest that participants do not prioritise the online aspect of hearings compared to other aspects like communication and document handling.	

Most Important Aspects		Hardest Aspects to Do Online
8	Submitting a defence via an online form The fact that this is the lowest ranking aspect may indicate that while necessary, it is not as crucial as direct communication or security concerns. However, the positioning of this aspect may also be influenced by the fact that uploading documents is seen as challenging by many of those digitally excluded. In addition, this process is relatively uncommon and unfamiliar to most people, which may explain why fewer respondents selected it as either important or difficult.	

The findings highlight a mismatch between what users consider most important when accessing legal services online and the aspects they find most difficult to navigate. Participants placed the highest importance on being able to find relevant legal information, communicate effectively with legal professionals, and feel confident that the process is secure. However, many reported significant difficulties with precisely these tasks, especially finding information and communicating with professionals, indicating that current digital systems are not meeting users' needs in these core areas.

This alignment between what matters most and what is hardest suggests that the digital design and delivery of legal services require attention. Tasks that are essential to a successful legal journey, such as communication and sharing key documents, are often undermined by unclear systems, lack of support, and technical barriers.

While this research focuses on digitally excluded individuals, many of the same challenges are likely to be experienced by those who are not digitally excluded. The difficulties of finding the right information and feeling secure and understood are common pain points across the wider population when accessing legal services. This reinforces the view that inclusive design is not only about addressing digital exclusion, it is about improving the overall accessibility, usability, and quality of legal services for everyone.

Having explored participants' priorities and difficulties when selecting a provider, the survey also examined their experiences once they began to use legal services.

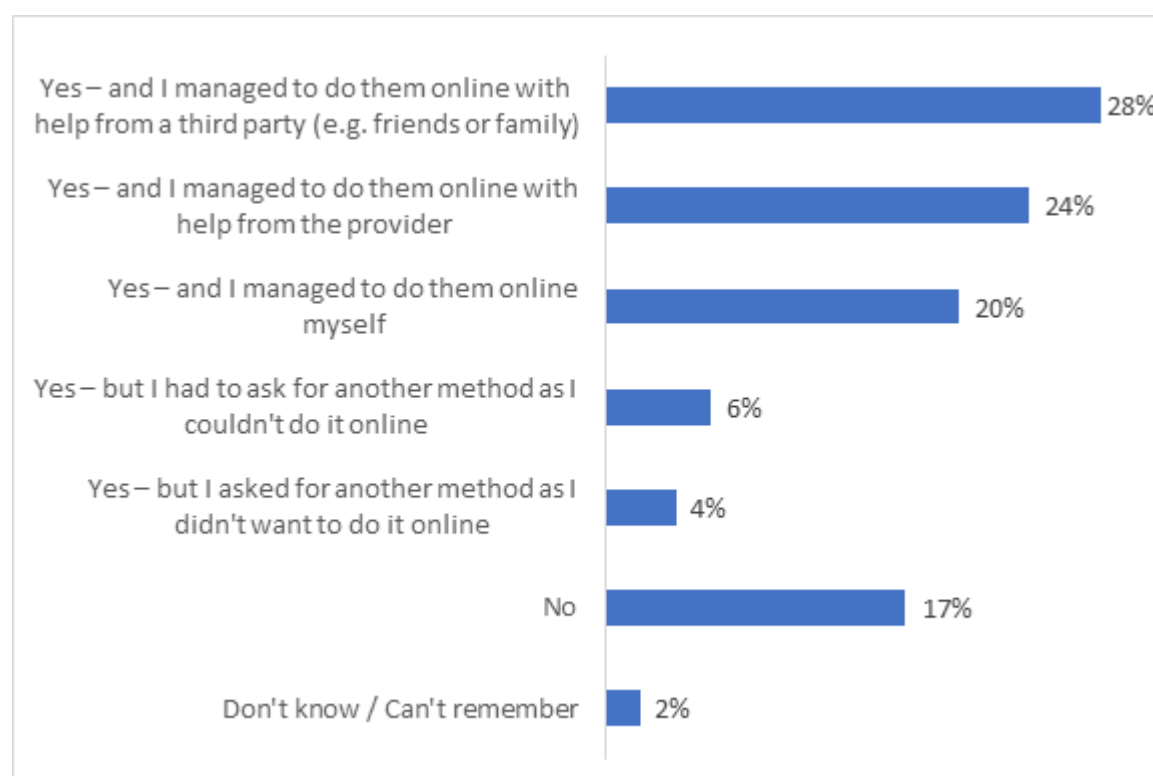
Service Delivery

Using Online Legal Services

Survey respondents were asked whether they had been asked to complete tasks online when using the legal service. This was true for the majority of respondents (82%). Of those asked to complete tasks online, 20% were able to complete those tasks entirely on their own and over half were able to access services with help (28% from friends or family and 24% from the provider). Meanwhile, 10%

asked for an alternative method, either because they were unable (6%) or unwilling (4%) to complete tasks online.

Figure 6: Q15. Were you asked to do things online when using the legal service? Base n=448



Participants dealing with employment law and criminal law were the most likely to be asked to engage with services online, with 100% of respondents in each group reporting this. Similarly high levels were recorded for family law and personal injury (both 99%), consumer rights (98%), and debt and bankruptcy (97%).

Slightly lower, though still very high, rates of online engagement were reported for immigration law (96%), welfare law and housing law (both 95%), and social security law (91%).

The only exception was wills and probate, where just 62% of participants reported being asked to complete any aspect of the service online.

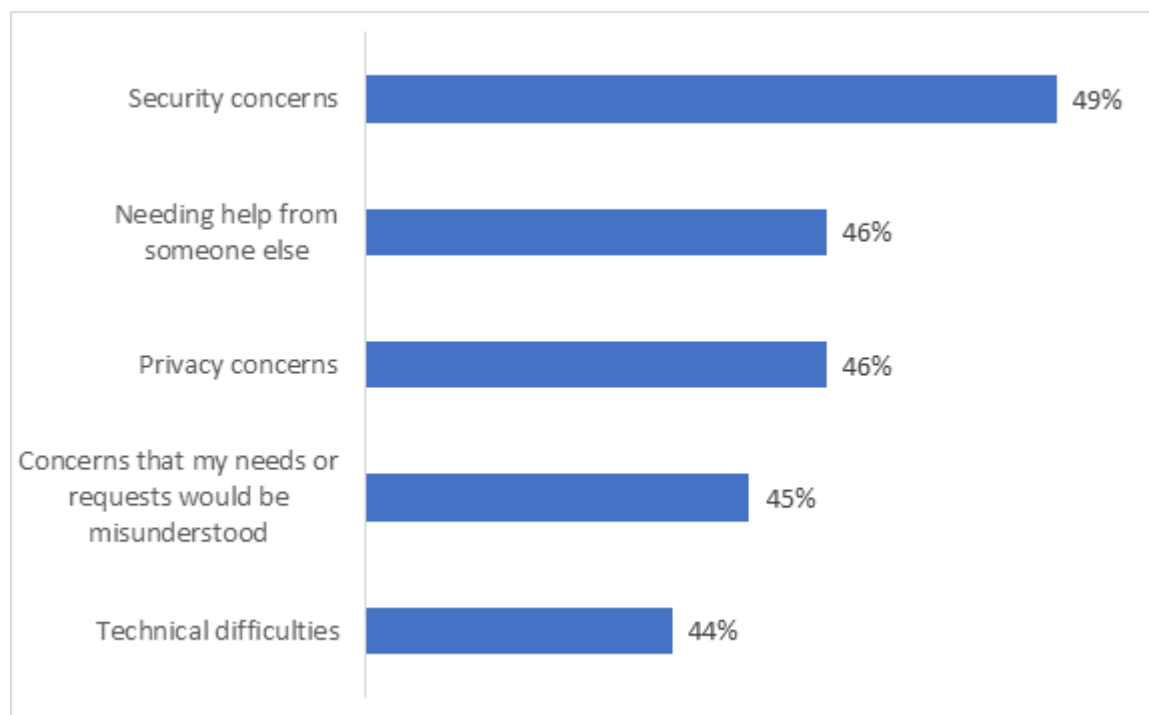
Seventeen percent of respondents were not asked to carry out any tasks online. This figure increased significantly to:

- 59% amongst those who did not have internet access at home (suggesting that access was discussed at the start of the legal process)
- 59% amongst those who rely on others to access online services
- 41% of those aged 55+
- 35% amongst those using a wills or probate legal service
- 31% amongst those who were not confident using the internet for more complicated services

Challenges in Accessing Legal Services Online

Survey respondents were asked about the challenges they faced when completing legal tasks online. A number of difficulties were identified, with the most frequently reported being concerns about security (49%).

Figure 7: Q16. What problems or concerns, if any, did you have with the online aspect of the services? Base, those who had been asked to complete tasks online n=366²



These findings show that both practical and emotional barriers are common when accessing legal services online. Difficulties with technology, concerns about data protection, dependence on others, and fear of being misunderstood all serve to undermine confidence and deter engagement. This underscores the importance of designing legal services that are not only more accessible and user-friendly but also supported by clear offline alternatives for those who continue to face digital barriers.

Help and Support from Legal Service Providers

When asked about the help and support they received from legal service providers, respondents described a wide range of experiences. The types of support offered included:

- **42% of respondents were referred to external support services** These services may include digital literacy training, technical assistance, or legal advice.
- **39% of respondents reported receiving in-person help and support from the provider.**
- **40% of respondents were advised to seek help from a friend or family member.**
- **31% of respondents were offered non-digital alternatives.**

² Note that respondents could select more than one option and so the % figures add to more than 100%

- 6% did not receive any help.

The table below shows how the types of support received varied across different areas of law, highlighting that experiences were not uniform and that some groups were more likely than others to be offered particular forms of help. Figures highlighted in green are significantly above the overall average for that type of support.

These results show clear differences by area of law. For example, respondents dealing with welfare law were much more likely to receive in-person help (52%) than those using wills and probate services (43%), while immigration and personal injury cases showed particularly high rates of referral to external support (57% and 59% respectively).

Figure 8: Q17. What help did the legal service provider give you to solve your concerns or problems?
Base, those who had concerns or problems in relation to online service aspects n=363

	They helped me in person	They gave me different, non-digital options	They referred me to a support service	They suggested that I asked a family member or friend for help
Total	39%	31%	42%	40%
Social Security Law	39%	34%	44%	46%
Welfare Law	52%	41%	51%	49%
Family law	46%	39%	51%	43%
Criminal law	49%	44%	49%	45%
Housing law	51%	42%	37%	51%
Employment law	46%	45%	46%	47%
Immigration law	46%	39%	57%	37%
Personal injury	45%	42%	59%	45%
Wills and probate	43%	42%	41%	43%
Debt and Bankruptcy	49%	35%	52%	40%
Consumer Rights	46%	44%	51%	46%

These findings suggest that while some providers are making efforts to support digitally excluded clients, there remains a significant gap between user needs and current provision. Too often, the responsibility for overcoming digital barriers is passed on to others, either through signposting to external organisations or encouraging individuals to rely on friends and family.

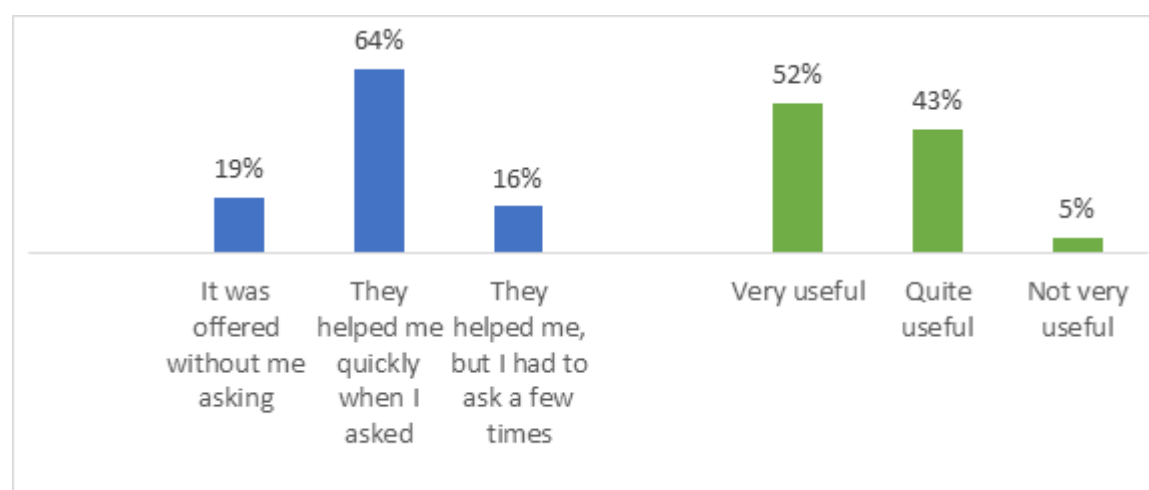
In total, 46% of respondents were referred to an external service and/ or advised to seek informal support. While these approaches may offer some practical assistance, they are no substitute for direct, personalised support from the provider itself.

To ensure equitable access, legal service providers must take a more proactive and accountable role. This includes maintaining offline options such as in-person support and non-digital communication channels and ensuring that support is tailored to individual needs, rather than assuming that digital access is universal or that others will fill the gap.

Ease of Access and Effectiveness of the Support Received

The survey also asked respondents about the ease and usefulness of this support they received in person from the provider.

Figure 9: Q18. How easy was it to get this help? Q19. How useful was this help? Base, those who received support in person from the provider n=141



Only 19% of respondents reported receiving help proactively, with a similar proportion having to ask multiple times before support was provided.

Given that most participants found the support they eventually received to be valuable, this highlights the importance of legal service providers adopting a more proactive approach. Anticipating and offering support early, particularly to those showing signs of difficulty, could make a significant difference in improving access, reducing frustration, and ensuring that digitally excluded individuals are not left behind.

Providing Offline Alternatives

Participants were asked how important it is for providers to offer offline alternatives. The majority (88%) said that it is important.

- **58%** of respondents felt that it is Very important
- **31%** Quite important
- **7%** Not very important
- **3%** Not needed

These results reflect a clear message: while digital service delivery is expanding, there remains an expectation of accessible, non-digital routes, particularly for those who lack confidence, skills, or resources to engage online. For legal service providers and regulators, this underlines the importance of designing inclusive services that do not assume universal digital capability and that continue to prioritise choice, accessibility, and support for those most at risk of exclusion.

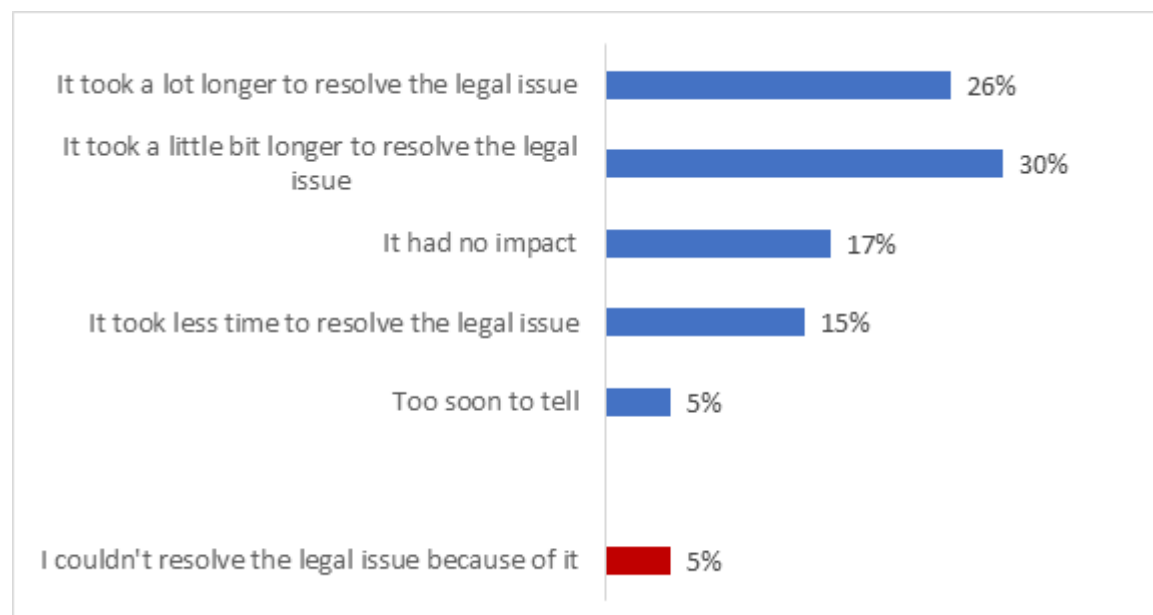
Time and Outcomes in Digital Legal Services

Respondents were asked about whether undertaking elements online impacted on the time it took to resolve legal issues. 15% said that it helped to reduce the time taken to resolve the issue, indicating that when used properly digital tools can result in the desired effect.

However, the results reveal that for over half (56%) of digitally excluded clients, they felt that the online elements of the service increased the time it took to resolve the issue. This is concerning as one of the key purposes of incorporating digital technology in service delivery is to save time. These increasing timelines are not only to the detriment of clients but will also have an adverse effect on service providers.

It is also concerning that 5% felt that they could not resolve the legal issue key issues due to the online requirement.

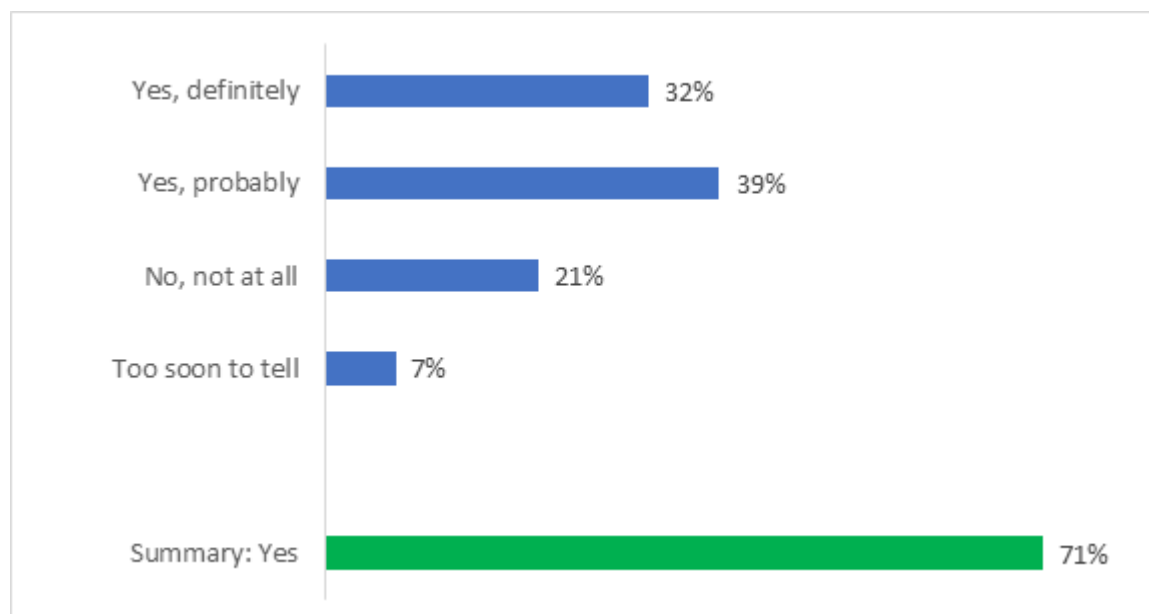
Figure 10: Q20. Did doing things online make it take longer to resolve your legal issue? Base n=355



Legal Outcomes

Respondents were asked whether using online services had any impact on the outcome of their case.

Figure 11: Q21. Do you think you got a better legal outcome because you did things online? Base n=333



The majority (**71%**) believed that they had achieved a better legal outcome because they did things online (32% definitely and 39% probably) with 21% saying that using online services had no benefit.

The data also shows that while digital services do not always provide quicker resolutions, they can still result in better outcomes for a significant portion of users. However, this suggests that legal service providers should focus on reducing delays in digital processes to enhance the user experience and reduce the barriers to accessing justice in a timely manner, particularly given the potentially high stakes nature of many of the legal issues that our survey sample were navigating.

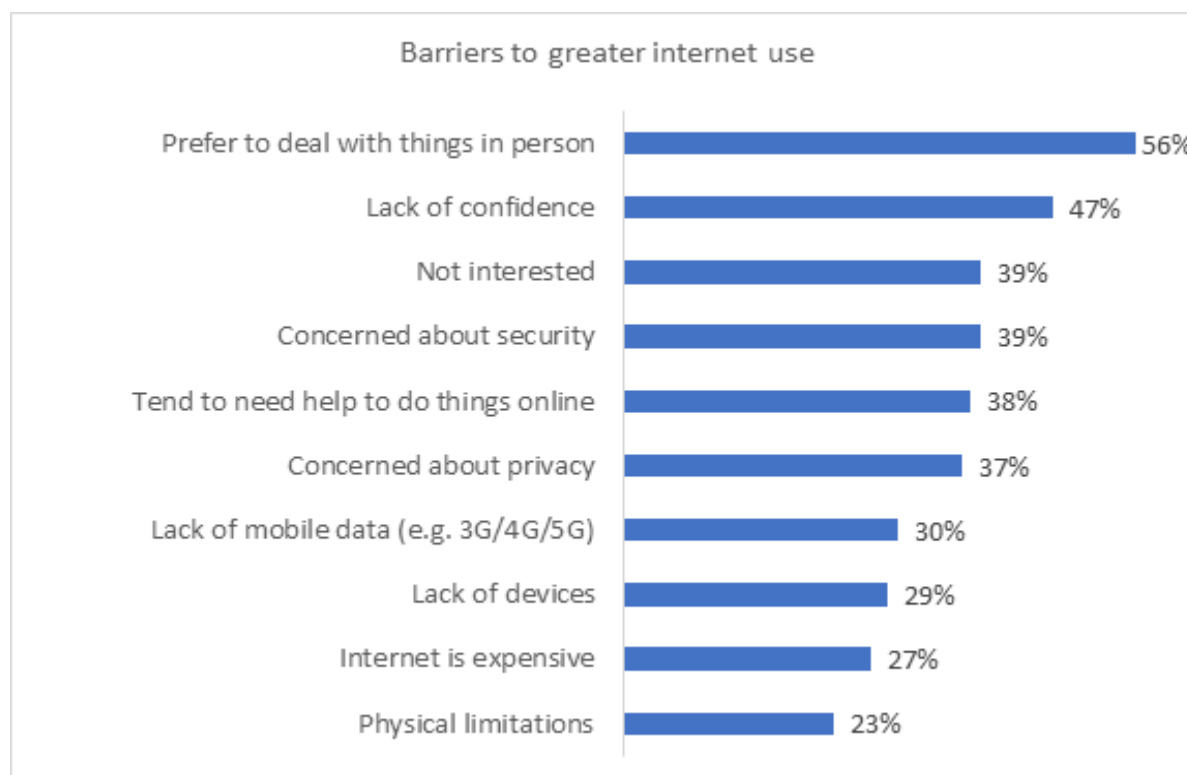
While these results show that digital services can in some cases improve outcomes, participants also pointed to a range of barriers that limited or undermined their use of online legal services.

Key Issues and Barriers

Barriers to Greater Internet Usage

There are numerous barriers preventing individuals from using the internet more frequently.

Figure 12: Q3. What stops you from using the internet more often? Base: Respondents who use the internet on a less than daily bases n=171³



The percentages add to more than 100% because participants were able to select multiple responses. This suggests that many individuals face more than one barrier, and that digital exclusion is often the result of a combination of interrelated challenges rather than a single issue, reinforcing the complexity of digital exclusion.

A large proportion of respondents (56%) simply prefer face-to-face interaction and 39% are disinterested in online services, however many experience more structural challenges. Almost half (47%) report low confidence and 38% need help, pointing to widespread digital literacy issues.

Concerns around privacy and online security also act as deterrents, particularly where legal matters are involved. Additionally, affordability and access remain key obstacles: some respondents are limited by the cost of internet services, a lack of suitable devices, or insufficient mobile data. Physical limitations further compound these challenges for some individuals. Together, these findings underline the importance of recognising digital exclusion as a multi-dimensional issue that requires holistic, inclusive responses, particularly in the legal sector where access to services is critical.

³ Note that respondents could select more than one barrier and so the % figures add to more than 100%

Coping Mechanisms

Digitally excluded individuals employ several strategies to overcome barriers:

Figure 13: Q 9. Which, if any, of these solutions have you used to overcome problems accessing services online? n=454

1. Social Support Networks:

Family and friends are the primary source of support for accessing online services, with 70% of respondents relying on them. While this can be helpful in the short term, it is not always appropriate for complex or sensitive legal matters and may not be a reliable or sustainable form of support over time. Some groups are particularly vulnerable to the withdrawal or absence of this kind of help. Those who are not confident using the internet for more complicated services, respondents aged 55 and over, and those who are economically inactive are all significantly more likely than the average to depend on support from friends or family, meaning that any loss of this informal support network would have a disproportionate impact on their ability to access legal services. It also means they may have to choose between revealing personal or confidential details to family members, or not dealing/dealing less effectively with a legal issue.

2. Community Resources:

Libraries and community hubs (30%), free public Wi-Fi (35%) and community support services (33%) play a crucial role, particularly for those lacking internet access or devices. However, these settings may not provide the confidentiality needed for sensitive legal matters.

3. Government and Non-Profit Support:

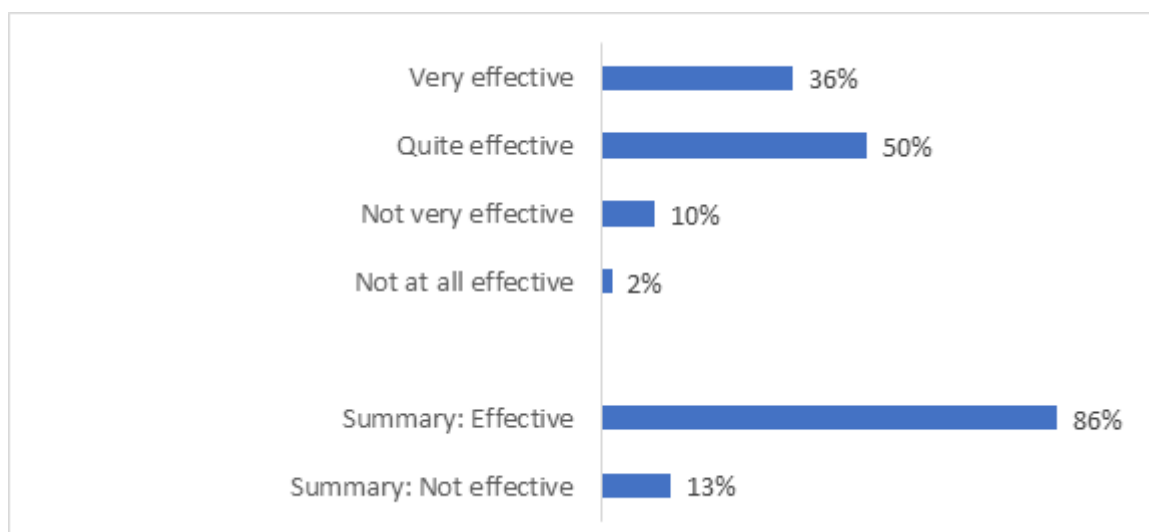
Government programs (21%) are less commonly used, suggesting potential gaps in awareness, suitability or availability. This also links to comments made by stakeholders outlined earlier, around reductions in funding or funding only be short-term or localised in nature.

These findings indicate a need for more tailored, confidential, and accessible forms of digital support within the legal services sector, particularly for those facing multiple forms of exclusion.

Effectiveness of Support Solutions

The support strategies used by digitally excluded individuals are generally viewed as effective, with **86%** of respondents rating them as either very (36%) or quite (50%) effective.

Figure 14: Q10. How effective were these solutions? n=409



This indicates that informal and community-based support can play a meaningful role in helping people overcome digital barriers.

However, the fact that 13% of respondents found these solutions ineffective suggests that existing support does not always meet users' needs, particularly in the context of accessing legal services, where timeliness, accuracy, and confidentiality are critical.

There is a clear opportunity for legal service providers to engage more proactively with support networks, to strengthen their capacity and ensure individuals receive the right support at the right time. This could involve building formal partnerships with community organisations, providing training or resources to frontline staff in libraries or advice centres, and signposting clients to trusted sources of digital help in a consistent and transparent way. By working collaboratively with these networks, providers can help make sure that support is reliable, confidential, and better aligned with the specific needs of those navigating legal issues.

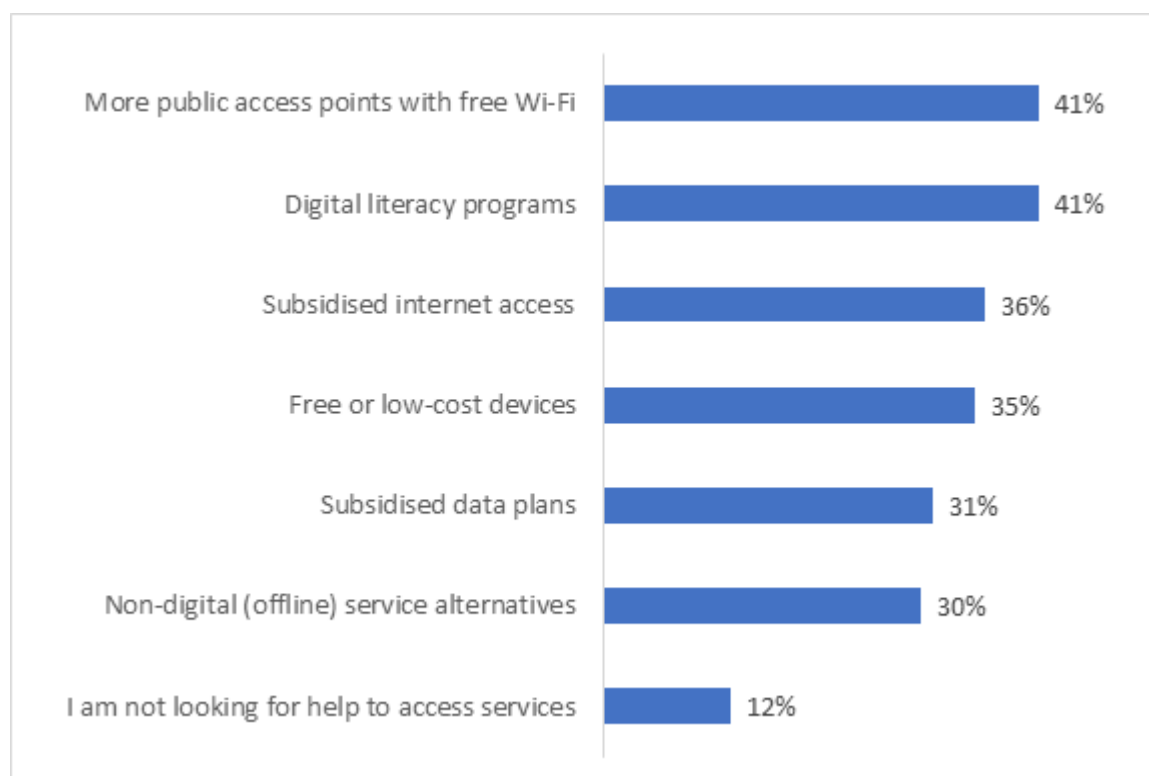
Building on these accounts of barriers and coping strategies, participants also shared what would make it easier for them to access legal services in the future.

Recommendations from Participants

Support Needs and Preferences

When respondents were asked what would help them access services online, several important trends emerged. Individuals who face digital exclusion are not only looking for technical support but also seeking alternative methods of engagement with legal services.

Figure 15: Q11. What would help you to access services online? Base n=454⁴



Digitally excluded individuals are seeking both improved digital access and continued availability of non-digital alternatives. While many are open to developing their digital skills there is also a clear need for practical infrastructure and financial support.

Public access points with free Wi-Fi, subsidised internet, data plans and affordable devices were all highlighted as critical enablers for online engagement, reflecting the economic barriers faced by many.

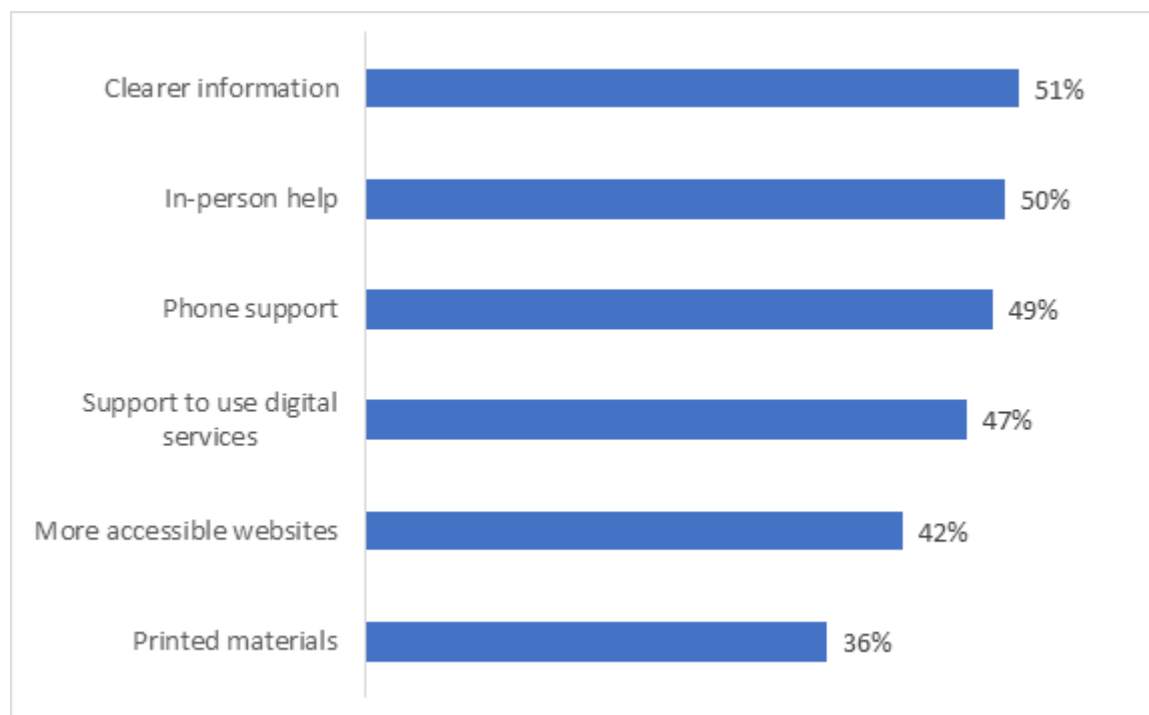
However, the call for offline service options by over a quarter of respondents underscores that digital solutions alone are not sufficient. Legal service providers and policymakers must therefore adopt a dual approach: investing in digital inclusion initiatives while ensuring that accessible, high-quality offline routes remain available for those who cannot or choose not to engage online.

⁴ Note that respondents could select more than one support option and so the % figures add to more than 100%

Preferred Support Options

Respondents who had been asked to complete tasks online as part of their legal issue were asked what type of support they would find most helpful in the future.

Figure 16: Q22. What type of support would you find most helpful in the future? Base, those who had been asked to complete legal tasks online n=363⁵



There is a strong and diverse demand for support that goes beyond digital access, underscoring the importance of clear, inclusive, and flexible service delivery. Respondents expressed a need for clearer information, particularly regarding complex legal terminology and procedures, suggesting that confusion, rather than technology alone, can be a significant barrier to engagement.

In-person and telephone support are also widely valued, reinforcing the need to maintain human-led options within legal service provision. At the same time, many participants called for support in using digital platforms, reflecting that access to technology must be paired with meaningful guidance to be effective. Calls for more accessible website design point to the role that user-friendly, inclusive digital services can play in reducing dependence on others.

Finally, the demand for printed materials highlights the ongoing relevance of traditional formats, especially for individuals without reliable internet access or who prefer to process information offline.

The data underscores the importance of a hybrid approach, combining digital enhancements with offline alternatives to meet diverse needs. Effective integration of these support mechanisms can empower users, enhance accessibility, and ensure equitable access to legal services for digitally excluded populations.

⁵ Note that respondents could select more than one option and so the % figures add to more than 100%

Taken together, these preferences highlight what good looks like from the perspective of service users. The following section sets out how providers can act on these findings.

Recommendations for Service Providers

The survey findings point to several clear actions for legal service providers. As set out earlier in the sections on service delivery, participants emphasised the importance of in-person help, offline alternatives, and timely, proactive support. While some providers are already offering these, respondents described a lack of consistency and often felt the responsibility for overcoming digital barriers was shifted onto them or their families.

Suggestions for service providers include:

- Service providers should maintain and improve offline routes, including telephone, paper-based and face-to-face options. The expectation of non-digital access was voiced strongly across the survey, reflecting the reality that many clients either cannot or do not wish to engage online.
- Service providers should take a proactive approach to offering help. Only a small proportion of respondents reported receiving help without asking for it, yet most found the support they eventually received to be valuable. Anticipating and offering assistance early would reduce frustration and help ensure that digitally excluded clients are not left behind.
- Service providers should focus on offering tailored support rather than passing responsibility to external organisations or to clients' family and friends. While referrals and informal help can be useful, they are no substitute for direct, personalised support from the provider itself. Ensuring that assistance is confidential, reliable and responsive is central to inclusive service delivery.

These steps represent practical, achievable changes that providers can adopt to improve access for digitally excluded clients and strengthen trust in the legal services they deliver.

While service providers have a direct responsibility to ensure that clients can access support, the survey findings also highlight a wider role for regulators.

Recommendations for Regulators

Participants felt that regulators should set the tone for inclusion across the sector by ensuring minimum expectations are met, monitoring accessibility, and requiring providers to offer non-digital alternatives where needed.

The Role of Regulators in Supporting Digitally Excluded Individuals

Participants feel that regulators can play an important part in making certain that legal services are inclusive and accessible, particularly for individuals who are digitally excluded or prefer not to use online services. When asked to prioritise a list of actions regulators could take to help individuals who are digitally excluded or prefer not to access services online, respondents focused on:

1. Ensuring Services Are Accessible for All Backgrounds and Situations - Most important (noted by 28%)

Respondents agreed that regulators should ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background or current situation, can access legal services easily. This suggests a strong preference for universal service accessibility, with an emphasis on inclusivity. Participants see this as a critical role for regulators to play in overcoming digital exclusion, ensuring that no one is left behind simply because they lack the digital tools or skills to access services online.

2. Mandating Non-Digital Alternatives - 2nd most important (noted by 19%)

Participants believed that regulators should require legal service providers to offer non-digital alternatives for individuals who are unable or unwilling to engage with online services. This finding aligns with earlier responses in which many participants expressed a preference for offline methods, such as face-to-face communication or phone support. This suggests that the provision of digital alternatives should be complemented by offline channels to ensure full inclusivity.

3. Requiring Providers to Tailor Services to Individual Needs - 3rd most important (noted by 16%)

Respondents felt that legal service providers should be required to offer services tailored to the specific needs of individuals, particularly those who face barriers to using online services. This could involve providing flexible communication channels (e.g., phone support, in-person consultations), as well as the option for non-digital alternatives. There was a clear sentiment that one-size-fits-all approaches, particularly in the digital realm, are insufficient and fail to accommodate those with specific access issues.

4. Conducting Regular Assessments of Service Accessibility (10%), Introducing a Levy to Support Digital Accessibility (9%) and Creating Awareness Campaigns (9%) – lower importance

Respondents also expressed a desire for regular assessments of how accessible legal services are for digitally excluded individuals. This could involve regulators conducting audits or reviews of legal service providers' digital accessibility and identifying gaps that might hinder those with limited digital skills or access. Regular assessments would help to identify emerging issues and ensure that services remain aligned with the needs of all users, particularly the digitally excluded.

Some respondents felt that regulators should focus on levies or fees imposed on legal service providers to fund initiatives aimed at improving digital accessibility. This could include the development of more user-friendly websites, training programs for service users, or resources that provide digital access in underserved communities. The use of levies could also encourage providers to invest in accessibility technologies and processes, knowing they would have financial support for doing so.

Respondents recommended that regulators should run awareness campaigns to highlight the issue of digital exclusion and promote solutions. These campaigns could target both legal service providers and consumers, raising awareness about the availability of alternative services, digital literacy programs, and support resources for those who need them. By raising awareness, regulators could help bridge the knowledge gap and ensure that more people are aware of the options available to them, reducing the risk of exclusion from legal services.

5. Providing Incentives for Inclusive Service Design - Least important (noted by 6%)

The least important aspect in the views of participants is for regulators to create incentives for legal service providers to design more inclusive services. This could include offering tax breaks, certification, or public recognition for firms that excel at designing services that are accessible to all, regardless of digital ability. These incentives could help encourage providers to prioritise inclusivity in their service offerings.

Overall, the results underscore the need for regulators to take a proactive and multi-faceted approach to address digital exclusion in legal services, ensuring that accessibility is embedded as a core principle across the sector.

Qualitative interviews

To complement the quantitative findings and stakeholder insights, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals identified as digitally excluded. The aim of this qualitative phase was to explore in greater detail how digital exclusion affects people's ability to access and engage with legal services.

Qualitative interviews were included as while the quantitative survey provided broad patterns and prevalence data, qualitative interviews provides richer insight into how digital exclusion is experienced in practice. One-to-one interviews were chosen over focus groups to ensure that participants felt comfortable discussing personal or sensitive legal matters, particularly important given that many were navigating distressing life events such as bereavement, debt, or family breakdown. This format also allowed for greater flexibility and support, accommodating communication preferences and access needs.

Recruitment and Sample

Participants were recruited from the wider survey sample. Ten were recruited from the online panel and 20 from the telephone interviews, providing some diversity in terms of digital confidence and access. A profile of participants is included in the Appendix.

The Interviews Explored:

- Establishing brief details of the legal case
- Choosing a provider
- Views on the move to digital services generally, and within legal services
- Help and support received/ desired
- Thoughts on the role of Regulators

The topic guide was developed in collaboration with the BSB, CRL, CLC, and ICAEW and informed by early survey findings. It was designed to be flexible and responsive, allowing participants to raise issues that were important to them. Across the interviews, strong themes emerged about the types of barriers people faced, what good service looked like, and the need for legal services to offer real choice and human support. A copy of the guide is included in the Appendix.

Qualitative Data Insights

Pre-existing Challenges

In most cases, participants were already in distressing or pressured circumstances when legal issues arose, and the need to navigate these under the added burden of digital exclusion only compounded their stress. One participant, who had recently dealt with a probate issue following the death of a parent, explained:

"It was an emotional time anyway, and trying to figure out the legal stuff online was just impossible for me. I didn't know what to click on, or who to ask. I felt completely lost."

Others described a broader set of challenges that existed well before digital tools became common in legal services. Participants frequently cited difficulties including unclear communication, intimidating

legal language, slow or inconsistent service, and barriers to accessing reliable professionals. These problems shaped their experiences and perceptions of legal services, with digitisation often amplifying rather than creating them.

Several participants had little or no prior experience of using legal services and felt unprepared when faced with legal processes. They described uncertainty around what steps to take, what documentation was needed, and how decisions would be made. Where digital systems were involved, this uncertainty often deepened.

"I'm not great with forms anyway, but when they're online, and they don't explain what anything means, you just sit there staring at it. I gave up a few times before I even started".

For many, barriers were practical as well as emotional. Some lived in rural or semi-rural areas where public transport was limited and broadband connectivity unreliable. For these participants, exclusion was both digital and geographic, they were unable to go online for help and also struggled to reach legal services in person.

"I can't walk very far. The parking isn't very good in the local area where my bank is, so that wasn't really an option".

Health conditions, disabilities, or caring responsibilities also restricted participants' ability to attend in-person appointments yet they did not feel supported by online alternatives. One participant, who was the sole carer for a disabled family member, noted:

"The solicitor said I could upload documents at any time, but I don't even have a proper computer. I'm caring all day and night. I needed someone to talk to, not an email."

Several participants had past experiences with legal professionals that left them feeling dismissed, overwhelmed, or powerless. One described trying to have her wishes respected during a will-writing appointment:

"She didn't want me to put in the will what I wanted to put in... I thought, it's none of your business what I'm putting in my will. You are there to write what I want".

Others reflected on how difficult it had been to even identify a trustworthy provider, especially when previous firms had shut down or offered poor service.

"We were trying to find our title deeds to the house... and the solicitor we'd used had retired without telling anyone".

Another described the difficulty of starting from scratch:

"I don't have a solicitor, so I was looking for a local solicitor, which would've been my next move if this hadn't worked out"

Legal terminology was another consistent obstacle, whether encountered in person or online. Many found legal documents confusing and inaccessible.

"I think sometimes maybe with the jargon or the legal... it's quite important that it's plain in everyday language. Because some of the words, I don't understand what they mean, and that puts me off".

What Good Service Looks Like Across all Formats

Following their accounts of barriers to legal services, from complexity to poor communication and lack of support, participants were clear about what they did want from a legal service. Across all interviews, there was a strong and consistent message: the qualities that matter most to people when engaging with legal services are universal, regardless of how those services are delivered.

Whether a service was provided in person, by phone, or online, participants emphasised the importance of trust, respect, empathy, clarity, and responsiveness. These were not seen as "nice-to-haves," but as core expectations, especially for people who may already be in distress or unfamiliar with legal processes.

Trust was central to how participants judged their experience. They wanted to feel confident that their legal service provider understood the issue, was acting in their best interests, and had the competence to handle the matter correctly. Trust was often built early in the process, through clear explanations, follow-through on commitments, and signs that the legal service provider was listening.

"I had a person who I knew who they were. If I rang the office and I was like, 'Can I please speak with XXX?'... I knew that they were managing my case."

In contrast, when participants felt rushed, dismissed, or not taken seriously, trust was quickly lost, regardless of whether the interaction was face-to-face or online.

Respect was equally important. Participants wanted to be treated with dignity and not made to feel inadequate for struggling with legal language, procedures, or digital tools. Several recalled experiences where they felt patronised or ignored because they didn't understand a term or couldn't complete a task online.

"Some places deal like, I'm above you sort of thing, especially barristers... but you need to be treated the same. That's what the lady solicitor gave me; she treated me the same as an equal."

In contrast, where providers offered to explain things without judgement, or asked how the client preferred to proceed, participants felt respected and included.

Empathy featured prominently in discussions about what good service looked like. Legal issues often arise in times of emotional stress, such as bereavement, relationship breakdown, or health decline, and participants appreciated providers who acknowledged this.

"Your solicitor being there in-person, it's your advocate... it's also that emotional compassion of, 'Well, I'm here for you.'"

"These are things no one really wants to go through, and that face-to-face compassion is important."

Professionals who took a calm, reassuring tone, allowed time for questions, or followed up with a courtesy call were remembered positively.

Clarity was another priority. Participants wanted information presented in plain language, free from jargon, and structured in a way that made it clear what they needed to do. Whether the message was delivered in a letter, an email, or over the phone, it needed to be understandable.

"You're sitting there thinking, 'Am I even doing this right?'"

"They assume you know what to do. But it's not clear. I just didn't know how to start."

Several participants said they had received legal correspondence that they "didn't know what to do with," or forms they "just stared at," unsure of how to begin. When instructions were clear and broken into manageable steps, participants felt more confident and less stressed.

Finally, **responsiveness**, being able to ask questions, check progress, or correct misunderstandings, was seen as essential. Long gaps with no updates or being directed to portals or voicemails with no human follow-up, left participants feeling ignored.

"They phoned me to explain things rather than just emailing. That made a big difference."

"Even just to know that someone is still acting on your case... rather than just getting a random email that comes through on a random day."

Conversely, prompt replies, confirmation that documents had been received, or even just knowing there was someone to call if needed made a significant difference to their experience.

These values cut across delivery modes. Participants did not dismiss digital tools outright, but they were clear that technology must not replace human connection and basic service principles. It was not the channel that mattered most, it was the quality of the interaction.

Digital as the Only Route

Another recurring theme across the qualitative interviews was that digital systems were often not experienced as an option, but as the only available route.

Many participants described how digital tools dominated the early stages of accessing legal services, from booking appointments to completing forms or uploading documents, often without the offer of offline options. For some, this created immediate difficulty. Participants spoke of receiving online booking links they did not know how to use or being directed to websites or email addresses when they tried to ask for help by phone. These were not isolated technical issues; they reflected a broader sense that the systems had not been designed with people like them in mind.

"You had to go online, that was it. There wasn't a choice of doing it another way."

"They just kept sending me links. I didn't know what to do with them... there wasn't any explanation, no help."

One respondent described calling for help only to reach a voicemail, saying the experience felt like “the door was closed.”

Even those who were willing to engage online found the tools unintuitive. Drop-down menus, login portals, and requests for scanned documents left many feeling overwhelmed or excluded. For people without digital literacy or equipment, tasks such as uploading ID or providing evidence became near impossible.

"It wouldn't let me go to the next page because I hadn't uploaded something. But I didn't know what I was supposed to upload."

One participant explained that being told to “just scan and send” a document meant nothing to them; they had no scanner, no computer, and no idea how to begin.

In response, many relied on others, mainly family members including their children, to carry out digital tasks on their behalf. While this support was appreciated, it also raised concerns about privacy and dignity. Several participants shared that they did not feel comfortable involving others in personal legal matters but felt they had “no choice.”

"I had to get my son to do the whole thing. I didn't want to, but I didn't have a choice."

"I didn't want my daughter knowing everything. But I couldn't do it myself, so I had to ask her."

This loss of autonomy was particularly painful for older participants and those who had previously managed their own affairs. It contributed to feelings of helplessness, frustration, and in some cases, withdrawal. A small number of participants gave up on their legal tasks altogether, not due to lack of motivation, but because the systems felt too difficult and no alternatives were offered.

"In the end, I just left it. I couldn't get through the forms and no one would help me."

For those living with long-term health conditions, mobility challenges, or caring responsibilities, digital-only services presented additional burdens. These participants were not necessarily unwilling to use online systems, but their circumstances made it impractical.

"As a carer I don't have time to be faffing with portals and uploads. I need to talk to someone."

"I've got arthritis, typing in long reference numbers on my phone was a nightmare."

In many cases, digital exclusion was about more than technology. Participants were often navigating legal issues while also dealing with grief, debt, or personal crisis. What they needed was flexibility, reassurance, and support, a human connection that could help guide them through.

A small number of participants did encounter providers who offered a more flexible approach, such as sending both email and paper copies of documents or providing updates by phone. These examples were valued and made a clear difference. However, they were dependent on the discretion of individual staff rather than embedded in service design.

"They sent me stuff by email but also through the post. That really helped because sometimes I'd miss things online."

"They phoned me to explain things rather than just emailing. That made a big difference."

Choosing a Provider

For most participants, the idea of choosing a legal service provider was less about making an informed decision and more about finding someone who could help. In many cases, participants had no real choice. Providers were selected based on availability, proximity, a name given by a trusted contact, or because no alternatives were known or accessible. The process rarely involved comparison or deliberation, and participants frequently relied on others to direct them toward a service.

Very few participants actively compared multiple providers or conducted online research. This was especially common among those with limited digital access or confidence but also reflected wider patterns that extend beyond digital exclusion. Even among the general population, people tend not to compare legal providers in the same way they might compare utilities or retail products. For the participants in this study, the challenge was even more acute: they were often unsure what kind of legal support they needed, what to look for in a provider, or how to judge whether a service was appropriate. The result was that most went with the first provider they were directed to or were already familiar with.

Some participants found their provider through informal recommendations, from friends, neighbours, or family members. Others were signposted by support workers or external agencies, particularly in housing, health, or social care contexts. In these situations, the participant did not go through a selection process at all. Instead, a provider was named, an appointment was made, and the participant followed through.

"My support worker sorted it. She said they were good with this kind of thing. I didn't ask questions; I just went with it."

In several cases, adult children or younger relatives conducted the search and booked appointments on behalf of the participant. This was often necessary due to digital barriers, but it also reduced the participant's own visibility and sense of control over the process.

"My son found someone online and booked it all in. I didn't see anything, just turned up when he told me. I had to trust him."

"I had to get my daughter to do everything online. But I didn't want her to know all the details. I just had no choice."

Even participants who did attempt to look for a provider online often found the experience overwhelming. Websites were difficult to navigate, full of jargon, and rarely offered clear comparisons between firms. Many struggled to tell whether providers were reputable or affordable.

"There were loads of results when I searched, but I didn't know what any of it meant. They all looked the same. I was scared of picking the wrong one."

"I didn't even know what kind of lawyer I needed. It was hard to search when you don't know the right words to use."

In some cases, participants tried to reach out by phone, only to be met with voicemail instructions directing them back to online booking systems or digital forms, a cycle they could not break.

“I rang a few places and got no answer, just told to go online and fill out a form. I can’t do that. So I had to wait until I could get help.”

As a result of these barriers, many participants returned to providers they had used previously, even if the service wasn’t a perfect fit. Familiarity and predictability were more valuable than attempting to start again.

“I used the same solicitor I had years ago, even though it wasn’t exactly their area. I just didn’t want to go through it all again.”

A small number of participants did engage in some form of comparison, usually where they were digitally capable or had experience in similar services. In these cases, people looked for reviews on websites like Trustpilot, sought out firm size or credentials, or made assessments based on phone calls. However, even among this group, the most important factor was often interpersonal, whether the legal service provider sounded approachable, whether things were explained clearly, and whether the participant felt they could trust the person they were speaking to.

The idea of “choice” in this context was largely theoretical. For many, the combination of digital barriers, time pressure, emotional stress, and lack of information meant that choosing a provider was not an empowered decision but a reactive one. Few felt they had enough knowledge, resources, or support to judge whether they had received a good service.

“They were fine, but I have no idea if I could have got something better. It’s not like I had any way of checking.”

“It seemed like a lot of money, but I didn’t want to make a fuss. I thought maybe they always cost that much.”

General Views on Digitalisation

Participants held mixed views about the growing role of digital technology in legal services, shaped by their personal experiences, digital confidence, and broader attitudes toward digitalisation across sectors. For many, digital tools were not inherently problematic, but the shift toward making them the default, and often the only available option, was experienced as isolating, anxiety-inducing, and at odds with how they wanted to engage.

When asked about digitalisation more broadly in areas such as banking, healthcare, or retail, participants frequently described feeling excluded, left behind, or anxious and several reflected on the speed of change.

“Everything’s online now, and if you don’t keep up, you’re forgotten. That’s how it feels. You just don’t exist anymore.”

This sense of being “out of step” was common, particularly among older participants and those living alone. It was not just about skills or confidence, but about the loss of more familiar, human ways of interacting with services.

Many participants had adapted to certain forms of digital communication, such as using email, messaging apps, or browsing the internet, but often only for basic tasks. Many reported that they could “do bits and pieces,” but anything complex felt overwhelming or stressful.

"I can do bits and pieces on my phone, but anything complicated, forget it. I just leave it or ask someone else. It's stressful."

For those without nearby support, digital tools created barriers that could not be navigated alone.

The challenges were not only technical but also financial. A number of participants described being on pay-as-you-go data plans, lacking home broadband, or relying on older devices that were slow, unreliable, or shared with others.

"My internet is patchy at best. Sometimes I use it, sometimes I just give up. I can't afford to upgrade all the time."

This added a layer of insecurity and unpredictability to their interactions with digital systems, not because they lacked motivation, but because the infrastructure simply wasn't there to support consistent use.

Even those with some digital access and experience expressed concerns about the suitability of online systems for legal matters. Legal issues were often described as complex, sensitive, and stressful and participants wanted the reassurance of a human conversation. For many, trust was not something that could be established through a website or automated form. They wanted to know who they were dealing with, to hear a voice on the phone, and to feel that their situation was understood.

Participants drew a strong distinction between using the internet for casual or entertainment purposes and using it for important services. While several said they used digital tools to browse the news, watch videos, or stay in touch with family, they did not equate this with being "digitally confident" in a service setting. In fact, the assumption that they were digitally capable, simply because they owned a smartphone or could use email, was a source of frustration. Many had learned to use technology in a piecemeal way, often through trial and error, and still struggled when systems were not intuitive or forgiving.

"Just because I'm on Facebook doesn't mean I can handle legal stuff online."

The design of legal websites and digital portals was also raised as a concern. Participants described these platforms as cluttered, filled with jargon, or difficult to navigate. Drop-down menus, multi-step forms, and confusing terminology made it hard to complete tasks independently. This was particularly difficult for those dealing with grief, health conditions, or other personal challenges, circumstances in which cognitive overload was already high, and confidence was low.

"I couldn't even find the form they were talking about, let alone fill it in right."

Despite these concerns, a minority of participants spoke positively about certain digital features, particularly where these saved time or allowed for flexibility. Some appreciated being able to receive documents by email, review materials at home, or track the progress of a case without having to travel. However, even in these examples, participants emphasised the importance of choice. They wanted to be able to opt for digital tools, not be forced into using them. The most frustration came from being told that digital was the only route available.

"Getting updates by email was useful. But I still wanted the option to call someone when I needed to."

Views on Digitalisation in Legal Services

Concerns about digitalisation became sharper and more specific when participants spoke about legal services. Across the board, there was a strong belief that legal matters are different from other areas of life, they are often complex, emotionally charged, and carry significant consequences. As such, many participants felt that legal services should not be handled entirely online. For those who lacked digital confidence or familiarity with legal language, the idea of navigating legal processes through websites or portals was not just difficult, but inappropriate.

Participants frequently emphasised that legal issues required clarity, reassurance, and the ability to ask questions in real time. Many said they wanted to “sit down with someone” to make sure they understood what was happening, what was expected of them, and what the implications might be.

“With legal stuff, you want to be sure. You want to sit down with someone who can explain it, not guess your way through a website.”

Even where participants were open to using digital tools, they were critical of the way these had been designed and implemented. Online legal services were often described as impersonal, difficult to navigate, and lacking the flexibility or support that many users needed. Portals, forms, and email-based communication might work well for confident users, but felt alienating or opaque to others.

“It probably works well for people who know what they’re doing. But for people like me, it’s just a wall.”

Several participants recalled struggling with seemingly basic digital tasks such as uploading documents, using an online booking system, or accessing information via a portal. In many cases, the instructions were unclear or assumed a level of digital fluency the participant did not have.

“I had no idea what to do. They told me to upload something but didn’t say how. I didn’t even know where the file was saved.”

Others spoke about feeling anxious or stuck when things didn’t go as expected. A common experience was submitting a form or sending an email and receiving no response, leaving participants uncertain about whether their action had worked or whether the process was progressing.

“I sent it off and then heard nothing. I didn’t know if they got it, if it was right, or what to do next. It just left me worrying.”

For many, these systems felt not only confusing but isolating. The lack of human interaction meant there was no one to spot when a user was struggling, to explain something in different terms, or to offer reassurance at a stressful moment.

“When you speak to someone, they can tell if you’re confused. A website doesn’t know that. You’re just stuck.”

These feelings of confusion and isolation were especially acute among participants dealing with emotionally sensitive legal issues. In these contexts, digital-only processes were not just inconvenient they were inadequate. Participants wanted legal professionals to acknowledge that reassurance, empathy and flexibility are integral to legal service delivery, particularly for vulnerable or excluded clients.

That said, some participants did see potential in digital tools if they were better designed and used appropriately. A few suggested that simpler interfaces, like mobile-friendly apps or phone-based systems, might be more accessible than full websites, especially if they were accompanied by human support.

“If it was something like a simple app, maybe I could manage. But I’d still want to talk to someone first, just to be sure.”

The most consistent concern was not with digital technology itself, but with how it was being positioned: as a universal solution, rather than one option among many. Participants felt that current systems were designed with digitally confident users in mind and failed to account for the needs of those who are older, less experienced with technology, or facing multiple challenges. For them, digital tools often felt like barriers rather than gateways.

“It just makes the gap wider. People like me fall through the cracks.”

This perception contributed to a wider scepticism about digital transformation in legal services. Many participants questioned whether digitalisation was genuinely about improving service for users or simply about cutting costs and reducing face-to-face contact.

“It’s not about making it easier for us, it’s about saving money for them. That’s how it feels.”

The Importance of Choice: Digital is not Suitable for Everyone

One of the strongest themes across the interviews was the importance of **choice** in how legal services are delivered. While some participants had managed to use online forms, portals, or emails, and a few were open to using digital tools in simple cases, the overwhelming message was clear: digital should never be assumed as the default or only option.

Participants expressed frustration at being pushed toward digital channels they could not use or felt uncomfortable with. Some described being directed to online booking links they didn’t understand, portals they couldn’t log into, or documents they were expected to upload without knowing how. When no paper, phone, or in-person options were available, participants often felt shut out entirely.

“They just assumed I’d go online, but I couldn’t. So I didn’t get anywhere.”

Others described how this lack of choice made them feel powerless, dependent on others, or even ashamed. They spoke about relying on relatives to complete online forms, fearing they might miss something important, or giving up altogether because the process felt insurmountable. This was particularly hard for those who were already dealing with stress, grief, or complex life circumstances.

“You want help, but it’s like there’s a wall in the way. And if you can’t get through it, that’s it.”

While a small number of participants had positive experiences with digital tools, this was usually where:

- They had strong digital support from others
- The task was simple and well-explained

- A human was still available to answer questions

Even those who managed online tasks said they would have preferred to speak to someone first or have a backup option in case something went wrong. The assumption that everyone can manage digitally, and that those who cannot will simply “figure it out” or “get help”, was seen as deeply unfair.

Several participants said they would have engaged sooner, or felt less anxious, if they’d simply been given options. For them, flexibility was not about convenience it was about access. And the absence of choice often meant the absence of access.

Help and Support Received / Desired

Participants’ accounts of the help and support they received, or wished they had received, revealed just how critical human contact, tailored assistance, and accessible communication channels are when navigating legal services in the context of digital exclusion. While a small number described helpful, personalised support from their legal provider or a third-party advocate, others expressed frustration at the limited, inconsistent, or inaccessible help they encountered. This lack of tailored support often contributed to confusion, delays, distress, or disengagement.

"It was like they expected me to just know what to do. I didn't, and no one explained anything."

Some participants said they felt well-supported by their legal provider throughout the process. Where this occurred, it made a significant difference to their overall experience. These legal service providers tended to offer clear explanations, used plain language, and allowed time for questions. In some cases, they provided written checklists, posted paper documents, or took time over the phone to walk participants through each step.

"She sent me a checklist in the post, handwritten. I really appreciated that."

"They phoned every few days to make sure I was keeping up. That helped a lot."

In contrast, many others described a notable absence of support from legal professionals. Participants frequently felt that legal service providers assumed they would be comfortable using email, online portals, or scanning tools, and failed to provide alternatives when this was not the case. Even when helplines or contact emails were available, participants reported long waits, generic responses, or a lack of follow-up. Several described feeling dismissed or left to manage alone, even after explaining that they struggled with digital systems.

"They told me to just fill in the online form. I said I wasn't comfortable with that, but they didn't offer anything else."

This lack of structured or empathetic support meant that, for many, the primary source of help came not from the legal provider but from family members, friends, or neighbours. This informal support was often essential for carrying out tasks such as uploading documents, filling in digital forms, accessing emails, or understanding correspondence. Several participants emphasised that without this help, they would have been unable to proceed with their legal matter at all.

"If my daughter hadn't helped me, I wouldn't have got through it. I didn't even understand what half the emails meant."

Others described relying on informal support not just for digital tasks, but for interpreting legal terminology or understanding how the process worked. For example, one participant said they brought a neighbour with them to a legal service provider's appointment "just so someone could help me remember what they said and explain anything I missed."

"I didn't want to bother people or keep asking for help. It was embarrassing. But I couldn't manage on my own."

This reliance also introduced delays. Participants often had to wait until someone was available to assist, which meant that simple tasks could be postponed, missed, or rushed.

"I didn't even know there was a form to send back. By the time I found out, it was nearly too late. I had to rush everything with my neighbour's help."

A few examples emerged of effective support provided by third-party professionals outside of the legal service itself, for instance, from housing officers, support workers, or carers. In one case, a support worker not only identified a suitable legal provider but helped the participant prepare the necessary paperwork and attended appointments to offer reassurance.

"My housing officer filled out the form with me, made the call, and even printed things out for me."

Another participant described how a care worker had assisted with scanning and emailing documents using a shared device at a community hub. These interventions were crucial in enabling people to complete legal tasks that would otherwise have felt unmanageable.

However, these examples were exceptional rather than standard. Most participants received no structured support beyond their immediate social circle. For those who lived alone or had no digitally confident contacts nearby, this left them particularly vulnerable to falling through the cracks.

Participants were clear about what kinds of support would have helped. They wanted:

- Clear written instructions in plain English
- Confirmation when documents had been received
- The ability to speak to a named contact by phone
- Paper-based options when digital methods were not viable
- Reassurance that questions or confusion would be met with patience, not judgment

By contrast, participants found it unhelpful when they were pushed toward digital channels with no support, for example, being told to "log in and check the portal" when they had already said they couldn't.

"The worst part - you tell them you can't do it, and they just tell you to try again, like that's going to fix it."

Lack of Proactive Support from Legal Providers

Participants raised concerns over the absence of proactive support from legal service providers when it came to navigating online systems. While some described helpful, step-by-step guidance from legal service providers, these experiences were uncommon. More often, participants said they were left to manage digital processes on their own, with little recognition of the challenges they faced. This echoes

findings from the quantitative survey, which indicate that although some clients receive support directly from providers, many are instead signposted elsewhere or encouraged to rely on friends or family for help.

"You're just left to figure it out unless you chase them."

Participants in the qualitative interviews spoke of having to chase updates, interpret unclear instructions, or complete unfamiliar digital tasks without guidance. For those with low digital confidence, this lack of hands-on support led to confusion, stress and delays to the legal case.

"I kept checking the email, wondering if I'd missed something, but nothing came."

Participants described feeling "left in the dark" after submitting forms or making initial enquiries. In several cases, they sent documents by post or email and then heard nothing for days or weeks. For people who were already unsure of the process or lacked confidence using digital systems, this silence was unsettling. Some didn't know whether their materials had been received, whether they had done things correctly, or what would happen next. One participant described how they waited two weeks before calling to check, only to be told that the firm had received their documents but "hadn't had a chance to look yet."

"I thought maybe I'd done it wrong, but they never got back to me."

Others recalled being told to check online portals for updates, systems they either couldn't access or didn't understand how to use. In these instances, participants were not only unsupported but also placed in a position where their ability to proceed depended on tools that excluded them. When they phoned for help, they sometimes reached automated menus or receptionists who couldn't provide meaningful answers.

"They said to check the portal. I said I didn't know how, and they just said it was the only way."

For digitally excluded participants, this lack of proactive contact often meant they only received support if they asked for it, which many were reluctant to do. Some didn't want to "bother" busy staff, while others said they weren't sure who to call or what questions to ask. A few said they gave up trying after being passed around or receiving no reply. This meant that small misunderstandings or delays could quickly escalate into major barriers.

"You end up waiting and hoping. But if no one calls, you're stuck."

Participants emphasised that even basic, proactive gestures would have made a difference. These included:

- A phone call to confirm documents had been received
- A brief explanation of the next steps
- A check-in partway through the process to see if the client had any questions
- Offering to talk through forms or send a paper version where needed

Where legal providers did take this kind of initiative, these examples stood out. Participants remembered the legal service providers who "called me back without me chasing," or who "explained what would happen next straight away."

"She rang me before I could follow up. Just that made me feel they were on top of things."

"He said straight away, 'Here's what we're going to do next.' That calmed me down a lot."

These small acts of responsiveness and forethought gave clients confidence that they were being taken seriously, and that their case wasn't lost in the system.

However, most participants felt that legal providers relied too heavily on clients to manage their own engagement, assuming a level of digital fluency, assertiveness, and familiarity with legal processes that many people simply didn't have. For those already facing stress, health issues, or unfamiliar systems, the expectation to self-navigate was not just unrealistic, it was exclusionary.

"They act like everyone's done this before and knows the drill. I didn't."

Importance of In-person and Phone-based Support

For many participants, access to legal services was not simply about the outcome, but about how the service was delivered, and in particular, whether they were able to speak to someone directly. Across interviews, participants consistently emphasised the importance of in-person and phone-based support as a means of building trust, gaining clarity, and feeling reassured throughout the process.

"Being able to sit across from someone and explain my situation made all the difference."

In-person interaction was especially valued at the start of a legal issue. Participants felt that sitting down with a legal service provider helped them explain their situation properly, ask questions, and judge whether they felt comfortable proceeding. Body language, tone of voice, and the ability to "read the room" were described as vital, things that were often missing in email exchanges or digital forms. One participant described how a legal service provider's calm and reassuring manner during a face-to-face meeting had put them at ease and helped them move forward with confidence.

"When I met her, I just knew I was in good hands. She explained everything calmly and clearly."

Phone-based support was also described as a lifeline by many participants, especially for those who had limited mobility, lived in rural areas, or lacked digital access. Speaking on the phone allowed participants to clarify what was required, seek reassurance, and feel heard. Some preferred to call even for tasks that could have been handled online, simply because they felt more in control when speaking to a real person.

"I always ask if I can phone. You can explain better, and you know if they've understood you."

"It's just easier to talk to someone. I get flustered with emails."

Participants often contrasted the flexibility and human touch of phone and in-person contact with the rigidity and impersonality of digital channels. Several described feeling frustrated when websites or automated systems replaced basic communication.

"Nobody wants you to phone them anymore. They want you to email them or text them. But I'd rather talk - it's quicker and you know where you stand."

For participants who had experienced stress, grief, or anxiety alongside their legal issue, in-person or phone-based support also played an emotional role. They described feeling "looked after" or "listened to" when someone took the time to talk them through a process. In contrast, the absence of these options left participants feeling isolated or unsure. One woman described how even a quick phone call would have saved her from days of uncertainty after submitting a document online and hearing nothing back.

"I just needed someone to say they'd got it. A phone call would have saved me a lot of worry."

It was also clear that these forms of communication were not just preferred, they were necessary for some people. Participants with long-term conditions, learning difficulties, or very limited digital literacy simply could not engage without the option to speak to someone. For this group, the withdrawal of phone or face-to-face services amounted to exclusion.

"I can't do the forms or websites. I need to talk to someone, or I just can't do it at all."

The Kind of Support People Want

Participants were clear and consistent in describing the kind of support they wanted when navigating legal services. Above all, they wanted human contact, clarity, patience, and flexibility, not high-tech solutions, but practical, empathetic assistance that responded to their circumstances.

"Sometimes I don't know what I'm being asked to do, I just want someone to explain it properly and not make me feel stupid."

The most valued form of support was the ability to speak to someone, either in person or by phone, who would take time to explain things in plain language and answer questions without rushing or making assumptions. Participants wanted professionals who would recognise when someone was confused or struggling, and respond with patience rather than pressure.

"I just wanted them to slow down and talk like a normal person, not like I'm supposed to know all this already."

Participants frequently said they wanted clear, step-by-step guidance at key moments, particularly when documents needed to be completed, decisions were required, or next steps were unclear. Written guidance was helpful to some, but only when it was simple, well-structured, and free from legal jargon. Many said they had received emails or letters they didn't understand or had been referred to websites that made assumptions about their knowledge or comfort with digital systems.

"They sent me a long email and I couldn't make sense of it. It was full of words I didn't understand."

The tone and approach of legal professionals mattered just as much as the information itself. Participants valued legal service providers who were "down to earth," "not too formal," or who "explained things in normal words." A few described positive experiences where they were offered both email and postal options, or where they were asked directly how they preferred to receive information. These small acts of flexibility made participants feel respected and in control.

"One solicitor said, 'Do you want me to post it instead?' That was the first time someone asked me what I needed."

What people did not want was to be passed from person to person, told to "check online," or made to feel like a nuisance. When participants encountered rigid systems, for example, online-only portals, no reply after submitting a query, or automated instructions with no alternative contact, they felt excluded or overwhelmed. Several noted that even well-designed systems could fail if there was no way to ask questions or follow up with a human being.

"You feel like a number, not a person. There's no one to talk to, no way to check anything."

Participants also wanted professionals to acknowledge that legal matters often arise during difficult times, bereavement, family breakdown, housing insecurity, illness, and that clients may be emotionally or cognitively stretched. In these contexts, even small barriers or delays could become overwhelming. What people needed was not just factual guidance, but reassurance, the ability to check that they were doing things correctly, and confidence that someone was available to help if something went wrong.

"I was grieving, and everything felt harder. I needed someone to just say, 'It's okay, here's what to do.'"

In a few cases, participants said they wished they had been asked more explicitly whether they needed support. Some said they would not have spoken up unprompted, but would have welcomed being asked: "Do you need help with that?" or "Would you prefer a phone call?" Offering support as a standard part of the process, rather than relying on clients to request it, was seen as a way to prevent exclusion and embarrassment.

"If someone had just asked me, I'd have said yes straight away. But I didn't want to admit I was struggling."

Finally, participants wanted systems that were flexible and responsive to their individual needs. For some, that meant printed documents rather than attachments; for others, it meant updates by phone instead of email. But for nearly everyone, it meant being treated as a person, not a case file.

"It felt like they were just ticking boxes. I wanted to feel like I mattered, not like I was on a conveyor belt."

Support at Key Moments

Across interviews, participants highlighted the importance of receiving support not just in general, but at specific moments when it mattered most. These key points in the legal process, such as making initial contact, understanding what was required, submitting documents, or confirming next steps, often determined whether participants were able to proceed confidently or were left feeling lost, delayed, or disengaged.

"At the start, I didn't know who to call or what to say. I just wanted someone to talk me through it."

The initial contact stage was described by many as particularly stressful. Several participants said they were unsure how to start or who to contact, especially when services used online booking systems or

email-only enquiries. In cases where a phone number was available and someone picked up quickly, participants often felt reassured enough to move forward. But when they encountered voicemail instructions, impersonal forms, or delays in response, their confidence quickly eroded.

"They sent me a link to book an appointment. I didn't know what to do with it. I rang the number, but it was just a voicemail. It felt like the door was closed."

Another critical moment was when documents needed to be prepared or submitted. Participants frequently mentioned needing help to understand what documents were required, how to fill them out, or how to send them. For digitally excluded individuals, these difficulties were amplified when the only or main option was digital submission. Tasks such as downloading, scanning, uploading, or even locating forms in an online portal were unfamiliar and intimidating. Those who had someone to assist, often a family member, described managing the task with effort and support. But many others faced delays, made mistakes, or felt paralysed by fear of doing something wrong, particularly because the digital systems offered little guidance or reassurance.

"I had no idea which form they meant. I kept putting it off because I didn't want to mess it up."

Confirmation and follow-up were also important. After sending documents or completing tasks, many participants were left uncertain about whether their submission had been received or whether further action was needed. In the absence of acknowledgement or clear next steps, this uncertainty caused stress and, in some cases, unnecessary follow-up calls or visits. Participants wanted reassurance, something as simple as a phone call, text, or letter saying "we've received your documents" or "you'll hear from us by next week."

"I sent the documents, but no one replied. I kept checking my emails and nothing. It was stressful not knowing."

Participants also identified the final stages of a legal issue, such as reviewing draft documents or receiving a final decision, as moments when clear explanation and the chance to ask questions were essential. A few described reviewing important legal documents on their own, unsure what parts they were supposed to check or approve.

"They sent a draft, but didn't say what I should be looking for. I didn't know if it was right or not."

Others described feeling unsure whether they had actually "finished" the process. In one case, a participant thought they were still waiting for final confirmation when in fact the matter had already been resolved, they had simply not understood the final communication.

"I thought I was still waiting for something, but then someone told me it was already done. I'd missed that part."

Throughout these key moments, the difference between a positive and negative experience often came down to timing, clarity, and tone. Participants did not expect constant updates or handholding, but they did expect to be told what was happening and what to do next, in a way that they could understand and act on. When providers anticipated these key moments and offered the right kind of

support, participants felt confident and in control. When they didn't, participants were left to piece things together on their own, often with limited success.

Outcomes and Reflections

Participants' reflections on the outcomes of their legal experiences were shaped by more than just whether the case was resolved. For many, their satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, also stemmed from how they were treated during the process, how accessible and understandable the service was, and how much confidence they felt throughout.

"It wasn't just what they did, it was how they did it. I felt like they cared about getting it right."

Some participants described positive or at least adequate outcomes. In these cases, the legal task was completed, such as writing a will, transferring ownership of a property, or resolving a probate issue. These participants often credited their legal service provider's clarity, patience, or communication style with making the process smoother. For example, a few said they were pleased that documents were checked carefully, that they were kept informed, or that the legal service provider "didn't rush things." Even among those who had concerns about digital aspects, some still felt the overall service was professional and effective.

"She took her time with me, explained things clearly, and made sure I understood before moving on."

However, a larger proportion of participants gave more mixed or negative reflections. Several were unsure whether their outcome had been handled correctly, whether the fee they paid was fair, or whether they had missed something important. This uncertainty was often linked to a lack of explanation, minimal contact, or the need to depend on family, friends, or neighbours to complete online elements on their behalf. This reliance reduced their sense of control over the process and heightened anxiety, illustrating how digital exclusion can directly shape the quality of people's legal experiences.

"They were fine, but I have no idea if I could have got something better. It's not like I had any way of checking."

"It seemed like a lot of money, but I didn't want to make a fuss. I thought maybe they always cost that much."

"I didn't feel in control. My son did most of it online, so I wasn't sure what I was agreeing to sometimes."

Some participants said they would not use the same provider again, either because they felt poorly supported, pressured, or dismissed. Others described giving up entirely, postponing their legal issue, asking someone else to take over, or abandoning the process. This was particularly common when digital systems created insurmountable barriers or when participants lacked confidence that their issue would be understood. In some cases, legal problems were left unresolved not because of cost or lack of need, but because of confusion, lack of support, or a breakdown in communication.

"I just thought, what's the point? I'll deal with it later."

"I gave up halfway through. The emails were too much and I couldn't get through on the phone."

Participants also reflected on how the experience had affected their future willingness to seek help. A few said they now felt more confident and would approach a legal provider again if needed. But many said they would avoid legal services in future unless absolutely necessary. The reasons were varied, fear of being treated poorly, anxiety about digital processes, or a belief that legal help was "not for people like me."

"It made me feel like legal stuff isn't for people like me. I'd have to be desperate to go back."

Even where legal needs were relatively minor, the emotional weight of the experience, particularly when coupled with digital exclusion, left a lasting impression. For some, it reinforced a belief that legal systems are inaccessible or indifferent to their needs. For others, it highlighted the critical importance of being treated with empathy and respect, not just once, but throughout the whole process.

"It stuck with me, the way they just expected me to manage it all online. I needed more support and didn't get it."

Thoughts on the Role of Regulators

When asked about the role of regulators, most participants had little or no prior awareness of these organisations. Even when provided with a brief explanation, they often struggled to articulate clear expectations or saw regulators as distant from their day-to-day experiences of legal services. However, once prompted to reflect, participants raised important points about the need for oversight, standards, and accountability, particularly in the context of increasing digitalisation.

"I didn't even know there was a regulator for this. No one tells you that."

Many participants began by expressing broad scepticism about regulators. Some questioned whether these bodies genuinely had the power or will to hold providers to account. Others pointed to failures in other sectors, such as banking, energy, or policing, as evidence that regulation was often ineffective or unevenly applied. One participant, reflecting on their experience with various regulators, commented: *"There's one rule for some people and not for others."*

Despite this scepticism, most participants supported the idea that legal services should be subject to some form of independent regulation. They wanted reassurance that providers were qualified, competent, and treating people fairly, especially those in vulnerable situations. Participants often spoke about the emotional or financial consequences of legal errors and felt that regulators should act to prevent poor practice and make it easier for people to complain or seek redress.

"If someone messes up something important like probate or your will, there should be someone you can go to."

Accessibility emerged as a key concern. Participants felt strongly that regulators should take responsibility for ensuring that legal services remain accessible to those who cannot engage digitally. Many had already encountered digital barriers or felt excluded by online-only systems. They believed that regulators should set expectations for providers to offer alternatives, whether through paper forms, telephone contact, or face-to-face appointments.

"If you're going to take away the in-person stuff, then someone needs to make sure there's something else in place. Not everyone can just go online."

"They need to make sure there's still a phone number you can call. That should be a rule."

Participants also felt that regulators had a role to play in promoting plain language, transparency, and fairness. Legal jargon, confusing documents, and unclear pricing were all raised as barriers to access and trust. Several said they would have appreciated clearer guidance at the outset of their case, both from providers and from a trusted external source. They felt that regulators could help by setting minimum standards for how information is communicated, and by encouraging firms to explain legal terms in ways that people can understand.

"They use all this legal talk and you don't know where to start. Someone should make sure they explain things properly."

There were also calls for regulators to ensure that legal services were responsive, that people could ask questions, get updates, and feel heard.

"You need to feel like someone's checking that they're doing their job, not just leaving people hanging."

A few participants expressed concern that digital legal services might worsen inequalities by favouring those who already have digital confidence and resources. They argued that regulators should do more to highlight the risks of exclusion and require firms to assess and accommodate the needs of different clients.

"It just makes the gap wider. People like me fall through the cracks."

Case studies

Case Study ID09: Human contact at key stages is essential to building trust and confidence in legal services.

This participant described two contrasting legal experiences: one conducted entirely online for a divorce, and another handled face-to-face for a criminal matter. The comparison highlighted how digital-only services can feel impersonal and incomplete, while in-person support provides reassurance and builds trust.

In the divorce case, communication was limited to emails and online forms, with no opportunity to meet a solicitor. The participant said this left them feeling disconnected and unsupported:

“Everything was done remotely... it didn’t feel real to me.”

By contrast, the criminal case involved several in-person meetings, including at the police station and in the solicitor’s office. This face-to-face contact provided reassurance and advocacy at critical moments:

“You’re sat here waiting, not knowing what’s going to happen with the rest of your life... your solicitor being there in person... it’s your advocate.”

Case Study ID15: The importance of providers offering real choice in communication methods and recognising when digital processes are a barrier.

This participant began a personal injury claim but abandoned it after struggling with a digital-first provider. Communication was mainly by email, with requests to use an online portal to upload documents. She found it difficult to secure a phone call, and when she did, the interaction felt rushed and unsupportive.

“They were only answering to me by email... I don’t know why I struggled a lot to get a phone call.”

The lack of choice in how to communicate, and the expectation to adapt to digital systems without support, left her feeling disconnected and undervalued:

“They would just see you as this name... just a number.”

Case Study ID16: Digital services are most effective when combined with human contact at key points.

This participant described a lengthy legal case involving his son’s health. The firm offered a mixture of face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and email contact, which worked well for his busy circumstances. In-person meetings were especially valuable before court, helping him feel prepared and reassured.

“I felt more comfortable coming in... because what they wanted to do was make me feel as at ease as possible when going to court.”

For day-to-day matters, he valued being able to use email, as this fitted around his work and family commitments:

“When you’re managing lots of things... and someone rings you up in the middle of the day... I always say, follow up with an email.”

Case Study ID24: For some clients, digital-first systems create exclusion rather than choice.

This participant, arranging power of attorney and later probate, described herself as deeply uncomfortable with online processes. She relied on her son for tasks like online payments and struggled when legal staff assumed she could manage digital tools without support.

“It was like a cave woman talking to a spaceman.”

She stressed that while digital options may work for some, she needed phone calls and paper documents to feel confident. When these alternatives were not offered, she felt shut out and undervalued:

“If I don’t understand something, I want to talk to somebody... Not a chatbot, not a forum, just a person.”

Case Study ID10: Legal service providers need to accommodate varied preferences within the same family, especially where legal issues are emotionally significant.

This participant was confident using digital tools but emphasised that not everyone in his family was. While he was happy to handle parts of conveyancing online, his partner’s brother refused to use digital methods when dealing with wills and probate. The firm adapted by offering in-person meetings, which the family valued for sensitive issues.

“Her brother wouldn’t have even known how to turn it on.”

Even for this digitally confident participant, some matters still felt too personal to be handled entirely online:

“Because you’re dealing with something that’s so delicate and personal, we just felt this was the right way to go.”

Conclusions

This research provides compelling evidence that digital exclusion is a substantial and multifaceted barrier to accessing legal services. While digital platforms may increase efficiency and save time for providers, they risk marginalising those who lack the skills, confidence, equipment, or support to engage with them independently, and may inadvertently deepen inequalities in access to justice if poorly designed.

Digital exclusion rarely exists in isolation. It is closely linked to other vulnerabilities, including poverty, disability, caring responsibilities, low literacy, and limited formal education. These overlapping disadvantages can make digital-only legal processes inaccessible, especially in high-stakes legal contexts where confusion, delay, or disengagement can have serious personal consequences. This can result in procedural errors, missed deadlines, or withdrawal from services altogether.

The experiences shared in interviews make clear that digitally excluded individuals often face limited access to information and a heavy reliance on others. This reliance can compromise confidentiality, introduce delays, and increase emotional strain, particularly when legal issues involve sensitive personal matters.

Interviewees consistently reported that their experiences were shaped not just by the availability of services, but by how those services were delivered. Legal professionals who offered flexible formats, such as giving clients the option of phone calls, paper documents, or in-person meetings alongside digital channels, provided explanations in plain language, and proactively offered support were viewed far more positively. In contrast, rigid, digital-first services left many participants feeling ignored, devalued, or unable to proceed.

There was a strong and consistent demand for choice. Interviewees did not reject digital tools outright, but were clear that online systems should never be the only option. They wanted services to be responsive to individual needs, with alternatives such as phone calls, paper forms, or face-to-face appointments made readily available. The lack of such alternatives was often experienced not just as an inconvenience, but as exclusion. Participants emphasised that choice fosters not only access but also dignity, control, and trust.

The quantitative survey findings reinforce these themes. While most survey respondents had some form of internet access, many lacked confidence or independence, with over half relying on others to complete online tasks on their behalf. Many expressed fears of making mistakes, being misunderstood, or compromising their privacy when engaging with legal processes online.

Even where digital systems were used, users often struggled with unclear instructions, inaccessible platforms, or a lack of human follow-up. Many found themselves caught in digital feedback loops, unable to complete a task online, unable to get a response by phone, and unsure how to move forward. In some cases, this led to missed deadlines, unresolved issues, or the complete breakdown of communication. This sense of being ‘locked out’ of the system was particularly pronounced among older adults, carers, and those with limited literacy or English language proficiency.

Stakeholder interviews echoed these findings and highlighted several structural issues within the legal system. These include fragmented support provision, underinvestment in accessibility, inconsistent

local delivery, and a general lack of awareness in the legal sector about the realities of digital exclusion. Organisations called for greater collaboration, sustainable funding, and regulatory intervention to prevent digital exclusion from becoming a structural barrier to justice.

Stakeholders were also critical of the broader policy environment, noting the absence of a coherent national strategy for digital inclusion and the reliance on short-term, piecemeal initiatives. They stressed the importance of embedding digital inclusion into the design of mainstream services, and not treating it as a niche or add-on concern. Sustainable and systemic action was seen as critical to avoiding a ‘postcode lottery’ in digital access and support, where the help available to people depends heavily on the policies and resources of their local authority or region. In practice, this means that some areas benefit from investment in inclusive websites, digital drop-ins, or community support schemes, while others offer very little, leaving residents with fewer options for accessing legal services.

Interview participants and stakeholders alike raised questions about fairness. As legal services become increasingly digital, there is a risk that those who are already marginalised will face further disadvantage. There was concern that systems are being designed around the needs of digitally confident users, with insufficient consideration for those who lack access or confidence. This has implications not only for service delivery but for public trust in the legal system more broadly.

The findings point to a set of practical and policy implications:

- Legal services must offer multiple access routes, including telephone, paper, and in-person options, as standard practice.
- Providers should assess digital needs early and offer support proactively, particularly for those showing signs of difficulty or disengagement.
- Staff training should include awareness of digital exclusion and its links to vulnerability, so that front-line professionals and digital champions can identify and respond appropriately.
- All communication should be clear, plain, and actionable, including legal terminology, procedural steps, and digital instructions.
- Regulators should monitor digital accessibility as a core aspect of service quality and develop compliance measures that go beyond website functionality to include user experience and access routes.
- There is a role for regulators to set clear expectations around inclusive service design, ensuring that considerations of access and digital exclusion are embedded from the outset rather than retrofitted after design. While a uniform set of prescriptive standards may not be realistic given the diversity of firms in terms of resources, systems, service models, and client bases, regulators can still promote a consistent set of principles, such as the need for choice, clear communication, and accessible alternatives, that all providers should apply in ways proportionate to their circumstances.

Finally, this research highlights a broader principle: digital transformation must not be pursued at the expense of inclusion. Innovation in the legal sector must serve the needs of all service users, not only the most confident or connected. Regulators and providers have a shared responsibility to ensure that

systems are fair, accessible, and designed with real-world users in mind. The right to access justice must not depend on someone's ability to navigate a digital form.

Appendix A: Screening questions

Q1. We are doing this research for the Bar Standards Board, Cilex Regulation Ltd, Council for Licensed Conveyancers and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. who make sure that legal professionals in England and Wales do their jobs properly and so we are keen to speak to people who have used a legal service in the last five years. May I ask if you have used any of these legal services in the last five years? We will not ask you about the specifics of any legal cases.

- Social Security Law (e.g., unemployment benefits, disability benefits, retirement benefits)
- Welfare Law (e.g., food stamps, housing assistance)
- Family law (e.g., divorce, child custody)
- Criminal law (e.g., theft, assault, vandalism, drugs)
- Housing law (e.g., eviction dispute, landlord-tenant disagreements, purchasing a house or other property)
- Employment law (e.g., unfair dismissal, workplace discrimination)
- Immigration law (e.g., asylum application, visa issues)
- Personal injury (e.g., workplace injury claim, slip and fall accidents)
- Wills and probate (e.g., drafting wills, estate administration)
- Debt and Bankruptcy (e.g., help with managing debt, insolvency and bankruptcy)
- Consumer Rights (e.g., legal help for disputes relating to goods and services)
- Any other legal service (please specify)
- Used/ tried to use a legal service but not sure which
- Never tried to use a legal service [[screen out]]

Q2. Do you have access to the internet at home? Please select all that apply.

- Yes – broadband
- Yes – mobile/4G/5G
- No
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

Q3. Roughly how often do you use the internet? This could be at home, at work, at school or college or in a public place such as a library or internet café.

- Daily
- A few times a week
- Once a week
- A few times a month
- Around once a month
- Less often than once a month
- Never

Q4. What stops you from using the internet more often? Please select all that apply.

- Lack of devices
- Lack of mobile data (e.g. 3G/4G/5G)
- Internet is expensive
- Tend to need help to do things online
- Concerned about privacy
- Concerned about security
- Lack of confidence
- Prefer to deal with things in person/face to face
- Not interested
- Physical limitations
- Other (please specify)
- Don't know

Q6. How confident do you feel using the internet to access some of the more complicated services? Please don't think about social media when you answer the question, instead think about services such as healthcare, utilities, legal or financial services.

- Very confident
- Quite confident
- Not very confident
- Not at all confident
- Don't know

Q7. Do you personally do any of the following tasks online? By this we mean you do these things without needing help from someone else to do so.

Please select only one option for each task.

- Send an email
 - Use a search engine (e.g., Google)
 - Video calls
 - Manage an online account to use a government service (e.g. manage Council tax, pay personal tax, claim benefits) **[[screen out if yes]]**
 - Use mobile banking to complete tasks such as arranging payments, transfers, direct debits or standing orders. **[[screen out if yes]]**
 - Use social media (e.g, Facebook, X)
-
- Yes
 - No
 - Yes, but I need help
 - Don't know

Q8. How often do you rely on others to access online services for you?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Don't know

SCREENING INSTRUCTION.

Respondents to qualify if they select Q1/1-13 (to ensure they have accessed a legal service in the last 5 years) **AND** one or more of the following codes:

- Q2/3
- Q3/3-7
- Q6/3,4
- Q8/1,2,3

Appendix B: Survey questions

General access challenges

Q9. Which, if any, of these solutions have you used to overcome problems accessing services online?

- Help from friends or family
- Community support services
- Government programs
- Use free public Wi-Fi
- Use libraries or community hubs
- Other (please specify)
- None of these/ I have not found a solution
- I have not looked for/ needed to find a solution
- I prefer not to access services online
- Don't know

Base: Respondents who have used a solution (Q9/1-6)

Q10. How effective were these solutions?

- Very effective
- Quite effective
- Not very effective
- Not at all effective
- Don't know/ can't remember

Q11. What would help you to access services online?

- Subsidised internet access
- Free or low-cost devices
- More public access points with free Wi-Fi
- Subsidised data plans
- Non-digital (offline) service alternatives
- Digital literacy programs
- Other (please specify)
- I am not looking for help to access services
- Don't know

Q12. Would you be willing to participate in digital literacy training if it were available?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Legal services specific challenges

These next few questions focus on using legal services. Legal services include services such as help to buy or sell a property, wills and probate, divorce, criminal defence, immigration law and debt recovery

amongst others. If you have used more than one legal service, please think about the most recent time you did this when answering my questions.

Q13. From the following list, please choose the three that you think are the most important when accessing legal services online.

- Finding information
- Finding a potential provider
- Comparing potential providers
- Communicating with legal professionals
- Submitting documents
- Knowing that the process is private
- Knowing that the process is secure
- Attending Online hearings
- Submitting a defence via an online form
- Don't know

Q14. From the same list, please choose the three that you think are the hardest to do online when using legal services.

- Finding information
- Finding a potential provider
- Comparing potential providers
- Communicating with legal professionals
- Submitting documents
- Knowing that the process is private
- Knowing that the process is secure
- Online hearings
- Submitting a defence via an online form
- Don't know

Q15. Were you asked to do things online when using the legal service?

- Yes – and I managed to do them online myself
- Yes – and I managed to do them online with help from the provider
- Yes – and I managed to do them online with help from a third party (e.g. friends or family)
- Yes – but I had to ask for another method as I couldn't do it online
- Yes – but I asked for another method as I didn't want to do it online
- No ([route to Q23](#))
- Don't know/ can't remember ([route to Q23](#))

Base: Respondents who were asked to do things online (Q15/1-5)

Q16. What problems or concerns, if any, did you have with the online aspect of the services?

- Technical difficulties
- Privacy concerns
- Security concerns
- Needing help from someone else
- Concerns that my needs or requests would be misunderstood
- Other (please specify)
- Don't know ([route to Q23](#))

Base: Respondents who had concerns or problems in relation to online service aspects (Q16/1-6)

Q17. What help did the legal service provider give you to solve your concerns or problems?

- They helped me in person
- They gave me different, non-digital options
- They referred me to a support service
- They suggested that I asked a family member or friend for help
- Other (please specify)
- I have not received any help ([route to Q20](#))
- Don't know ([route to Q20](#))

Base: Respondents who were given help (Q17/1-5)

Q18. How easy was it to get this help?

- It was offered without me asking
- They helped me quickly when I asked
- They helped me, but I had to ask a few times
- Don't know/ can't remember

Base: Respondents who were given help (Q17/1-5)

Q19. How useful was this help?

- Very useful
- Quite useful
- Not very useful
- Not at all useful
- Don't know/ can't remember

Base: Respondents who were asked to do things online (Q15/1-5)

Q20. Did doing things online make it take longer to resolve your legal issue?

- I couldn't resolve the legal issue because of it
- It took a lot longer to resolve the legal issue
- It took a little bit longer to resolve the legal issue
- It had no impact
- It took less time to resolve the legal issue
- Too soon to tell
- Don't know

Base: Respondents who were asked to do things online (Q15/1-5)

Q21. Do you think you got a better legal outcome because you did things online?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, probably
- No, not at all
- Too soon to tell
- N/A - There were no online elements involved in the process
- N/A – Anything I was asked to do online I managed to do online
- Don't know

Base: Respondents who were asked to do things online (Q15/1-5)

Q22. What type of support would you find most helpful in the future?

- In-person help
- Phone support
- Printed materials
- More accessible websites
- Clearer information
- Support to use digital services
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above
- Don't know

Q23. How important is it for legal service providers to offer offline alternatives?

- Very important
- Quite important
- Not very important
- Not needed
- Don't know

Q24. How comfortable are you with the idea of virtual legal consultations? By this we mean consultations which take place via video chat or similar technology.

- Very comfortable
- Quite comfortable

- Not very comfortable
- Not at all comfortable
- It depends on the subject matter
- Don't know

The next question asks about regulators. These are organisations that work to protect the public by ensuring that legal services are delivered fairly and competently.

Q25. From the following list of actions regulators could take to help those who prefer not to access services online, or don't have regular internet access. Please can you choose the three that you think would be the most helpful.

- Making sure that everyone can use services easily, no matter their background or current situation
- Requiring providers to provide services that are tailored to the needs of the individual
- Requiring legal service providers to offer non-digital alternatives
- Conducting regular assessments of service accessibility
- Creating awareness campaigns
- Introducing a levy on legal service businesses to support digital accessibility
- Providing incentives to firms for inclusive service design
- None of these
- Don't know

Thank you for your time. Your responses will help us understand the challenges faced by digitally excluded individuals. [\[\[info\]\]](#)

Appendix C: Qualitative Topic Guide

24026 Digital Exclusion

Topic guide for interviews with digitally excluded legal service users

INTERVIEWER NOTE

Defining Digital Exclusion

In its broadest definition, digital exclusion among UK adults comprises three aspects that are often intertwined. These are:

- Access – those who are digitally excluded because they have no access to the internet at home or elsewhere
- Ability – those who lack the digital skills and/or confidence to navigate the online environment safely and knowledgeably
- Affordability – those who struggle to afford access to the internet, and so either go without it, or experience other financial strains to retain access.

These three related aspects encompass a range of issues that are connected to digital exclusion, including insufficient access to devices (device poverty); the inability to pay for an adequate data package (data poverty); the inability to navigate the online world alone due to lack of skills or knowledge; limited or narrow internet use; only using the internet via others (proxy users); or having access to the internet only outside the home, e.g. at a library.

Research Objectives

We are working on behalf of a collaborative partnership of four legal services regulators who regulate a range of legal professionals that carry out a wide range of legal work in high street and big city firms and across civil and criminal courts: the Bar Standards Board (BSB⁶ - barristers), CILEx Regulation Ltd (CRL⁷ - chartered legal executives), Council for Licensed Conveyancers (CLC⁸), and Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW⁹ - accountants conducting probate work).

Evidence suggests that digital exclusion represents a challenge to many service users, and often those in the most vulnerable circumstances. There is, however, limited research into the challenges presented by digital exclusion in the legal sector in particular and the BSB has commissioned [M·E·L](#) to undertake research into the challenges faced by individuals and communities experiencing digital exclusion, and in particular how this may impact their experience of legal issues or legal services.

⁶ <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/>

⁷ <https://cilexregulation.org.uk/>

⁸ <https://www.clc-uk.org/>

⁹ <https://www.icaew.com/>

This topic guide has been designed for use during interviews with digitally excluded legal service users to explore the challenges they encounter accessing legal services, and the potential measures that service providers and regulators can adopt to address these issues. The insight gathered during the interviews will be used to inform policy development and operational practices aimed at mitigating digital exclusion risks and enhancing service accessibility for all consumers, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

We will be speaking to 30 legal service consumers who are facing digital exclusion. Participants have been recruited through a quantitative survey during which they agreed to take part in an in-depth interview. Interviews will be a mix of face to face, video conferencing and telephone. The approach will be selected by the participant. During the interview you will be exploring some of the answers they gave during the survey and so you will need to familiarise yourself with their survey responses.

The discussion will last for about 30 minutes.

The interviews will be digitally recorded with respondents' consent.

INTERVIEWER/MODERATOR PREPERATION

To prepare, please read the responses provided by the participant in the quantitative survey as you will need to refer to these during the course of the discussion, along with the background documents provided.

INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

The topic guide is sub-divided into sections, as follows:

- Getting to know the participants and establishing brief details of the legal case
- Choosing a provider
- Views on the move to digital services generally, and within legal services
- Help and support received/ desired
- Thoughts on the role of Regulators

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. I work for M.E.L Research, an independent social research company. We are working with the Bar Standards Board, CILEx Regulation Ltd, Council for Licensed Conveyancers, and Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales who make sure that legal professionals in England and Wales do their job properly.

We are speaking to people who have used a legal service in the last five years, and I would like to ask you about your experience of using a legal service, the challenges that you faced and your views on how the delivery of legal services can be improved.

If possible, I would like to record our conversation. This is for my use only, so I can ensure my write-up is accurate and represents your views and opinions. The recording will only be shared with the research team at M.E.L Research. It will not be shared with anyone else, including the BSB, and it will

be deleted 3 months after the research has finished. Do I have your permission for this? **Gain consent for recording and re-state that the recording has started so captured on recording itself.**

Do you have any questions before I start?

<< Start recording, if consent provided >>

Background information (3 minutes)

I would like to spend the first few minutes getting to know a little about you, and your recent legal case.

- Firstly, could you briefly tell me about yourself, for example, who you live with and what you spend your time doing?
 - Probe urban/rural / local area
- Have you used a legal service before?
 - What was that in relation to?

It would really help if I could ask you a few questions about your case. Please only share what you are comfortable with.

- Please can you now tell me the broad details of your recent case?
- Please can you also tell me the outcome of your case? You do not need to go into detail, but it would be helpful to know if it has been resolved, and how you feel about the outcome.

Finding a legal service provider (5 minutes)

I would like to ask you a few questions about your legal service provider.

- When you were looking for a legal service, did you compare different service providers? Why/ why not?
 - How important was it to you to compare different providers before you you're your choice?
- What challenges would you face if you wanted to compare providers?
- Please can you tell me what was important to you in choosing your provider?

(Interviewer note: prompt if needed with personal recommendations, cost, online reviews, the legal service providers website, whether the provider was local, how much guidance you thought the legal professional would provide)

Views on the move to digital services (7 minutes)

You may remember that in the survey we asked you questions about your use of technology and online tools and services. I would like explore some of those issues in more detail.

- Do you use digital tools like smartphones, computers, or the internet? Why or why not?

(Interviewer note: here we are establishing the barriers they face to digital services in general. Please probe and prompt if needed with lack of access, affordability, limited digital skills and understanding, personal preference)

- How do you feel about the fact that many service providers in industries—like banking, healthcare, or retail—are delivering more and more services online?
- What impact does this have on you in your day to day life?
- Many legal service providers are also incorporating technology into their services (for example, using online systems to upload documents, track progress, or sign agreements digitally). What are your thoughts on this?
 - What do you think are the main benefits for service users of this move to an increase in the use of technology?
 - And what do you see as the main challenges?

(Interviewer note: prompt if necessary with limited access to equipment, technical difficulties, privacy, confidentiality or security concerns)

- Did you personally experience any benefits or challenges during your legal case that were caused by your legal service provider using more online services?

(Interviewer note: prompt if necessary with the responses provided during the survey, specifically at question 16)

- Would you say that the benefits and challenges you experienced affected the whole legal process, or were there any specific points in the process that were made easier or more difficult by the use of technology?

(Interviewer note: ask only those who have also used a legal service prior to the one being discussed)

- Thinking about the last time you used a legal service, and comparing it to the time before, how has the growing use of technology (like online forms or video calls) changed how you feel about the service you received?

Help and support (5 minutes)

- Did you receive any help or support during your legal case?
 - If yes: Who provided it, and how helpful was it?
 - If no: What kind of help or support would have been useful?
- Did you receive help or support from your legal service provider? If yes:
 - What kind of support did you receive, and how helpful was it?
 - Did they offer to help you in person, or direct you
- If you didn't receive in-person help, how did you manage to access the services you needed?
- Would you have benefitted from help and support from your legal service provider throughout the whole legal process, or were there any specific points in the process where you would have particularly appreciated help and support?
- What combination of support methods (e.g., in-person, phone, non-digital tools) works best for you?

- Are there any digital tools that could be used by legal service providers that would work well for you?

(Interviewer note: prompt if necessary with the example of accessing services through a mobile app rather than a website on a computer)

Suggestions for improvement (4 minutes)

- Based on your experiences, what could legal service providers do differently to better support people who prefer not to use online tools?
- Are there specific tools or processes that could make accessing legal services easier for people who prefer not to use online tools?

Role of the Regulator (4 minutes)

My next few questions are about the role of regulators within legal services. These are organisations that work to protect the public by ensuring that legal services are delivered fairly and competently.

- What role do you think legal regulators should play in improving access for digitally excluded users?

(Interviewer note: if the participant struggles to answer then please remind them of the response they provided to Q25 in the survey)

- Would it help if regulators made sure legal services always had non-digital ways to access their help?
- What advice would you give regulators about how to help people who prefer not to use technology to get the best support?

Final thoughts (2 minutes)

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences or challenges with accessing legal services?
- Do you have any questions for me?

THANK AND CLOSE

Appendix D: Fieldwork sample

Quantitative survey participant profile

A total of 454 surveys was completed with digitally excluded individuals who had accessed legal services in the past five years. Three distinct modes of fieldwork were used, each selected to engage different groups across the digital inclusion spectrum. This approach ensured that individuals with a wide range of digital experiences and needs were included in the research.

- **Online Panel (n=300):** Participants from an online panel were included to reach individuals who are digitally connected but still face exclusion due to ability, confidence, or attitude. These respondents may have access to the internet but lack the ability or comfort to complete formal legal processes online. Including this group is essential because many legal services assume some degree of digital engagement; those who are semi-connected are often among the most vulnerable to exclusion in legal settings.
- **Telephone Interviews (n=130):** CATI methods were used to reach individuals who may not be online at all or who use the internet only sporadically. This helped include those excluded by access, affordability, or limited ability.
- **Face-to-Face Interviews (n=24):** To include individuals with the highest levels of exclusion, face-to-face interviews were carried out through door-knocking and outreach via community organisations. These respondents often had no digital access, no suitable devices, or were entirely offline.

This ensured the research to include people with a wide range of exclusionary experiences, from those with poor digital confidence, to those with no digital access whatsoever.

Figure 17: Participant profile. Base n=454

Age					
16-35: 36% (n=162)		36-55: 28% (n=127)		55+: 36% (n=162)	
Refused: 1% (n=3)					
Ethnic group					
White: 76% (n=345)	Asian: 11% (n=49)	Mixed: 6% (n=25)	Black: 5% (n=22)	Other: 2% (n=7)	Refused: 1% (n=6)
English the primary language spoken in the home					
Yes: 92% (n=418)		No: 7% (n=31)		Refused: 1% (n=5)	
Gender					
Male: 52% (n=238)	Female: 46% (n=210)		Prefer to self- describe: *% (n=2)		Refused: 1% (n=4)

Gender identity same as that registered at birth		
Yes: 96% (n=436)	No: 2% (n=10)	Refused: 2% (n=8)
Economically active		
Yes: 63% (n=285)	No: 36% (n=165)	Refused: 1% (n=4)

Qualitative research participant profile

Ten participants were recruited from the online panel and 20 from the telephone interviews.

- There was an equal mix of gender with 15 male and 15 female participants.
- Participants had accessed a broad range of services including Social Security Law, Welfare Law, Family Law, Criminal Law, Employment Law, Housing Law, Immigration Law, Personal Injury, Wills and Probate and Debt and Bankruptcy.

Each participant went through a screening process when they completed the quantitative survey to ensure that they could be described as digitally excluded. Individuals were recognised as digitally excluded if they met one or more of the following three criteria:

- They had no internet access at home (access, affordability and attitude)
- Used the internet infrequently (access and attitude)
- Were less confident using the internet to access more complicated services (ability and attitude)
- Relied on others to help them access online services (ability and access)

All had internet access at home. This was necessary for them to complete the interview.

Figure 18: Q3. Roughly how often do you use the internet? Q6. How confident do you feel using the internet to access some of the more complicated services? Q8. How often do you rely on others to access online services for you? Base n=30

Appendix E: Interpreting the findings

Throughout this report, references to results being *significant* should be taken to mean *statistically significant* at the 95% confidence level, unless otherwise stated. This means that differences identified are highly unlikely to have occurred by chance and can be treated as robust findings. To avoid repetition, the word “statistically” is not used in every instance, but this definition applies consistently.

Percentages shown in tables and charts are generally rounded to the nearest whole number. As a result, totals may not always sum exactly to 100. In questions where participants were able to select more than one response option, percentages may add to more than 100.

The data has not been weighted. Results therefore reflect the achieved sample rather than being adjusted to match the wider population profile.

Base sizes are shown where appropriate. Readers should bear in mind that smaller base sizes may lead to greater variability in results, so findings should be interpreted with caution in these cases.

