



**Delivering**  
**more impact**  
**for more people**



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## About this plan

*'They gave me a complaint booklet to fill in and send back to them. I didn't get any reply. I was kind of set up for it not to happen anyway. I don't even know if anyone read it because I didn't hear anything. It's probably just sat in some mail tray somewhere going nowhere.'*

As Parliament's Ombudsman service, every day we listen to stories like this, of people's experience of complaining about public services. We hear how hard it can be to find out how and where to complain; how front-line staff can appear to dismiss complaints and how the complaints process can seem overly lengthy and bureaucratic. For people who are vulnerable, it can be even harder.

One woman told us that she was advised to complain in writing about her concerns that her mother, who was in hospital, was not being washed or helped to go to the toilet. She was told her complaint would be acknowledged within 28 days. *'My mum could have died in that amount of time,'* she said.

Unsurprisingly, often the people who come to us have lost faith in complaining and in public services.

In the past, we have judged the complaints system across government departments to be inconsistent and haphazard, and we have asked the NHS to listen harder and learn more from complaints. Our daily caseload shows that there is still more work to do. For complaints to make a difference,

change is needed. When mistakes are made by public services, the public's voice needs to be listened to, from the front line to the board.

This plan describes the part we will play to help achieve this. It explains how we will investigate more complaints from individuals, while working with public services and others to help embed learning from complaints in the way they work. We will take the lead in helping to make the complaints system a simpler and less wearisome experience and will share the insight from our work with Parliament to help them hold government and public services to account.

To do this, we will need to be alert to, and respond to, the political, social and economic changes in the world around us. By changing the way we work and investing our resources in investigating more complaints more quickly, we will deliver greater value to the taxpayer, as well as a better service for our customers.

We would like to hear your views and comments in response to our plan. The different ways you can get in touch with us are set out on the last page of this plan.

**Dame Julie Mellor, DBE**  
**Parliamentary and Health Service**  
**Ombudsman**

**Helen Hughes**  
**Chief Operating Officer**

## Our vision for change

We know from our work and research that change is needed when public services get things wrong.

### The need for complaining to be easier

Our research shows that most users of public services are satisfied with the service they receive. But of those who are unhappy with public services, nearly 40% don't bother to complain. This may be because:

- it can be difficult to find out who to complain to;
- complaining can seem difficult and take a long time; or
- people don't believe that their complaint will make a difference.

In particular, young people, people with learning difficulties and people from black and minority ethnic communities are less likely to complain.

### The need for a better complaints system

Even when people complain, it can be difficult to get a fair and final answer. Our research found:

- Most people who complained about public services said they were not listened to or not kept up to date.
- Nearly half of people feel they are not taken seriously.

- Nearly half are not told about the Ombudsman's service.

Often, people who are vulnerable fear they will be treated worse if they complain. People told us:

*'The system was not set up with the public in mind.'*

*'How many times will I have to explain this?'*

*'Nothing changes.'*

### The need for public services to learn from complaints

When things go wrong, people often tell us that they do not want the same thing to happen to someone else. Yet the public lacks trust that complaints will make a difference. Nearly two thirds of people do not expect any change as a result of their complaint.

In order to make things better, public services need to learn from complaints, and Parliament needs information and evidence about big or repeated mistakes by public services.

Our vision describes the changes we want to see to ensure these needs are met.



## Our vision

We want complaints to make a difference and help to improve public services for everyone.

- We want everyone, whoever they are, to be confident that complaining about public services is straightforward and fair.
- When people complain about public services, we want them to be listened to, treated fairly and for mistakes to be put right.
- We want public services to learn from complaints and use them to improve the service they provide to everyone.

Parliament, government and public services all have work to do to make this vision real. This plan sets out the part we will play by delivering more impact for more people through our work.



## Our role

We were set up by Parliament nearly 50 years ago to help both individuals and the general public.

We are not part of government or the NHS; our role is to investigate complaints that individuals have been treated unfairly or have received poor service from government departments and other public organisations and the NHS in England. We do this fairly and without taking sides. We ask people to complain to the organisation they are unhappy about before bringing their complaint to us.

Our powers are set out in law and our service is free for everyone. The law gives us the power to investigate and make the final decision on complaints about public services for individuals. We make

recommendations on how mistakes can be put right and can ask organisations to produce action plans to show how they will implement them. If our investigations find big or repeated mistakes, we share this information with regulators to help them do their job.

We share information about our work with Parliament to help them hold government and the NHS in England to account for the service they provide and the way they handle complaints.



## Our aims

To help make our vision real, our aims for the next five years are to:

### **1. Make it easier for people to find and use our service**

This includes raising awareness of our work for everyone and helping people who find it hard to complain to contact us.

### **2. Help more people by investigating more complaints and to provide an excellent service for our customers**

This includes using different ways to investigate and resolve different types of complaint and setting high standards for the service we provide.

### **3. Work with others to use what we learn from complaints to help them make public services better**

This includes sharing information about what went wrong with different organisations so that mistakes can be avoided in the future. We will help Parliament find out the reasons for mistakes and how services can be improved.

### **4. Lead the way to make the complaints system better**

This includes working with Parliament to help make it easier for people to complain. We will also share information about the way in which public services respond to complaints to help them do it better.

### **5. Develop our organisation so that it delivers these aims efficiently and effectively**

This includes helping our staff develop new skills and developing new ways to handle complaints and to manage knowledge and information. We will also look hard at how we spend our money to make sure we are delivering the best value.





# Our objectives

## Aim 1: Make it easier for people to find and use our service

- We will increase awareness of the Ombudsman's service amongst the general public, including when they can seek support from us and the difference we can make. We will pay particular attention to increasing awareness amongst users of public services who are under-represented in contacting us, especially those from the protected equality groups.
- We will improve access to our services so people can contact us more easily. We will target those who find it hard to make complaints on their own.
- We will help people who come to us too early put their complaint to the right organisation.
- We will use information from a wider range of sources to spot emerging trends, potential service failure issues or repeated problems, in order to take more proactive steps to increase access to our services.

## Aim 2: Help more people by investigating more complaints and to provide an excellent service for our customers

- We will use a wider range of approaches to investigating and resolving complaints to enable us to achieve more impact through our complaints work.
- We will deliver better value for money by investigating and resolving more cases, more quickly and cost-effectively.
- We will provide excellent customer service standards for all contact with our customers, irrespective of the outcome of their complaint.
- We will use our powers robustly when necessary to hold public organisations to account regarding action on our recommendations.

## The impact we will have

### In 2011-12

We investigated 421 individual complaints and, where mistakes had been made, we found out what went wrong.

We aimed to finish 90% of investigations within 12 months. We achieved 79%.

### By 2018

We will investigate thousands of complaints each year and, where things have gone wrong, we will find out the reasons why.

We will conclude 95% of enquiries and investigations within six months and 99% within 12 months.



**Aim 3: Work with others to use what we learn from complaints to help make public services better**

- We will more systematically generate insight into service failures. This insight will be gained from investigating and resolving complaints and will be used to more effectively contribute to improving public services.
- We will work with experts, service providers, regulators and policy makers to use our insight to influence the development and adoption of solutions to major service failures.
- We will support Parliament in holding government and public services to account.

**The impact we will have**

In 2011-12

We shared information with regulators and professional bodies on over 210 occasions.



**We will work with a wider range of organisations to identify why things have gone wrong and make shared recommendations about how things could be improved. We will ask public services to commit to action to prevent the same mistakes in future.**

We published four reports.



**We will publish summaries of all our investigations, and more themed reports on big or repeated mistakes by public services.**

We shared information about our work at our hearing with Parliament’s Public Administration Select Committee.



**We will share our insight about big or repeated mistakes with more Select Committees to help their work.**

**Aim 4: Work with others to make it easier to complain about public services and to help public services resolve complaints better**

- We will more systematically generate insight from the data that we gain when investigating and resolving complaints, including equality data. We will use this to more effectively contribute to improving the way in which complaints are dealt with across public services.
- We will use our insight and expertise to help increase the capabilities of those handling complaints in government departments and agencies, and the NHS in England.
- We will use our insight to make recommendations to Parliament and public services on how improvements could be made to the way that complaints are investigated and resolved.

**The impact we will have**

In 2011-12

We could not investigate 9,018 complaints from people because they had not made their complaint in writing or (for non NHS complaints) via an MP as required by law. We gave all these people help and advice about how to take their complaint forward and in around 250 cases managed to resolve the complaint by contacting the organisation responsible at this early stage.



**Over the next five years, we will share with Parliament our insight on how the law could be changed to make the complaints system better for everyone.**

We worked with complaint handlers across government to help improve complaint handling.



**We will be working with others to build public confidence in the value of complaining. We will provide training and guidance on complaint handling to organisations that deliver public services.**

## Aim 5: Make sure that our organisation works well to help us achieve this

- We will build on our existing capabilities and will continue to develop a flexible and adaptable workforce to meet our delivery priorities.
- We will deliver value for money and do more with our financial and other resources so that we can maximise our impact and deliver our strategic objectives.
- We will live our values of excellence, leadership, integrity and diversity, and will review and update these as appropriate to ensure that they support our plan.
- We will develop our information, insight and knowledge management to learn from our casework and deliver a wider public impact.
- We will support a diverse workforce and will be an organisation that demonstrates excellent equality and diversity practice.
- We will have a robust and proportionate approach to corporate governance, risk and decision-making that meets the Ombudsman's good governance principles and public sector standards.



## Making it happen

Our work to deliver this plan has started and will continue for the next five years. We will need to be alert to the world around us, ready to adapt how we are working in response to social, political and economic change. The first change to our work is already underway: from April 2013, we will be investigating more complaints and sharing what we learn from those investigations more widely.

In the next 18 months, we will build our capacity to deliver more investigations by:

- **Generating insight and learning from complaints**

We will improve the way we collect and analyse information from complaints to generate learning that can help others improve their service. A wider range of staff will work together to identify big or repeated mistakes and the reasons behind them.

- **Improving our technology**

We will improve our website so that complaints can be made online and we will develop how we collect and use information to help us identify connections and trends from complaints.

- **Building new and stronger relationships with others**

We will work in partnership with more organisations to share information about mistakes in public services and to recommend improvements. A wider range of our staff will be involved in working with others to share what we learn from complaints and help to make the complaints system better.

- **Becoming a more efficient organisation**

We will make sure we have the skills and capacity to deliver this plan. We will also review our costs, administration and accommodation to ensure that we are working as efficiently and effectively as we can.



## Five years at a glance 2013-2018

### Years 1-2 Building

#### We will:

- Finalise our plans and how we use our resources
- Investigate more complaints
- Procure and pilot new technology
- Build relationships with more external organisations
- Share more information from complaints with Parliament
- Review our costs
- Start to accept complaints online

### Years 2-3 Transforming

#### We will:

- Raise our profile with hard-to-reach communities
- Use digital and social media to communicate and to collect data
- Use a new casework system to store and manage data
- Commission and collect the right data for insight and learning
- Use new ways to investigate and resolve complaints
- Support our staff through training and development

### Years 3-5 Realising

#### We will:

- Continue to deliver our five aims
- Identify the challenges for the future

more **impact**  
for more **people**

## How we will measure our success

We will measure the progress of our work, and that of others, towards achieving our vision, as well as our success in achieving our aims and objectives.

We will use **system measures** to measure how public services have learnt from complaints and how the complaints system is improving. These will include:

- asking the public how confident they are in the value of complaining and whether they feel complaints make a difference;
- looking at how complaints are handled by public services; and
- reviewing the action public services take in response to our recommendations following complaints.

## Our finances

To deliver this plan, we will prioritise our available funding: providing better value for the taxpayer by conducting more investigations, and resolving more complaints within our existing funding. We will look hard at how we use our resources, and will invest in providing the most benefit to our customers, Parliament and the public.

To do this, we will invest in technology and new ways of working during the first 18 months of this strategy. These will be

We will use **organisational measures** to judge how well we meet the aims and objectives in this plan. These will include:

- asking the public and other organisations what they know and think about us;
- asking our customers what they think about our service; and
- standards for how quickly we resolve and conclude complaints about public services. We will also measure how quickly we resolve and conclude requests for a review of our decision and complaints about our service.

We will incorporate equality and diversity into the measures above.

Some of our success measures will be regularly reported to Parliament and all of them will be available on our website.

financed through our current funding and will mean we can investigate and resolve more complaints more efficiently and identify more learning about how public services can improve. We will pay for this by reducing some of our costs.

Our Board and our Audit Committee regularly review our financial plans. They will be set out in a five-year financial strategy.

## How we run our organisation and make decisions

We have set up a new decision-making structure to help us achieve the aims and objectives set out in this plan and to monitor our progress.

**The Board**, chaired by the Ombudsman, makes decisions about our performance, our plans, our finances and how we are delivering our strategy. The Board does not make decisions on complaints. It is made up of non-executive directors and executive directors. Their names are on our website.

The Board is supported by the Audit Committee, the Pay and Appointments Committee and a new customer and advisory group. This group, which will be set up in 2013, will help us identify areas where public services are providing poor service or complaint handling and will help us improve our own service.

**The Leadership Team** leads and manages the organisation and takes action to achieve the aims and objectives in this plan. It is led by the Chief Operating Officer and reports to the Board.

**The Chair and Ombudsman**, Dame Julie Mellor, DBE, is appointed by the Queen and is our Accounting Officer. As Chair, her focus is:

- leadership of the Board: strategy, performance and governance
- high-impact cases and sharing information about big or repeated mistakes by public services; and
- leading our work with Parliament, and others, to make the complaints system better.

**The Chief Operating Officer**, Helen Hughes, is the Accountable Officer and leads our organisation day to day. Her focus is:

- delivering our strategy by leading the organisation to deliver the objectives in this plan;
- the service we provide to our customers and our work to resolve and investigate complaints; and
- leading the management of our people, finances and systems.



## Find out more

There are different ways you can find out more about our work and progress in delivering this plan:

Visit our website at: [www.ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk)

Follow us on Twitter: @phsombudsman

Find us on Facebook

Sign up for our e-newsletter by emailing: [resolve@ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:resolve@ombudsman.org.uk)

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