

Briefing

Demand across the public service ombudsman landscape

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Executive summary

Over recent years, demand for public service ombudsman schemes has risen markedly across the UK. Increasing caseloads, heightened complexity and longer wait times are placing pressure on organisations whose role is to provide independent redress and support learning across the public sector.

To better understand these trends and the likely future trajectory of demand, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) is starting a research project to explore drivers of demand. This initiative will examine current patterns, investigate drivers of future demand, and strengthen PHSO's capacity to anticipate and respond to emerging pressures.

Background

Ombudsman services act as the final tier of the complaints system for many areas of public service. When demand rises unpredictably or quickly, the impact can be significant: growing operational pressures, increased backlogs, longer waiting times and, ultimately, reduced public confidence in the redress system.

Recognising this, UK ombudsman institutions have worked together in recent years to share insights on demand levels and mitigation strategies. In 2023-24 and 2024-25, a number of UK schemes participated in a coordinated data collection exercise to understand the scale of rising demand and its effects across jurisdictions.

Current demand trends

1. Rising caseloads across all UK public service ombudsman schemes

Data from 2024-25 confirms consistent and, in several cases, substantial increases in complaints being progressed for consideration or preliminary investigation.

Ombudsman scheme	Complaints considered 2024-25	Percentage increase since 2022-23
Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) ¹	9,692	25%
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) ²	12,611	25%
Housing Ombudsman ³	7,082	42%
Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) ⁴	3,065	39%
Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) ⁵	3,232	16%
Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) ⁶	1,333	27%

These figures represent only the complaints accepted for consideration. They do not reflect the full volume of enquiries received. For example, PHSO received over 123,000 enquiries via its contact centre in 2024-25. SPSO responded to 10,958 calls and emails in 2024-25 via its Assessment and Guidance Team.

¹ PHSO, complaints accepted for investigation - primary investigation.

² LGSCO, number of assessment decisions (equivalent to preliminary investigation).

³ HO, this is based on the numbers of annual 'determinations' figure. For 2022-23, this was 5,000.

⁴ SPSO, number of complaints progressed to preliminary investigation.

⁵ PSOW, number of 'duly made' complaints about public services received.

⁶ NIPSO, number of complaints received, annual report data.

This wider demand profile puts significant additional pressure on frontline services, including casework triage and customer-contact teams.

2. Uphold rates

Across the UK, uphold rates remain high. This suggests that not only are more complaints being raised, but they are also raising substantive issues where failings have been found.

Recent uphold rates include:

- LGSCO: 83% (2024-25)⁷
- PHSO: 75% upheld and partly upheld (2024-25)⁸
- Housing Ombudsman: 71% (2024-25)⁹
- SPSO: 86% (2024-25), representing a 20% increase over three years.¹⁰

These trends underline the importance of using the full suite of ombudsman powers to support systemic improvement.

3. Increasing waiting times

Rising volumes are now translating directly into extended wait times in many ombudsman schemes.

- At PSOW, the average waiting time to close a complaint at assessment stage in 2024-25 was 28 calendar days.
- At PHSO, the average waiting time for assessment is 67 days. At LGSCO, this is approximately 35 days.¹¹
- At SPSO, the average waiting time for assessment is 25 days.¹²

Delays risk undermining complainants' confidence, prolonging distress and limiting the timeliness of learning for public services.

⁷ LGSCO, uphold rate includes some complaints upheld at assessment processes where LGSCO has been able to achieve early remedy or the body has provided early remedy through agreed local processes.

⁸ PHSO, upheld and partly upheld: overall.

⁹ HO, annual complaint review 2024-25.

¹⁰ SPSO, average percentage uphold rate.

¹¹ Average (PHSO average wait until allocated - allocation from assessment from receipt; LGSCO receipt of complaint to assessment).

¹² Year to date (1 April to 30 November 2025).

Drivers of demand

Demand is likely to continue rising in the coming years due to a complex mix of factors, including:

1. Pressures in public service delivery

Wider systemic challenges - capacity constraints, demographic changes, workforce shortages in some sectors and rising service expectations - often lead to more errors, delays and unsatisfactory experiences that generate complaints.

2. Increasing public awareness and accessibility

Sustained efforts across the ombudsman sector to improve accessibility and reduce barriers are succeeding. Greater visibility and public confidence in ombudsman services naturally lead to higher complaint volumes.

3. Growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) by complainants

Emerging evidence from several schemes indicates a significant increase in the use of generative AI to produce complaint submissions. PHSO, SPSO and PSOW have all noted this trend.

AI-enabled submissions can increase volume, raise expectations of rapid resolution, and contribute to complexity if the content is less tailored or includes inaccuracies.

Despite these indicators, the full set of demand drivers remains insufficiently understood. This evidence gap underscores the need for proactive research and long-term planning.

Sector response: a balanced and sustainable approach

Short- to medium-term measures

Ombudsman schemes are prioritising a number of approaches to manage immediate pressure and maintain high service standards. These include:

- enhanced triage systems
- improved prioritisation of complex or urgent cases
- streamlining initial assessment processes
- increasing the use of technology to drive productivity.

Longer-term strategic challenges

Sustainable demand management requires deeper structural change, including:

- stronger understanding of systemic drivers of complaints
- greater focus on upstream prevention, including improved first-tier complaint handling in public bodies and embedding the complaint standards set or proposed by ombudsman schemes
- more robust and targeted recommendations for service improvement
- strengthened feedback loops between ombudsman schemes, public bodies and the public to foster a positive complaints culture.

Addressing demand is not only a matter of capacity but also of tackling root causes in the broader public service environment.

Drivers of demand research project

To support a more robust evidence base, PHSO is commissioning external research to explore the drivers of demand on its service.

The aim is to enable earlier identification of emerging issues, more proactive intervention, and a strengthened capacity to resolve complaints at the earliest possible stage in future.

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