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Before you rely on AI-assisted legal research: checking checklist

For solicitors and small firms in England and Wales. This educational checklist does not cover Scotland or Northern Ireland and is not a compliance certificate. Use it within the firm's existing research and supervision process.

Treat an AI answer as a draft requiring checks against the actual authorities. A plausible citation, working link or confident explanation does not establish legal accuracy. The SRA's warning on misuse of AI, published on 17 August 2026, addresses inaccurate material and risks to confidentiality. Responsibility for the work remains with the solicitor.

1. Define the question and relevant date

Write down the legal issue, material facts, jurisdiction and date for which the law is needed. Separate facts supported by the matter documents from assumptions in the prompt or answer. Identify missing instructions. An answer to a different question can remain misleading even if every authority it cites exists.

2. Protect information before searching

Assess the proposed disclosure before entering client information into an online tool or search service. Consider confidentiality, data protection and legal professional privilege separately; a confidentiality promise does not itself establish that privilege is preserved. Use a generalised question where possible and keep affected material out where the assessment is unresolved. Client consent is not blanket authority for every subsequent disclosure.

Para. 6.3 of the SRA Code of Conduct for Solicitors governs confidentiality and its exceptions.

3. Locate the actual authority

Find the judgment or legislation through an authoritative source. Read the source document, checking the case name, neutral citation, court and decision date, or the legislation's title and provision. Record the source actually opened. Citation syntax and a generated URL provide leads only. If an authority cannot be found, mark it unverified and exclude the proposition from reliance pending resolution.

4. Establish jurisdiction and weight

For a judgment, identify the court, procedural stage and issue decided. Consider whether it binds the relevant court, is persuasive or concerns a materially different legal system. Check the later history and treatment needed to assess its status. Distinguish the court's reasoning from a party's submissions, a headnote and comments unnecessary to the decision.

5. Read the passage in context

Locate the paragraph said to support each proposition. Read enough surrounding reasoning and facts to understand its limits. Compare every quotation with the source, including omissions and qualifications. Record the pinpoint reference. A correct quotation can still support a narrower conclusion than the draft suggests. Correct the proposition as well as the citation when necessary.

6. Check the applicable law

For legislation, confirm territorial extent, application, commencement and the version relevant to the issue. Check amendments, transitional provisions and any material outstanding changes. For procedural rules and guidance, use the applicable version. Record both the date checked and the date the analysis concerns; today's text may not answer a question about an earlier event.

7. Look for qualifications and contrary authority

Test the proposed conclusion through further research. Look for exceptions, later decisions and material contrary authority, rather than repeatedly asking the same tool to confirm its answer. In proceedings, consider paras. 2.4 and 2.7 of the SRA Code: assertions must be properly arguable, and relevant authorities or procedural irregularities likely to have a material effect must be drawn to the court's attention.

8. Review the complete draft before use

Check the reasoning, facts, calculations and proposed application to the client's circumstances. Keep unresolved points marked in the working draft. A solicitor must review a generated client, court or matter document before it is used, signed, filed or sent. Record what was checked and which version was reviewed; a later edit can require another check.

Paras. 3.2, 3.3 and 3.5 of the SRA Code address competent service, maintaining competence and supervision. A completed checklist does not replace professional judgement.

Reusable research-checking record

Keep this with the existing research note or matter file:

- **Matter reference; question; material assumptions:**
- **Jurisdiction; relevant legal date; intended use:**
- **Draft identifier and version; preparer:**
- **Each proposition and authority:** source actually opened, access date and pinpoint.
- **Checks:** existence, jurisdiction, weight, later treatment, quotation and applicable version.
- **Contrary authority, qualifications and corrections:**
- **Unresolved points:** research needed, responsible person and restriction on reliance.
- **Review:** solicitor's name, date, version reviewed and scope of checks.
- **Outcome:** further work required / reviewed for the stated purpose, subject to recorded limits.
- **Recheck triggers:** changed facts, amended draft, new authority or changed law before use.

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Check for a newer edition before relying on this checklist. Changes to law, guidance or the intended use can require an earlier review.