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RESEARCH

Condensed Report:  
**Client Satisfaction Survey 2017**

Legal Aid NSW

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises key results from the 2017 survey of n=690 clients serviced by in-house Legal Aid NSW lawyers under a grant of aid from March to June 2017. This included clients who when interviewed, had active matters and a few clients who had matters that were recently completed.

## Responses to common questions for legal assistance services

The Commonwealth Attorney General's Department recommended Legal Aid Commissions include a common set of questions in their client satisfaction surveys. Client responses to these questions showed very high levels of agreement (over 90%) with the statements that: it was easy to make contact when they first needed help; the lawyer helped them understand how to deal with their legal problem; the lawyer listened to their legal problem; they know where to get help if they have another legal problem in the future; and they would recommend the service to others.

The other questions related to clients' personal and cultural needs. Of approximately 22% who indicated they had personal or cultural needs that Legal Aid NSW needed to consider, 77% agreed that Legal Aid NSW met these needs.

## Client satisfaction survey results

Over 85% of clients were satisfied with: the service they received from the administrative and reception staff (91%), the service they received from their lawyer (86%), the contributions process (for those required to pay a contribution) (87%) and the overall service received from Legal Aid NSW so far (87%). 50% to 54% of these clients gave the maximum rating of ten on the zero to ten satisfaction scale used. Amongst clients who had interactions with the Grants Division (n=104) most clients (80%) were satisfied with the Grants Division but only 31% gave the maximum rating of 10.

Previous surveys (conducted in 2011, 2013, and 2015) canvassed clients who received advice and minor assistance. The current survey focussed on clients who have a grant of aid. There was no significant change over the four surveys in the satisfaction ratings for administrative and reception staff (or clerical staff in previous surveys), lawyers or the overall service.

When asked to describe in their own words, what was good about the service, most replied (68%) that the service was very good (34%) or good enough (34%) and only 7% replied with wholly negative statements. Asked what could be improved, 52% indicated there was nothing bad or nothing that needed to be improved. 48% had suggestions for improvement. The replies about what was good and what could be improved confirmed the importance of the competence and commitment of the lawyer, the need for prompt responses and clear communication when the client had queries, and the importance of ensuring the client feels accepted and supported.

In 2017, clients were much more likely to indicate that the service made various aspects of their situation better than worse. Understanding of their legal problem and situation (77% better) and confidence in dealing with the problem (72%) showed the most favourable impacts. On six of the seven aspects covered, less than 10% considered the help they

received made that aspect worse. Although 56% considered the help received had made their level of stress and anxiety better, 17% reported this had been made worse.

Most (75%) expected the outcome of the problem would at least be acceptable, and 31% considered it would be very good.

For a third of clients (34%), Legal Aid NSW was not the first place they went for help. They contacted one or more other organisations, people or resources before Legal Aid NSW.

The majority (90%) of clients paying a contribution considered the payment 'value for money'. However, a relatively small group of clients did not consider the payment 'value for money' and were also generally critical of the service.

The main barriers to access that reduced the quality of the service experience or resulted in lower service ratings were:

- Having a disability that created difficulties in accessing or using the service (19%).
- Having personal or cultural needs that Legal Aid NSW needed to consider (22%), especially for those who felt their special need had not been taken into account.
- Having difficulty paying a contribution to their costs (9% of the sample).

### **Conclusions**

Based on the interviews that were conducted and the findings of the report, the conclusions are as follows:

- Satisfaction with the service remains very high for both the administrative and reception staff, and for lawyers.
- Satisfaction with the Grants Division is high but there is scope for improvement.
- Clients with a disability, personal or cultural need are generally having those needs met, but there is room for improvement.
- What matters is the service response to meet the needs of these clients, rather than whether the client has such needs. When the service response did not meet the need, perceptions of the service were much less favourable.
- Key elements of the service response that contribute to client satisfaction are:
  - Competence and commitment of the lawyer,
  - Prompt responses and clear communication when the client has queries,
  - Ensuring the client feels accepted and supported.

### **Recommendations**

Initiatives should focus on the following to maintain and further improve the high levels of service that Legal Aid NSW provides:

- Managing client expectations at the outset of the relationship between the client and Legal Aid NSW and throughout the period of the relationship.
- Ensuring clear communication between Legal Aid NSW lawyers and their clients.
- At the outset of interactions with the client, identifying what a client needs to successfully access and use the service, and putting in place measures to ensure the service response meets those needs.

# CONDENSED REPORT

## 1. Background

Legal Aid NSW has conducted client satisfaction surveys since 2006 to obtain client feedback and identify opportunities for service improvement. In 2011, 2013 and 2015, the survey canvassed clients who received advice at a Legal Aid NSW office.

In 2017, Legal Aid NSW commissioned Taverner Research to interview clients who had received a grant of legal aid about their experience of the service. Taverner Research successfully interviewed 690 Legal Aid NSW clients serviced by in-house lawyers under a grant of aid from 2<sup>nd</sup> March to 5<sup>th</sup> June 2017. This included clients who when interviewed, had active matters and a few clients who had matters that were recently completed. The survey canvassed clients with criminal, family and civil law problems. Clients who were in custody or in a mental health facility and clients under 16 years of age were not interviewed.

Taverner Research carried out computer assisted telephone interviews from 1 May to 29 June 2017. 33 interviews were undertaken by bilingual interviewers in Arabic, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Farsi and Hindi.

### Sampling method

The sampling method sought to obtain, to the extent reasonably practical, a representative sample from across the offices servicing clients with a grant of aid. Almost all clients granted legal aid with an active case in the period from 2<sup>nd</sup> March to 5<sup>th</sup> June 2017 were sent either a letter or an email informing them of the survey and seeking their participation if they were called by Taverner Research for an interview. They were also offered the opportunity to contact Legal Aid NSW and ask to be excluded from the survey sample.

In addition to 24 pilot interviews, 3,042 phone numbers were loaded to Taverner's system. 1,201 (39%) of loaded phone numbers were successfully contacted (other numbers were invalid, were called but not answered or were not called). 55% (666) of clients who were contacted, successfully completed interviews.

The sample comprised of clients from across all Legal Aid NSW offices and specialist units. Some of these offices and units had not been included in previous survey samples due to lack of referrals of clients consenting to participate in the survey.

### Safety concerns addressed

A number of measures were put in place to address safety and privacy issues for clients.

Clients who elected for correspondence to be sent to their lawyer rather than to their residential address and clients of the Domestic Violence Unit, were not sent letters or emails. Rather Legal Aid NSW staff contacted these clients directly to inform them about the upcoming survey.

Taverner interviewers were briefed to ensure that they did not mention Legal Aid NSW until they had confirmed they were talking with the actual client. To further minimise risk, clients of the Domestic Violence Unit were not called but were invited to contact Taverner Research to arrange an interview.

Figure 1 summarises key demographic information about the survey sample.

**Figure 1: Client Demographics**

	Number of Clients	% of Total Sample (n 690)
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	377	55
Female	311	45
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	83	12
Clients with a Disability	241	35
Clients who speak a language other than English at home	144	21
Clients who prefer to use an interpreter with Legal Aid NSW	34	5
<b>TYPE OF CLIENTS</b>		
Criminal Law Clients	269	39
Civil Law Clients	95	14
Family Law Clients	322	47
Unspecified Matter/Declined to say	4	1

Aggregated data reported in this document may be different (+/- 1%) to the sum of the individual components shown in a chart or commentary due to rounding. The results of survey responses are reported in the graphs throughout the document as percentages that have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

## 2. Responses to common questions for legal assistance services

All Legal Aid Commissions in Australia are required to conduct client surveys. The Commonwealth Attorney General's Department recommended a set of common questions to be included in the client surveys in accordance with the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services 2015 – 2020 (NPA).

The questions consist of a set of six core statements rated on a five point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Responses to these items are presented in Figure 2. These questions were included in the client satisfaction survey.

The proportion of clients surveyed who either agreed or strongly agreed (total agreed) with each statement exceeded 90% for all but one statement.

- 93% in total agreed it was easy to contact Legal Aid NSW when they first needed help
- 91% in total agreed that the lawyer helped them to understand how to deal with their legal problem
- 90% in total agreed the lawyer listened to their legal problem
- 95% in total agreed they know where to get help if they have another legal problem in the future
- 92% in total agreed they would recommend the legal service to other people.

Approximately 22% (156) of clients surveyed identified they had personal or cultural needs. 77% (120) of this subgroup agreed or strongly agreed that Legal Aid NSW met these needs. This was well below the 90% to 96% totals agreeing with each of the other statements. There were a small subgroup (19% n=29) of clients who did not believe their needs were met and they were likely to have less favourable perceptions of the service.

There was much less variation in the percentage that strongly agreed with the statements. This ranged from 41% (Q2 about ease of contact) to 48% (Q22a about knowing where to get help in future and Q22b about being willing to recommend the service). 43% strongly agreed that Legal Aid NSW met clients' personal and cultural needs.

### Effect of law type on responses to core statements

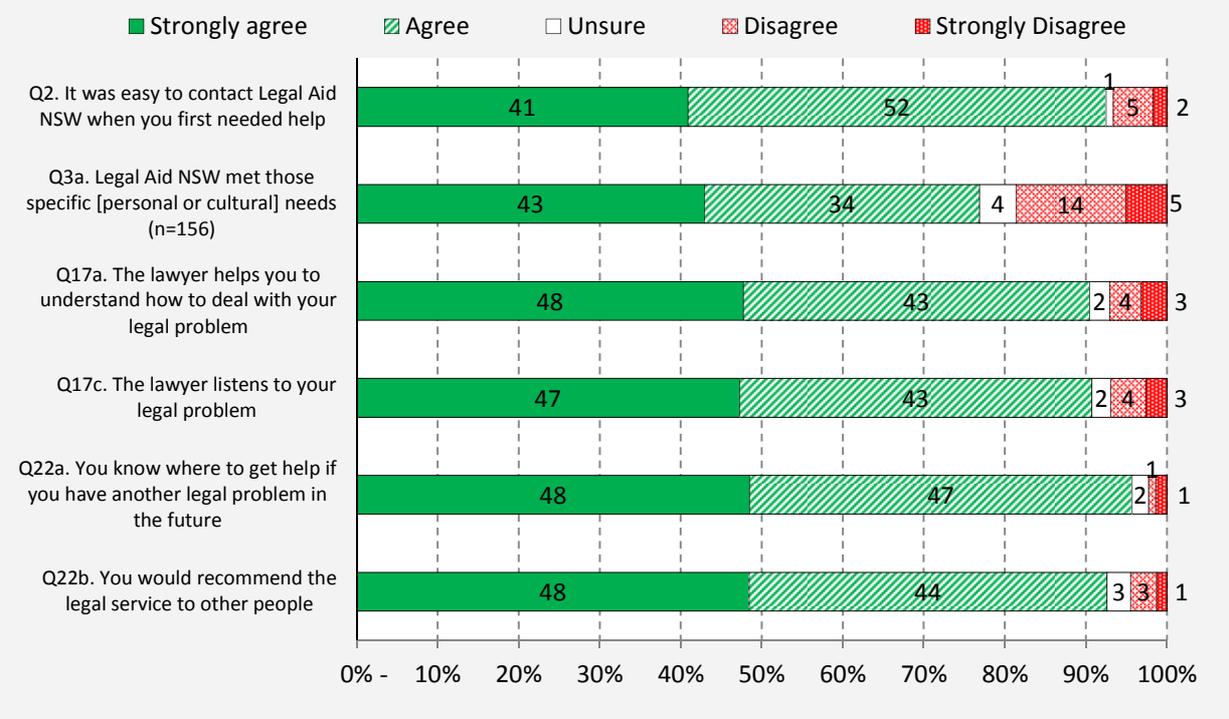
Civil law clients were significantly more likely (33% compared to criminal (22%) and family (21%) law clients) to report having personal or cultural needs to be taken into account.

Criminal law clients did not agree as strongly with the core statements as family and civil law clients. There was a consistent trend for criminal law clients to be less likely to strongly agree, and more likely to disagree with the statements.

**Figure 2: Responses to recommended common questions for legal assistance services, 2017<sup>1</sup>**

I will read you a statement. Please tell me if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with that statement.

Base: All respondents n = 690 except Q3a (n = 156 respondents with personal or cultural needs that Legal Aid NSW needed to consider)



**Effect of other sub groups on responses to core statements**

An analysis of the responses of various sub groups of clients to the core statements revealed:

- Speaking a language other than English at home did not, in general, reduce agreement with the statements.
- Preferring to deal with Legal Aid NSW through an interpreter was associated with greater difficulty in making initial contact. However, feeling personal and cultural needs were met and (perhaps as a result) knowing where to get help as well as a willingness to recommend Legal Aid NSW to others had higher levels of agreement from the clients who preferred to use an interpreter.
- For those who believed their disability resulted in problems accessing or using the service, making initial contact, obtaining appropriate responses to their specific needs, being listened to and gaining increased understanding were adversely affected.
- The better that needs were perceived to be met, the stronger the agreement with the core statements.
- Clients who had difficulties paying contributions were more likely to have other difficulties in using the Legal Aid NSW service (such as difficulties in making initial contact, in feeling their lawyer helped them better understand their legal problem, in believing that their lawyer listened to them or in believing that their specific needs were being met).

<sup>1</sup> The results of survey responses are reported in the graphs throughout the document as percentages that have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number. As a result, some of the totals in the graphs in the document vary between 99 – 101%.

### 3. Satisfaction

Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction on a scale from zero (very dissatisfied) to ten (very satisfied). Ratings of six to ten indicated the client was satisfied, a rating of 5 was neutral and ratings of 0 – 4 indicated the client was dissatisfied.

As can be seen in Figure 3, satisfaction ratings exceeded 85% for all service aspects except those relating to Grants Division staff. However, even this was still relatively high at 80%.

- 91% were satisfied with the service they received from administrative and reception staff (asked of the total sample, n=690)
- 86% were satisfied with the service they received from the Legal Aid NSW lawyer (asked of the total sample, n=690)
- 80% were satisfied with the service received from the Grants Division staff (for those with direct contact with those staff, n=104)
- 87% were satisfied with the service received so far from Legal Aid NSW (asked of the total sample, n=690)
- 87% were satisfied with the contributions process (of n=396 who had to make a contribution).

50% - 54% of clients gave a maximum rating of ten in relation to all service aspects except in relation to Grants Division Staff (of the n=104 clients who had spoken with someone in the Grants Division 31% of clients gave a maximum rating of 10).

The percentage of clients expressing outright dissatisfaction was low for all the rated aspects of the service. Only:

- 9% were dissatisfied with the Grants Division
- 8% were dissatisfied with the Legal Aid NSW lawyer
- 6% were dissatisfied with the contributions process
- 7% were dissatisfied with the service they had received so far from Legal Aid NSW
- 3% were dissatisfied with administrative and reception staff.

Criminal law clients were less likely to be satisfied with their Legal Aid NSW lawyer or the overall service from Legal Aid NSW so far.

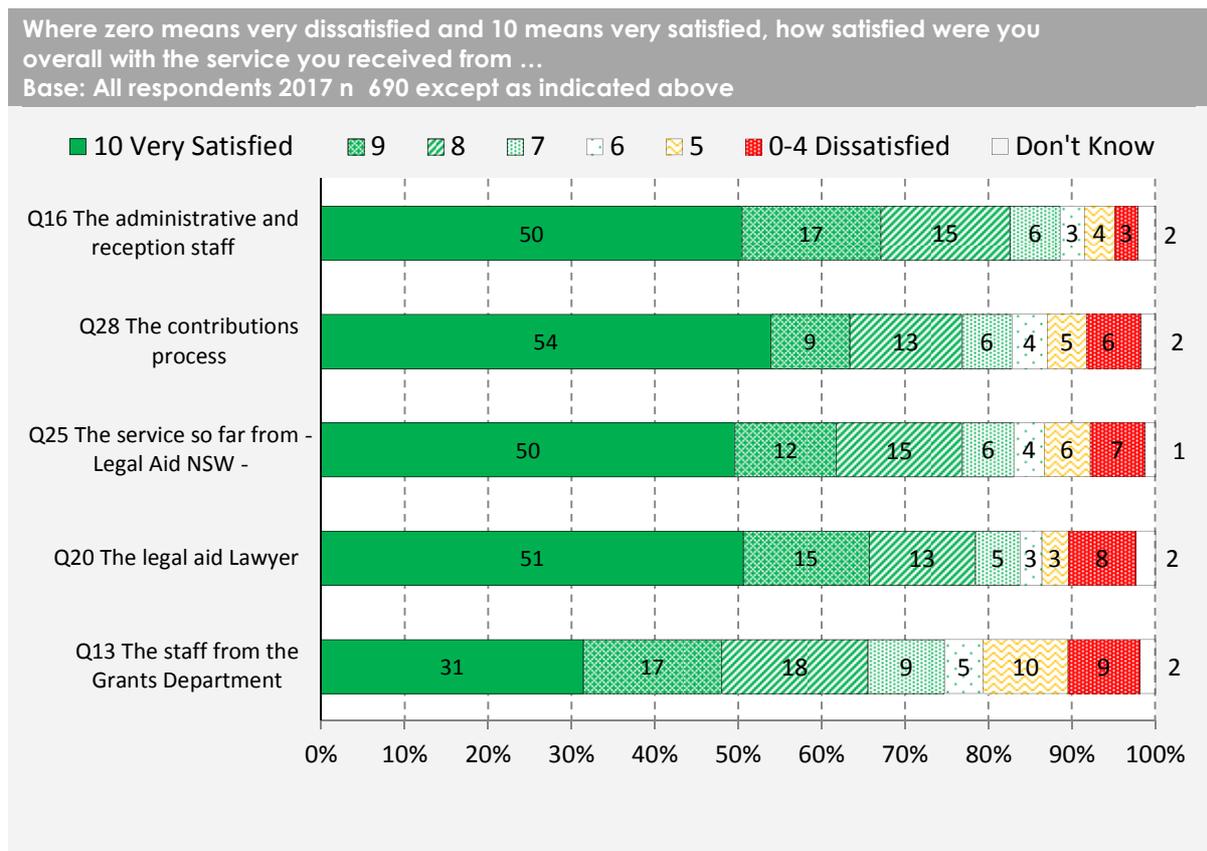
Analysis of various subgroups of clients and their satisfaction ratings consistently demonstrated that it is the way the service responds to a client with particular needs (e.g. personal and cultural needs, disability) rather than whether they in fact have such needs that produces differences in satisfaction.

Previous surveys (in 2015, 2013 and 2011) canvassed satisfaction with “clerical staff” in relation to clients who had attended a Legal Aid NSW office for advice and minor assistance.

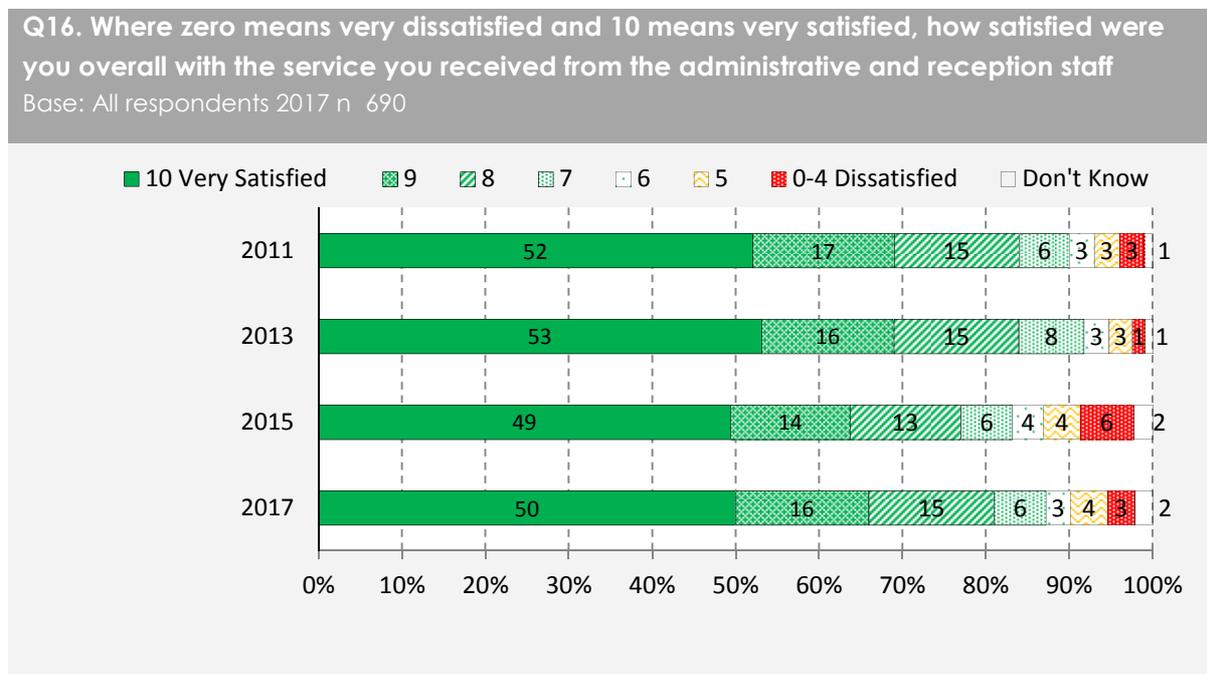
Figure 4 compares the satisfaction rating of administrative and clerical staff in 2017 to the ratings of clerical staff in the three previous surveys.

None of the variations approach being statistically significant despite the substantial sample providing enough power to detect quite small differences. Satisfaction with administrative and reception staff among clients granted legal aid in 2017 is no different to satisfaction with clerical staff among clients receiving advice and minor assistance in the three previous surveys.

**Figure 3: Satisfaction with service aspects - 2017**



**Figure 4: Satisfaction with administrative & reception staff, 2017 and clerical staff 2011 - 2015**



Satisfaction with the performance of the Legal Aid NSW lawyer showed even less variation (see Figure 5). These very favourable ratings of the lawyer's performance are consistent with

client replies in each survey to the question of how well the lawyer’s service met their expectations.

**Figure 5: Satisfaction with Legal Aid NSW lawyer, 2011 to 2017**

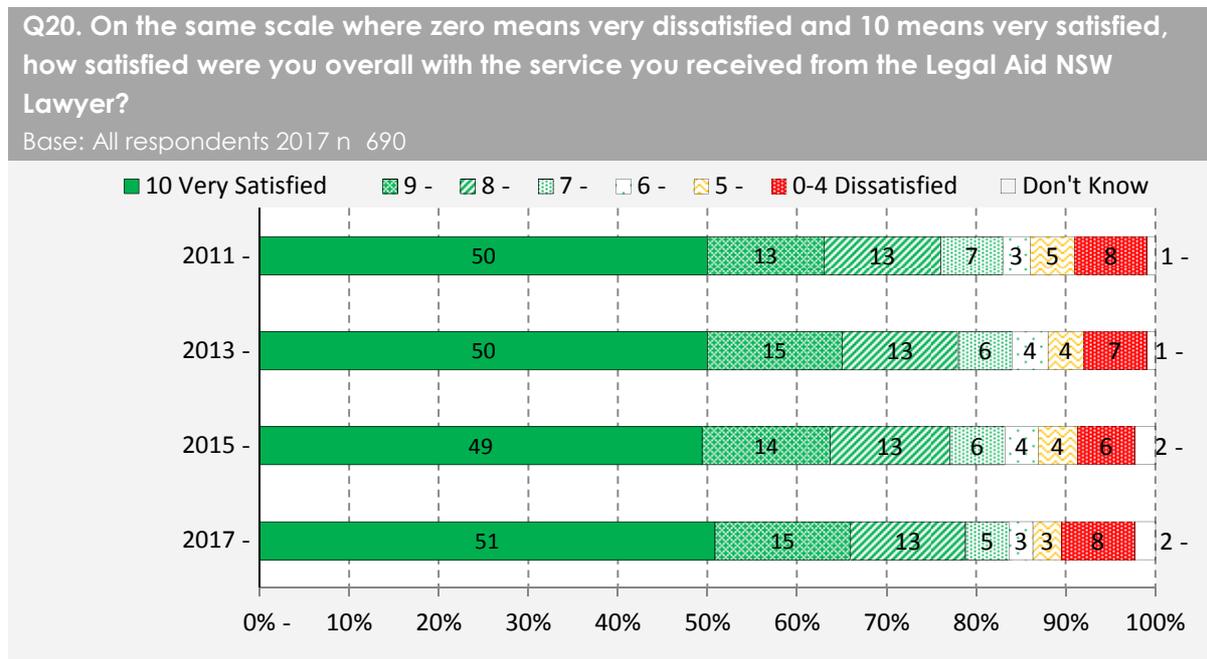
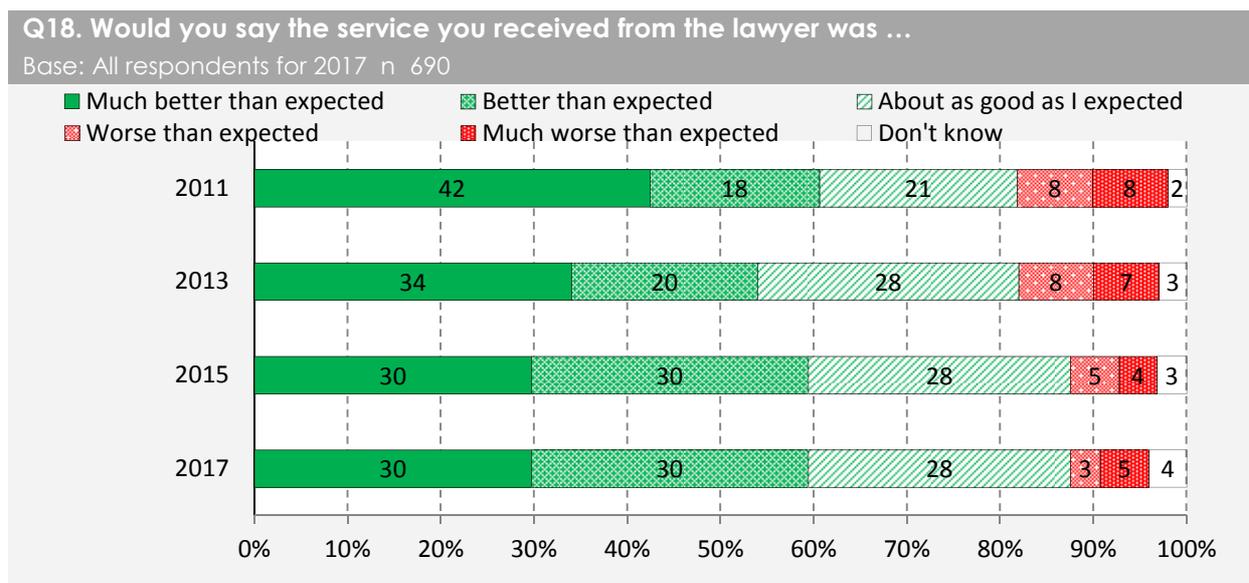


Figure 6 shows that in the last four surveys:

- Less than 16% of clients surveyed, rated the lawyer’s performance as worse than expected, with the two most recent surveys having totals of 9% (2015) and 8% (2017).
- Over half of clients surveyed (54% to 60%) rated the lawyer’s performance as better or much better than expected. 21% to 28% rated performance as good as expected.

**Figure 6: How well lawyer’s service met client expectations, 2011 to 2017**



## 4. Verbatim opinions of the service

The very favourable ratings are largely consistent with the opinions expressed in the 2017 survey when respondents were asked to state in their own words what (if anything) was good about the service, and what (if anything) could be improved.

### 4.1. What was good

Approximately one in three clients surveyed gave responses that indicated performance was very good (34%) and the same percentage gave replies indicating that performance was good or that there were no problems. Only 7% denied there was anything good or said performance was bad, with 2% making some positive comments but also expressing reservations.

The outstanding positive comments concerned the competence and professionalism of the solicitor (22%) and that the client gained a feeling of support or caring (12%). A number of other specific aspects (e.g. prompt responses, easy to talk to, kept informed) were reported by smaller percentages.

These replies are consistent with the low percentage of respondents giving ratings indicating dissatisfaction, and confirm the importance to clients of receiving competent and committed representation, of being kept informed and of feeling accepted and supported.

### 4.2. Improvements sought

Q1b asked what (if anything) needed to be improved. 52% of clients said that there was nothing bad or nothing that needed to be improved. However, most of the other 48% did have suggestions.

The most common criticism of the service was that better, quicker communication, especially in response to a client's queries, would improve the service (17%). This reflects the 6% who mentioned good or prompt communication and response to queries as good aspects of the service.

Some (6%) considered that the service needed more people or that their lawyer was overloaded, and 5% criticised the need to change lawyer. Some complained of having three or more different lawyers, and while this sometimes resulted in better service (as mentioned in the comments on what was good), it was more likely to undermine the quality of service.

A few considered their solicitor incompetent or uncommitted (5%) confirming the importance of competence and commitment that emerged from comments on what was good.

Slow Legal Aid NSW processes (3%), and mentions of the slow court system (2%) mirror the mentions of being prompt or quick in the favourable comments.

Other issues were each mentioned by only a few respondents, but the fact that some volunteered these points confirm the need to ensure that service providers listen, the communication be clear as well as prompt, that lawyers and other staff are respectful, that offices be accessible, and that the service not cost too much.

However, the low percentages criticising such aspects of performance are consistent with the overall service maintaining a high standard.

### **4.3. Relationship of verbatim comments to recommendation and satisfaction**

The responses to the questions asking what, if anything, was good and what could be improved both showed strong relationships to willingness to recommend the service to others, to overall satisfaction with the service received so far, and other indicators of the quality of the service.

These results strongly validate the ratings, but also showed that many clients will still recommend the service or indicate being satisfied overall, despite having nothing good to say or having suggestions for how to improve the service.

## 5. Lawyer performance

Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of additional statements about the performance of their lawyer (or lawyers) and to rate their satisfaction with different aspects of their lawyer's performance. Each of these statements about the lawyer's performance was agreed with by at least 75% and up to 95% of those asked, with 35% to 54% agreeing strongly. This suggests that respondents were largely positive about their lawyer's performance.

Being polite and respectful attracted the highest level of agreement (54% strongly agreed and 40% agreed). However, the select group that reported they had a disability were less likely to agree (total 75%) and to agree strongly (35%) that the lawyer helps them with any special needs due to their disability. Agreement with this statement might be reduced by some who report a disability believing they did not require such help, but the result suggests that this might be an area where some additional care or training in meeting the needs of the group might be needed.

Over 85% considered the advice given was helpful, that the lawyer helped them understand the type of assistance that Legal Aid NSW can provide, that the lawyer does not rush them, and that they feel confident in the lawyer's advice.

During the legal aid process, the respondents once more agree (84%) that the lawyer clearly explained what would happen next in their case. Nonetheless, twelve per cent were in disagreement (with 4% strongly disagreeing). When it came to keeping them informed throughout the process, respondents gave similar answers about their lawyer (82% agreed, and 15% disagreed). There was however a higher portion of respondents unsure (10%) about their lawyer being sensitive and responsive to meet their needs given their culture and background. This level of uncertainty was higher than for any other question, although respondents were still in overwhelming agreement (84%).

## 6. Grants processes

The interviewer asked the respondents a series of questions about completing the grant application form, and (for those who had spoken to someone in the Grants Division) about their perceptions of the service received from that division.

### 6.1. The Grant Application

Two out of three clients (68%) filled in the application form themselves, and one fifth of clients (19%) had this done for them by their Legal Aid NSW lawyer.

Most of those who had filled in the application form themselves indicated that they needed no help (78%) or that they got the help they needed (22%) - almost 100% in total.

In total, 82% found filling the application form to be either very easy (22%) or easy enough (60%). Most of those who found difficult rated it as not quite easy enough (12%); a few found it quite difficult (5%) and almost none found it much too difficult (1%).

However, many of those who would find the form difficult to complete had the form completed for them or had help from someone else.

Q10 asked those who indicated they had difficulties in completing the form themselves about the nature of their difficulties. Difficulty understanding the questions was the most common problem (51% of those with a difficulty), followed by understanding what information was needed to answer the question (30%). Some found that the form took too long to complete (18%) and some (17%) had difficulty in obtaining or attaching supporting documents.

### 6.2. Satisfaction with Grants Division

The n=104 respondents who had talked with staff of the Grants Division were asked to rate the Grants Division staff and various aspects of their service on the zero to ten satisfaction scale. The results are summarised in Figure 7.

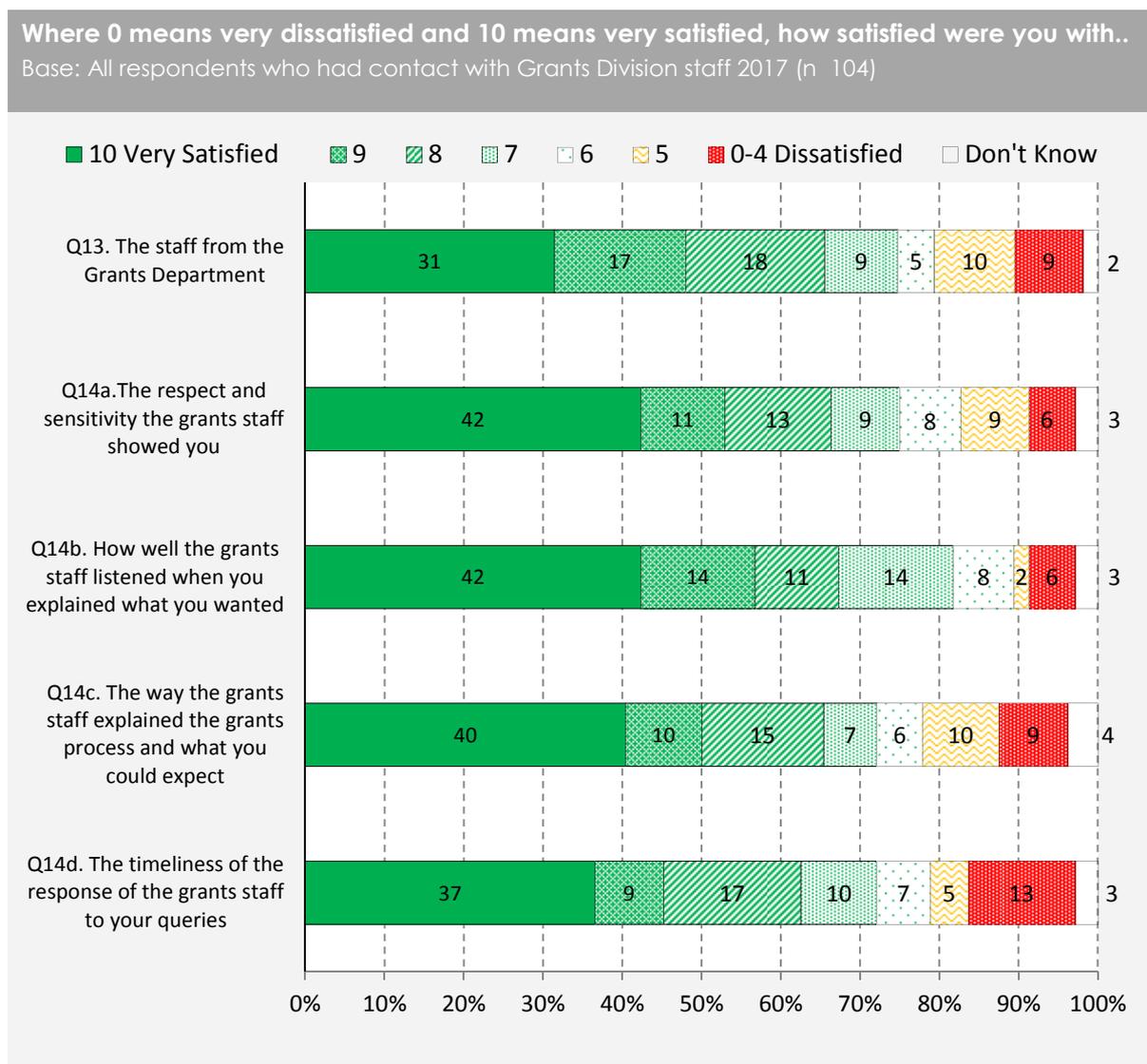
Overall, 80% of this group were satisfied with the staff from the Grants Division, somewhat lower than for the lawyers (86%), the administrative and reception staff (91%) and the service from Legal Aid NSW so far (87%). This group were also less likely to give the highest rating of ten (31%) than the total sample was for the lawyers, the administrative and reception staff and the overall service so far (all 50%).

Two aspects of grants staff performance were considered satisfactory by over 80% of those who dealt with the division: how well the grants staff listened (89%) and the respect and sensitivity they showed to the client (83%), with only 6% indicating dissatisfaction with these aspects of grants staff performance.

Satisfaction was lower for two other aspects: the way the staff explained the grants process and what the client could expect (78% satisfied, 9% dissatisfied) and the timeliness of staff response to the client's queries (79% satisfied, and 13% dissatisfied).

Whether clearer explanations of the process and a faster response would make a difference can only be determined by attempting to make improvements and seeing what effect this has. Any improvement is not likely to be large, as most are satisfied. There might be other aspects of performance (or perhaps of the process of assessing eligibility) that need attention that have not been measured by the specific items.

**Figure 7: Satisfaction with aspects of Grants Division service - 2017**



### 6.3. Contributions

Over half the clients interviewed (57%) indicated they have to pay a contribution to the cost of their grant of aid, with 38% saying they did not and 4% being unsure. Most (82%) had to contribute \$100 or less and 90% contributed \$500 or less.

Most (90%) of those paying a contribution considered that the amount of the contribution was 'value for money' for the legal services they received from Legal Aid NSW.

Satisfaction with the contributions process was high, with 87% satisfied and 54% giving the top rating, while only 6% indicated dissatisfaction.

In contrast to those clients (n = 355) who believed the contribution represented value, the small group who believed the contribution paid was not 'value for money' (n=41) were:

- Much less likely to be satisfied with the contributions process (39% compared to 93%),
- Very much less likely to give the maximum rating (5% compared to 60%).

In contrast to those clients who had no difficulties, those (n=64) who reported difficulty in paying the contribution were:

- Somewhat less likely to be satisfied with the contributions process (77% compared to 91%), and
- Somewhat less likely to give the maximum rating (41% compared to 57%)
- They were also more likely to be dissatisfied (16% compared to 4%).

Doubting that the contribution provided value for money had a larger effect on satisfaction with the contributions process than simply having difficulties in paying the contribution.

Having to pay a contribution had little or no significant impact on measures of the quality of the experience of receiving a grant of aid. However, having difficulty paying the contribution, and especially believing the contribution was not 'value for money', significantly reduced the quality of the experience. Judging the required payment is not 'value for money' identifies many of the relatively small sub-group that were critical of the service provided.

## 7. Outcomes

### 7.1. Impact of the help from Legal Aid NSW

Respondents were asked to rate whether the service received so far had made seven aspects of their lives better, made no difference or made that aspect worse. The aspects concerned how well they were coping with their legal problem and their general well-being.

The help that clients received from Legal Aid NSW had the greatest positive impact on the client's understanding of their legal problem and situation (77% better, but 3% worse) and confidence in dealing with the problem (72% better, but 9% worse).

Clients reported that the help they received from Legal Aid NSW was more likely to improve (rather than make worse) their ability to carry on their day to day activities (46% better, 10% worse), their ability to deal with their financial situation (43% better, 7% worse), their relationship with their family (35% better, 9% worse) and their level of safety and security (48% better, 6% worse).

Over half (56%), considered the help from Legal Aid NSW made their levels of stress or anxiety better. However, some clients (17%) said their stress and anxiety levels increased. This result suggests that when some clients receive help from Legal Aid NSW, they may develop a better understanding of their legal problem but may also confront the reality that their lives are about to take a turn for the worse.

Criminal law clients were consistently least likely to report an improvement in an aspect of their lives, with this being significantly lower than the proportion of family law clients.

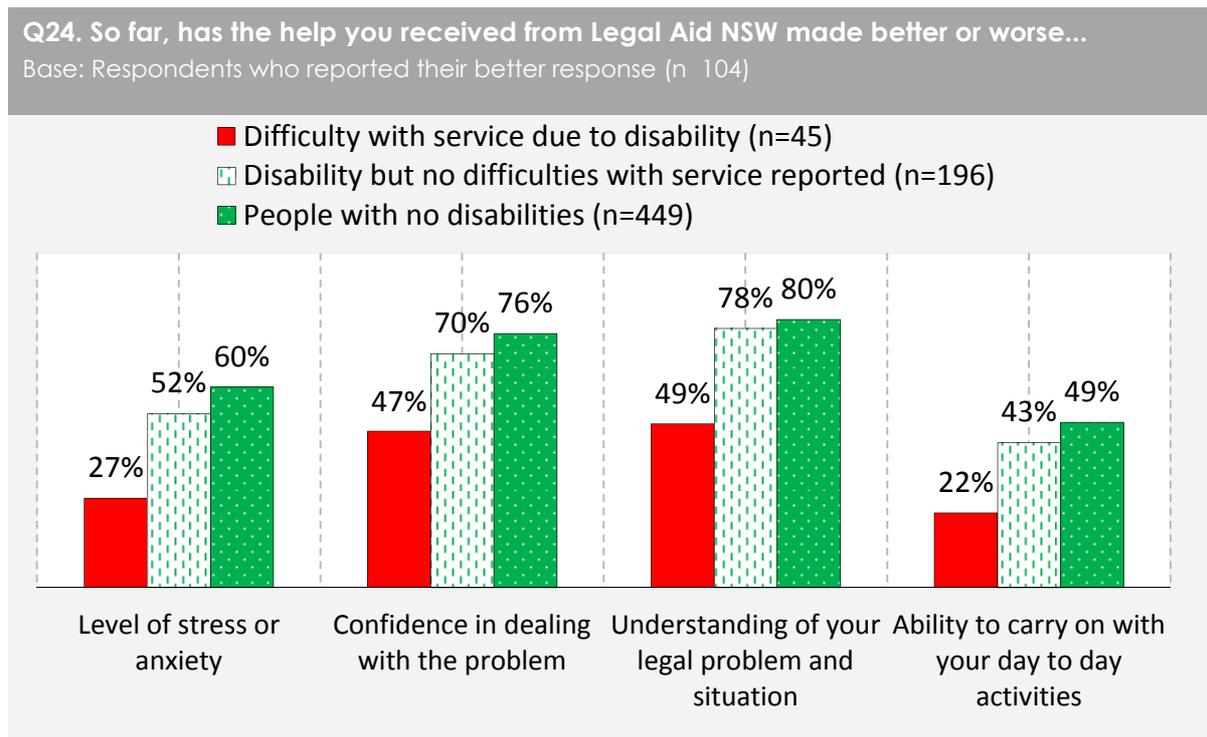
Family law clients were the most likely to consider the service had improved their: relationship with their family; their ability to carry on their day to day activities and their level of safety and security. The differences between the results for criminal and family law clients are statistically significant.

The results are consistent with the conclusion that a fuller understanding of their matter might be more likely to increase the level of stress and anxiety for those clients facing criminal law matters than for those dealing with the other two law types. Although there is a clear trend in this direction, it is not statistically significant.

Clients who speak a language other than English at home were more likely than those who only speak English to report that the service had a positive impact on their: levels of stress and anxiety (67% compared to 52%); safety and security (65% compared to 44%); and ability to deal with their financial situation (56% compared to 40%).

Clients with a disability were consistently less likely to report being better than clients without a disability. These differences were statistically significant and are largely due to those with a disability who reported they experienced problems with access or using the service due to their disability.

**Figure 8: Positive impact due to Legal Aid NSW help**



In summary, the service clearly had a favourable effect on how clients cope with their legal problem, and reduced adverse effect of this on the lives of many clients. The service had an adverse impact on a small minority of clients.

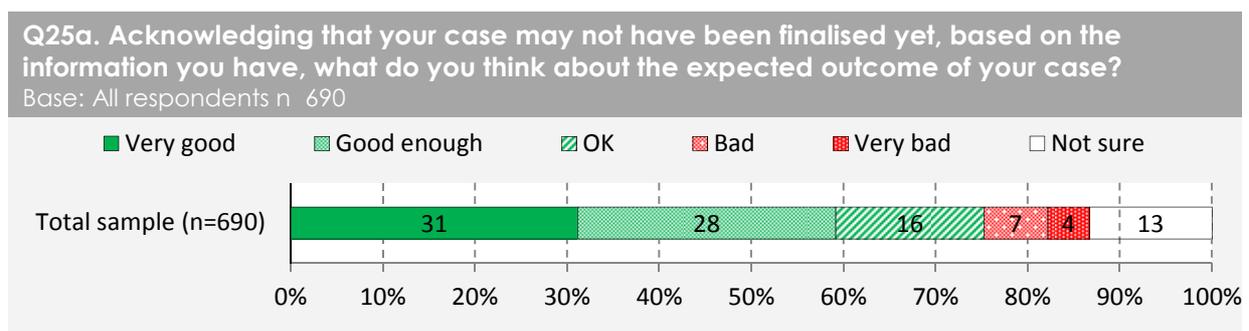
Legal Aid NSW service providers need to be aware that some clients may feel adversely affected and consider how to provide additional support to these clients.

### 7.2. Expected outcome

Other studies have shown that the actual or expected outcome of a process generally has a large impact on perceptions of the process. To enable this to be taken into account, all respondents were asked to rate how good or bad they believe the outcome of their legal problem will be, based on the information they have.

As Figure 9 shows, most (75%) expected an acceptable outcome and only 11% expected the outcome to be bad (7%) or very bad (4%), with 13% saying they were not sure.

**Figure 9: Expected outcome, 2017**



**Effect of law type**

Criminal law clients were significantly more likely to expect their outcome to be bad or very bad (16% compared to 9% and 6% for family and civil law matters). Civil law clients were significantly more likely to expect a very good outcome (44%) than those with family law (32%) or criminal law (26%) matters.

**Effect on recommendation, overall satisfaction and extent of help**

There was a strong relationship between expected outcomes to overall satisfaction with the service so far, and to agreeing that they would recommend the service to someone else.

Amongst clients who expect a very good outcome (n=215):

- 97% were satisfied (i.e. rated the service 6 – 10 on a scale where zero was very dissatisfied and 10 was very satisfied) and 73% gave a maximum rating of 10
- 98% agreed, including 67% who strongly agreed they would recommend the service
- 92% considered having an ongoing lawyer helped them to sort out their legal problem.

In contrast, of the clients who expect the outcome to be bad or very bad (n=79):

- 49% were satisfied, with 20% giving the top rating of 10
- 63% agreed, including 22% who strongly agreed they would recommend the service
- 43% considered having an ongoing lawyer helped them to sort out their legal problem.

The anticipated outcome of the problem has a big effect on perceived quality of the process but does not completely determine opinions of the process.

## 8. Barriers to access

### 8.1. Potential barriers

A variety of potential barriers to access were probed during the interviews. These included:

- Having to pay a contribution to the cost of the legal aid received (57%)
- Having difficulty paying the contribution (9% of the total sample, 16% of those having to pay a contribution)
- Having a disability (35%)
- Having difficulties accessing or using the service due to a disability (7% of the total sample, 19% of those with a disability)
- Having personal or cultural needs that Legal Aid NSW needed to consider (22%)
- Not having internet access (22%)
- Identifying as being Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander (12%)
- Speaking a language other than English at home (21%)
- Preferring to speak a language other than English with the help of an interpreter when contacting Legal Aid NSW (5% of the total sample, 24% of those who speak a language other than English at home).

### 8.2. Effects of potential barriers on the quality of service

To establish whether any of these potential barriers actually reduce the quality of service received, those reporting each potential barrier were compared to those who did not. The comparisons examined a number of indicators of the quality of service including recommendation, satisfaction with the service so far, and a rating of how much having a Legal Aid NSW lawyer throughout the process was helping them sort out their legal problem.

Across the outcome measures, the factors that showed evidence of reducing the quality of the service experience were:

- Having difficulties with accessing or using the service due to a disability
- Having personal or cultural needs that Legal Aid NSW needed to consider (and especially if this was not done)
- Having difficulty paying a required contribution to costs.

Having a disability reduced the quality of service primarily for those who reported their disability created difficulties in accessing or using the service. Thus it should be possible to identify those with a disability who are being adversely affected and to explore what could be done to bring their level of service up to that of other clients.

Any client having difficulties paying a required contribution needs to be identified, and asked what other problems (if any) they are having with the service. This small group might need additional assistance to receive the same quality of service as reported by most other clients.

### 8.3. Speaking a language other than English and preference for an interpreter

Speaking a language other than English at home, and preferring to use an interpreter when dealing with Legal Aid NSW did not significantly affect overall satisfaction, willingness to recommend the service, or feeling that ongoing contact with a lawyer made their problem better. However speaking a language other than English was associated with difficulty in completing the grant application form. The small group who wanted the help of an

interpreter were much less likely to have completed the application form themselves without assistance from anyone else.

The n=34 clients who prefer to use an interpreter were more likely to agree strongly that they would recommend the service (65%) than the n=656 other respondents (48%) – a substantial difference but not statistically significant, perhaps due to the small number of these clients in the sample.

This same group of clients were asked if they had sought the services of an interpreter. Most (85%) said they had asked for an interpreter. Of these n=29 respondents, 93% said that Legal Aid NSW staff had handled their request at least well enough and 79% that it had been handled very well. Only 7% said it had been handled not quite well enough.

#### **8.4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Clients**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients were:

- More likely than others to report difficulty in paying their contribution (23% of n=43 compared to 15% of the other 353 people who had to make a contribution)
- More likely to report having difficulty completing an application form than others who did so themselves (24% of n=54 compared to 17% of n=424).

There was almost no difference between these clients and others in recommending the service to others (n = 92% compared to 93%).

#### **8.5. Clients with a disability**

The percentage of clients with a disability is quite high (35%) reflecting the combination of having a disability and other criteria for the granting of legal aid or the decision to grant aid.

The most common type of disability was a mental or psychiatric disability (reported by 45% of those with a disability). Physical disabilities (30%), learning or reading disabilities (14%) and intellectual disabilities (8%) were less common, but would create very direct problems in dealing with any legal complexities.

Many of those reporting disabilities indicated this did not create difficulties in accessing Legal Aid NSW services (81%) and were very similar to respondents without a disability in their opinions of the service. However 19% (n=45) reported having difficulties and were much more likely to be critical of the service received. Just under half of these clients considered that Legal Aid NSW staff had handled these difficulties well enough (49% including 29% who rated this as being done very well). Almost half thought their difficulties had been handled not well enough (20% not quite well enough, 13% poorly and 11% very badly).

While those who had difficulties due to their disabilities were more likely to consider these had been well handled and the deficiencies were often considered minor, there is room to improve the experience of a small group) who rated the staff response as poor or very bad (under 2% of the total sample).

## 9. Pathways to the service

One in three (34%) respondents had contacted or looked into one or more other organisations, people or resources to obtain help before contacting Legal Aid NSW. The Law Society of NSW or a private lawyer was the dominant information source (43%) followed by community organisations (23%) and government departments (10%). A range of other sources were used by 1% up to 7%. Very few (1%) relied on an internet search, and under 1% said they had used Legal Aid NSW before.

## 10. Conclusions

Based on the interviews with respondents and the findings of this report and of additional analyses detailed in the Full Report, the conclusions are as follows:

- Satisfaction with the service remains high for both the administrative and reception staff, and for lawyers.
- Satisfaction with the Grants Division is high but there is scope for improvement.
- In particular, improving overall satisfaction with Grants Division staff might be achieved by improving:
  - Satisfaction with the timeliness of response to client queries
  - Satisfaction with the explanation of the grants process
  - Satisfaction with explanation of what the client can expect
  - Identifying those who are having difficulty paying their assessed contribution, and working with them to assist them to overcome their difficulties, and ensure that they have the same quality of experience as other clients.
- Key elements of the service response that contribute to client satisfaction are:
  - Competence and commitment of the lawyer
  - Prompt responses and clear communication when the client has queries
  - Ensuring the client feels accepted and supported.
- Clients with a disability, personal or cultural need are generally having those needs met, but there is room for improvement in this area.
- What matters is the service response to meet the needs of these clients, rather than whether the client has such needs. When the service response did not meet the need, perceptions of the service were much less favourable.
- The specific sub-groups that account for most of those who were dissatisfied appear to be those who:
  - Have a disability that resulted in difficulties in accessing or using the service
  - Have personal or cultural needs that were not met
  - Had difficulty in paying a required contribution
  - Those who expect a bad or very bad outcome.
- While each of these groups are quite small, identifying them early and providing additional appropriate assistance might further improve the already high level of service provided.

## 11. Recommendations

Initiatives should focus on the following to maintain and further improve the high levels of service that Legal Aid NSW provides:

- Managing client expectations at the outset of the relationship between the client and Legal Aid NSW and throughout the period of the relationship.
- Ensuring clear communication between Legal Aid NSW lawyers and their clients.
- At the outset of interactions with the client, identifying what a client needs to successfully access and use the service, and putting in place measures to ensure the service response meets those needs.
- A client may have particular needs that arise out of difficulties with accessing the service because of:
  - A disability,
  - A language barrier,
  - Difficulty paying a contribution
  - Increased stress and anxiety as they become aware of the consequences of their legal problem
  - Expecting a poor outcome of their case.
- Establish process to:
  - Identify these clients as early as possible
  - Overcome any consequent problems in their service experience (so far as possible)
  - Monitor their progress and further modify the service provided to overcome difficulties they experience due to their disadvantages.

