



Creating genuinely useful solutions

Modern Law spoke with **Tim Champney**, Managing Director, to find out how their environmental searches go the extra mile. What's more, we discuss how remaining innovative is helping FCI to always put the client first.

Q. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at FCI?

A. I'm the Managing Director, so I've got the exciting and varied task of looking after the business, developing our strategic direction and growth. I'm a chartered environmental practitioner, with a background in environmental consultancy, so I am heavily involved in the risk assessment, product design and service development elements of the business; all aspects of my role I really enjoy.

I've been with FCI just shy of two years. It's been an exciting journey so far and I've learnt a lot, both personally and professionally. Each day really is different, and we are constantly evolving and developing which is certainly key to our continued growth and success! I'm really lucky to have inherited a great team with a great dynamic, some of whom have been with FCI since its first days of trading, and it really shows in terms of the level of knowledge, collaboration and dedication.

Q. How does FCI look to support the conveyancing industry and in what ways can you help businesses across the sector?

A. Fundamentally, FCI supports the conveyancing industry by building products and services which genuinely help our clients. Our core aim is to save them time and money, and

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support them in attaining a speedy conclusion of their client's property transaction. Conveyancers are really pressured, and their time is tight, so inevitably they need the most efficient, diligent, timely products available to support them.

It's common for products or services to come onto the market which don't necessarily solve a problem or serve a genuine need. There's lots of interesting technology and data out there which we're constantly evaluating, building and developing. A lot of this can be fascinating to us; but there's a danger that if not evaluated and executed properly, it can be productised as little more than a gimmick. We're super conscious of this at FCI. We've developed our brand on being solutions-focussed, succinct and delivering genuine change through our products. So, we keep that in mind, and before we embark on any changes to our products or services we always start by challenging ourselves on the "why?". "What purpose does it serve?" "Are we bringing genuine benefit to our clients?". If it doesn't serve a clear purpose, we don't pursue it. This means that everything we put in front of our customers adds value.

We also recognise the vast range of topics which solicitors, conveyancers and legal support staff must keep up with. So we offer content, such as CPDs, training materials and case studies and blogs which focus on issues relevant to specific localities. Environmental searches are only one aspect of a conveyancer's due diligence responsibilities,

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so having access to evidence-based, real world examples of environmental perils and how they can be safely navigated has been well received.

Q. Your ethos is to ‘always put your clients first’. How do you look to deliver comprehensive solutions for them?

A. We never leave a client ‘hanging’ i.e., highlighting a potential risk to a property but not suggesting a solution.

We offer plain English advice on the context of any issues identified in a search, and guidance on what the legal professional, or the client, can do themselves to better understand or mitigate that risk. Where further assistance is needed, we offer affordable value-added solutions in the form of our ‘FCI Appraisal’ range. These services see our expert team work on behalf of the client to source, review, analyse and interpret additional information which is key to a more detailed quantification of the risk. We’re not just search data providers; we’re experts with lots of experience in environmental matters. Often, access to this tailored advice from qualified environmental experts is what’s needed to give the purchaser the confidence they need to make an informed decision. Data is good, but knowledge and understanding is key.

Additionally, risk acceptance doesn’t always boil down to a ‘yes/no’ answer; there is nuance to risk and the implications differ based on the purchaser, and the aspirations they have for a property. Through our solutions we look to illustrate the true situation, helping the purchaser to really understand the actual risk to *them*.

Q. This edition of the main magazine focuses on Innovation – something that FCI prides itself on. Why do you believe FCI are true data innovators in your area of the legal sector?

A. I think it’s the attitude and the ethos within the team. FCI was founded in 2014 based on feedback from conveyancers who were saying that environmental searches didn’t meet their needs. Searches were too long, sometimes confusing, they presented data rather than adding value and commonly became a vehicle for upselling, without that always being clear at the outset.

So, the founding principle and drive of FCI was the idea of offering a transparent, concise and robust service, and that’s still the case today. That’s what underpins and drives the business forward because fundamentally, FCI are not afraid to try something new in the spirit of innovation and improving the landscape for property purchasers and the legal profession.

Q. How have FCI lifted the standards of search reports? Does your technology play an important role in this?

A. FCI is all about acting in the best interest of the consumer. FCI is regulated by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), as well as being part of the Search Code. RICS has a Royal Charter based all around Consumer Protection so we take our responsibility to that code very seriously and we’ve championed more accessible products and services.

A key example of where FCI has lifted standards was to introduce the concept of ‘exception reporting’. Put simply, this is the avoidance of pages and pages of ‘null’ results. What this means in practice is that rather than a conveyancer scanning through countless pages of a search trying to identify the pertinent results amongst all the entries, they’re instead looking through a short, concise report where issues are drawn into the foreground and elements of no consequence left in the background. All the data is analysed and assessed, but only the relevant results are published front and centre. This allows the conveyancer to spend their valuable time addressing specialist matters, not meticulously scanning environmental searches.

Technology definitely plays a role too though. FCI is a relatively young business, so the baseline technology that we run off is modern and allows us to be very agile and flexible. As legislation changes, or indeed information and data changes, the technology which underpins the business allows us to quickly react and keep pace in the environmental search market.

Q. For the benefit of our readers, please can you give an example of a recent solution you’ve developed?

A. Yes, a good recent example is our development of a brand new CON29M Coal Mining Search. The legal profession is well versed on Coal Searches, as they’ve

been around for some time. However, we noticed two things in the market which we felt was lacking. The first being a really accessible Search which explained the context of Coal Mining risks to both conveyancer and house buyer.

The second was a nuance of the data. We know that the Coal Authority dataset which underpins the CON29M includes thousands of features which related to the mining of non-coal minerals. This interested us because there didn’t appear to be any clear differentiation or consideration in the legal searches market for the fact that these features wouldn’t necessarily be covered by the statutory protection afforded by the Coal Mining Subsidence Act 1991, if they caused subsidence. We felt this was an important distinction, so we built a CON29M Coal Search product, licensed by the Law Society, which gives the full picture. Our search highlights those non-coal workings from the Coal Authority database, and where necessary dynamically inserts a neat solution to bridge the gap left by the potential lack of statutory protection in the form of an integrated insurance policy. This gives the purchaser, lender (and of course conveyancer) comfort that robust and detailed assessment has been carried out, but with a novel solution offered to avoid introducing a barrier where our greater degree of assessment identifies an otherwise unreported, although very real, risk.

Q. What does the future hold for FCI? What impact has Covid-19 had on your plans?

A. Covid-19 has definitely brought challenges for us - like it has for everybody. Although on the other had the pandemic has connected us better as a business, both internally and externally. In some instances it’s also provided us with an opportunity to develop. As a society, I think it’s been a catalyst for quite a significant step forward in the broad acceptance of technology and automation of processes, and how information is exchanged. So, rightly so, we are working hard to align ourselves with that trajectory, and looking to lead from the front as information and data comes further forward in the property transaction process.

Tim Champney
is Managing Director at FCI