

Everything you need to know about Lexcel accreditation



Lexcel is the Law Society's practice management standard, the objective of which is to enhance the service given by a practice to its clients, and to improve the management of the practice. There is an emphasis within the standard on continuous improvement.

The Lexcel standard is applicable to all organisations within the legal sector providing they have at least one qualified solicitor working for them.

The Lexcel standard is divided into 8 parts:

- Structures and policies: e.g. health and safety policy, risk management policy, equality and diversity policy and looking to see how these are working in practice
- Strategic plans: e.g. Business, Marketing and Business Continuity plans
- Financial Management: e.g. procedures for billing clients, documentary evidence of financial management and time recording process
- Information Management: e.g. email and internet policies, website policy, social media policy and control of the office manual
- People Management: e.g. recruitment and induction, job descriptions, appraisals, training and development
- Risk Management: including processes which are in place for supervision of staff and whether these are working, areas of risk the practice should consider before taking on new work, management of high risk instructions, procedures for the independent review of files by the supervisor and how is this working in practice.
- Client Care: e.g. how client enquiries are dealt with, what information should be given to the client in writing at the start of a matter and as the matter progresses, costs information given to the client, complaints procedures, and the process for gathering client feedback
- File and Case Management: covering how a matter file is run and whether it can be easily picked up and followed by another fee earner if necessary. Also looks at the procedure for instructing barristers and other experts and procedures to be followed at the end of a matter.

Preparing for your Lexcel Assessment

IBP would recommend completing the self assessment checklist which is available, to judge where you are against the standard and where work is still required.

The key piece of documentation your firm needs to have in place is an Office Manual, which normally contains all of your procedures, plus all of the required policies.

Before coming forward for an assessment your firm needs to have evidence that it has been Lexcel compliant for at least 3 months. During the first Lexcel Assessment, your Lexcel assessor will not look back further than 3 months, however for subsequent visits the assessor will consider the last 12 months worth of evidence.

How to apply for your Lexcel Assessment

Once you think you are ready for your Lexcel assessment, you can contact an assessment body so that they can allocate an assessor and agree a date with you. *IBP is one of the 3 licensed assessment bodies for Lexcel within England, and were awarded a 3 year licence at the end of 2012.*

You must also submit an application form to the Lexcel office at the Law Society at least 8 weeks prior to the date of your visit, as there are checks the Lexcel office need to do, such as verifying solicitor status, before giving the go ahead for an assessment.

The Assessment itself

Your assessment will include some pre-visit planning, when your assessor will normally work through the office manual to see which areas of the standard are met and which need further information to be gathered on site. The on site visit then takes place, which consists of a review of documentation; review of a selection of open and closed case files and interviews with a range of staff.

The assessor will give verbal feedback on the outcomes of the visit. It could be that the standard is met in full or that there are major or minor non-compliances, i.e. areas of the standard which haven't been met. Minor non-compliances need to be addressed within 21 days of the on site visit, and are normally easy to correct. Major non-compliances need to be addressed within 3 months of the on site visit and are more serious issues, which will normally require the assessor to re-visit your firm. The assessor will also give feedback on areas of good practice and suggested areas for improvement. They will then produce a report, which will be sent to the Law Society.

Achieving Lexcel Accreditation

If there were no non-compliances identified during your assessment, the Law Society will grant accreditation within about 6 weeks. If there are non-compliances, you will need to provide evidence to show that these have been addressed, upon which a corrective action report will be written by your assessor and submitted to the Lexcel office before accreditation can be given.

Once Lexcel accredited, your firm must have a visit by a Lexcel assessor every 12 months thereafter. The first 2 years' visits (called Annual Maintenance Visits) take roughly half the time of a full assessment as less files are reviewed and less staff interviewed. 3 years from the date of your accreditation, a full review is carried out and then the cycle begins again.

If all this sounds a lot to do, remember there are many benefits to becoming Lexcel accredited...

- Lexcel is welcomed by indemnity insurers and can lead to a reduction in your premiums
- Lexcel is a good risk management tool, so helps to reduce the risk of complaints
- Lexcel can help you become a better run practice with well supervised staff
- Being Lexcel accredited will enable you to demonstrate that you are meeting the majority of Solicitor Regulatory Authority Code of Conduct
- Lexcel helps ensure consistency of approach to how matters are run across your practice.

INSPIRING is one of the 3 licensed assessment bodies for Lexcel within England and is the Solicitors Group's preferred supplier for Lexcel. Contact IBP at Lexcel@ibp.uk.com or call free on 0800 612 3098 to discuss your Lexcel requirements.