



# Our response to the consultation on our draft Service Charter

July 2016

## Introduction

Over the last two years we have been building the foundations for long-term changes and improvements to our service. We want everyone to be confident that complaining to us is straightforward, fair and can make a difference.

As we now investigate thousands more complaints, we need to look at the way we work to make sure it is in line with what people expect from a modern and responsive public service. We have consulted a wide range of people who use our service, the organisations we investigate, advocacy groups and other stakeholders as well as our own staff.

This feedback is collated in the independent report 'Creating a Service Charter for the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman' by OPM.

We know that there are some things we do really well, but feedback highlighted a lack of consistency across our organisation. We have heard that we are not always clear about our role and that we sometimes raise expectations beyond what we can provide.

Like other ombudsman services, there are times when people are disappointed that we are unable to accept their complaint for investigation or with our decision not to uphold their complaint. We know this can affect how people feel about our service and their views on whether we have been fair.

That is why it is so important for us to be open and transparent about the way we work, so that people understand how we reach sound decisions and can have confidence in us.

## About our Service Charter

Our Service Charter is a set of commitments describing the level of service people can expect from us when we look into their complaint. It provides a benchmark for our new ways of working. It also sets out what we need from people who complain to us, and organisations complained about, to help us all work together to resolve complaints.

Our Charter is supported by information which describes each of the three steps in our complaints process in detail.

Our Service Charter and these supporting materials will, together, help everyone to be clear about our role, what we can and cannot do, and how we work.

We plan to begin reporting on how we are performing, in line with the commitments in our Charter, in the autumn and every quarter after that.

Thank you to everyone who has taken time to help us create our Service Charter: your input is helping us to focus on what matters most to the people who use our service.

---

## Key themes in the feedback on the draft Service Charter

We consulted widely on a draft version of our Service Charter. Here are the key themes that came up in the feedback we received and our response to this feedback.

### Language and wording

Although some commented that the Charter was clear, simple and easy to follow, some felt the language was a bit 'bland' or 'vague' in places and wasn't specific.

#### **Our response:**

*'The Charter defines how we work and the level of service everybody can expect from us. It will be supported by other detailed published materials describing what happens at each step in our complaints process as well as personalised information and updates for people on what we are doing about their specific case.'*

*'Following feedback, we have made the Charter more concise so people can quickly identify what to expect. At the same time we have not lost any of the key elements people told us they wanted to see in the Charter.'*

*'We have strengthened the language of our Charter to make it absolutely clear what people can expect from us. To avoid repetition and make the Charter clearer, we have grouped the commitments together under headings which describe the different aspects of how we work rather than the different steps in our process.'*

*'We have changed 'service promises' to 'service commitments' as we believe that 'service commitments' are stronger and make us more accountable.'*

## Our role and remit

Many people felt that there needed to be greater clarity and a fuller explanation about our role and remit. Comments included needing to explain what we can and cannot investigate, being clearer on what needs to happen before contacting us and explaining that many cases are not taken up.

Some felt that providing more information on why some complaints are investigated and others are not, as well as the outcomes that could be expected, should be included in the Charter. Others noted that case studies on the website would help to provide greater clarity.

### **Our response:**

*'Our Charter includes specific commitments to ensure we explain our role and how we work and we will make sure we clearly explain these important issues to people when they come to us.'*

*'Our website includes information about our powers and our service, what we can look at and what happens at each stage of a complaint.'*

*'We also publish on our website summaries of complaints we handle, to show how complaining can make a difference.'*

*'Rather than repeat this detailed information in the Charter itself, we have included a reference to our website where people can find it.'*

*'We are investing in developing our website to be clearer, more interactive, and easier to navigate and understand.'*

## Accessibility

Although the draft Service Charter talked of giving information in other languages and formats, feedback said that it should be more explicit about what support is available for complainants from advocacy groups. It should highlight all the different ways that people can bring their complaint to us, as well as the support we can give to those with particular needs.

### **Our response:**

*'We recognise the clear need for our service to be flexible and accessible. There is a very wide range of things we can do to help people to use our service and we did not want to suggest that some of these are more important than others. We have used intentionally broad terms in our Charter as this commits us to providing support wherever it is needed, now or in the future, rather than setting limitations for ourselves by describing what this support looks like.'*

*'We recognise the invaluable support given to complainants by advocacy groups. Our website can help people find advocacy groups and other organisations that can help them make a complaint. When we first talk to a complainant, we will check to see whether they would like information to help them find a local advocacy service, to make sure they are supported during the process.'*

*'Our website explains the different ways that people can bring complaints to us. We also guide people through this when they get in touch with us.'*

## Timescales

A number of comments suggested that the Service Charter should provide indicative or target timescales. However, some respondents said that there should be mention of flexibility in these and that they needed to be mutually agreed and realistic.

A number of respondents wanted to see more clarification in the Charter about how we keep customers updated throughout our investigation

### **Our response:**

*'We understand that it's important for people to know how long we are going to take to look into their complaint. In our Charter we have committed to giving people regular updates, which will include what we are doing to progress the complaint and how long we think it will take.'*

*'We will also make sure we are clear about our standard timescales in the information we provide to support our Service Charter, so people know what we are working to.'*

## The investigation process

Respondents wanted to see more detail about what happens during an investigation. They felt that the draft Service Charter did not fully outline the complaints process, including the evidence used, how it is shared and with whom, and the time allowed to comment.

People thought it would also be useful to explain the powers we have to get evidence from the organisations we investigate.

### **Our response:**

*'We recognise people want more details about what we do when we investigate a complaint. Our Charter will be supported by additional materials which give this information. For example, we have published a step by step guide to our process on our website (under 'Making a complaint') and we are also planning to give an information leaflet on the process to everyone whose complaint is accepted for investigation.'*

*'Our Charter commits us to following an open and fair process. This includes giving people tailored information about what our investigation will cover, how we are going to approach our investigation, and keeping them updated as our investigation progresses, which includes sharing facts and discussing what we are seeing. These commitments will make sure that we carry out transparent investigations.'*

## Receiving the final decision

Many felt that the draft Service Charter needed a clearer explanation of what somebody can do if they are unhappy with our final decision.

### **Our response:**

*'At the heart of our Charter is the need to ensure we are in regular communication with the parties involved in the complaint and that we follow an open and fair process. By living up to our commitments, we will ensure that any issues or concerns about our work are identified and discussed as early as possible and are clearly taken into account.'*

*'We are also committed to listening to feedback and using it to improve our service. To support this, we provide clear information on our website that explains what people should do if they have any feedback or comments about our service and the decisions we make. Our staff will also remind people how they can provide feedback at each stage of our processes.'*

*'By reporting on our performance, we will provide details on what feedback we have received throughout the year and what we have done to learn from that feedback to improve our service.'*

## Measuring the promises in the Service Charter

There were questions about how the commitments in the Charter would be measured and how we would be held to account.

Respondents said they would like clear and easy to understand reports published regularly online with statistics about the number and type of complaints and outcomes.

### **Our response:**

*'The clear, concise commitments in the Service Charter allow us to set well-defined measures. They allow us to be robust and transparent in monitoring and reporting our performance against them.'*

*'We are changing how we survey people who use our service so that we ask the right questions and get feedback we can use. We are investing more resources to capture what people think in real time at every step in our process.'*

*'We have also invested more resources in making sure we carry out robust quality checks on all aspects of our service.'*

*'We have introduced a Quality Committee of non-executive directors, whose task is to critically assess our performance to help us to maintain and improve the quality of our service.'*

*'We will publish the results of our performance on our website in line with a number of key service commitments, beginning this autumn and in full within our Annual Report.'*

*'Parliament's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee holds us to account through an annual scrutiny hearing and we will regularly report to it on our performance in line with the Service Charter.'*

---

## Contact us

**If you would like this content in a different format, such as DAISY or large print, please contact us.**

**Tel: 0345 015 4033 or visit our website: [www.ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk)**