

Summary Engagement Report

Lawyer Quality Assurance Framework

July 2026

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Your knowledge, time, and practical experience helped deepen our understanding of quality legal aid services and informed the development of Legal Aid BC's (LABC) Lawyer Quality Assurance (QA) Framework.

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Executive summary

In 2025, in response to the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) of BC's performance audit, LABC undertook a Lawyer Quality Assurance (QA) Framework project to define and monitor quality expectations for contracted legal representation services. As a core part of that project, LABC undertook a focused engagement process from December 2025 to March 2026 to inform the development of the QA framework. Engagement opportunities were offered to service providers, including private bar lawyers as well as other interested and impacted parties, through several channels:

- surveys distributed to private bar lawyers, LABC staff lawyers, and frontline staff,
- a QA discussion paper shared with interested and impacted parties, accompanied by an invitation to provide detailed written submissions, and
- focus groups with both private bar lawyers and LABC staff lawyers.

Together, these engagement activities enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, which is summarized in this report, to support development of a lawyer QA framework.

Although project timelines did not allow for direct engagement with legal aid clients about their perspectives on service quality, LABC regularly surveys clients following representation services. This report summarizes the analysis of client feedback from these surveys related to quality of legal aid services.

Key takeaways from LABC's engagement activities included:

- high-quality legal representation is essential and should be defined by how services are delivered rather than solely by legal outcomes,
- system conditions (e.g. number of tariff hours) can impact quality,
- a QA framework should focus on supporting lawyers, and
- a QA framework should be practical, flexible, and focused on continuous improvement, with clear expectations and proportionate oversight.

The analysis of client survey results uncovered several findings, including that communication and timeliness or responsiveness are most important, and that competence, professionalism, continuity and client-centred representation are also integral to service quality.



The input summarized in this report has helped inform early development of a framework for defining, supporting, monitoring, and improving quality legal aid representation services. As this work moves forward, LABC will continue to build on existing quality-related activities, refine its approach through further analysis and engagement discussions, and share updates and provide opportunities for input as appropriate.



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Background and context

Providing quality legal services is part of LABC's mandate and a long-standing strategic priority for the organization. LABC has developed several individual QA initiatives over the past 25 years, including mentoring support, training and legal resources, the Criminal Case Management (CCM) program, biennial client surveys, and the Client Services Compliance Policy.

The OAG audited LABC for the period of April 1, 2023, to August 31, 2024, releasing its final report on April 29, 2025. The audit recognized that while the Law Society of BC (LSBC) is the professional regulator, LABC has a separate and distinct responsibility to ensure lawyers representing its clients meet LABC's quality expectations. One of the OAG's key recommendations was that LABC "define and monitor quality expectations for legal aid representation services."

In fall 2025, in response to the OAG's report, LABC undertook a Lawyer Quality Assurance (QA) Framework project to define and monitor quality expectations for contracted legal representation services. Legal aid clients, as a group, are among the most vulnerable members of our society. They face economic and other forms of systemic disadvantage while confronting legal problems that affect their most fundamental rights and interests. LABC's Lawyer QA Framework aimed to assess, build on, and expand the organization's existing QA initiatives within a more comprehensive and integrated framework that will help ensure clients, lawyers, funders, and the public have confidence in the quality of services lawyers provide. The project set out to accomplish several goals:

- Support better outcomes for clients by defining and monitoring what quality legal representation means in the LABC context.
- Examine options for clear and consistent service standards for legal representation, so expectations are transparent for lawyers, clients, and funders.
- Improve understanding of how client needs are being met by identifying strengths, gaps, and opportunities in current practices.
- Lay the groundwork for a systematic, evidence-based QA framework that supports accountability, continuous improvement, and alignment with LABC's strategic goals. Engagement activities were a central piece of project work.



Engagement approach and timeline

From December 2025 to March 2026, LABC undertook a focused engagement process to inform the development of its QA framework. Engagement opportunities were offered to service providers, including private bar lawyers as well as other interested and impacted parties, through several channels: surveys, focus groups, and a QA discussion paper.

In early December 2025, LABC distributed three surveys to private bar lawyers, LABC staff lawyers, and frontline staff to gather anonymous, broad-based input on a QA framework. LABC received 89 responses from private bar lawyers, 16 responses from staff lawyers, and 22 responses from frontline staff. In addition, service providers were invited to submit more detailed feedback after completing the survey and reviewing the QA discussion paper.

LABC prepared and shared a [QA discussion paper \(PDF\)](#) with interested and impacted parties on December 19, 2025, through an email blast to all active lawyers and several justice partners, agencies, and client-serving organizations, and via the Legal Aid Brief (LAB) newsletter for private bar lawyers and a news announcement on the LABC corporate website. The discussion paper sought to inform parties about LABC's current work to develop a QA framework for contracted lawyers' legal representation services, and it invited parties to provide detailed written submissions. Written submissions were accepted via email until January 17, 2026. LABC received seven detailed submissions from a mix of private bar lawyers and other interested and impacted parties.

Between February and March 2026, LABC conducted two focus groups — each with both private bar and staff lawyers — to capture more in-depth perspectives and nuanced insights. The focus groups sought to gather these service providers' perspectives on defining and assessing quality in legal aid contracted representation.



While project timelines and capacity constraints did not allow LABC to directly engage with legal aid clients on their perspectives of service quality, LABC regularly surveys clients following representation services. The project team reviewed data from LABC's existing client surveys to help inform development of a QA framework, recognizing that deeper and more focused client engagement could be conducted as part of future QA implementation work. The project examined 395 client comments submitted through LABC pulse surveys between May 2024 and November 2025. Of these, 148 comments related to gaps in quality and were analyzed for themes related to the quality of legal services private bar lawyers provide. Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) considerations were included in the design of the project's engagement activities, and engagement input helped inform how GBA Plus was carried throughout the QA framework. Engagement questions invited participants to reflect on quality from the client's perspective. This included what culturally safe and responsive service can look like in practice. Participants were also asked how they consider inclusivity in their own practice and what supports may help strengthen their ability to provide quality services to diverse clients.

The results and themes from LABC's engagement activities presented below helped inform the design of LABC's Lawyer QA Framework, including the definition of quality legal aid services, guiding principles, and specific initiatives, actions, or activities LABC will carry out to promote, monitor, and ensure quality.

Engagement findings

Analysis of client survey responses related to quality

The analysis of client pulse survey results highlights several issues connected to service quality, particularly communication, timeliness, competence, professionalism, and client-centred representation.

The most common concern was lack of communication and responsiveness, with about half of the negative comments describing unanswered calls and emails, prolonged periods without updates, and difficulty obtaining basic information about court dates or case status. Clients frequently described feeling ignored or abandoned, with one client stating that communication "just isn't really there," and another reporting they had been "literally ghosted." From a QA perspective, these comments point to challenges in maintaining consistent communication, managing client expectations, and ensuring clients can meaningfully participate in their legal matters.



Concerns about failure to take action and case stagnation, raised in roughly 45 percent of comments, also relate closely to quality of service and effective case management. Clients described long delays in filings, hearings, and other procedural steps, sometimes resulting in prolonged separation from children, unresolved criminal matters, or ongoing uncertainty. Many clients attributed these issues to lawyers being overworked or carrying excessive caseloads, leading to rushed interactions, forgotten details, and delayed responses. Other comments raised concerns about competence and preparedness, including lawyers appearing unfamiliar with files, lacking knowledge in specific areas of law, or attending hearings unprepared. About one fifth of the comments also reflected concerns about insufficient advocacy, with some clients feeling their lawyer did not adequately represent or advocate for them.



A smaller but notable number of comments related to professionalism and continuity of service, including reports of rude or condescending behaviour, missed hearings, lawyer turnover, and reliance on articling students or alternate counsel unfamiliar with the case. A limited number of comments also raised concerns about potentially incorrect or harmful legal advice. While these comments reflect client perceptions rather than verified findings, collectively they identify areas that may warrant QA attention, including communication standards, file management, workload pressures, continuity of representation, and supports for competent, client-centred advocacy. Many clients also described significant personal impacts, including emotional distress, financial hardship, ongoing safety concerns, and harm to family relationships, underscoring the importance of quality legal services for both client experience and legal outcomes.

Overview of project survey results

This section provides a high-level overview of survey results collected through the project engagement process. The surveys gathered feedback from private bar lawyers, LABC staff lawyers, and frontline staff on how quality legal representation should be understood, what factors support or affect quality, and how potential QA methods may be viewed by those involved in legal aid service delivery.

The charts below summarize responses to questions that were compared across respondent groups. Frontline staff input is included to ground the survey results in service delivery context. The more detailed analysis that follows focuses on lawyer survey responses, which are more closely connected to the proposed QA methods.

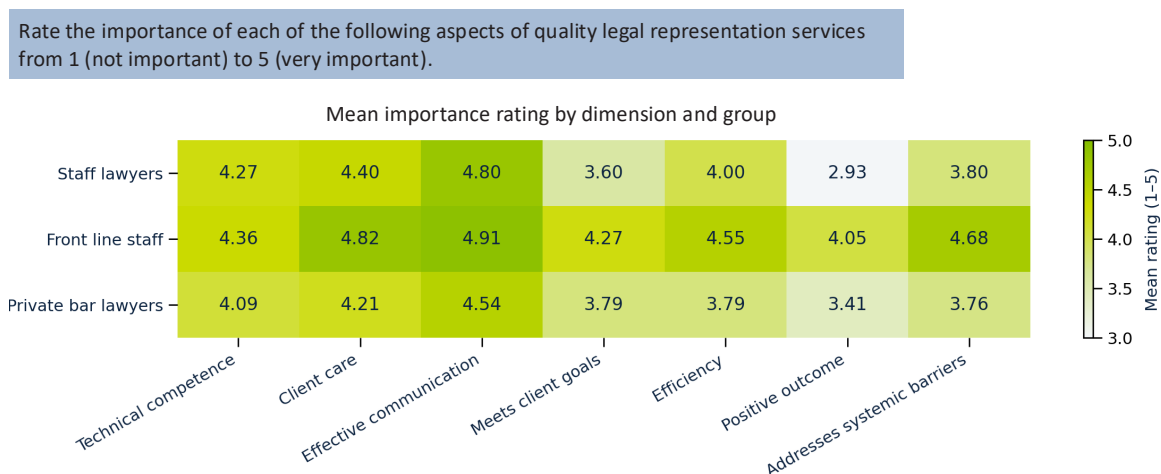


Figure 1: Mean importance rating for quality measures, all respondent groups



Rate the importance of each of the following aspects of quality legal representation services from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

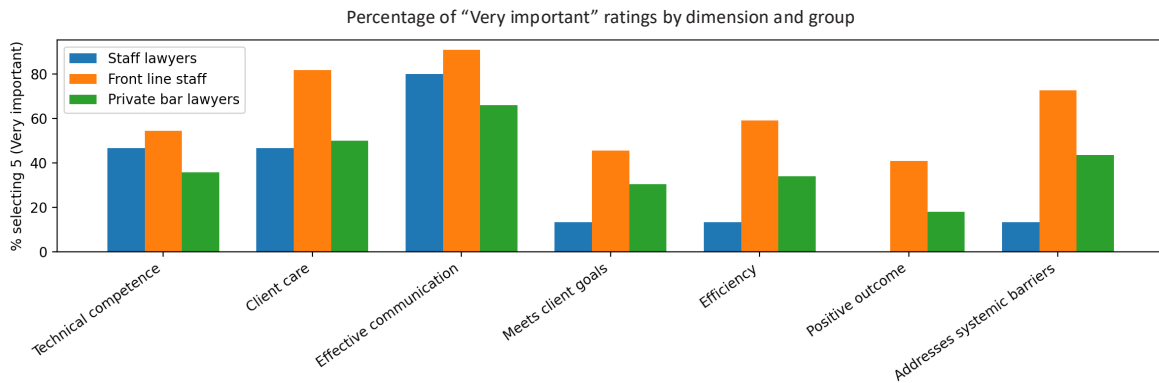


Figure 2: Percentage importance rating for aspects of quality, all respondent groups

Rate how effective you believe each of the following measures is in ensuring high-quality legal representation services for legal aid clients from 1 (not effective) to 5 (very effective).

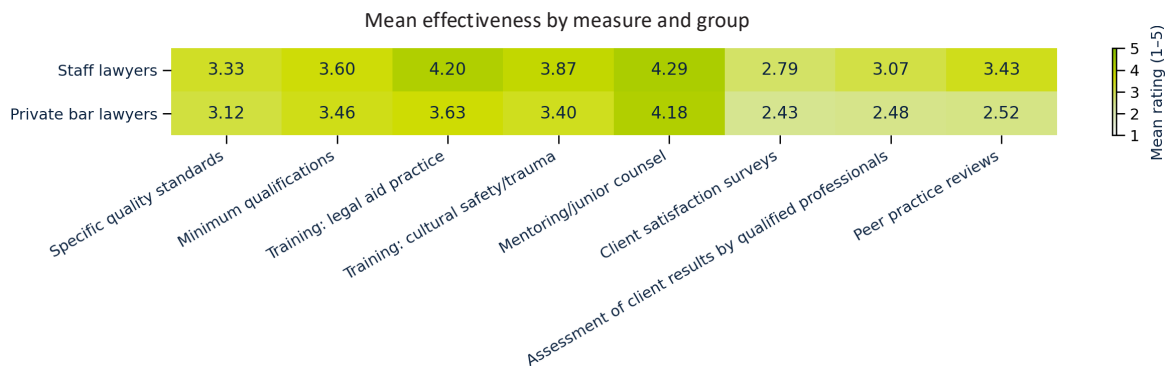


Figure 3: Mean effectiveness rating for quality measures, all respondent groups



Please rate how effective you believe each of the following measures is in ensuring high-quality legal representation services for legal aid clients from 1 (not effective) to 5 (very effective).

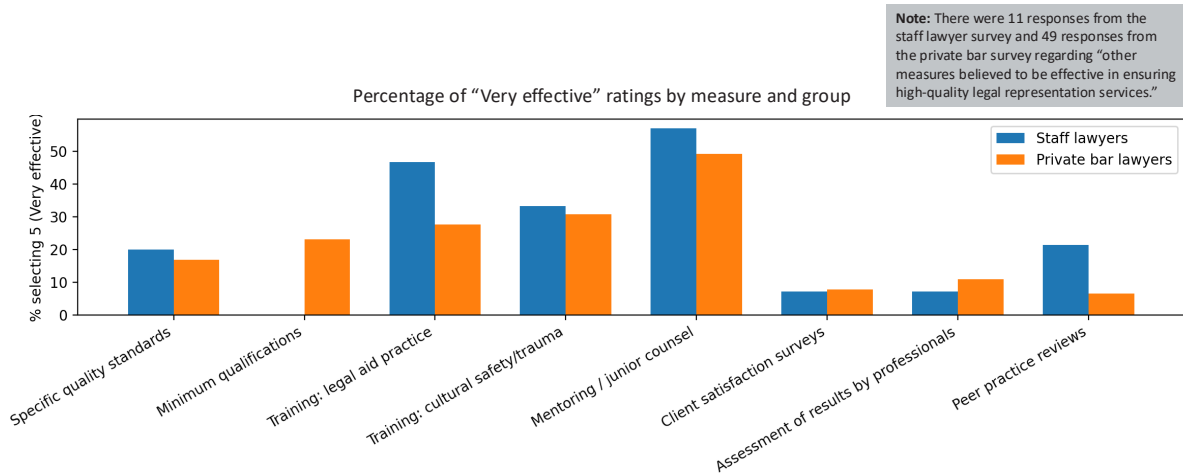


Figure 4: Percentage rating for quality measures, all respondent groups

When concerns arise about the quality of legal representation, different remedial measures may be considered. Please rate your level of support for the following remedial measures from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support).

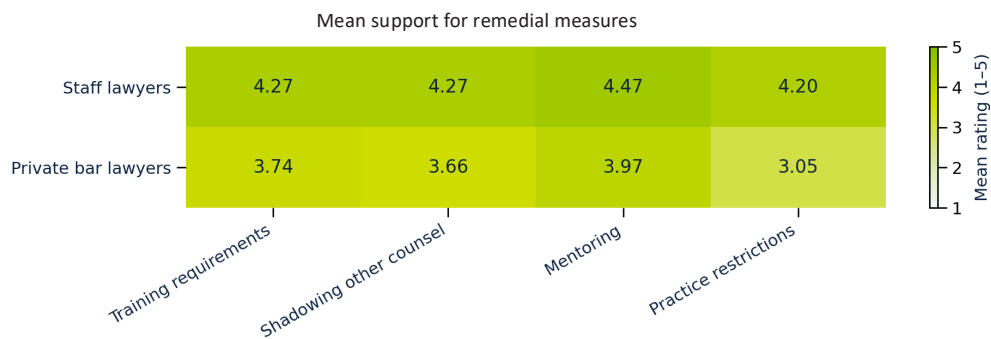


Figure 5: Mean support rating for remedial measures, all respondent groups



What issues do clients most often raise about working with private-bar legal aid lawyers?

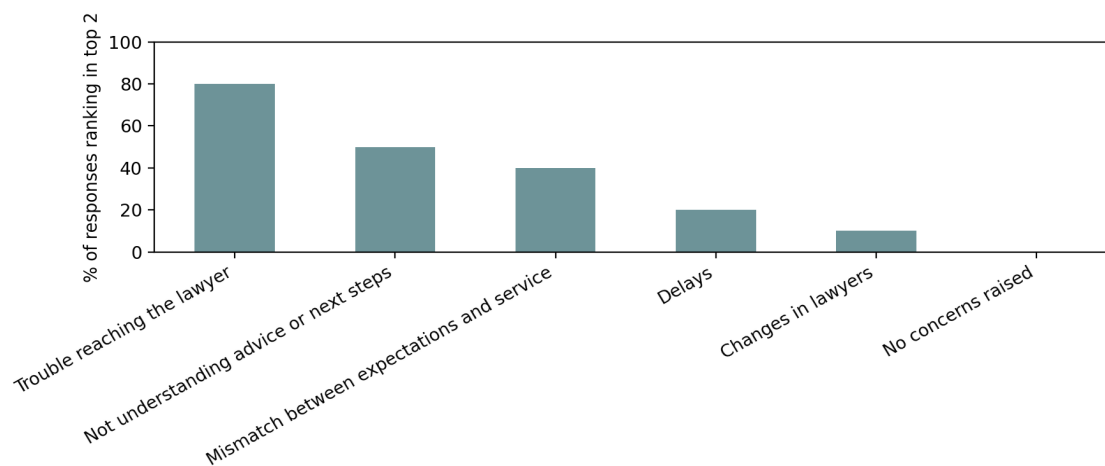


Figure 6: Common client issues, frontline staff

Lawyer survey results

Findings from both the private bar and staff lawyer surveys point to a clear and consistent direction for the design of the QA framework. Across all questions, respondents strongly prioritized supportive, relationship-based approaches to quality over administrative or outcome-based measures.

When asked to rate the importance of various aspects of quality legal representation services, effective communication ranked by far the highest, with 88 percent of private bar lawyers and 100 percent of staff lawyers saying it is “very important” or “important.”

“Responsive, balanced, and thoughtful representation that always considers the client’s holistic best interests rather than narrowly focusing on individual legal outcomes. (...) Being prepared for court. Following up with client and other counsel/party to move the matter forward.”

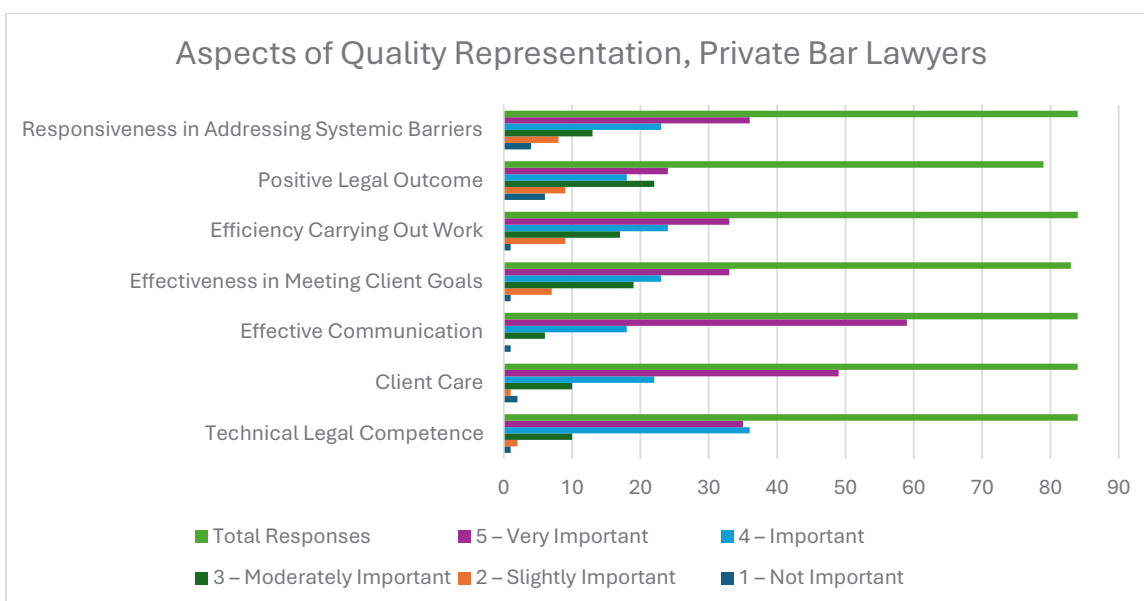


Figure 7: Aspects of quality representation, private bar lawyers

When asked to provide their view on the effectiveness of quality measures, mentoring emerged as the most consistently supported and effective mechanism across both datasets, indicating it should be positioned as a central component of a QA framework. Shadowing and experiential learning such as junior counsel support were also highly valued, reinforcing a broader preference for hands-on, developmental approaches.

“Some kind of forced or mandatory mentorship with other lawyers. All lawyers under 5 years call must conduct 5 files per year in concert with a senior lawyer. That senior lawyer should be paid a set amount of hours. (...) Witnessing someone’s judgement is as valuable as witnessing their legal product.”

“Allowing some shadow hours on each file for junior co-counsel for a mediation, trial, or contentious chambers would allow the junior lawyer to watch, learn and practice these things without the pressure or high stakes of figuring it out on their own for the first time.”

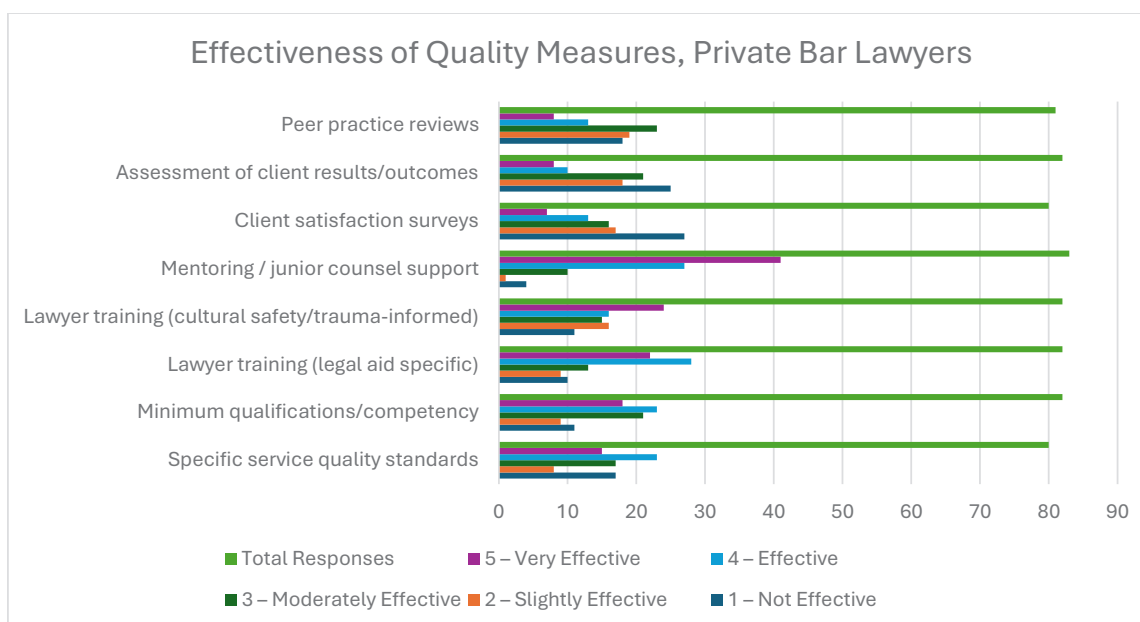


Figure 8: Effectiveness of quality measures, private bar lawyers

Overall responses indicate that quality in legal aid should be defined primarily by how services are delivered, particularly effective communication and client care, rather than by legal outcomes. This suggested the framework should emphasize process, relationships, and client experience as core dimensions of quality.

Lawyer training was broadly supported as a complementary QA measure, though responses indicate it should not be relied on as a standalone solution. In contrast, the value of evaluative and administrative mechanisms such as client surveys, peer reviews, and outcome assessments were met with skepticism by private bar respondents.

Finally, remedial approaches should prioritize supportive and capacity-building interventions over punitive measures. While mentoring and shadowing received strong support, practice restrictions were the most contested measure, indicating a need for careful consideration with respect to application.

Overall, the survey findings support a QA Framework that is grounded in mentorship, professional development, and strong client relationships, with a more limited role for compliance-driven or punitive mechanisms.



Providing QA for clients from equity-seeking groups

Both staff and private bar lawyer respondents consistently identified high-quality legal representation as essential for all clients, including those facing systemic discrimination. However, private bar lawyers emphasized that delivering quality services is primarily limited by resource constraints, rather than a lack of commitment among lawyers. The most prominent theme was the need for increased funding, higher tariff rates, and more billable hours, including coverage for administrative and non-tariff work. It was noted that current constraints within the LABC Tariffs hinder thorough representation and make it difficult to attract and retain experienced counsel.

There is strong support for enhanced training and professional supports, particularly in trauma-informed practice, cultural competency, and mentorship. Respondents highlighted the importance of matching clients with appropriately skilled and experienced lawyers, and called for greater system flexibility, including reduced administrative burden, and faster access to additional hours and resources in complex cases.

Many also noted the need for wrap-around supports, such as interpreters, expert assessments, and services for clients facing mental health, addiction, or housing challenges.



While most supported targeted efforts to address systemic discrimination, some emphasized that all clients should receive a consistent standard of high-quality service.

Survey respondents were asked what they do to ensure high-quality representation services for clients from equity-seeking groups:

“We are very cognizant of the barriers that our clients can face and have a dedicated office space where we can meet with clients who face barriers relating to the use of telephones and computers — for example we can review particulars face to face. (...) We try to provide referrals to culturally appropriate resources. We take the time with clients who struggle to understand the legal process with the help of our staff. We make efforts to provide trauma-informed services.”

“Appropriate hours under the retainer to allow the lawyer to do the tasks that will take more time for these clients. (...) Time to ensure that when the retainer ends they have tools to continue independently managing their legal matter.”

“Making sure that they have support from other non-legal organizations and individuals, such as cultural or gender-based groups. Ensuring they have the ability to communicate to counsel in their first language if they have language difficulties. Being patient and understanding of how their background and their beliefs impact their decisions and actions.”



Discussion paper responses

Process and client experience

Across discussion paper submissions, there was alignment that the quality of legal aid services is shaped as much by system conditions and supports as by individual lawyer performance. Current structural constraints including limited coverage, insufficient tariff hours, administrative burden, and a shortage of experienced counsel significantly affect the ability to deliver high-quality representation, particularly in complex family law matters and for high-needs clients.

Another consistent theme was that quality should be understood primarily in terms of process and client experience, rather than outcomes. Rather, high-quality representation includes clear and proactive communication, early and meaningful engagement, thorough preparation and effective advocacy. Establishing trust between counsel and client is critical: clients should know who their lawyer is, be able to reach them, and feel respected, informed, and supported throughout their case. Initial meetings, ongoing communication, and guidance with key legal documents are seen as essential components of quality service.

Ability to represent vulnerable clients

Submissions also highlighted that legal aid clients often face heightened vulnerability, including experiences of trauma, systemic discrimination, language barriers, and cognitive challenges. As a result, quality representation must also include competencies in trauma-informed, culturally safe, gender-inclusive, and neurodiversity-affirming practice, along with access to interpretation services where needed. More broadly, participants emphasized that legal aid services should affirm client dignity, build trust, and address inherent power imbalances in the lawyer-client relationship.

Supports for lawyers

All submissions highlighted the need for stronger proactive supports for lawyers, particularly mentorship, experiential learning, and practical tools. While training is valued, it is perceived as most effective when combined with hands-on support, such as mentorship. Respondents also identified the need to align tariff hours with case complexity, streamline administrative processes (especially requests for additional hours and disbursements), and ensure timely access to necessary resources. Without these supports, lawyers may be required to absorb unpaid work or deliver services without adequate tools.



A key concern raised within the submissions was centred around the sustainability of the legal aid workforce. Current conditions, including low compensation and high administrative burden, create barriers to attracting and retaining experienced counsel. Submissions emphasized the need for incentives, including financial supports, professional recognition, and career development opportunities, to ensure that legal aid work is a viable and respected area of practice.

Supported QA measures

Regarding specific QA measures, the submissions articulated support for clear standards and expectations around communication, client engagement, and file management, alongside practical tools such as templates and guidance materials. Monitoring should be targeted and proportionate, using indicators such as communication breakdowns, complaints, or repeated changes of counsel, while recognizing that not all quality issues are externally visible. Complaint processes should be more accessible, client-centred, and supportive, and should not create barriers to changing counsel or raising concerns.

Finally, there was a strong emphasis on ongoing engagement and continuous improvement. It was suggested that clients, community organizations, and frontline workers should play a role in shaping, implementing, and evaluating the framework. QA processes themselves should reflect the same values expected of legal services: being client-centred, transparent, trauma-informed, and inclusive.

Overall, the combined submissions suggested that meaningful QA requires a balanced approach: investing in the conditions that enable quality (funding, supports, and incentives), clearly defining client-centred standards, and implementing flexible, practical oversight mechanisms that reflect the realities of legal aid practice.

Lawyer focus groups

Focus group participants were asked a series of questions, with the following goals in mind:

- develop a clearer understanding of what “quality” means from the private bar perspective,
- understand existing strengths, gaps, and experiences,
- explore perspectives on QA approaches without committing to specific solutions, and
- identify what would make a QA framework successful or unsuccessful.



Focus group discussions identified the following themes and conclusions:

Service delivery outweighs outcomes

Across discussions, participants consistently described quality in legal aid as being grounded more in how services are delivered than in the outcomes achieved. Communication, client care, preparation, advocacy, and accessibility were all seen as central components of quality, with strong emphasis on ensuring clients understand their case and feel supported throughout. In this context, communication stood out as especially important — when it breaks down, it is often one of the clearest signs that something may be going wrong.

Legal aid is distinct

Participants also highlighted that legal aid operates in a distinct environment. Limited funded hours, complex client needs, and the reality that clients may need to continue on their own all shape how lawyers approach their work. This creates a need to balance efficiency with thoroughness, while also taking on a coaching and educational role with clients.

Importance of mentorship and experience-based support

Mentorship and hands-on learning were repeatedly identified as some of the most important ways to support quality, particularly for junior lawyers handling complex files. While training and bursaries were viewed positively, there was a clear sense that they are most effective when combined with practical, experience-based support. At the same time, broader system pressures such as limited funding, challenges attracting experienced counsel, and the concentration of difficult files among newer lawyers were seen as ongoing factors that can affect quality.

More flexible lawyer eligibility requirements

There was also general agreement that eligibility requirements should allow for some flexibility, particularly where lawyers have demonstrated strong performance, and that overly rigid rules could limit access to representation. Participants noted that quality concerns are often tied to individual practitioners, but can be difficult to identify and raise, as there is reluctance within the profession to report peers, even when issues may be visible to others in the system.



Targeted and flexible monitoring approaches

Regarding monitoring, participants suggested that certain patterns such as repeated changes of counsel, complaints, or poor communication may be useful signals of concern, while noting that high workload alone does not necessarily indicate poor quality. More targeted approaches, such as selective file review, clearer expectations, and thoughtful screening of new vendors, were generally supported, if applied in a flexible way. At the same time, more resource-intensive approaches, like observing lawyers in court, were seen as less practical, and it was acknowledged that not all quality issues are easily visible from the outside.

Shared expectations

Participants also pointed to the need for clearer, shared expectations, both for lawyers and clients, so that there is a common understanding of what legal aid services should provide. Some gaps in awareness of existing tools and resources were noted, suggesting an opportunity to improve communication and uptake.

Greater recognition of legal aid work

Finally, broader perception issues were raised, including the sense that legal aid work is undervalued within the profession. Participants suggested that greater recognition of this work could help support both quality and retention.

Overall, there was strong alignment around a framework that focuses on mentorship, client-centred practice, and practical, proportionate approaches to oversight, while remaining flexible enough to reflect the realities of legal aid work.

Engagement findings key takeaways

Some clear and consistent themes emerged as part of LABC's engagement on the development of a QA framework. Participants agreed that high-quality legal representation is essential and is defined primarily by how services are delivered rather than outcomes alone.

At the same time, there was a strong message that system conditions shape quality. Limited tariff hours, administrative burden, and challenges attracting and retaining experienced lawyers were identified as key barriers. Improving quality is therefore closely linked to improving the conditions in which legal aid services are delivered.



There was broad support for a QA framework focused on supporting lawyers, with mentorship, hands-on learning, and practical tools identified as the most effective approaches.

Participants also emphasized the need for flexibility to respond to clients who face complex and intersecting barriers, including access to culturally competent and wrap-around supports. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of a framework that is practical, flexible, and focused on continuous improvement, with clear expectations and proportionate oversight.

Engagement outcomes and future work

The feedback summarized in this report has helped inform LABC's ongoing work to build on existing quality-related activities and strengthen how quality legal aid representation services are supported over time.

The project team has used this input, along with research and analysis, to support the early development of a lawyer QA framework — a clearer structure for how quality legal aid representation services are defined, supported, monitored, and improved. This work has helped clarify how quality legal aid representation services can be understood, what principles should guide future quality-related work, and where further development may be needed.

This work will continue to be refined and tested through further analysis, engagement, and discussions with those involved in and affected by legal aid services. As this work moves forward, we will communicate updates and provide opportunities for input as appropriate.

By continuing this work, LABC aims to support legal aid services that are practical, consistent, responsive, and focused on better outcomes for clients. Questions about this report or the Lawyer QA Framework project can be directed to lawyerqaframework@legalaid.bc.ca.

