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CJEU rules director of failed company has no right to be forgotten at Companies House

*Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di
Lecce v. Salvatore Manni
Case C-398/15*

Article by David Bowden

Executive speed read summary

Mr Manni had been the sole director and liquidator of a failed company which initially became insolvent in 1992 and was eventually struck off the Italian Companies Register on 7 July 2005. Details of that liquidation and of Mr Manni's involvement with the company were publicly available. Mr Manni set up a new venture which was awarded a contract to build a tourist complex. He claimed he was having difficulty selling any units in that complex and requested the Lecce Chamber of Commerce to remove his personal details from the companies' register which it refused to do so. He brought a claim seeking an order requiring it to either erase, anonymise or block the data linking him to the liquidation of his previous failed business. The first instance court in Italy upheld the claim and awarded compensation of €2000. The Lecce Chamber of Commerce appealed to the Italian Supreme Court which referred 2 questions to the CJEU for a preliminary ruling as to whether Mr Manni had a right to be forgotten. The operation of companies' registers was governed by a 1968 Directive which had been amended.

The CJEU applied its earlier rulings particularly that in *Google Spain*. However here the CJEU ruled there was no right to be forgotten. It said the data processing satisfied a number of legitimate grounds under the 1995 Data Protection Directive as it related to compliance with a legal obligation as well as the exercise of a task performed in the public interest. The CJEU ruled that after the dissolution of a company, rights and legal relations relating to it continued to exist. It said the DPD did not guarantee to natural persons that they had the right to obtain after a certain period of time from the dissolution of the company concerned, the erasure of personal data concerning them. This was not a disproportionate interference with the fundamental right to respect for private life. Company law required disclosure only for a limited number of personal data items and this was justified because that natural persons who choose to participate in trade through a limited company were required to disclose their identity and functions within that company. The CJEU said there may be a right to be forgotten but this would need exceptional justification and a data subject would need to allow a sufficiently long period after the dissolution of the company in question to make that application. Personal data on corporate records was needed to ensure legal certainty, fair trading and the proper functioning of the internal market.

However the CJEU said the final decision as to whether the natural persons could apply to have personal data erased lay with the companies registrar who could decide on the basis of a case-by-case assessment whether it was exceptionally justified on compelling legitimate grounds to limit, on the expiry of a sufficiently long period after the dissolution of the company concerned access to a former director's personal data. Although changes are made on data erasure under the General Data Protection Regulation which comes into force in May 2018, the result in a case such as Mr Manni's is likely to be the same.

Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Lecce v. Salvatore Manni, The Governments of the Republics of Italy, Czech, Germany, Ireland, Poland & Portugal and the European Commission intervening

Case C-398/15

9 March 2017

Court of Justice of the European Union (2nd Chamber) - Judges Ilesič (President), Prechal, Rosas, Toader and Jarašiūnas

Opinion of Advocate-General Bot

8 September 2016

What are the facts?

Mr Manni had been the sole director and liquidator of Immobiliare e Finanziaria Salentina srl ('the failed company') which became insolvent in 1992. It was eventually struck off the Italian Companies Register on 7 July 2005 following the completion of its liquidation. Details of that liquidation and of Mr Manni's involvement with the company were publicly available at Companies House and had been obtained by a commercial ratings agency who made them available to its subscribers.

Mr Manni is now the sole director of a building company called Italiana Costruzioni srl which was awarded a contract to build a tourist complex. Mr Manni claimed he was having difficulty selling any units in that complex. Mr Manni requested the Lecce Chamber of Commerce to remove his personal details from the companies' register which it refused to do so. Mr Manni brought a claim seeking an order requiring the Chamber of Commerce to either erase, anonymise or block the data linking him to the liquidation of his previous failed business.

What does the Data Protection Directive say?

The relevant parts of the Data Protection Directive ('DPD') are these.

- **Article 2** - *'For the purpose of this Directive: (a) "personal data" mean any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person (data subject), whereby an identifiable person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identification number or to one or more factors specific to his physical, physiological, mental, economic, cultural or social identity'*
- **Article 6** - *'1. Member States shall provide that personal data must be: (a) processed fairly and lawfully; (b) collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not further processed in a way incompatible with those purposes.....(c) adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to the purposes for which they are collected and/or further processed; (d) accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date...(e) kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the data were collected or for which they are further processed. ...'*
- **Article 7** - *'Member States shall provide that personal data may be processed only if:...(c) processing is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation to which the controller is subject; or ...(e) processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller or in a third party to whom the data are disclosed; or (f) processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by the third party or parties to whom the data are disclosed,'*
- **Article 12** - *'Member States shall guarantee every data subject the right to obtain from the controller...(b) as appropriate the rectification, erasure or blocking of data the processing of which does not comply with the provisions of this Directive....'*
- **Article 14** - *'Member States shall grant the data subject the right: (a)... to object at any time on compelling legitimate grounds relating to his particular situation to the processing of data relating to him, save where otherwise provided by national legislation....'*

Are there any recitals in the Data Protection Directive of relevance?

There are a 2 of recitals to the DPD that are also relevant. These are:

- **Recital 10** - *'Whereas the object of the national laws on the processing of personal data is to protect fundamental rights and freedoms, notably the right to privacy, which is recognised both in Article 8 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms[, signed in Rome on 4 November 1950....',*
- **Recital 25** - *'Whereas the principles of protection must be reflected, on the one hand, in the obligations imposed on persons ... responsible for processing, in particular regarding data quality, technical security, notification to the supervisory authority, and the circumstances under which processing can be carried out, and, on the other hand, in the right conferred on individuals, the data on whom are the subject of processing, to be informed that processing is taking place, to consult the data, to request corrections and even to object to processing in certain circumstances'.*

What does the 1st Company Law Directive say?

The 1st Company Law Directive **68/151/EEC** ('CLD1') has these 2 articles which are relevant:

- **Article 2** on 'Disclosure' - *'1. Member States shall take the measures required to ensure compulsory disclosure by companies of at least the following documents and particulars:...(d) the appointment, termination of office and particulars of the persons who either as a body constituted pursuant to law or as members of any such body: (i) are authorized to represent the company in dealings with third parties and in legal proceedings; (ii) take part in the administration, supervision or control of the company....(h) the winding-up of the company;...(j) The appointment of liquidators... (k) the termination of the liquidation and, in Member States where striking off the register entails legal consequences, the fact of any such striking off.'*
- **Article 3** - *'1. In each Member State a file shall be opened in a central register, commercial register or companies register, for each of the companies registered therein. 2. All documents and particulars which must be disclosed in pursuance of Article 2 shall be kept in the file or entered in the register....3. A copy of the whole or any part of the documents or particulars referred to in Article 2 must be obtainable on application. As from a date to be chosen by each Member State, which shall be no later than 1 January 2007, copies as referred to in the first subparagraph must be obtainable from the register by paper means or by electronic means as the applicant chooses....'*

What happened in the Italian courts?

On 1 August 2011 the first instance court in Italy (the Court of Lecce) upheld Mr Manni's claim seeking the anonymisation of his personal details linked those details to the details registered against the failed company at Companies House. The court awarded him compensation of €2000 with interest and costs. The Lecce Chamber of Commerce appealed to the Italian Supreme Court (the Court of Cassation). It stayed the proceedings and referred 2 questions to the CJEU for a preliminary ruling.

What were the terms of reference to the CJEU?

The Italian Supreme Court in Italy referred these 2 questions to the CJEU. These were:

- **Question 1** – *Must the principle of keeping personal data in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the data were collected or for which they are further processed laid down in Article 6(e) of the DPD take precedence over and the system of disclosure through the commercial registers provided for by CLD1 in so far as it is a requirement of that system that anyone may, at any time, obtain the data relating to individuals in those registers?*
- **Question 2** – *Consequently, is it permissible under Article 3 of CLD1 that there should be no time limit and that anyone may consult the data published in the companies register, for the data no longer to be subject to 'disclosure' in both those regards but to be available for only a limited period and only to certain recipients on the basis of an assessment case by case by the data manager?*

Are there any special provisions in Italian Law?

Article 2188 of the Italian Civil Code provides that:

'A companies register shall be established for entries in the register required by law. The register shall be kept by the office of the companies register under the supervision of a judge appointed by the president of the court. The register shall be publicly available.'

Articles 8(1) & (2) of Law No 580 on the reorganisation of the chambers of commerce, industry, craft trades and agriculture dated 29 December 1993 provides that it is the responsibility of the chambers of commerce, industry, craft trades and agriculture to keep the companies register.

What did the CJEU rule on the obligations of websites to remove data in Google Spain?

The Grand Chamber of the CJEU handed down its judgment in *Google Spain SL v. Agencia Espanola de Proteccion de Datos (C-131/12)* on 13 May 2014. It ruled on the right to be forgotten as it applied to internet search engines. By searching automatically, constantly and systematically for information published on the internet, an operator of a search engine 'collects' data within the meaning of article 2(b) of the DPD. Where an operator within the framework of its indexing programmes, 'retrieves', 'records' or 'organises' the data in question, which it then 'stores' on its servers and 'make available' to its users in the form of lists of results. Those operations have to be classified as 'processing'.

An operator of a search engine is a 'data controller' in respect of that processing. The operator of a search engine must ensure that its activity complies with the requirements of the DPD. A website operator is (in certain circumstances) obliged to remove links to web pages that are published by third parties and contain information relating to a person from the list of results displayed following a search made on the basis of that person's name. The effect of the interference with an individual's rights is heightened on account of the important role played by the internet and search engines in modern society.

A data subject may address an erasing request directly to the website operator which must then duly examine its merits. Where the data controller does not grant the request, the data subject may bring the matter before a supervisory authority or court so that it carries out these checks and orders the data controller to take appropriate measures.

Are there any other prior authorities of relevance?

These CJEU authorities are relevant in this case and are referred to by 2nd chamber in its judgment:

Friedrich Haaga GmbH C-32/74 (CJEU - Judges Lecourt, Dálaigh, Donner, Monaco, Mertens de Wilmars, Pescatore and Kutscher)

The purpose of CLD1 is to guarantee legal certainty in relation to dealings between companies and third parties in view of the intensification of trade between member states following the creation of the internal market. It is important that any person wishing to establish and develop trading relations with companies situated in other member states should be able easily to obtain essential information relating to the constitution of trading companies and to the powers of persons authorised to represent them. This requires that all the relevant information should be expressly stated in the companies register.

Verband Deutscher Daihatsu-Händler eV v. Daihatsu Deutschland GmbH C-97/96 (CJEU, 5th chamber – Judges Gulmann, Wathelet, Moitinho de Almeida, Edward and Puissochet)

The wording of Article 54(3)(g) of the Treaty of Rome refers to the need to protect the interests of 'others' generally without distinguishing or excluding any categories falling within the ambit of that term. The term

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'others' cannot be limited merely to creditors of the company. Disclosure of annual accounts is primarily designed to provide information for third parties who do not know or cannot obtain sufficient knowledge of the company's accounting and financial situation. Article 3 of CLD1 enables any interested persons to inform themselves of these matters.

Axel Springer AG v. Zeitungsverlag Niederrhein GmbH & Co. Essen KG C-435/02 and C-103/03 (CJEU, 2nd Chamber – Judges Timmermans, Puissochet, Schintgen, Macken and Colneric)
Any person may inspect the annual accounts and annual report of the types of partnerships that that CLD1 refers to, without having to establish a right or an interest requiring to be protected.

Compass-Datenbanken GmbH v. Republik Österreich C-138/11 (CJEU, 3rd chamber – Judge Lenaerts, Malenovský, Silva de Lapuerta, Arestis and Šváby)
The activity of a public authority consisting in the storing in a database of data which companies are obliged to report on the basis of statutory obligations, permitting interested persons to search for that data and providing them with print-outs thereof, falls within the exercise of public powers.

Client Earth and PAN Europe v. EFSA C615/13 (CJEU)
The fact that that information was provided as part of a professional activity does not mean that it cannot be characterised as personal data.

Maximillian Schrems v. Data Protection Commissioner and Digital Rights Ireland Ltd C-362/14 (CJEU, Grand Chamber, 6 October 2015. Judges Skouris, Lenaerts, A. Tizzano, Silva de Lapuerta, von Danwitz, Rodin, Jürimäe, Rosas, Juhász, Borg Barthet, Malenovský, Šváby, Berger, Biltgen and Lycourgos)
The CJEU had to consider the validity of the 'safe harbour' agreement by which companies based in the EU transferred data to or through the US for processing. In a stark but clear ruling, safe harbour was struck down. The provisions of the DPD in as much as they govern the processing of personal data liable to infringe fundamental freedoms (in particular the right to respect for private life) must be interpreted in the light of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Charter.

What opinion did Advocate-General Bot give?

On 8 September 2016, Advocate-General Bot gave his opinion where he was required to decide if the processing carried out by the Chamber of Commerce in relation to Mr Manni's personal data was 'necessary' as such word appears in the DPD. His opinion has not been translated in English and I have worked from the Spanish text. His opinion was that the processing was justified under Article 7(f) of the DPD because the processing of Mr Manni's data by the Chamber of Commerce was 'necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests' pursued by the Chamber of Commerce.

How did the CJEU treat the 2 referred questions?

It decided not to answer them separately but its opinion treated them as 1 combined question. The CJEU prefaced its opinion by saying that the referred questions did 'not concern the subsequent processing of the data at issue in this case by a specialised rating company' but rather 'the accessibility of such data held in the companies register by third parties'.

What did the CJEU rule on whether the DPD takes priority over the 1st Company Law Directive?

The CJEU said that under Article 2(1)(d) of CLD1 member states had to 'take the measures necessary to ensure compulsory disclosure by companies of at least the appointment, termination of office and particulars of the persons' who were 'authorised to represent the company in dealings with third parties and in legal proceedings' and that the 'appointment of liquidators, particulars concerning them and, in principle, their respective powers must also be disclosed'.

The CJEU noted that the provisions relating to the processing of personal data under Articles 2(1)(d)/ (j) and 3 of CLD1 were now expressly provided for in Article 7a of Directive **2009/101** as amended by Directive **2012/17** which it said was 'only declaratory in that regard'. The changes made by Directive **2012/17** were 'aimed at ensuring interoperability of registers of the Member States'.

The CJEU said that 'the purpose of the disclosure provided for by' CLD1 was to 'protect in particular the interests of third parties in relation to joint stock companies and limited liability companies, since the only safeguards they offer to third parties are their assets' and that this required that 'basic documents of the company concerned should be disclosed in order that third parties may be able to ascertain their contents and other information concerning the company'.

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It said that CLD1 was there 'to guarantee legal certainty in relation to dealings between companies and third parties' which was important because of 'the intensification of trade between member states following the creation of the internal market'. It stressed it was 'important that any person wishing to establish and develop trading relations with companies situated in other Member States should be able easily to obtain essential information relating to the constitution of trading companies'. Further the CJEU said that the Article 54(3)(g) of the Treaty of Rome on which CLD1 was based referred to 'the need to protect the interests of third parties generally, without distinguishing or excluding any categories falling within the ambit of that term'.

What ruling did the CJEU give on the DPD?

The CJEU said that 'by transcribing and keeping that information in the register and communicating it ... to third parties' that the Chamber of Commerce was carrying out 'processing of personal data' for which it is the 'data controller' under Articles 2(b)/(d) of the DPD. It cautioned that 'the processing of personal data liable to infringe fundamental freedoms and, in particular, the right to respect for private life' had to be 'interpreted in the light of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union'. The processing of Mr Manni's data by the Chamber of Commerce had to comply with 'the principles relating to data quality' and also satisfy 'one of the criteria for making data processing legitimate'.

On this point, the CJEU ruled that the data processing by the Chamber of Commerce satisfied 'several grounds for legitimation' under Article 7 of the DPD because it related to 'compliance with a legal obligation' as well as the 'exercise of official authority or the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' and also the 'realisation of a legitimate interest' pursued by the Chamber of Commerce. On this latter point the CJEU said that 'the activity of a public authority consisting in the storing, in a database, of data which undertakings are obliged to report on the basis of statutory obligations, permitting interested persons to search for that data and providing them with print-outs thereof, falls within the exercise of public powers'. It noted in particular that CLD1 made 'no express provision in that regard' whether it was 'in principle necessary for the personal data of natural persons' to remain on the company register.

What did the CJEU rule on whether there was a right to be forgotten in relation to company data?

The CJEU started by noting that where there was a failure to comply with Article 6(1)(e) of the DPD, a member state had to 'guarantee the person concerned' that it had 'the right to obtain from the controller, as appropriate, the erasure or blocking of the data concerned'. It then went on to note that data subject had a right to 'object at any time on compelling legitimate grounds relating to his particular situation to the processing of data relating to him' and that this involved a 'balancing to be carried out' under DPD article 14(a) which permitted 'account to be taken in a more specific manner of all the circumstances surrounding the data subject's particular situation' and that where there was 'a justified objection, the processing instigated by the controller may no longer involve those data'. The CJEU said the first step was to 'ascertain the purpose of that registration'.

The CJEU agreed with its Advocate-General that it was 'common ground that even after the dissolution of a company, rights and legal relations relating to it continue to exist' and that in the event of a dispute, retention of Mr Manni's data may be necessary 'to assess the legality of an act carried out on behalf of that company during the period of its activity or so that third parties can bring an action against the members of the organs or against the liquidators of that company'. In the course of oral submissions from the governments of the other member states in this case, it had become clear that limitation periods varied considerably. The CJEU said that it seemed 'impossible, at present, to identify a single time limit, as from the dissolution of a company, at the end of which the inclusion of such data in the register and their disclosure would no longer be necessary'.

Going on to deal with erasure of personal data the CJEU ruled that the DPD could not guarantee to persons in Mr Manni's position that they had 'the right to obtain, as a matter of principle, after a certain period of time from the dissolution of the company concerned, the erasure of personal data concerning them, which have been entered in the register pursuant to the latter provision, or the blocking of that data from the public'. The CJEU stressed that the DPD did not 'result in disproportionate interference with the fundamental rights of the persons concerned, and particularly their right to respect for private life and their right to protection of personal data'.

The CJEU emphasized these 4 points on this:

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- Articles 2(1)(d)/(j) and Article 3 of CLD1 required 'disclosure only for a limited number of personal data items, namely those relating to the identity and the respective functions of persons having the power to bind the company concerned to third parties and to represent it or take part in the administration, supervision or control of that company',
- CLD1 provided for data disclosure only due 'to the fact that the only safeguards that joint-stock companies and limited liability companies offer to third parties are their assets, which constitutes an increased economic risk for the latter' and this it was 'justified that natural persons who choose to participate in trade through such a company are required to disclose the data relating to their identity and functions within that company',
- there may be 'specific situations in which the overriding and legitimate reasons relating to the specific case of the person concerned justify exceptionally that access to personal data entered in the register is limited, upon expiry of a sufficiently long period after the dissolution of the company in question, to third parties who can demonstrate a specific interest in their consultation'. This was needed not only to 'protect the interests of third parties' but also to 'ensure legal certainty, fair trading and thus the proper functioning of the internal market', and
- Under article 14 of the DPD the 'final decision' as to whether the natural persons 'may apply to the authority responsible for keeping the register for such limitation of access to personal data concerning them, on the basis of a case-by-case assessment, is a matter for the national legislatures'.

What will happen next with this case?

This case will be sent back to the Italian Supreme court so it can apply the CJEU ruling and also deal with costs. It is likely to need to refer the case back down to the Court of Lecce to determine a number of factual matters. The CJEU said it was ultimately a matter for the Italian data protection registrar to decide if Mr Manni's data did still need to be retained by the Chamber of Commerce. It was quite sceptical about Mr Manni's prospects in this regard however noting that it would have to take 'into account the time elapsed since the dissolution of the company concerned' as to whether there were indeed here 'legitimate and overriding reasons' which might 'exceptionally justify limiting third parties' access to the data concerning Mr Manni in the company register'.

The CJEU was clear on one thing however and this was because the tourist properties in Mr Manni's new venture were not selling 'cannot be regarded as constituting such a reason, in particular in view of the legitimate interest of those purchasers in having that information'. Finally the CJEU said it was for an Italian court to decide if Mr Manni could apply to the Chamber of Commerce to 'determine, on the basis of a case-by-case assessment, if it is exceptionally justified, on compelling legitimate grounds relating to their particular situation, to limit, on the expiry of a sufficiently long period after the dissolution of the company concerned' access to his personal data.

Will the position be any different under the General Data Protection Regulation?

The General Data Protection Regulation (EU)2016/679 comes into force on 25 May 2018 and from that date the DPD is repealed. This makes some key changes to the right to be forgotten. Recital 65 states that 'a data subject should have the right to have personal data concerning him or her rectified and a "right to be forgotten" where the retention of such data infringes this Regulation or Union or Member State law to which the controller is subject' and goes on to say that 'a data subject should have the right to have his or her personal data erased and no longer processed where the personal data are no longer necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are collected or otherwise processed'.

Recital 66 goes further providing that 'the right to erasure should also be extended in such a way that a controller who has made the personal data public should be obliged to inform the controllers which are processing such personal data to erase any links to, or copies or replications of those personal data'.

The right to erasure itself is set out in Article 17 of the GDPR. The relevant parts of this provide:

"1. The data subject shall have the right to obtain from the controller the erasure of personal data concerning him or her without undue delay and the controller shall have the obligation to erase personal data without undue delay where one of the following grounds applies:

(a) the personal data are no longer necessary in relation to the purposes for which they were collected or otherwise processed;

(b) the data subject withdraws consent on which the processing is based according to point (a) of Article 6(1), or point (a) of Article 9(2), and where there is no other legal ground for the processing;

(c) the data subject objects to the processing pursuant to Article 21(1) and there are no overriding legitimate grounds for the processing, or the data subject objects to the processing pursuant to Article 21(2);

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(d) the personal data have been unlawfully processed;
(e) the personal data have to be erased for compliance with a legal obligation in Union or Member State law to which the controller is subject;
(f) the personal data have been collected in relation to the offer of information society services referred to in Article 8(1).

2. Where the controller has made the personal data public and is obliged pursuant to paragraph 1 to erase the personal data, the controller, taking account of available technology and the cost of implementation, shall take reasonable steps, including technical measures, to inform controllers which are processing the personal data that the data subject has requested the erasure by such controllers of any links to, or copy or replication of, those personal data.

3. Paragraphs 1 and 2 shall not apply to the extent that processing is necessary:

- (a) for exercising the right of freedom of expression and information;
- (b) for compliance with a legal obligation which requires processing by Union or Member State law to which the controller is subject or for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller;
- (c) for reasons of public interest in the area of public health in accordance with points (h) and (i) of Article 9(2) as well as Article 9(3);
- (d) for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes in accordance with Article 89(1) in so far as the right referred to in paragraph 1 is likely to render impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the objectives of that processing; or
- (e) for the establishment, exercise or defence of legal claims.'

As can be seen from the words underlined and highlighted in Article 17 (whatever the Recitals say), the qualifications on the erasure of data under the GDPR are in substance the same as under the DPD. It is highly likely that the CJEU would reach the same conclusion in a case such as Manni even if it were referred to it under the GDPR. However the decision on data erasure in Google Spain was made by the Grand Chamber of the CJEU and it, at least, indicates a willingness on the CJEU in appropriate circumstances to apply or extend the right to be forgotten. This issue is clearly not going to go away.

9 March 2017

David Bowden is a solicitor-advocate and runs [David Bowden Law](http://DavidBowdenLaw.com) which is authorised and regulated by the Bar Standards Board to provide legal services and conduct litigation. He is the cases editor for the Encyclopedia of Consumer Credit Law. If you need advice or assistance in relation to consumer credit, financial services or litigation he can be contacted at info@DavidBowdenLaw.com or by telephone on (01462) 431444.