

Responsive and Accountable?

The Ombudsman's review of complaint handling by
government departments and public organisations 2011-12



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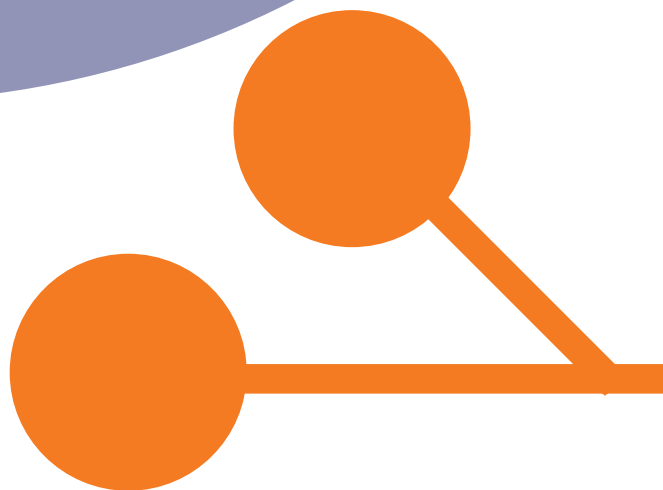
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Foreword by
Dame Julie Mellor, DBE,
Parliamentary Ombudsman





This report looks at the way government departments and agencies manage complaints. It tells a series of short stories about individuals who, when things went wrong, struggled to get themselves heard. It shows that complaining about government services can be hard to do. It takes confidence, persistence and, sometimes, sheer luck. For public services, each unheard complaint represents a missed opportunity to put things right and prevent mistakes from happening in future.

In the last year, we have been listening to what the public, our customers, stakeholders and staff have to say about complaining about public services. The results are stark: over one third of people who want to complain don't do so. The public lack confidence in the system, processes are long and unwieldy, and lessons from mistakes are not being shared. It is even harder for people who are unwell, vulnerable, or in difficulty.

Even when people do complain, they lack confidence that anything will change as a result. For too many people, the process of complaining is dispiriting and the outcome to their complaint can seem hollow. The stories in this report show what happens when complaints are handled badly, from the perspective of the individuals who complain to us. Each poorly handled complaint represents disruption to individuals, exhaustion, and often hurt and upset. One family talked about being made to feel like criminals.

Yet many of these complaints are about small, seemingly insignificant mistakes; administrative errors of letters unanswered, or documents unread. These issues should not need to come to us. Too many of the complaints we receive have to be sent back because there is more that can be done by the department or organisation concerned. Many of these complaints were about the UK Border Agency. We continue to see the impact that their backlogs have on individuals who are awaiting decisions that will affect their future.

Last year, my predecessor Ann Abraham highlighted inconsistent and haphazard complaint handling across government. I am pleased that the Government has responded positively to her report and is taking action in response. When handled well, complaints can make a difference both to the individual who complained and to the wider public. In this report we highlight how good complaint handling works and how some government departments and agencies are working to achieve this – by getting better at recognising when things have gone wrong and better at putting them right.

If things go wrong in people's day-to-day contact with public services, they want to know how and where to complain. The public want a simple, linear process for their complaint which is easy to understand. They want complaints to be resolved in a reasonable timescale, to be listened to, and to be treated like an individual. And they want an ombudsman service that is visible, impartial, fair, and has the power to hold organisations to account. We are committed to delivering this type of ombudsman service for the public, and to taking the lead in helping make the complaints system better.

Dame Julie Mellor, DBE
Parliamentary Ombudsman
December 2012

Hard to complain

‘The system was not set up with the public in mind.’
(Member of the public)

Most of the time, public services run smoothly. Four out of five people had no reason to complain about public services last year. But of the 18% of people who did want to complain, over a third (39%), did not do so.¹

We have been working to find out the reasons why.

It can be **hard to find out how to complain** and who to complain to.

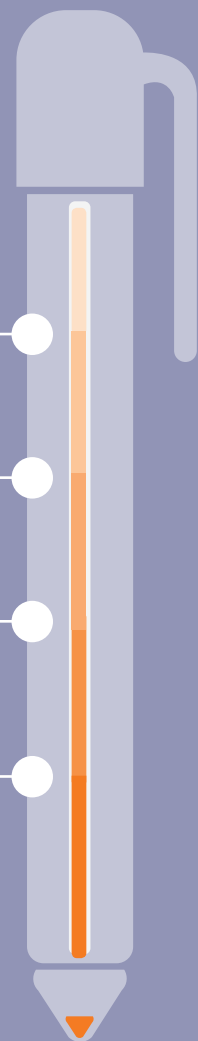
People think that **complaining will be difficult** and take a long time.

People feel that **complaining will not make a difference**, either for them or for others like them.

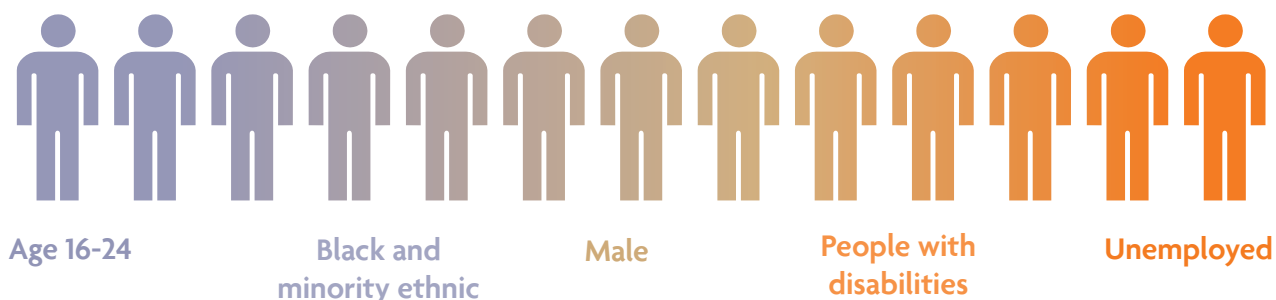
Some people **fear that they will get a worse service** if they complain.

For people who are unwell, vulnerable, or struggling with difficult circumstances, **making a complaint can be particularly hard**.

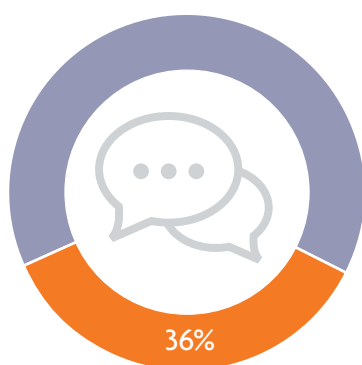
¹Omnibus research of 1,998 UK adults, conducted September 2012.



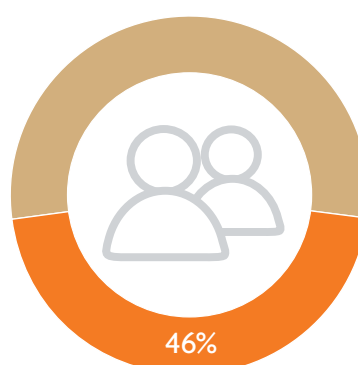
People who do not complain formally tend to be:



When people do complain, they can encounter obstacles:



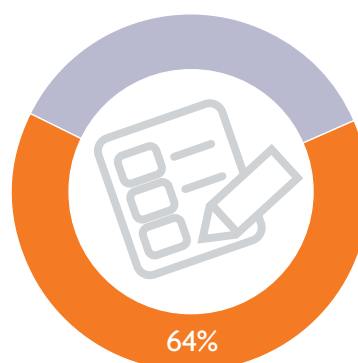
36%
Not listened to or not kept up to date (57%)



46%
Feel that they are **not taken seriously**



45%
Nearly half **not told** about the Ombudsman



64%
Nearly two thirds feel that their **complaint will not make a difference**

Our role is to make the final decision on complaints. In 2011-12, we received 6,818 complaints about government departments and public organisations.

‘...it is in their encounters with officialdom that most citizens get a sense of what the democratic state is like; of whether they will be listened to and how much their voice and their experience counts.’

Ann Abraham, October 2011 Tom Sargent lecture for the charity Justice

A massive machine

'You don't know where to go – it's like a massive machine.' (Member of the public)

Most people who come to us want advice. Something has gone wrong and no one else is able to help. They do not want a lengthy investigation – they want their problem fixed.



They want an answer to a letter, an update on a payment or, even, to be told how to find their MP. Sometimes, they just want to be heard. On their own, they had been unable to find the right person, in the right place, to deal with their complaints. It should be simple, but often it is not.

As an Ombudsman service, we can help by finding the right person to listen to the person's complaint. Organisations know that they need ways to look after customers when things go wrong, but they do not always make it easy for their customers to find the right person to listen to them.

We need to check a few things when anyone contacts us. Is the person asking about an organisation we can look into? Has the person already complained to the organisation? If a complaint has got stuck, we will give advice on how to keep the complaint moving. That can mean we get in touch with the organisation ourselves.

- A woman sent documents to the Tax Credit Office, part of HM Revenue & Customs, but they denied having them. They found the documents and returned them after contact from us.
- Some people who find writing difficult prefer to make their complaint by phone. The Pension, Disability and Carers Service, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and Jobcentre Plus all asked these people to write a letter – until we asked them to think again.

The pages from our casebook published here include examples of people needing our help to get very simple answers. These stories also show how one small mistake can go from bad to worse.

We were able to help by putting people in touch with complaint handlers who:

- treated them as individuals wanting problems resolved – helpfully, promptly, sensitively;
- had ways of logging complaints and queries so, even if they could not fix the problem, someone else would; and
- had access to people who could get things done if the complaint had got stuck.

In the words of one of our *Principles of Good Complaint Handling*, they were 'equipped and empowered to act decisively to resolve complaints'. Every organisation needs a strong safety net to protect its customers and itself from the small mistakes that go bad. It is called a robust complaints system.

A robust complaints system is one where:



- The phone gets answered and emails and letters are replied to.
- Customers are dealt with as individuals – helpfully, promptly and sensitively.
- Complaints and queries are logged so that the organisation has a grip on what is happening.
- Staff have access to people who can get things done.

'I might have pursued it further if a complaint form had been offered, or if I had been given advice of the "how to and who to complain to" variety.' (Member of the public)



Rescued from a revolving door complaint

A man was having trouble with Jobcentre Plus. He had been waiting five months for a decision about his claim for employment support allowance. Jobcentre Plus told him to ask Atos, their medical services supplier. Atos told him to ask Jobcentre Plus. After we contacted Jobcentre Plus, they looked into his case and gave him more information. As a result, he was able to claim a different benefit while he looked into ways to resolve his employment support allowance claim.

Refund delivered

A woman had overpaid tax and had been due a refund of almost £1,800 for two months. The cheque had got stuck in the system. After our contact, HM Revenue & Customs made the payment.



An appeal avoided

A woman had been unable to get a response to her complaint about delay in reaching a decision about her mother's pension credit entitlement. She had appealed, but there had been no action. We asked for an update, with the result that the Pension, Disability and Carers Service admitted they had overlooked the letter of appeal and immediately considered the case. They also found information which confirmed the family's reasons for appealing, and made it likely that a tribunal hearing could be avoided.

A photograph of a person with dark hair, seen from the side, looking down at a white toaster on a kitchen counter. The person is wearing a blue and white striped shirt. In the background, there is a white electric kettle and a white cabinet with glass doors. The scene is set in a kitchen with light-colored tiled walls. A large purple circle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing text. An orange circle is overlaid on the bottom right, showing a close-up of a hand holding a piece of toast with jam and a small jar of jam. Another orange circle is overlaid on the bottom right, showing a close-up of a hand holding a piece of toast with jam and a small jar of jam.

Delayed payments for a family

A family had been without their tax credit payments for five months, without getting a clear explanation of the problem. They were borrowing from relatives to make ends meet. After our contact, the Tax Credit Office (part of HM Revenue & Customs) looked into the case. They paid arrears of £3,716 and started weekly payments of £200.



The passport that was not lost

A woman had sent her passport to the Identity and Passport Service so they could renew it under her new name. But when she followed up with them, they told her they had no record of it. We found out that the Service had the passport. They needed more proof of identity from her. They had tried to telephone her, but were unable to reach her. They did not write to her. After our contact, they wrote to her and returned her passport.

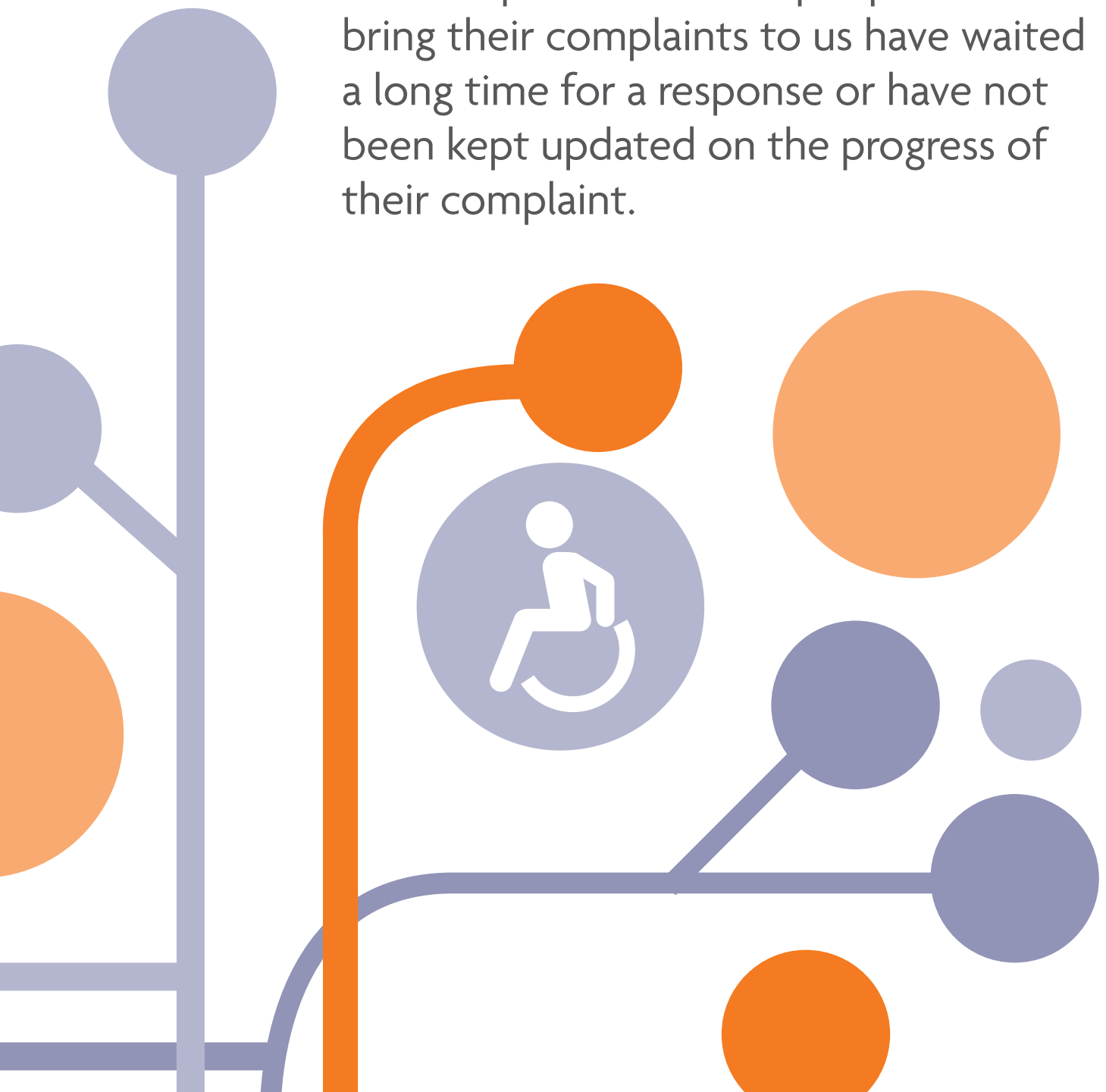
A man unable to work without a driving licence

A man was unable to work because of problems with his HGV driving licence. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency had omitted to add his vocational categories to the licence. He had returned it, then heard nothing more for four weeks, even when he queried the delay. After an email from us, the Agency sent the updated licence within a week and started to look at compensation.

Lots of effort required

‘How on earth am I going to put this right without lots of effort?’ (Member of the public)

Finding out how and where to complain can be just the first stage in a long and arduous process. Often people who bring their complaints to us have waited a long time for a response or have not been kept updated on the progress of their complaint.



Sometimes the response they receive is unclear or fails to address the reasons for their complaint. Not surprisingly, complainants can lack confidence that anything will change as a result.

Complaints about the nuts and bolts of modern government can be hard for organisations to resolve. The person complaining may have made mistakes. At other times, both sides have got it wrong. We expect organisations to give people proper explanations, accurate advice and clear information, even when public money is short. Treating people fairly means listening to them, and giving them the information that they need.

Our casebook includes the story of a woman who needed information to help her keep a court case on track. She emailed court staff, but received no reply. She ended up paying court fees, pointlessly. When she complained, HM Courts & Tribunals Service told her she should have read their leaflet on the internet. Our view was that court staff could have told the woman about the leaflet if they had replied to her emails.

In this instance, we were able to help resolve the complaint because we:

- spoke to the person who complained, and listened to what they told us;
- looked at the facts objectively – trying to put ourselves in the complainant's shoes, as well as listening to what the organisation told us;
- took time to explain things; and
- had access to people who could get things done.

A robust complaints system:



- Makes sure that staff can and do recognise mistakes, and that they can and do act quickly to put them right.
- Reports to the top of an organisation.
- Is one where every senior manager cares about complaints and what they are saying.

'It felt like each letter they sent me had come from their legal team. I spent a lot of time and effort producing coherent responses to them. I didn't have time to think about anything else. It felt like they thought I would go away if they kept stonewalling me.'
(Complainant)



An unexpected interest bill

A woman, given legal aid in 1985, faced an unexpected bill 24 years later for interest. She ended up paying lawyers to help her deal with the Legal Services Commission. The Commission reviewed their decision and stopped charging her interest. They paid her £100 to recognise the anxiety they had caused, but they refused to reimburse her legal costs of £1,650. Our closer look found that the Commission used the wrong legislation when they dealt with the woman's case. We asked them to reconsider their decision not to pay the legal costs, and the Commission agreed to pay her the full amount.

Wrongly labelled abusive

A man made repeated telephone calls to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority about his application. They treated him as an abusive complainant and used that as a reason to stop accepting his telephone calls, but their records of his calls were not sufficiently robust to support such a decision. Our intervention led the Authority to apologise and to resume telephone contact, having written to him with clear guidelines showing the basis on which telephone contact would resume.



Sorry for being inflexible

A man with sleep apnoea, a condition that causes intense tiredness, had agreed to an independent medical assessment as part of an employment tribunal. The Treasury Solicitors were handling the case for his employer and arranged the medical assessment. Our complainant faced five hours of travelling to and from the assessment, and wanted to change the appointment. But the Treasury Solicitors insisted that no change was possible. In fact, by sheer luck, our complainant found out that the doctor was willing to be flexible. After our intervention, the Treasury Solicitors accepted that they could have been more helpful. They apologised.

A young child with dark skin and curly hair is looking intently at a tablet held in front of them. An adult's face is partially visible in the background on the right side. The image has a warm, slightly blurred aesthetic. Overlaid on the left side is a large, semi-transparent purple circle containing text, and several orange circles of varying sizes are scattered in the upper left background.

Driving test delay

A young man was due to take his driving test – the work he wanted needed him to have a full driving licence. The Driving Standards Agency cancelled his test. They offered another slot the next day, but he could not get a car for that slot at such short notice. He waited seven weeks for the next test slot and felt that was a serious inconvenience. He said complaining to the Agency was like dealing with a bureaucratic wall. They had apologised and offered to pay him £90 in compensation. Our closer look at the case showed delay by them in completing the complaint process. Our contact led the Agency to offer a further £70 and to apologise.



A father deprived of child support

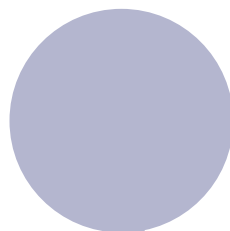
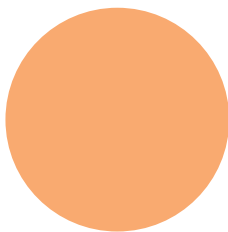
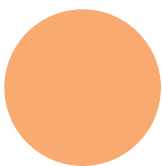
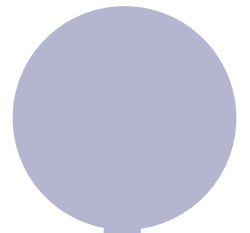
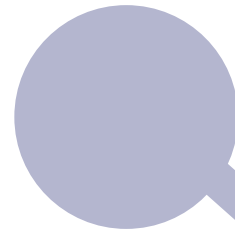
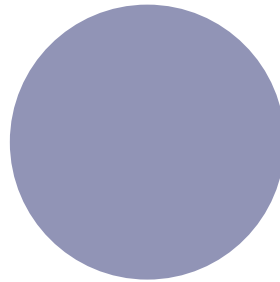
A father found that mistakes by the Child Support Agency had allowed his ex-partner to avoid paying enough child support maintenance since 2006. It had taken years for the Agency to act on his complaints. The Independent Case Examiner is the arms length complaint handler for the Department for Work and Pensions. Their investigation had ensured that the Agency had corrected their mistakes; but they were unable to obtain full payment for the family. Our contact prompted the Agency to recognise that the father's case now qualified for compensation. The Agency aim to recover this money from the ex-partner. They paid the father, in advance, the £10,000 the family could have received if the Agency had pursued the ex-partner correctly, and almost £800 in interest.

The cost of delay

The Criminal Records Bureau has minimum standards for the time it will take to deal with cases. A health worker waited 22 weeks too long for the Bureau to give his employer a records check. He was unable to work during that time. The Bureau had agreed to pay his lost earnings, but had treated him as a higher-rate taxpayer and deducted tax at 40%. They should have taxed him at 20%. We asked them to look again and they paid him a further £2,780 to make up the underpayment.

Complex and challenging

'My complaint is too complex and opens up a whole can of worms. I feel lip service is paid to anything that challenges the system.'
(Member of the public)



'I was walking down the street and I saw he was having a surgery. I am non political. I have had very little to do with MPs. I have always been opposed to the ruling government! But he was very good with me.'

This man, who complained to us, was talking about the MP who helped him when he found out he had made a mistake that was going to cost him £17,000. It had been a small mistake, which had dire results over several years. The MP supported him from the day the man walked into his surgery, until our investigation led to the man getting his money back, with interest. Each time the man went back to the MP, he found him ready to listen. His complaint was about the Rural Payments Agency and his story shows the way MPs can help individuals, and the way we can help MPs.

The cases we investigated in 2011-12 were some of the most complex and protracted complaints we received. Our investigations give a human face to the effect of lost files and unanswered telephone calls. Putting things right at an early stage – however much hard work that needs – is the least costly approach.

One of our investigations looked at what happened after an incorrect decision to give legal aid. Our complainant won his case and the court awarded costs against his opponent. But the incorrect legal aid decision had not only prolonged the court action, it also meant he could recover only some of the costs. This was money he felt he could not afford to lose: his legal bill was £28,600. The Legal Services Commission offered him some help, but felt unable to compensate him and, in our view, left him no choice but to go back to the courts. This cost yet more in legal fees. Putting things right, years later, cost the Commission £135,000.

Sometimes, ordinary mistakes can have extraordinary results. Our investigation snapshots include a UK Border Agency complaint where immigration officers failed to realise that an Australian backpacker had a ticket home. They removed him to France, rather than let him board his flight. He was marooned in France for six weeks, penniless and unable to speak the language. We obtained an apology, and compensation for the complainant for the impact of the Agency's errors.

We investigate complaints because organisations either do not realise that they acted wrongly; or do not acknowledge, and put right, the consequences of their mistakes.

We find that organisations can easily:

- forget to listen to their customers before deciding they must be wrong;
- overlook how flexible the law allows the organisation to be;
- set an unfairly high standard for their customers compared with the standard they set for themselves;
- fail to see that their small mistake can have a serious (even if unintentional) effect on an individual; and
- misunderstand their legal duty to take account of disability and equality law.

Government departments are under intense pressure – now more than ever. They are cutting costs and losing staff. Some have legacies of failed computer systems and failed policy. It is not easy for them, and it is right that they take account of public money. These problems make it even more important that complaints are resolved at an early stage. Especially in a time of financial pressure, failing to invest in good complaint handling is a false economy.

Practical action: passing complaints back to the UK Border Agency

It is no secret that the UK Border Agency have backlogs. The complaints we receive show that some people, stuck in a backlog, are also unable to find out when they might receive a decision. Almost two-thirds of complaints we sent back to organisations for a full answer in 2011-12 were complaints about the Agency. Sometimes, the Agency fail to deal properly with complaints even when an MP has intervened.

The Agency gave a man permission to stay permanently in the UK. But they sent his papers to the wrong place. The man then found that the papers were in his name, but the photograph was of a stranger. Writing to the Agency got him nowhere. Coming to us meant the man received a reply, and papers he could use.

A woman had applied in 2004 for the right to stay in the UK. Seven years later, she was in poor health, living in poverty, and still waiting for a decision from the Agency. We asked them to look at her case. They gave her permission to stay in the UK for three years.

We are the experts on complaint handling and good administration. The Agency are the experts, with the power to make the decisions, on immigration matters. It makes sense for them to deal with complaints before we get involved. It means any immigration decision that underlies the complaint receives attention first. Also, once the Agency look at the complaint, they can often put things right quickly. A prompt, accurate result is good for the individual, and good value for taxpayers.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a red long-sleeved shirt, smiling and holding a baby in a blue sweater. They are in a kitchen with white cabinets and a tiled backsplash. A box of Kellogg's cereal is visible on the counter. The image is overlaid with a large purple circle containing text and several orange circles at the bottom right.

A mix-up with forms

A mother, married to a UK citizen, applied to the UK Border Agency for leave to remain in the UK for her and her children, on the basis of her marriage. The Agency returned her application because they needed different photographs. The fees had gone up to £659, so the family had to send more money. By mistake, they sent £10 too little. But instead of asking for the missing £10, the Agency returned all the money and told the family, three times, that no fee was payable. Overall, it took a year for the Agency to explain matters accurately, and by then the fee payable had risen to £1,100. The Agency agreed, after we contacted them, to handle the application at the original cost of £659.



Deprived of her pension share


A mistake by court staff in a divorce case meant that a man was able to move his pension fund overseas without giving his ex-wife her share of the money. A court decided that the woman should have a share (about £55,830) of her ex-husband's pension. The court order said the money should be transferred to the woman within four months. But court staff failed to tell the pension provider about this – to 'serve the order'. The ex-husband moved his pension fund out of the UK. The woman attempted to put things right through the courts, but found she could not pursue her husband because he lived outside the UK.

She complained to HM Courts & Tribunals Service. They said it was her lawyers' job to tell the pension provider, not theirs. Our investigation showed that the court rules state the court needed to serve the order, or direct someone else to serve it. Court staff had failed to do that. Then they had failed to admit their error. We said that these were serious mistakes. We obtained a remedy for her of £56,000 in compensation, and a £1,000 apology for the stress of dealing with HM Courts & Tribunals Service. They also made a commitment to improve their systems for handling similar court orders.

Mistakes at the worst of times

A daughter was paying the nursing home fees for her elderly mother, who had dementia. In order to keep paying the fees, and to avoid moving her mother to a different nursing home, she needed to sell her mother's house. The Office of the Public Guardian sent the daughter the wrong forms for setting up her Power of Attorney; then failed to put the correct forms in the letter they sent her about using the wrong forms; then lost a crucial part of the forms

when she returned them; and gave her inaccurate advice. We decided that each day of delay caused by the Office had cost the daughter £55 in fees. The officials' mistakes, at a sensitive time when the daughter wanted to protect her mother's feelings, had also caused the daughter stress and upset. We obtained a payment of £1,200 towards the avoidable costs and for the frustration caused by her dealings with the Office of the Public Guardian.



Given the wrong National Insurance number

A man and his wife suffered years of problems after he received an incorrect National Insurance number because of a mistake by Jobcentre Plus. Their tax credit awards were muddled and some of their personal information repeatedly went to the correct holder of the National Insurance number. This breached the privacy of the man and his wife. The organisations involved failed to put things right and the couple felt they were treated like criminals, although they had done nothing wrong. We obtained apology payments amounting to £1,000.



Stranded in Paris

An Australian backpacker, wanting to be in England just long enough to catch a flight home to Australia, ended up stranded in Paris for six weeks. He was sick, almost penniless, unable to speak the language, and only got home thanks to help from the French government. The UK Border Agency had detained him, and sent him back to France instead of letting him pick up his flight connection at Heathrow. Our investigation found that the Agency's mistake was sending the man to France when he had a ticket for a flight to Australia within a day. When he complained, the Agency had persisted in overlooking their mistake. We obtained compensation of £2,250 for him, plus £430 with interest for the cost of his wasted ticket.

Better government complaint handling

'It's about picking up the phone to talk to the person – to get to the bottom of the complaint at the earliest opportunity.' (Department for Work and Pensions complaint handler)



The good news from what we have seen in the last year is the increasingly expert way in which some government departments are tackling complaints. Their good practice is all the more impressive because it is happening at the same time as cuts in public spending.

In places like the Department for Work and Pensions, the Rural Payments Agency, and the Child Support Agency, we see a powerful mix of hands-on leadership from senior managers, careful planning by staff and hard work to tackle complaints. In time, this should help build public confidence in the difference that complaining can make, so that even complaints caused by problems that look too big to fix (such as failing computer systems) can get the attention they need.

- In 2012, in response to one complaint, the Child Support Agency told us about a direct instruction sent to senior managers. They were to seek out the most long-standing complaints and fix them. In some serious cases, they will be offering to meet people to make face-to-face apologies, if the person wants that. They will be staying involved in difficult cases, to make sure the cases stay on track. We welcome that willingness, stretching to the top of the organisation, to get involved.
- The Department for Work and Pensions have recognised that good listening is a skill in itself. From 2012 onwards, specially trained complaints resolution managers are at the heart of their approach to complaints. In the words of one complaint handler: *'It's about picking up the phone to talk to the person – to get to the bottom of the complaint at the earliest opportunity'*. This cuts out unnecessary letter writing and reduces the number of layers in the complaints process from three to two. Someone who is unhappy with the Department's handling

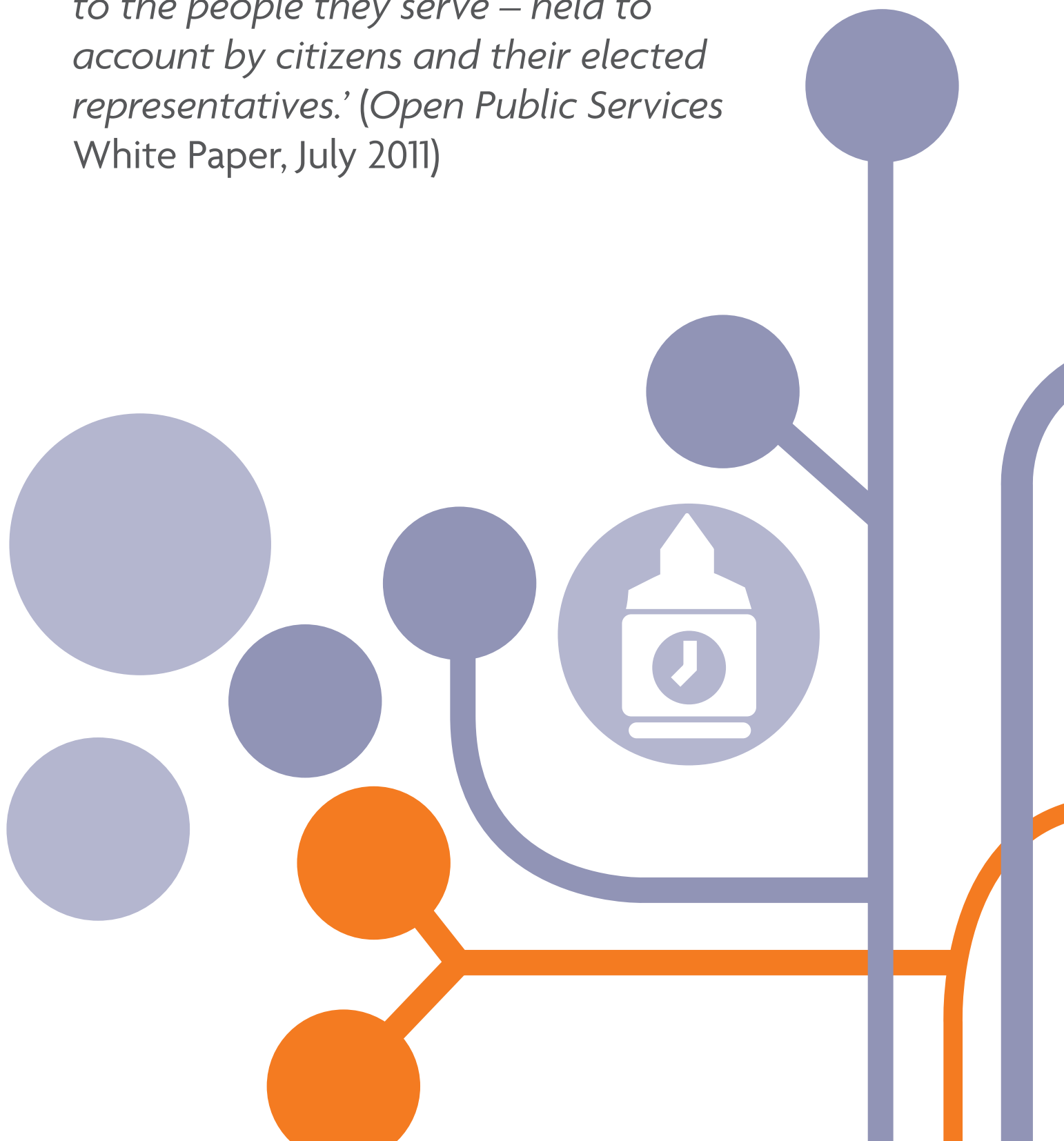
can turn to a complaints resolution manager and, if still unhappy, to the chief operating officer. So far, they have found that only 1.5% of complaints need the attention of the chief operating officer, compared with 10% previously.

- We have seen similar hard work from the Rural Payments Agency. Better complaint handling was part of their plan, published in 2012, for recovering from their administrative crisis. Their plan feeds down to specific, practical action. Among other things, they have looked again at how to support farmers with disabilities to understand and comply with the strict European Union rules for receiving farm subsidies. Again, senior managers are involved in face-to-face meetings and in resolving complaints.
- This year, the Ministry of Defence worked hard to listen to complaints. In August 2012 its Permanent Secretary issued a reminder to senior managers about complaint handling in the Ministry. This followed our report on the handling of Far East Prisoners of War compensation schemes. The reminder stated: *'What is clear from the report is that staff did not follow either the Department's policy or the Ombudsman's principles on handling complaints'*.

We welcome all these initiatives, which show the commitment of the most senior managers to tackling complaints. Yet in the end, it will be the experience of the public that counts. Those most unhappy with the service they have received will be the judge of whether these initiatives in complaint handling are successful in the longer term.

Taking the lead

‘This is the fifth principle of open public services: that they must be responsive to the people they serve – held to account by citizens and their elected representatives.’ (Open Public Services White Paper, July 2011)



Last year we highlighted that complaint handling across government was inconsistent, haphazard, and unaccountable; operating without any overarching design, overall standards, or common performance framework. Despite the good practice described on page 27, these concerns remain, and are brought into even sharper focus as public services seek to operate with reduced budgets.

However, government has started to take action in response to the concerns we have raised. We called for standards to be established so that the public would know what they can expect when making a complaint about public services. Work has begun on a set of high-level standards that will be applied across government departments and public organisations. We welcome that.

Through the Cross-Government Complaint Handling Forum, those directly involved in handling complaints have come together to share best practice, learn from each other's experiences, and to agree on standards that are relevant for any size of public organisation. We welcome this greater co-operation across government and hope that ministers, senior civil servants and board members give the Forum the support needed to ensure that it drives improvements in complaint handling.

In July 2011 the Government published the *Open Public Services* White Paper. Here the Government said it wanted to make sure that everyone has access to the best possible public services, and that the best become better still. The challenge that this poses is to find ways, in an era of austerity, of delivering better public services for less money.

In a time of increased financial pressures, there is a risk that developing and maintaining good complaint handling processes is seen as a luxury that the public purse cannot afford. In truth, poor complaint handling can lead to an added financial burden on taxpayers. The most cost-effective way to resolve complaints is to put things right as soon as possible. There is perhaps no better time to improve the complaints system than when there is pressure on budgets.

Public services should be responsive to the needs and choices of the public, shaped by the voice of citizens' experiences. In addition, public services need to be accountable to the wider public as taxpayers and as consumers, putting things right when they go wrong and constantly learning from those experiences.

Accountability and responsibility for delivering high-quality public services lies with government. We have a unique role in helping to ensure that the voice of citizens' experiences is heard, and informs the design and delivery of those services. Through our investigations, the voice of the individual can be heard. The challenge for us is to ensure that government and Parliament can hear those voices too.

Last month, we published a new high-level strategy that sets out how we want to work with others so that complaints will make a difference. This strategy is available on our website. Like some of the organisations featured in this report, we want to deliver the very best service for our customers, and make sure that we share the learning from the complaints we receive.

Over the next five years, we aim to:

- make it easier for people to find and use our service;
- help more people by investigating more complaints, and provide an excellent service for our customers;
- work with others to use what we learn from complaints to help them make public services better; and
- lead the way to make the complaints system better.

We look forward to working with Parliament, government and others to help make this happen.

An opportunity for change

The Government's *Open Public Services* White Paper (2011) seeks to promote choice and competition in public services. In our response to the White Paper, jointly made with the other public service ombudsmen in England and Wales, we welcomed the Government's recognition that ombudsmen have much to offer in ensuring fair access to public services for everyone.

The Open Public Services agenda provides an opportunity to develop public services that are responsive and accountable. It also highlights the need to explore the role of ombudsmen so that we can meet the challenges posed by a changing public sector. That includes ensuring that we have the legal framework necessary to be a modern and responsive ombudsman service.

There is much that we can and will do to improve the accessibility, visibility and impact of our work. However, a modern ombudsman service, meeting the challenges of modern public services, also requires a modern legislative framework. Open public services must go hand in hand with a more open ombudsman service. A small step, that could have real impact for some of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society, would be for us to have the powers to carry out investigations on our own initiative.

Currently, we can only undertake an investigation if we receive a complaint. However, most other national ombudsmen in Europe have the power to launch an investigation on their own initiative. This allows them to use evidence gathered through their own research, by regulators, by Parliament, or prompted by a specific public concern, to carry out a systemic investigation. Perhaps more importantly it provides another opportunity for the public's voice to be heard in the delivery of public services.

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing glasses, a pink polo shirt, and large hoop earrings, is sitting in front of a window with horizontal blinds. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. Her hands are clasped in her lap. A person's arm and hand are visible in the foreground, holding a pen over a notepad.

What government departments say about effective complaint handling

'We all have a part to play in raising the bar on how we deliver for customers – and for HMRC that includes how we respond when we've got it wrong.'

To be more customer focused in our approach, we have to put ourselves in the customer's shoes and ensure that when we respond, we do so in a clear and professional manner. It's also essential that we use this feedback to review and improve our products and processes.'

Lin Homer, Chief Executive and Permanent Secretary, HMRC

'Understanding why people complain is critical to improving the quality of our public services'

Bronwyn Hill, Permanent Secretary, Defra

Glossary of the organisations mentioned in this report

Here is a short guide to the organisations we mention in this report. You will find more information at www.gov.uk, which also explains how to complain about government departments. We have based these explanations on the information at www.gov.uk or the organisations' own websites.

Child Support Agency

give advice and information on the statutory child maintenance schemes. By calculating and collecting child maintenance payments, they aim to ensure that parents who live apart meet their financial responsibilities to their children. They had been part of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission until 2012, when they returned to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Criminal Records Bureau

are an executive agency of the Home Office. They do criminal record checks for organisations in England and Wales. People who work with children or vulnerable adults often need to have a criminal record check. On 1 December 2012 the Bureau and the Independent Safeguarding Authority merged to become the Disclosure and Barring Service.

Department for Work and Pensions

provide services for people of working age, employers, disabled people, pensioners, families and children. Jobcentre Plus, The Pensions, Disability and Carers Service, and the Child Support Agency are all part of the department.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

aim to support road safety and enforcement by maintaining registers of drivers and vehicles, and by collecting vehicle excise duty.

Driving Standards Agency

promote road safety in Great Britain by improving driving and motorcycling standards. They set standards for education and training, as well as doing driving and riding tests. They are an executive agency of the Department for Transport.

HM Courts & Tribunals Service

are part of the Ministry of Justice. They run the magistrates' courts, the Crown Court, county courts, the High Court and Court of Appeal in England and Wales.

Independent Case Examiner

provide a free resolution service to people wishing to complain about Department for Work and Pensions' agencies and businesses.

Identity and Passport Service

are part of the Home Office. They are responsible for the application, renewal and amendments of passports and ID cards in the UK.

Jobcentre Plus

are part of the Department for Work and Pensions. They run services that support people of working age on welfare benefits in finding work, and help employers fill their job vacancies.

Legal Services Commission

look after legal aid in England and Wales. They are also responsible for ensuring that people get the information, advice and legal help they need to deal with a wide range of everyday problems.

Glossary of the organisations mentioned in this report

Rural Payments Agency	are part of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). They run services such as rural payments, rural inspections and livestock tracing.
The Adjudicator's Office	investigate complaints about HM Revenue & Customs, the Valuation Office Agency, and the Insolvency Service.
HM Revenue & Customs	are responsible for collecting and administering direct and indirect taxes, and for paying some tax credits and other benefits, including child benefit. They were formed from the merger of the Inland Revenue with HM Customs and Excise.
The Pension, Disability and Carers Service	are part of the Department for Work and Pensions. The Pension Service provide information about the state pension, pension credit, winter fuel payment and related benefits. The Disability and Carers Service provide information about disability related benefits.
The Office of the Public Guardian	aim to protect people lacking mental capacity. They manage registers of information on Lasting Power of Attorneys, Enduring Power of Attorneys, and Deputies.
The Treasury Solicitor's Department	provide legal services to over 180 central government departments and other publicly funded organisations.
UK Border Agency	are part of the Home Office. They are responsible for border control for the UK, and enforcing immigration and customs regulations. They also consider applications for permission to enter or stay in the UK, for citizenship, and for asylum.

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

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