

Your right to challenge legal costs (Version 2 – October 2007)

Legal Profession Act 2007 – Queensland

Note:

This information applies to costs for all legal matters dealt with in Queensland, **except for family law matters dealt with in the Family Court or the Queensland Magistrates Court**. If you wish to challenge these costs, look for the Family Court of Australia Costs Notice available at www.familycourt.gov.au (under Forms & Fees > Legal Costs) or contact the Family Court on 1300 352 000. Different time limits to those below may apply.

There are any number of reasons why you may not be happy with a bill from your lawyer. This fact sheet prepared by the Legal Services Commission and the Queensland Law Society will help you decide what to do.

Read the fact sheet carefully and, if you need more help, see the contacts listed at the end. Note that time limits apply to resolving this kind of problem.

1. Talk to your lawyer

Generally, the best approach is to start by talking to your lawyer about the bill as, in many cases, this will be all you need to do. Once your lawyer understands why you are concerned, they will be able to explain the costs to you and may agree to review the bill.

If you are still not happy after the discussion, consider using the suggestions below.

2. Lump sum and itemised bills

A bill usually summarises the work your lawyer has done and gives the total amount charged for that work. However, you can request an itemised bill that lists each item of work that has been done and the amount charged for each item.

An itemised bill might help you work out which part(s) of the legal costs you are unhappy about. Your lawyer cannot charge for preparing the itemised bill, although it is possible that the total amount of the bill may increase once each piece of work is itemised.

3. Costs mediation

‘Costs mediation’ allows you to discuss your concerns with the help of an independent facilitator. Mediation is generally quicker and cheaper than costs assessment (see below). Although mediators cannot give legal advice during the mediation or decide on the fairness or reasonableness of the costs, mediation has proven to be a good way to settle many disputes.

In Queensland, the Department of Justice & Attorney-General has a free mediation service through its Dispute Resolution Centres. Contact details are:-

Brisbane 3239 6269
Other than Brisbane 1800 017288

However, act quickly to ensure you have enough time for other alternatives if mediation fails.

4. Costs assessment

Costs assessment is a process in which a court appoints an independent person (a costs assessor) to consider the bill and your objections to it. The costs assessor will decide what is a fair and reasonable amount for you to pay.

You have **12 months** to apply for a costs assessment from when the bill was given to you (or you were asked for payment, or when you paid the costs if you didn't get a bill or a request to pay).

Your bill cannot be assessed unless it is an itemised bill. If the bill is not an itemised bill, you can ask your lawyer to give you an itemised bill and they must provide that within 28 days. Your lawyer cannot charge you for preparing an itemised bill.

You can apply for costs assessment even if you have paid all or part of your legal costs, or if you have paid them without receiving a bill. There is a fee for applying for costs assessment, but if the bill is reduced by 15 percent or more, or your lawyer is found to be at fault, your lawyer may be required to pay the costs of the assessment.

To obtain a costs assessment, you must apply to the appropriate court – Supreme, District or Magistrates Court, depending on the amount involved (for amounts over \$250,000 go to the Supreme Court, for amounts under \$250,000 go to the District Court, and for amounts under \$50,000 the Magistrates Court). You must also give notice of the costs assessment application to the law practice that issued the bill.

The court will appoint a costs assessor to assess the bill. If you and your lawyer negotiated a 'costs agreement' early on, then the assessor must assess the disputed costs based on that agreement, as long as it specifies an amount or charge rate, or the agreement has not been set aside by an order of the Supreme Court.

The costs assessor must consider several things – whether the work was required, whether it was carried out in a reasonable way and the fairness and reasonableness of the costs. The assessor will also want to know if the law practice gave you a realistic estimate of the costs and kept you informed of any substantial changes to those costs.

Contact your local court for more details of this process. See the courts website – www.courts.qld.gov.au – to find the court nearest to you.

5. Setting aside a costs agreement

You can challenge the 'costs agreement' you made with your lawyer by applying to the Supreme Court. It is recommended that you get legal advice from an independent source before you consider this option.

6. Other avenues for challenging legal costs

There may be other ways you can resolve your concerns about legal costs. If the options above don't suit you, seek other legal advice. Remember that your lawyer can take court action against you if you don't pay your bill. However, they must wait until 30 days after giving you the bill (or 30 days after giving you an itemised bill, if you have requested one) or after a costs assessment.

7. Who to contact for more information

Courts of Queensland

A full list of the courts in Queensland giving locations and contact details can be found at the Queensland Government's courts website at:-

www.courts.qld.gov.au

Legal profession regulators

Office of the Legal Services Commissioner

Ph: (07) 3406 7737

Freecall: 1300 655 754

www.lsc.qld.gov.au

More fact sheets available

Client Relations Centre of the Queensland Law Society

Ph: (07) 3842 5843

www.qls.com.au

The Legal Services Commissioner or the Client Relations Centre may be able to help negotiate a quick resolution on your behalf, even though staff in both organisations cannot give legal advice nor make any determination as to the fairness or reasonableness of your bill.

Legal advice – the following organisations provide free legal advice:-

Community Legal Centres (CLCs)

A list of CLCs in your area is available at www.qails.org.au