



ANNUAL
REPORT 2019
SUMMARY

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER


LEGAL PROFESSION
Uniform Law

INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of the annual report of the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner. It covers the 12-month period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019. For the full report, please visit our website.

WHO WE ARE

We were established on 1 July 2015 under the *Legal Profession Uniform Law Application Act 2014* (Vic) (or the 'Application Act' for short). This legislation superseded the *Legal Profession Act 2004* (Vic).

The Application Act established us as two independent statutory authorities: the Victorian Legal Services Board and the Victorian Legal Services Commissioner. For practical reasons we operate as one body under a unified name: the **Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner**. Because we function as one unified body, we also present our annual report of operations and financial statements in a combined annual report.

Our Board is a body corporate with perpetual succession. It is a public entity, but does not represent the Crown. Our Commissioner, Fiona McLeay, is also the CEO of our Board. Fiona commenced her tenure in January 2018.

As statutory authorities, we are accountable to the Victorian Parliament. Our responsible minister is the Attorney-General, The Hon. Jill Hennessy MP.

OUR PURPOSE

As the primary regulator of the legal profession in Victoria, we implement the Legal Profession Uniform Law (or simply, the 'Uniform Law'). This forms Schedule 1 to the Application Act. A series of Rules and Regulations underneath the Uniform Law further expand the regulatory regime. These serve to protect consumers of legal services and enhance the integrity of the legal profession.

We see the following three objectives as crucial to meeting our obligations under the Uniform Law:

- protect consumers and the public by effective regulation of lawyers and legal practices;
- assist the legal profession to achieve the highest standards of ethics and legal practice; and
- manage the funds under our control to support effective regulation and promote confidence in the administration of justice.

To achieve each of these objectives, we work closely with the Legal Services Council, the Commissioner for Uniform Legal Services Regulation, the Law Institute of Victoria (LIV) and the Victorian Bar (as the local professional associations), and legal regulators in other jurisdictions. This helps us to ensure that our approach to delivering on our responsibilities is consistent with other Uniform Law jurisdictions.

We also consult with the broader legal sector, and are actively working on ways to improve how we engage with current and potential consumers of legal services.

WHAT WE DO

We have a broad range of responsibilities under the Uniform Law. These are summarised in Figure 1. To deliver on these responsibilities as well as our corporate objectives, we approach our work from two directions, as both a regulator and as a steward of the legal profession.

Our **regulatory** approach involves focussing on:

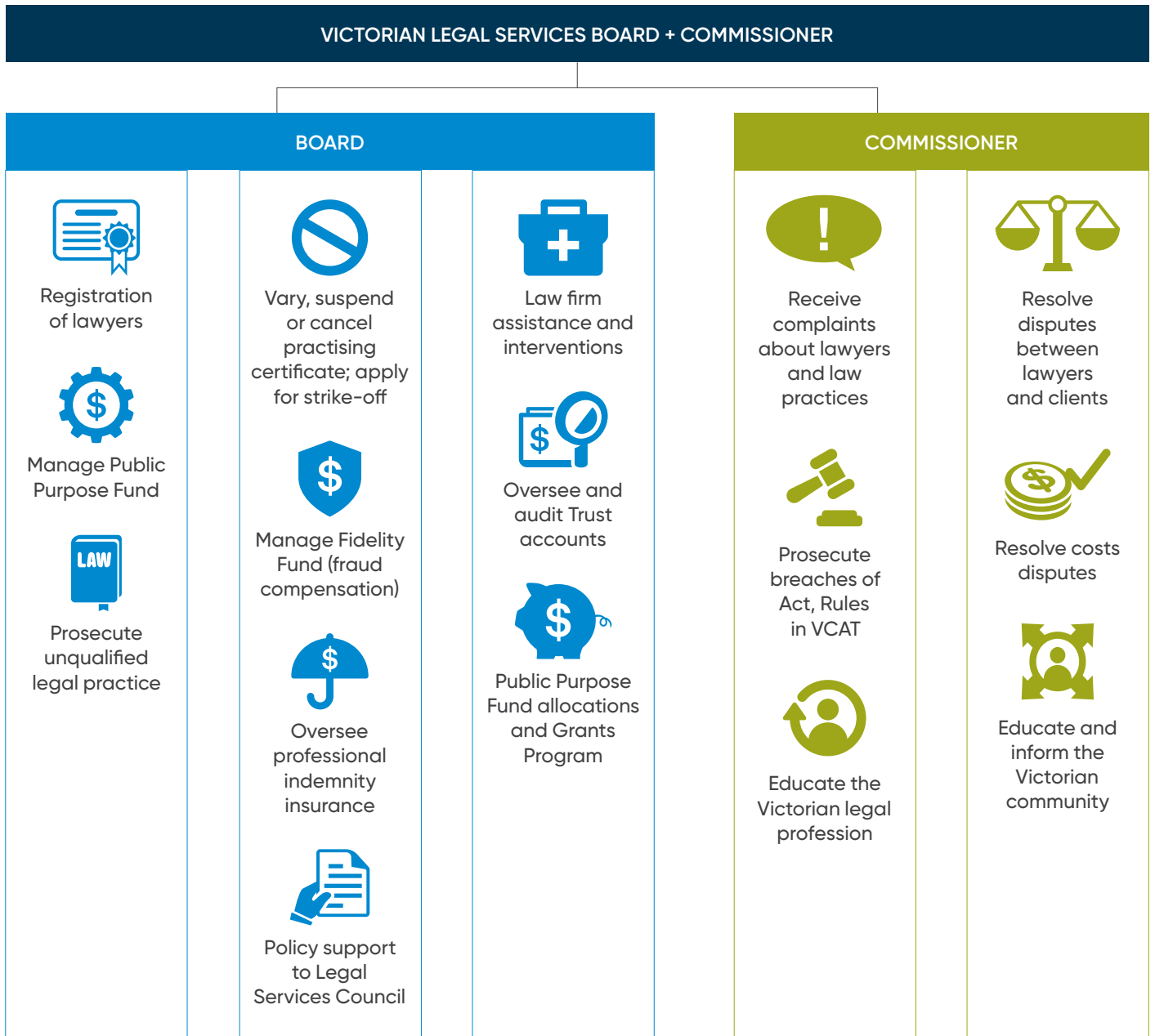
- achieving outcomes to improve legal practice and give consumers confidence in their lawyers;
- managing risk and targeting risky behaviour by lawyers;
- using evidence and high-quality data to make robust decisions;
- working collaboratively with our Uniform Law partners to ensure regulatory consistency;
- maintaining independence, transparency and fairness in everything we do;
- helping consumers make informed choices about legal services; and
- being experimental in how we approach emerging issues within the legal profession.

Our **stewardship** approach ensures that we manage and use our funds effectively so we can:

- provide for research and collaboration with the profession to meet the profession's needs;
- deliver effective regulation to improve confidence in the justice system, access to justice and legal education;
- support a grants program which will have long-lasting, tangible impacts on access to justice across Victoria; and
- provide stability of funding for Victoria Legal Aid and other important legal and justice organisations.

This report provides an overview of how we implement these approaches, and what we have done to meet our statutory responsibilities and corporate objectives during the 2018-19 reporting year.

FIGURE 1: Board and Commissioner functions



THE VICTORIAN LEGAL PROFESSION AT A GLANCE





CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

At the beginning of the 2018-19 year we welcomed three new Board members – Jennifer Batrouney QC, Liz Harris and Geoff Bowyer.

Jennifer is a past president of the Victorian Bar, and practises in a variety of fields including equity, commercial and revenue matters, as well as having experience in the not-for-profit sector. Liz is a widely-recognised costs expert in Victoria, and Geoff is a past Law Institute of Victoria (LIV) president and an accredited business law specialist. Their broad expertise and strong understanding of legal practice across the profession are valuable assets for our Board.

Two Royal Commissions have been a focus of attention in Victoria this year: the national Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry conducted by the Hon. Kenneth Hayne AC QC, and the Victorian Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants conducted by the Hon. Margaret McMurdo AC.

The Hayne Royal Commission released its final report in February 2019, and although not directly related to the legal profession, Commissioner Hayne's report contained important lessons for all regulators. The Commissioner identified a demonstrable failure of many professionals in the banking and financial services sector to meet the community's expectations on ethical conduct, and put their client's best interests ahead of their own. He was critical of financial regulators' enforcement approach in the face of such conduct. While we already pay heed to these issues, we have increased our focus on consumer engagement as described further in this annual report. We anticipate that these efforts will continue to give consumers comfort that we are actively protecting their interests.

The Victorian Government announced the McMurdo Royal Commission in December 2018, following public revelations that a former criminal barrister had been acting as a registered police informant and providing information about certain clients over a number of years. The revelations understandably generated significant concern throughout the legal profession, the wider justice system and the Victorian community.

In May this year we provided a detailed submission to the McMurdo Royal Commission explaining the current and previous regulatory framework for Victoria's lawyers, the key professional duties and obligations lawyers have, our view on the use of lawyers as human sources and our regulatory powers. The submission is publicly available on the Royal Commission website. We are committed to assisting the McMurdo Royal Commission in its important work, and are ready to provide further information should it be asked of us.

While they involve very different issues, these two Royal Commissions share one important theme: the public has a right to expect service providers to act ethically and in the best interests of their client – no matter the industry.

We will continue to work with the Victorian legal profession to ensure that lawyers adhere to their ethical obligations so that consumers can have faith that their lawyers are acting in their best interests at all times.

One of the ways we are doing this is through the Uniform Law. Under the administration of the Legal Services Council and the Commissioner for Uniform Legal Services Regulation, the Uniform Law provides a regulatory framework to help ensure lawyers uphold the highest standards of practice and conduct. We work closely with our NSW counterparts, the admission authorities in both NSW and Victoria, and both the Victorian Bar and the LIV to support and advise the Council and Commissioner on implementing and refining the Uniform Law.

Among the many benefits of the uniform model are the strong relationships that develop between the participating jurisdictions. This will expand further in July 2020 following the announcement earlier this year by the Western Australian state government that they will be joining the Uniform Law scheme. From 1 July 2020, approximately three-quarters of all Australian lawyers will come under the same set of regulations. The Western Australian decision is testament to the strength of the Uniform Law scheme, and its value to both lawyers and consumers of legal services.

Continuing this year, our incredibly successful Grants Program provided a further \$4.2 million in funding for access to justice and legal education programs for the Victorian community. In 2018-19 we funded 18 different projects, bringing our total investment to more than \$40 million over the past 11 years. Many of these projects are working to integrate legal services into different fields of practice, such as health, social services, corrections and secondary education.

One of the standout projects from this funding round is Sporting Change. Delivered by the Springvale-Monash Legal Service, it integrates legal education with sport to help engage with secondary school students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. This has proven to be an extremely successful program. Close to 100% of past participants reported a significant positive shift in attitude towards Police, Protective Service Officers and other authority figures. Students also developed a better understanding of the possible consequences of getting into trouble with the law.

Sporting Change, and indeed all of the other projects we support through our Grants Program, seek to foster change that empowers participants and leads to a fairer legal system. This has far-reaching benefits for the wider community. I am proud that our Board is able to fund these worthy projects, and make a very real difference in the lives of Victorians.

Fiona Bennett

Chairperson, Victorian Legal Services Board



CEO AND COMMISSIONER'S REPORT

It is always gratifying to look back across the year just gone and see how much we have achieved. This year has been a particularly productive one for us, with a new strategic plan and the launch of several long-term projects that involve both consumers of legal services and all areas of the legal profession and justice system.

Early last year we set about developing a new strategic plan to ensure that, as a regulator, we were meeting the needs of the Victorian public and the legal profession itself. We started with a comprehensive research and consultation phase involving staff, the professional associations, the Courts and several other organisations across the justice system. From those discussions we identified three major focus areas that we believe are equally vital to delivering a strong, just and independent legal regulatory regime:

- protect consumers and the public through effective regulation of lawyers and legal practice;
- assist the profession to achieve the highest standards of ethics and legal practice; and
- manage our funds to support effective regulation and promote confidence in the administration of justice.

To help us meet each of these objectives, we set about redesigning our organisational structure to support our new strategy. Following a carefully planned change management program, we gradually introduced the necessary adjustments to reporting lines and staff functions, and steadily expanded our capacity to undertake work on each of these priority areas. I must thank all of our staff for participating in this process; for their ideas, their feedback and their ongoing support.

With our new strategy in place, we began to progress a series of major initiatives that had been in planning since last year. The first of these was to improve on our understanding of consumers' needs. My visit to the UK in September 2018 gave me a valuable insight to how other regulators manage this issue. There I met with the Solicitors' Regulation Authority and the Legal Services Board of England and Wales. I was interested to learn that many of the issues the UK regulators deal with are similar to our experiences here in Victoria, albeit on a much larger scale than ours. I was impressed with their focus on consumer engagement, and the work both agencies put in to understanding consumer sentiment and needs, particularly the work of the Board's Consumer Panel. We recognise we need to build further capacity in this area. To that end we are in the process of setting up our own Consumer Advisory Panel which will help us fill the gaps we have in our understanding of legal regulation from the consumer perspective.

We also undertook a significant volume of work on investigating the extent to which sexual harassment occurs within the Victorian legal profession. While our data shows few instances of sexual harassment complaints against lawyers, anecdotal evidence and research by human rights organisations suggested this issue is likely more widespread than we know. For this reason in February 2019 I issued a statement making it clear that sexual harassment of any kind was unacceptable and it would not be tolerated within the Victorian profession. We developed a specialist unit to receive and handle complaints about sexual harassment, and commenced work on two surveys for the profession.

The first survey investigates the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment within Victorian legal workplaces, while the second looks at the training, policies and procedures law practices have in place to prevent and manage sexual harassment. Both surveys are due for launch in early 2019-20. I am grateful for the strong support we received for this initiative from leaders right across the justice sector.

Another of our new initiatives is to make it easier for lawyers to step outside the traditional constraints of legal practice and try new ways of providing legal services. We see in our complaints and from our own research that many consumers do not want or cannot afford the traditional methods lawyers use to provide legal services. It doesn't need to be like this. The Uniform Law is broad enough to support many diverse models of practice. We believe that new service designs, aided by technology where appropriate, will help open up new markets for lawyers, while also potentially improving access to justice for consumers. To that end we established a new program to investigate how we could encourage and support law practices who want to explore innovative service delivery models. Our intention here is to act as a sounding board where lawyers can discuss their ideas openly with us and resolve any regulatory issues they may encounter, before committing their time and effort to developing their ideas further. We believe this program will facilitate a level of experimentation that will ultimately benefit both the profession and consumers of legal services.

Both sexual harassment and the operations of legal practices have some influence on another major initiative we progressed during the year: lawyer wellbeing. Our profession is often a stressful one, and working under constant pressure can contribute to depression, anxiety and burnout. We interviewed people from across the sector for their views on wellbeing in the law, and listened to their stories of pressurised and competitive workplaces; of isolation, stress and perfectionism. These insights form a starting point from which we will work with the profession to develop a shared understanding of what drives poor lawyer wellbeing, and identify what we can change about legal workplaces to improve wellbeing outcomes for lawyers. Much more work will happen in this space in the coming years, but I am pleased with our solid start on an issue that will potentially touch a large proportion of our profession.

There are many other programs and initiatives underway, and what follows in this report is a snapshot of some of these. Such achievements are only possible with the encouragement of our Board, and our Chairperson, Fiona Bennett, and with the ongoing support of our skilled, enthusiastic and dedicated staff who drive our agenda forward every day.

Fiona McLeay
Board CEO and Commissioner

HOW WE PROTECT CONSUMERS AND THE PUBLIC

We play an important role in protecting the interests of consumers of legal services in their dealings with lawyers, as well as protecting the public from people falsely claiming to be a lawyer. Our goal is to ensure all Victorian consumers have confidence that they can access high quality legal services from competent and ethical lawyers, when and where they need them.

We use a range of strategies to achieve this. Our Grants Program provides funding to a range of services across the state that help consumers gain better access to justice, or make informed choices about the legal services they might need. The Uniform Law also grants us certain powers to monitor and enforce lawyers' compliance with the rules of legal practice. Our dispute resolution and complaints handling service helps people who have a problem with a lawyer's legal costs, the quality of service they received, or a lawyer's conduct. We also offer a compensation scheme for people who have entrusted money or property to a lawyer, but lost it because of dishonest or fraudulent behaviour by a lawyer.

Using these and other tools, we are able to guide the profession in meeting consumer expectations, as well as support consumers directly in their dealings with lawyers and the legal system.

APPLYING OUR REGULATORY TOOLS

AUDITING LAWYERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OBLIGATIONS

Under the Uniform Law, all lawyers (both solicitors and barristers) must complete a minimum of 10 units of continuing professional development (CPD) each year. This helps to ensure lawyers' skills remain current, and they are familiar with changes in the law.

When lawyers fail to meet their CPD obligations we may require them to submit a rectification plan to make up any missing units. We take appropriate enforcement action against lawyers who fail to complete their rectification plan. Further details on CPD are available on our website.



INTERVENING IN LEGAL PRACTICES

Occasionally a legal practice either fails to, or is unable to protect the interest of its clients. This might happen because of a lawyer's alleged improper conduct, insolvency, ill health or death. In such situations, we can take steps to intervene in the operation of the practice to protect client funds and their ongoing legal matters.

The Uniform Law grants us the power to appoint a supervisor to manage a practice's trust account, or appoint a suitably qualified lawyer to take over the management of a practice. In extreme circumstances, we may also ask the Supreme Court of Victoria to appoint a receiver to attempt to recover trust money or trust property belonging to clients.

USING OUR REGULATORY TOOLS TO PROTECT CONSUMERS

Our suite of regulatory tools allow us to tailor how we respond to different situations and enable us to rapidly intervene to protect vulnerable consumers from poor lawyer conduct.

In mid-2018 we were asked by the LIV to have a close look at a Melbourne-based sole practitioner's operations. The lawyer ran a small office, had no complaints history and his niche clientele came from referrals. A routine trust account investigation, however, revealed problems that needed attention.

We worked through a short-form compliance audit with him, which allowed us to look at how he managed his practice and whether he was meeting his regulatory obligations. We uncovered a litany of serious deficiencies in how he managed his practice and handled trust money, which posed significant risks to his clients.

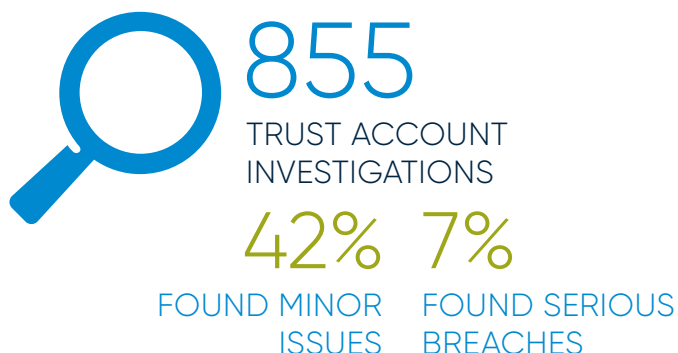
Working closely with the LIV, we began a full compliance audit of his practice alongside a formal trust account audit. These ultimately led us to issue him with a series of Management System Directions – instructions for him to make specific changes to how he worked within a finite timeframe. When a follow-up visit showed he had failed to implement even the most basic of actions, we immediately escalated our response.

Faced with serious disciplinary charges and having a Manager appointed to his practice, the lawyer surrendered his practising certificate and closed his practice.

OVERSIGHT OF TRUST ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT

In Victoria approximately 3,690 solicitors and barristers' clerks are authorised to receive and deal with trust money on behalf of clients. We are responsible for overseeing how all Victorian trust accounts are managed, and for prosecuting offences against the trust account regulations.

Trust accounts are tightly controlled, and severe penalties can apply where they are misused. To ensure law practices are maintaining the standards of record keeping and money handling that the law requires, we carry out both proactive and reactive investigations into hundreds of trust accounts each year. These investigations, and the strict trust account regulatory regime, serve to protect client money and property held in trust by lawyers.



LICENSING LAWYERS AND DETERMINING SUITABILITY

One of our major functions is to license all lawyers in Victoria, as well as assess their suitability to practise law.

We are also responsible for ensuring all Victorian lawyers are fit and proper to practise law at all times. Lawyers must disclose certain things to us, such as whether they have been declared bankrupt, found guilty of a serious offence or a tax offence, or have been disciplined by a legal regulator in another state, territory or country. In such instances, the Uniform Law gives us the power to cancel or limit a lawyer's ability to practise in Victoria, where appropriate. This is an important and powerful consumer protection mechanism.

GIVING CONSUMERS A STRONGER VOICE IN REGULATION

We acknowledge the importance of having a clear understanding of what consumers want and need so that we can provide a regulatory regime that protects their interests. To that end, we are establishing a Consumer Advisory Committee of our Board to provide us with a stronger consumer perspective on legal regulation. This Committee will commission research to learn about the needs and concerns of consumers of legal services, and their perceptions of the legal profession. This will ultimately feed in to the work we are also doing with the profession on encouraging and supporting innovation in how legal services are provided.

INVESTIGATING COMPLAINTS AND RESOLVING DISPUTES

The Uniform Law gives us the power to receive and handle complaints about Victorian lawyers. In 2018-19 we received 5,731 enquiries from the public about possible complaints involving a lawyer. Most enquiries do not become complaints as many are resolved on the first contact with our office. Where possible we give enquirers clear information on the issues they are concerned about, or empower them with strategies to resolve the problem for themselves. If we cannot help resolve the issue, we may refer them on to another organisation better able to assist them. Only a small proportion of enquiries go on to become a formal complaint.



PROVIDING A PROACTIVE GRANTS PROGRAM

Since its inception in 2007, our Grants Program has provided over \$40 million in funding to myriad legal and community organisations across the state. Through this program, we can help improve access to justice for all Victorians, support important policy research and law reform, develop education programs for consumers and the legal profession alike, encourage innovation in the legal sector, and support the development of initiatives that improve legal service delivery. All grants are approved by the Attorney-General.

2018-19 FUNDING

In 2018-19 we provided \$4.2 million in funding to 18 projects, focussing on a range of initiatives to improve access to justice in the Victorian community.



PROTECTING CONSUMERS FROM UNQUALIFIED LEGAL PRACTICE

Unqualified legal practice is a serious issue for consumers of legal services and for the reputation of the legal profession. An unqualified person can be either a lawyer who does not hold a current practising certificate, or a lay person who has no legal qualifications. If such a person undertakes legal work, they are 'unqualified'.



USING SPORT AS A WAY TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE ON LEGAL ISSUES

In 2016 the Springvale Monash Legal Service proposed a novel way to prevent young people coming into contact with the justice system through a program called 'Sporting Change'. Their idea integrated legal education with sport to connect secondary school students on one side, and lawyers and authority figures on the other.

Through the 2016-17 Grants round, we provided Sporting Change with \$277 000 in funding to run the program for two-years in a secondary school in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs. Over that time, Sporting Change ran 63 legal education sessions, reaching 153 young people from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. It also embedded a lawyer into the host school's wellbeing team to provide professional legal education to the school community. The program provided young people with an opportunity for peer-to-peer role modelling, making new friends and the development of an authentic relationship with authority figures and legal staff while playing sport. The outcomes have been overwhelmingly positive. Almost 100% of participants reported greater awareness of their legal rights and where to get help with legal problems. There was also a significant positive shift in attitude towards Police, Protective Service Officers and other authority figures, along with a better understanding of the possible consequences of getting into trouble with the law. In addition, a third of students who participated in the program were able to access legal advice from the embedded lawyer, covering issues such as employment law, family law, bullying and immigration. Sporting Change was so successful that in the 2018-19 Grants round, we provided a further \$330,000 funding to replicate the program at another secondary school in the south-eastern suburbs.

PROVIDING A COMPENSATION SCHEME

We manage a compensation scheme for people who have lost trust money or property due to the dishonest or fraudulent behaviour of a lawyer, an employee of a law practice or a barrister's clerk. Our website describes in detail how the compensation scheme – known as the Fidelity Fund – works. In 2018-19 we received 26 new claims for compensation totalling \$6,571,313.65. Over the year 17 claims for compensation totalling \$5,247,884.87 were resolved. This includes claims received during the previous reporting years.



HOW WE ASSIST THE PROFESSION

Our new strategy acknowledges the importance of our role in assisting the profession to achieve the highest standards of ethics and legal practice. Over 2018-19 we directed much of our effort towards formulating and implementing policies, developing procedures and progressing initiatives that we believe will serve to help lawyers in everyday practice. In some instances, they may also positively affect lawyers' personal lives.

IMPROVING OUR REGULATORY PERFORMANCE

ENHANCING OUR ONLINE PRESENCE

We are committed to providing the legal profession and consumers of legal services with the information and services they need. To that end, in 2018-19 we commenced a thorough review of our digital presence.



OUR LSB ONLINE PORTAL IS NOW
**FULLY
ACCESSIBLE**
ON ANY MOBILE DEVICE

KEEPING THE PROFESSION INFORMED

As an organisation, we place a high priority on educating the legal profession. We endeavour to keep lawyers informed of their regulatory obligations, and any changes to those obligations that come from either new regulatory policies or amendments to the Uniform Law. We do this by maintaining clear and regular engagement with the profession.



WE SPOKE TO OVER
2,500
LAWYERS AT SEMINARS,
WORKSHOPS AND CONFERENCES

MAJOR INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT LAWYERS

ADDRESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Addressing sexual harassment within the legal profession is one of several key focus areas for us in the coming years.

In February 2019 we issued a public statement affirming that we do not tolerate sexual harassment in the legal profession, and are committed to investigating any complaints we receive about lawyers who engage in such unacceptable and unprofessional conduct.

SUPPORTING LAWYER WELLBEING

During 2019 we met with law students, academics, lawyers from private practice and the community legal sector, government lawyers, and representatives from the Bar and the judiciary. We listened to their insights into, and experiences of, wellbeing, and observed the connections between different parts of the profession's experiences, and the breadth of current challenges to lawyers' wellbeing.

FOSTERING INNOVATION WITHIN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Another of the new projects we commenced this year was to address the barriers, real and perceived, that inhibit innovation in how lawyers provide legal services to clients. This project seeks to learn from the profession what these barriers are, and formulate a variety of approaches that will provide guidance and clarity around how innovative ideas fit within the regulatory regime.

NEW POLICIES TO SUPPORT LAWYERS

ENCOURAGING CONTINGENCY AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

When a sole practitioner or sole director of an incorporated legal practice falls ill or is otherwise unable to continue managing their legal practice for an extended period, we often need to step in and appoint a Manager to look after the practice on their behalf. Depending on the lawyer's situation, it is sometimes necessary for the appointed Manager to wind the practice up.

To give sole practitioners and sole directors a say in what happens to their practice should the unexpected occur, we launched our new Practice Contingency Planning Policy in December 2018. This policy encourages sole practitioners and sole directors to nominate another suitably qualified lawyer to take over management of their law practice while they are absent.

HOW WE MANAGE OUR FUNDS

The Public Purpose Fund is a vital source of funding for a host of public benefits. It is a major funding source for Victoria Legal Aid, funds the regulation of the legal profession, subsidises legal research and law reform, and sponsors a range of access to justice programs for the community. As the regulator of the legal profession, we are responsible for managing the Public Purpose Fund by exercising sound financial practices through a strong and transparent governance framework.

FUNDING ALLOCATED FROM THE PUBLIC PURPOSE FUND	\$'000
Commissioner	9,278
Payments to professional associations for programs	3,862
Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal – Legal Practice List	993
Victorian Legal Admissions Board	1,281
Delegated functions: Law Institute of Victoria	1,998
Delegated functions: Victorian Bar	162
Legal Services Council – Uniform Law Scheme	609
Major grants and projects paid	5,108
Victoria Legal Aid	35,539
Victorian Law Reform Commission	1,893
Victoria Law Foundation	2,150

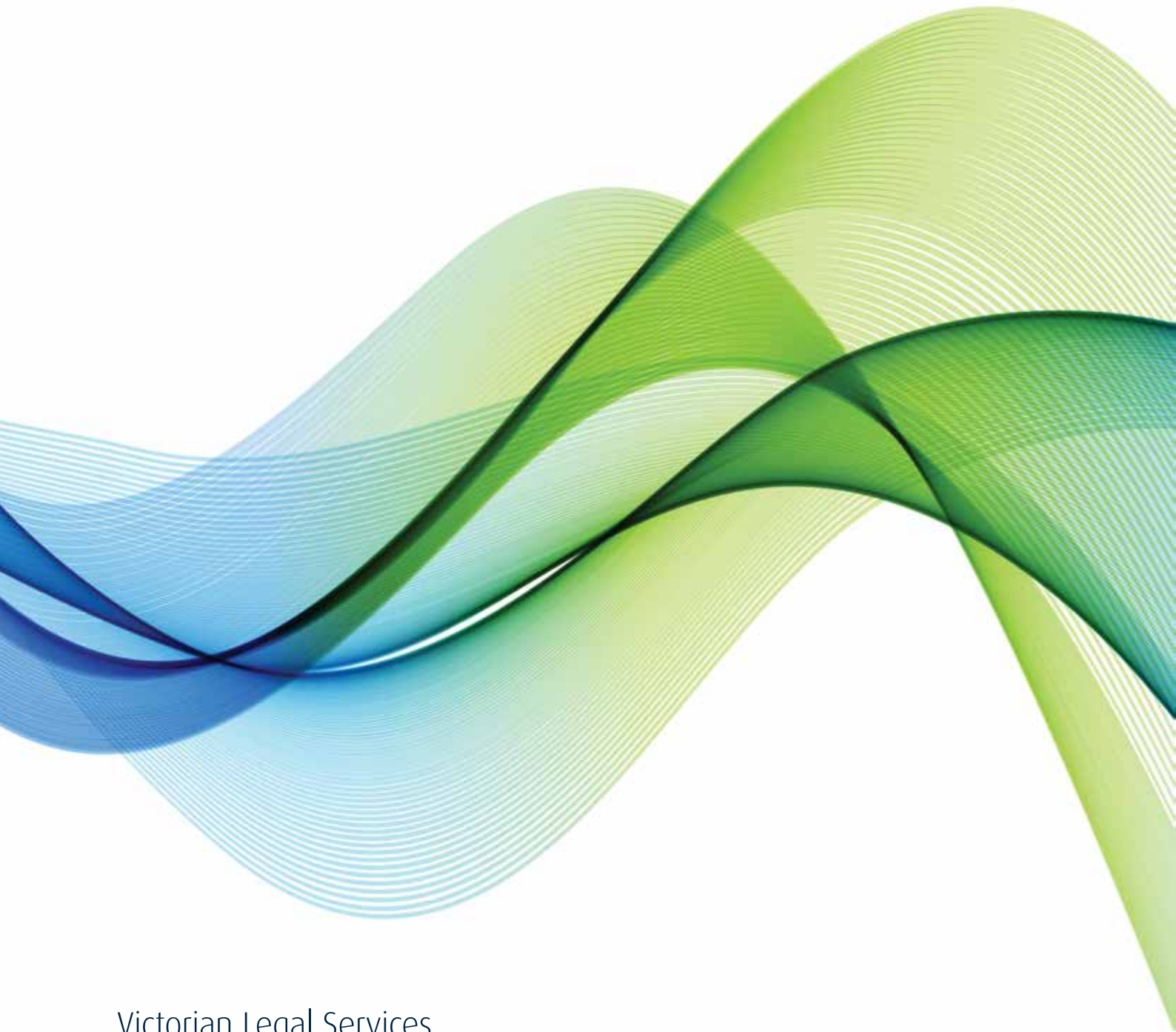
MAKING PRUDENT INVESTMENTS

We engage an external investment adviser to recommend and assist in investment decision-making, and seek to maximise investment returns whilst limiting risk to an acceptable level. We also directly engage a range of external investment managers to invest funds across asset classes.

At 30 June 2019 we held \$857.972 million in investments (excluding cash), compared with \$804.341 million last year. The increase in the value of the investment holdings was driven by positive investment returns across most funds along with our decision to reinvest investment distributions rather than receive cash payments.

NET GAIN/(LOSS) ON INVESTMENTS

Net gain on investments increased to \$33.401 million, \$17.599 million higher than the 2017-18 gains of \$15.802 million. This reflects the solid performance of our investment portfolio, despite some challenging market conditions experienced during the year, consistent with the past three years.



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BOARD + COMMISSIONER

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