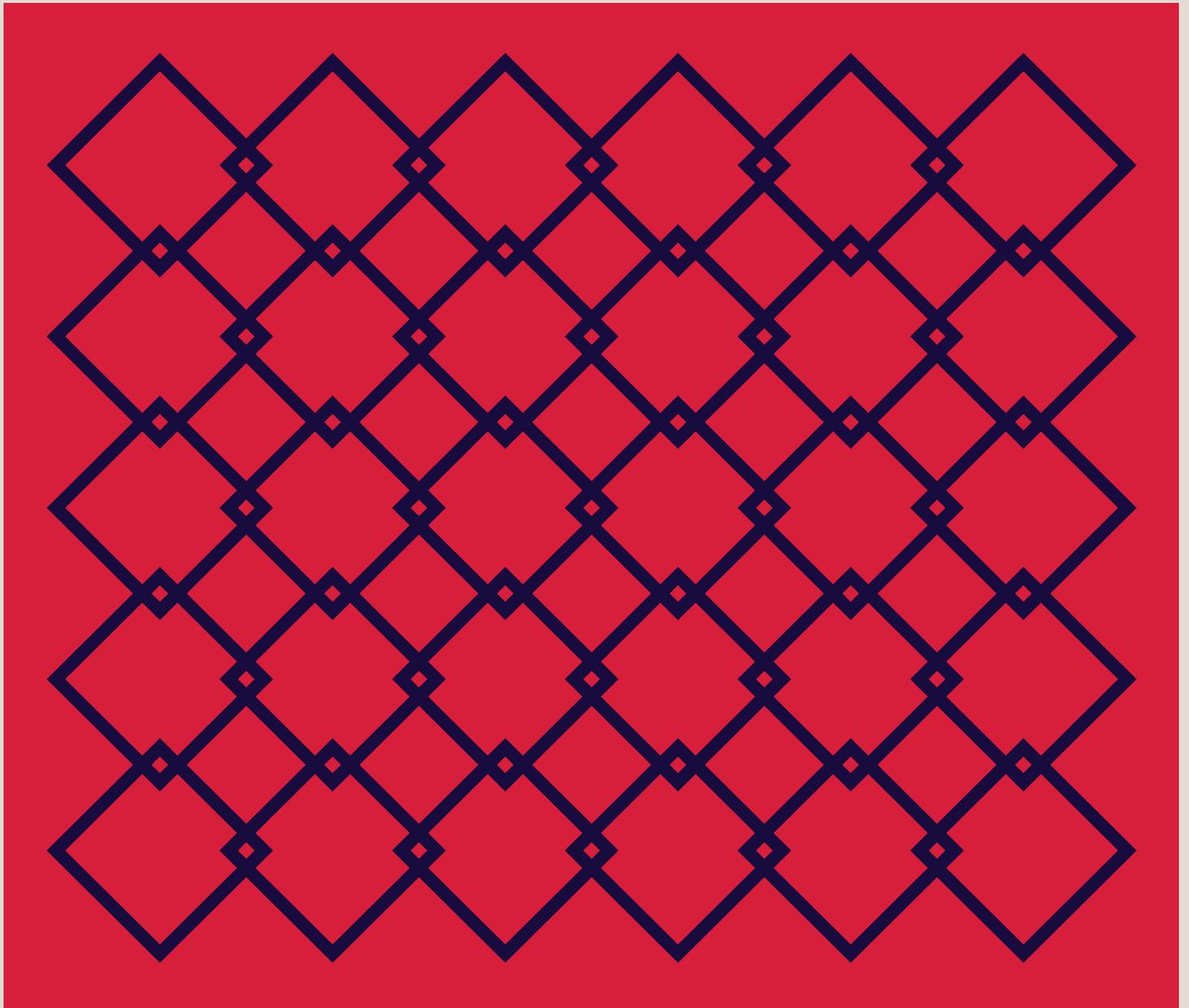

How People Use Legal Services: The Pilot Ex-Victoria Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (X-LULU) Survey

Prof Pascoe Pleasence and Prof Nigel J Balmer

Legal Services
Research Centre

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER



This report is published by the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner (VLSB+C). The Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner are independent statutory authorities responsible for the regulation of the legal profession in Victoria.

The VLSB+C aims to:

- protect and empower consumers
- maintain and enhance legal practice and ethics
- improve access to justice.

The authors of this research report are:

Prof Pascoe Pleasence

Professor Empirical Legal Studies, University College, London

Prof Nigel J. Balmer

Research Director, Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner

This document should be cited as:

Pleasence, Pascoe and Nigel J. Balmer. *How People Use Legal Services: The Pilot Ex-Victoria Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (X-LULU) Survey*. Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026.

ISBN: 978-1-7642105-6-0

This report is available to download at
www.lsb.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 2026

Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner,
Level 27, 500 Bourke Street, Melbourne 3000



The Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land, and pay respect to their Elders past and present.

How People Use Legal Services: The Pilot Ex-Victoria Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (X-LULU) Survey

Prof Pascoe Pleasence and Prof Nigel J Balmer

This report sets out the key insights, themes and lessons to be drawn from the pilot Ex-Victoria Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (X-LULU) survey (X-LULU survey).¹ The X-LULU survey was conducted by the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner (VLSB+C) across all Australian states and territories outside Victoria.² It was conducted in parallel with the more extensive pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) survey (V-LULU survey), reported on elsewhere.³

The X-LULU survey investigated the experience of 2,063 recent users of legal services. It provides a broad picture of the rationale behind people's service use, the nature of services provided and levels of satisfaction with different elements of service provision.

1. Using findings drawn from Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel J. Balmer, *Report of the Pilot Ex-Victoria Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (X-LULU) Survey* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2025).
2. The rationale for the geographic design of the survey is set out in Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel J. Balmer, *Report of the Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) Survey* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2025), as well as in the survey technical report. See Roy Morgan, *Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use Survey Technical Report* (Roy Morgan, 2025).
3. See Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel J. Balmer, *Report of the Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) Survey* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2025) for the full report and Pascoe Pleasence, Nigel J. Balmer and Karen Nokes, *New Vision for a New Future: The Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) Survey* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2025) for a summary of key themes.

The survey paints a broadly positive picture of people’s experience of legal services. Service use is extensive, satisfaction levels are high, communication is generally satisfactory, and complaint incidence is low. However, a minority of people have poor experiences of legal services, and pilot X-LULU findings highlight that this ties to particular types of issues, failures around communication, and failures in complaint systems.

The timing of the study is opportune as:

- Uniform Law cost-disclosure requirements have now been in force nationwide for several years⁴
- digital communication has altered how practitioners and clients interact
- the profession continues to face scrutiny regarding both affordability and accountability.

By drawing on the findings of the X-LULU survey, the reform and evolution of legal practice can be grounded in user-provided evidence and calibrated to promote and support public confidence in an evidently dynamic legal services market. The goal should be to optimise legal service provision for all users and all legal matters, from routine non-contentious transactions to complex disputes that go to the heart of people’s lives and welfare.

4. In Victoria, solicitors’ scoping, pricing and related client communication practices are governed, in part, by the Legal Profession Uniform Law (Victoria) (LPUL). See VLSB+C, “Rules and Compliance”, 12 July 2024, <https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/lawyers/practising-law/professional-obligations/rules-and-compliance>. Similar requirements are also seen internationally, such as in England and Wales: Solicitors Regulation Authority, “SRA Transparency Rules”, 16 December 2024, <https://www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/standards-regulations/transparency-rules/>.

The reach of legal services, barriers, choices and modes of communication

The X-LULU survey indicates that around one-quarter of adult Australians outside Victoria made use of one or more legal services during the 2 years before the survey's conduct. This implies substantial engagement between legal services and the public, and points to the important role that legal services play in everyday life. However, the survey also reveals that around one in 10 Australians tried unsuccessfully to access one or more legal services. Sometimes this was attributed to services being unable to help, but other common reasons provided included difficulties in making contact, difficulties or inconvenience linked to time, distance, and services being too expensive (particularly in the case of solicitors). Thus, the survey also points to significant barriers to access.

The most common issues concerned wills, probate or powers of attorney (31% of all legal service usage). A further 29% of issues concerned housing or property that the respondents owned. The only other issue that accounted for 10% or more of legal service usage was divorce or the end of a de facto relationship. Most, but not all, of these issues involved no dispute, meaning that, overall, over two-thirds of legal service use in the X-LULU survey related to non-contentious issues.⁵ The remaining service use related to contentious issues involving disputes.

By far, the most common type of legal service used by those who had engaged a legal service within the last 2 years was private solicitors (62%), followed by conveyancers (27%), legal aid (12%), notaries (11%) and community legal centres (CLCs) (8%).

People's choice of legal service was often informed by internet and social media searches (47%), though this was less common in the case of those using private solicitors (35%). In the case of solicitors, 48% of users were returning clients, slightly more than the 41% figure for other legal services. As with most aspects of service use, the picture varied between disputes and no-dispute issues, with the latter more likely to involve solicitors and users more likely to be repeat clients. Recommendations from friends and family were also commonly reported (39%).

5. The term 'non-contentious' does not directly correspond to the meaning traditionally employed by legal professionals, for whom it typically refers to specific non-litigious issues. Instead, in line with the survey's broader bottom-up methodology, non-contentious issues are defined from the perspective of those experiencing them. Specifically, they are characterised as justiciable issues that do not involve any dispute, so are not framed as contentious or adversarial in nature. Legal needs surveys, such as the pilot V-LULU surveys, have historically focused on the contentious, leaving gaps in our understanding of how people address issues and the reach of law. See Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel J. Balmer, "Justice and the capability to function in society," *Daedalus* 148, 1 (2019): 140-149; OECD/Open Society Foundations, *Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice* (OECD Publishing, 2019); Rebecca L. Sandefur, James Teufel and Matthew Burnett, *State of the Art in Civil Legal Needs Surveys: A Comparative Perspective* (American Bar Foundation Access to Justice Research Initiative, 2025).

Skills and experience were the most frequently mentioned factors guiding choice of service provider (51% of service users), followed by method of communication (49%) and location (48%). In broad terms, quality, ease of access and value for money were the overriding factors considered. Legal service users who indicated that method of communication was an important factor in choice of service most often preferred face-to-face communication (44%), followed by email and telephone (32% and 22%, respectively). In practice, face-to-face communication was the main form of communication on 36% of occasions (although it was used at some point in 59% of cases, which covered 85% of those who described it as their preferred method of communication). The telephone was used in 66% of cases and email in 61% of cases.

Face-to-face communication was more often the main form of communication with private solicitors (48%), and least often the main form with conveyancers (17%). Conveyancers were associated instead with email (59%). Legal aid and CLCs were more associated with the telephone (47% in both cases). Despite the nature of their practices, face-to-face communication was also more commonly the main form of communication used regarding no-dispute issues with conveyancers (40%, compared to 27%). And because of the role of legal aid and CLCs, the telephone was more common in the context of disputes using their services (37%, compared to 21%).

The picture painted here is unlikely to be a static one. As the V-LULU survey made very clear, technology is transforming the legal services landscape and shifting consumer expectations around form and mode of service delivery. Technology is changing how people research and identify services, as well as the way in which they engage with those services. Going forward, further change is inevitable, with the implication being that communication infrastructure – including secure digital portals, real-time document sharing and prompt messaging – will be increasingly important and prominent within legal service use. Legal services that adapt to mirror the needs and preferences of legal service consumers have the potential to be significant beneficiaries of these changes. As the V-LULU survey indicates, the reach of services can be greatly extended through innovation at the interface between personalised and generic information-based services.

Cost transparency, expectations and perceived value

While requirements vary across jurisdictions, taken as a whole, statutory cost disclosure requirements are intended to promote transparency and enable consumers to make informed choices.⁶ The X-LULU survey indicates that the framework is not fully achieving its purpose, with room for refinement and improvement. The provision of information about likely cost was recalled by just 56% of legal service users overall, although the figure was higher for solicitors (62%) and conveyancers (75%). In most instances costs information was recalled as having been provided in writing. Sixty-eight per cent of solicitors' clients recalled costs information being provided in writing, 32% also being provided verbally, and 32% verbally only. For conveyancers' clients, the figures were 86%, 27% and 14%, respectively.

Eight per cent of solicitors' clients could not recall being given an opportunity to ask about the costs information provided to them. For conveyancers' clients, the figure was 6%.

Ten per cent of solicitors' clients and 5% of conveyancers' clients could not recall being told about costs at any point.

Clients were much more likely to pay the full cost of legal services regarding no-dispute issues (77%, compared to 43% in the case of disputes). This is mirrored by the fact that services provided by conveyancers and private solicitors were the most likely to be paid for in full, while those provided by CLCs and legal aid were the most likely to have been reported as involving no payments at all, with costs covered by, for example, public funds. For those who paid for services, the mean cost of services was \$3,680 and the median was \$1,500.⁷

Seventy-eight per cent of those who paid for legal services reported that levels of bills were the same or lower than expected. However, 16% paid more than expected, with barristers' bills most often higher than expected.

Two-thirds of invoices were reported to have been issued at or near completion of service delivery, and when bills arrived, they were generally regarded as intelligible (87% of recipients).

The X-LULU survey findings indicate there is still much room for improvement regarding cost transparency, with such transparency important to clients' choices and satisfaction, as well as to their ability to challenge costs if costs exceed expectations.

6. Disclosure requirements vary across states and territories.

7. Solicitors more often charged by the hour and conveyancers by fixed fee.

Funding legal services – who pays, and at what cost?

Contrary to popular discourse that legal services are uniformly prohibitive, the X-LULU survey reveals a more nuanced landscape. A significant minority of legal service users incur no direct cost. Moreover, for those who do pay, the median outlay is \$1,500. This figure suggests, in the words used by Rebecca Sandefur in the United States context, the cost of ‘basic, transactional legal services appear to be relatively affordable’.⁸ However, it is worth noting that the distribution of legal costs is highly skewed as there is a long upper tail extending beyond \$40,000.

Funding sources mirror this diversity. Personal savings underpinned many payments, current income supported many more, and financial assistance from friends or family also featured in one-third of partial-payment scenarios. Contingency arrangements appeared in a small but significant number of issues, predominantly relating to personal injury.

The pilot X-LULU data made clear the importance of a mixed economy of legal service provision. Subsidised and pro bono pathways address demand that would otherwise convert into unmet legal need, while the private market offers variety and depth of options. It is therefore important that access to justice is not simply framed as a binary public-versus-private choice. Instead, it should be an objective best achieved through a healthy and diverse legal services market that fosters permeability between sectors, supported by transparent referral mechanisms and clear disclosure of potential costs at all points. A diverse market is also more resilient in the face of periodic pressures on particular sectors of service delivery.

High overall satisfaction tempered by communication vulnerabilities

Ninety-one per cent of service users rated their overall experience as either very or fairly satisfactory. Within that figure, a majority (57%) selected the highest category. This satisfaction is anchored in the provision of services that are wanted and needed. Satisfaction was strongly associated with whether or not legal service users got what they needed and asked for. So, 98% of legal service users who got everything they needed, asked for and were told they would get were satisfied with the service they received. In contrast, 75% of those who got none of what they needed, asked for or were told they would get, were dissatisfied (69%) or unsure (6%).

Client satisfaction was supported by positive perceptions of respect being shown, professionalism, expertise and timeliness of action. Satisfaction levels were a little lower regarding quality of communication, with poor communication a common reason for dissatisfaction. Failures to communicate progress were mentioned by 31% of those dissatisfied with services. Similarly, 26% mentioned the fact that bills were higher than expected.

8. Rebecca L. Sandefur, “Money isn’t everything: Understanding moderate income households’ use of lawyers’ services,” in *Middle Income Access to Justice*, eds M. Trebilcock, A. Duggan and L. Sossin (University of Toronto Press, 2012).

Highlighting the mismatch between service expectations and delivery,⁹ the most common reason for dissatisfaction was that services had not done enough (38% of cases of dissatisfaction) and, linked to this, had provided poor value for money (32%). Perceived mistakes and unprofessional conduct were also mentioned (33% and 18%, respectively).

The results confirm that satisfaction is not a single construct but a composite, contingent upon the match between service expectations and delivery, the quality of interpersonal and procedural communication, and perceived competence. Communication is evidently a key element of all of these.

The broad legitimacy enjoyed by the profession remains subject to ongoing performance in areas that clients can readily observe and evaluate. Regulation and monitoring of communication standards – especially in more complex dispute work – must be an important focus for future improvements in client experience and client protection.

Complaint behaviour and remedial effectiveness

Although dissatisfaction is uncommon, it warrants attention. Just 28% of dissatisfied legal service users raised their concerns directly. Just under one-quarter of these people made a formal complaint, as did 10% more, bringing the overall total to 16%. Separately, 20% of dissatisfied legal service users complained to a third party, with 11% doing so to a local legal services complaints body. A small number (4%) posted online reviews. This implies much silence and significant latent dissatisfaction (when aggregated to national levels). Moreover, of the 73 dissatisfied X-LULU survey legal service users who complained either directly or to a third party, 8 received an admission of fault, 6 received an apology, 6 had their complaint addressed (that is, the problem was fixed), 5 obtained an explanation for what had gone wrong, 4 saw action taken against them, and 2 received compensation. However, 13 reported that they achieved nothing by complaining.

Common barriers to making a complaint include perceived complexity, uncertainty about likely outcomes, and a wish to avoid further emotional or financial costs. For regulators, the challenge is to simplify and promote complaint channels and incentivise early, provider-level resolution. The evidence of the X-LULU survey indicates that, though thankfully uncommon, there are significant barriers and uncertainties relating to current complaint channels.

9. A core theme in the V-LULU survey. Pleasence and Balmer, *Report of the Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use Survey (V-LULU)*; Pleasence, Balmer and Nokes, *New Vision for a New Future*.

Last words

The X-LULU survey offers a rare, evidence-based window into the real-life experience of legal service users across Australia, outside Victoria. It reveals a broadly positive picture. Legal services are widely used, satisfaction is generally high, and communication is often effective. Most legal matters are resolved satisfactorily, and case work is generally valued and competently delivered.

However, beneath this overall positive picture lies nuance. A relatively small, but significant, number of people face barriers accessing services. Those who do access services sometimes experience communication failures and/or feel that expectations go unmet. Dissatisfaction, though relatively uncommon, is often unvoiced, with formal complaint pathways underused and not always effective when pursued. Costs are commonly understood but still surprise some. With more complex, disputed matters, vulnerabilities in communication and expectations can become more pronounced.

Legal service provision continues to evolve, shaped by regulatory reform, digital transformation, and shifting public needs and expectations. The X-LULU survey findings highlight the importance of maintaining and extending the strengths of the current system while addressing known weaknesses – particularly around transparency, communication and complaint resolution. Grounding reform in user experience, as captured by the X-LULU survey, is essential to moving closer towards a legal services market that is fair, accessible, and trusted by all who might need it.

References

OECD/Open Society Foundations. *Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice*. OECD Publishing, 2019.

Pleasence, Pascoe and Nigel J. Balmer. "Justice and the capability to function in society." *Daedalus* 148, no. 1 (2019): 140-149.

Pleasence, Pascoe and Nigel J. Balmer. *Report of the Pilot Ex-Victoria Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (X-LULU) Survey*. Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026.

Pleasence, Pascoe and Nigel J. Balmer. *Report of the Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) Survey*. Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2025.

Pleasence, Pascoe, Nigel J. Balmer and Karen Nokes. *New Vision for a New Future: The Pilot Victorian Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (V-LULU) Survey*. Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2025.

Roy Morgan. *Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use Survey Technical Report*. Roy Morgan, 2025.

Sandefur, Rebecca L. "Money isn't everything: Understanding moderate income households' use of lawyers' services." *In Middle Income Access to Justice*. Edited by Michael Trebilcock, Anthony Duggan and Lorne Sossin. University of Toronto Press, 2012.

Sandefur, Rebecca L., James Teufel and Matthew Burnett. *State of the Art in Civil Legal Needs Surveys: A Comparative Perspective*. American Bar Foundation Access to Justice Research Initiative, 2025.

To find out more visit:
lsbc.vic.gov.au/research-centre

or follow us on LinkedIn:
linkedin.com/company/victorian-legal-services-commissioner/

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER

Legal Services
Research Centre

Level 27, 500 Bourke Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000

GPO Box 492
Melbourne Victoria 3001