

Title: Reshaping Legal Services in South East England: Access, Accountability, and the Future of Regulation

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, distinguished guests,
Thank you to the Legal Services Board for hosting this important event and for inviting me to speak today on behalf of the Hampshire Law Society.

The theme of today's session *Reshaping Legal Services in South East England* is not simply timely; it is essential. Our region reflects, in many ways, the pressures, the challenges, and the opportunities facing legal services across England and Wales.

We stand at a point where the profession must confront structural pressures that have accumulated over many years: the growing gaps in access to justice, persistent underfunding, backlogs that compromise the rule of law, and a regulatory landscape that is increasingly questioned.

At the same time, we must respond to new developments that test the very architecture of our professional framework one example being the recent *Mazur v Charles Russell Speechlys* judgment, which raises significant concerns about clarity, fairness, and recognition within the legal workforce.

Today, I hope to provide a clear message: our challenges are shared, our responsibilities are collective, and the future of legal services depends on collaborative, bold reform that centres the public interest while safeguarding the diversity and vitality of the profession.

Part I: Access to Justice – The Central Pillar of Public Trust

Access to justice is not an abstract concept. It is the difference between a family keeping their home or losing it; between a vulnerable adult being protected or left exposed; between a victim feeling heard or forgotten.

In the Southeast, as in much of the country, we have seen access to justice deteriorate. This is not the result of any one policy or court reform but a cumulative erosion:

- **Legal aid provision has shrunk dramatically**, leaving whole areas especially housing, family, immigration, and employment effectively without accessible legal support.
- **Law centres and high-street firms providing publicly funded work are under huge financial strain**, with several closing or moving away from legal aid work altogether.

- **Large Law firms are evolving making access to those that need it most unaffordable to most**
- **Geographical legal advice deserts are expanding**, meaning that for many, especially in rural Hampshire, the nearest legal aid provider may be 30, 40, or even 50 miles away.

When people cannot enforce their rights, those rights cease to have meaning.

When justice becomes inaccessible, it ceases to be justice at all. I pause here, just for a second to raise in particular to the wider implications of compulsory Mediation and if this creates actual justice or if the public's right to a fair trial or their day in court is a thing of the past.

The legal profession has done extraordinary work to fill the gaps through pro bono, clinics such as those run here in the University of Southampton, charity-supported services, Local Citizens advice bureau's and local initiatives but goodwill cannot replace a sustainable system, it also creates an unfair and uneven playing field for those with deeper pockets.

If we want a legal sector that is strong, respected, and trusted, then access to justice must be the foundation upon which every reform rests. We must press for:

1. **Restoration and modernisation of legal aid**, including sustainable remuneration.
2. **Investment in early legal advice**, which reduces long-term costs for the state and improves outcomes.
3. **Strengthening local provision**, including incentives for firms to undertake publicly funded work in underserved communities.

The cost of doing nothing is far higher than the cost of meaningful reform.

Part II: Consumer Protection – Confidence in the Legal System

Consumer protection is central to what the public expects from any modern legal system.

People need to know that:

- Legal services are safe,
- Complaints are heard and resolved fairly, and
- Professionals are held to consistent standards.

However, consumer protection cannot be achieved simply by imposing more rules or asking more of regulated professionals. It requires a regulatory environment that is

coherent, transparent, and understood—both by the public and by those who work within it.

At present, the regulatory landscape is complex. We have multiple regulators with overlapping responsibilities, differing standards, and inconsistent consumer journeys.

For those of us delivering services on the ground, this fragmentation can undermine consumer confidence and create unnecessary barriers to innovation. For consumers, it can make the market difficult to navigate or understand.

This is why discussions about regulatory reform including the possibility of **a single regulator for the legal sector** must be taken seriously.

But any such reform must be thoughtful. It must preserve:

- The independence of the legal profession,
- The importance of ethical standards,
- The diversity of professional roles, and
- The ability of legal professionals to work and progress through different pathways.

Above all, any reform must **enhance consumer protection** not dilute it.

Part III: The Impact of *Mazur* – Professional Recognition at Risk

The recent *Mazur v Charles Russell Speechlys* judgment has understandably caused concern across the legal sector.

While the specific legal issues are for the courts, the **professional implications are far-reaching**, particularly for Chartered Legal Executives and others who form the backbone of modern legal practice.

In Hampshire, as across the South East, CILEX professionals work in every major practice area handling complex matters, managing client relationships, and supporting the delivery of legal services that the public relies on.

The concern arising from *Mazur* is not only about the particular facts of the case but about the potential **uncertainty it creates around job titles, responsibilities, and public perceptions**.

If left unaddressed, such uncertainty could:

- Undermine team structures within firms,
- Create unfair hierarchies that are out of step with modern professional competence,
- Erode confidence among clients who may be confused about the status of the person advising them, many of us have had direct experience of this with clients with whom we have built a rapport and confidence being told that we can no longer act for them but only support another solicitor whom they have never met and may have less experience.

The Hampshire Law Society stands firmly *unequivocally* in support of our Chartered Legal Executive colleagues.

Recognition, clarity, and respect for all qualified legal professionals are essential to a healthy legal ecosystem. The profession cannot function if we diminish the contribution of those who are professionally trained, accredited, and essential to delivering services.

We urge national bodies including the Law Society, CILEX, and the LSB (some work has been done on this already) to work collaboratively to provide clarity and ensure that the outcome of *Mazur* does not destabilise the profession or unfairly disadvantage those who serve clients with expertise and dedication.

Part IV: Court Backlogs and Systemic Pressures

Any discussion on reshaping legal services must acknowledge the severe strain on our court system.

In the South East:

- Crown Court delays remain at unacceptably high levels.
- The family courts are overwhelmed, leaving children, parents, and vulnerable adults waiting months sometimes years for resolution.
- Civil backlogs continue to discourage legitimate claims and frustrate businesses.

These delays undermine consumer confidence, increase costs, and test the resilience of practitioners facing impossible workloads.

A modern legal system requires:

- **More judges,**
- **Properly funded court staff,**
- **Better digital infrastructure,** and

- **Realistic timetables**, not aspirational ones.

Technology has a role to play, but it cannot compensate for inadequate investment. Nor can it replace the fundamental fairness that comes from proper judicial scrutiny.

If we are to reshape legal services in the South East, court reform and investment must be prioritised. Without functioning courts, access to justice becomes a hollow phrase.

Part V: The Case for Regulatory Reform – Including the Discussion Around a Single Regulator

The question of whether England and Wales should move toward **a single regulator for legal services** is not new, but it is increasingly pressing.

At present, the regulatory landscape consists of:

- The SRA,
- The Bar Standards Board,
- CILEX Regulation,
- CLC,
- Costs Lawyer Standards Board,
- And others.

Each performs important functions. But the complexity is undeniable.

There is soon to be further regulation on certain matters by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), which is likely to cause further confusion and more regulatory difficulties than it solves.

From the public's perspective, it is not always clear who regulates what, who handles complaints, or how professional accountability differs between types of qualified lawyers.

From the practitioner's perspective, the system can be inconsistent and administratively burdensome.

A single regulator could offer:

- A unified standard of consumer protection,
- Simplified regulatory journeys,

- Greater clarity about professional titles and responsibilities,
- Efficiency and reduced duplication.

But such reform must be approached carefully. It must not erase the unique strengths of different professional pathways, nor diminish the independence of the profession.

The goal is not uniformity for its own sake it is **coherent accountability**.

If the debate moves forward, the Hampshire Law Society urges that local law societies, practitioners of all levels, and consumers be fully included in the consultation process.

A regulator that does not understand the regional landscape cannot regulate effectively.

Conclusion: A Call for Collaborative, Courageous Reform

Ladies and gentlemen, we are at a defining moment.

The pressures facing legal services in the South East and indeed the country as a whole
→ access to justice gaps,
→ weakened legal aid,
→ court backlogs,
→ questions of professional recognition,
→ and an increasingly complex regulatory environment—
are not problems that will fix themselves.

They require leadership.

They require investment.

And above all, they require **collaboration across the entire sector**.

As President of the Hampshire Law Society, I give you this assurance:

We stand ready to work with the Legal Services Board, with national bodies, and with other regional societies to shape a legal landscape that is fairer, clearer, and more accessible for the public we serve.

We will continue to defend the integrity of the profession, to support all legal professionals including our Chartered Legal Executive colleagues—and to champion reforms that strengthen access to justice rather than compromise it.

Reshaping legal services in the South East and indeed the rest of England and Wales is not only possible it is necessary. And together, with shared purpose and a commitment to the public good, it is entirely within our grasp.

Thank you.