



Our strategy 2018-21

Delivering an exemplary
ombudsman service

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Foreword

As the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) moves past its 50th year and into its second half century of existence, we are excited by the opportunities that lie ahead for the service we provide.

In developing this new three-year strategy we have received valuable input from a wide variety of people who use our service as well as the organisations we investigate and work with. We have looked closely at what is working elsewhere in the ombudsman sector, and we have also invested significant time in talking to our staff to understand what our priorities should be and how we can improve and act more equitably. We are grateful to everyone who has given time to share their views with us and we have listened carefully to what they have said.

We are conscious in developing our strategy, that we must strike a balance between being ambitious and being realistic. PHSO is already in the middle of completing an ambitious change programme that will improve our service and help us achieve the 24% spending review savings that we are committed to delivering by 2019/20. The strategy we publish today, while bold, achieves this necessary balance.

Our main focus, particularly in the first year of the strategy, is to complete the work we have already started to improve our service. We will then build on this by speeding up our case handling, by using early resolution techniques and by exploring how different ways of resolving cases, such as mediation, can be incorporated into how we work.

We also want to show more effectively the impact our work can have. While government departments, public organisations and the health service successfully handle many thousands of complaints each year, this is not always the case. PHSO is often the last stop on a difficult journey for people who have suffered great injustice. Where this has happened, it is important that the mistakes that have been made are learned from so the same thing does not happen again. By being more transparent about what we do, including publishing far more of our casework, we plan to bring greater visibility where things have gone wrong and what is happening to put them right so others can learn from this.

We know that improving public services and the health system is not something we can deliver in isolation. We need to work with complainants, organisations we investigate and the advocacy services that support complainants, to achieve the changes that are needed. However, we have an important role to play in using our insight to help bring about improvements across public services and this can be achieved while also maintaining the highest standards of independence and impartiality in our decision making.

This strategy sets out our vision and makes clear the values that are at the heart of all that we do. We want to be an exemplary ombudsman service - one that continually learns from the best of what others are doing, while contributing to improvements elsewhere across the public sector and the wider ombudsman sector. We also want to continue building public confidence and trust in our service. While the PHSO Service Charter tells us that a significant majority of people who come

to us say they get a good service, we know that too many think this is not the case and there is more we must do to address this.

We will continue measuring how we are performing through our Service Charter over the lifetime of this strategy and are committed to improving our performance.

To help with this, both of us have invested a lot of time over the last year talking to colleagues across the organisation and asking them to help us shape a new set of values. In having these discussions we have once again been impressed by the dedication and commitment of our people to doing the best job possible on cases that are often complex, sensitive and emotionally charged. We are clear that those who work for us are our single most important resource and over the course of this strategy we will be investing in their training and development to ensure they are fully supported in delivering their work.

There is much to do, but we are confident that through continuous learning and improvement and with the commitment of staff at all levels of our organisation, we are well placed to achieve the objectives we have set out.

Rob Behrens CBE

Ombudsman and Chair

Amanda Campbell

Chief Executive

Introduction

Our vision

To be an exemplary public services ombudsman by providing an independent, impartial and fair complaints resolution service, while using our casework to help raise standards and improve public services.

Our values

Our values have been developed in close consultation with our staff and all those who use our service so we all have a shared understanding about the type of ombudsman service we want to be.

Our values are:

- **Independence:** we are independent from organisations we investigate, holding them to account for service failure.
- **Fairness:** we listen carefully to complainants and the organisations we investigate and we make impartial and fair decisions based on relevant evidence.
- **Excellence:** we learn from engagement with complainants and organisations we investigate to improve our accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness and the quality of our decisions.
- **Transparency:** we communicate with those using our service and then publish information about our findings, how we are performing, and how organisations we investigate have implemented our recommendations.

Our role

Now over 50 years old, although our jurisdiction has evolved over time, our core role remains highly relevant. We are the last resort for people who are dissatisfied with the treatment or service they have received - be it from a government department, their agencies or an NHS organisation. Each year we are contacted by tens of thousands of people to look into complaints where they believe there has been injustice or hardship because an organisation has not acted properly or fairly, or has provided a poor service and not put things right.

We make final decisions on complaints that have not been resolved by the NHS in England, UK government departments and some other UK public organisations. Usually people must complain to the organisation first so it has a chance to put things right. If, after an organisation has responded, an individual believes the dispute or situation remains unresolved, they can ask us to look into the complaint. If we find maladministration or injustice, we can make recommendations to put things right. Organisations failing to act on our recommendations can be called before Parliament to be held to account.

Investigating and resolving individual complaints is a key part of our role as a public services ombudsman, but our powers also allow us to shine a light on complaints across organisations, systems and sectors. Although not a consumer champion or advocacy service, we share the findings from our casework widely to help bring about improvements to public services, including with the UK Parliament, to help it hold organisations to account. The Ombudsman is a Crown appointment, independent of government, but accountable to Parliament. Our work

is scrutinised by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee.

Setting the scene

Our ambition is to become an exemplary ombudsman service, and the starting point for this strategy has been to refocus on our core role.

There is a clear demand for our service. In 2016-17 our information line received 123,084 contacts, 26% of which (31,444) we accepted as new complaints to look at under the first step of our casework process. We also immediately helped over 23,000 other people by providing information about how they could make their complaint to the organisation they were unhappy with or by signposting them elsewhere. While almost nine in every ten people who came to us were complaining about something that may have gone wrong in the NHS, we still receive a significant number of complaints about central Government and other national public organisations where people think that things have gone wrong.

There is no doubt that we must change and evolve to meet the combination of challenges we face. Pressures include increasing public expectations, the need to resolve complaints more quickly and to build trust and confidence in our decisions. We also need to live within a reduced public funding allocation and to show more clearly our impact and value for money.

In drafting this strategy, we have asked ourselves (and our stakeholders) a number of questions. How well we are able to fulfil

our role today and where are we falling short? Recognising that the environment in which we operate has changed, how do we adapt and transform our work?

What can we learn from colleagues across the diverse ombudsman community, who are responding to similar challenges and drivers for change? What do they do differently, and what practices might we follow and adopt? How have they approached improving the quality of complaint handling and showing their impact?

In addition to seeking the views of all our staff, we published a draft of our new strategic objectives for consultation on 6 November 2017. We sought comments from complainants, public organisations and the wider public, receiving 157 written responses by the time the consultation closed on 4 December 2017.

This process of review, discovery and consultation has helped shape our plans and informed the final objectives set out in this strategy.

For some ombudsman services, early resolution techniques to speed up complaint handling are producing greater satisfaction rates and improving the quality of casework. This is helping change the culture and behaviours of these ombudsman services in important ways, such as by listening more effectively to what complainants are saying.

Others in the sector have become more transparent about what they do, demonstrating their impact by publishing their casework findings online or extending their reach through making recommendations about important policy improvements in a similar way to our own insight work.

Just as we have continued to develop our own website and online services, national and international ombudsman colleagues have

been using other digital innovations to improve accessibility and communications with both complainants and their sector partners, capturing regular feedback and increasing their involvement. Many ombudsman colleagues are, therefore, helping to set the bar high. We have taken what we have learned from them in developing this strategy to inform the boldness of our own approach.

In some areas we start from a position of strength. For instance, our sector leading Service Charter sets out what people can expect from us when we are asked to look into a complaint. We use feedback from complainants on whether we have met our Service Charter commitments to focus on where we should improve.

We are also committed to demonstrating better value for money by delivering financial savings of 24% in the current spending review period, which we are on track to achieve without impacting on the long-term sustainability of our service.

Crucially, we are now in the process of transitioning to a new operating model, which will enable us to resolve complaints more quickly. We are investing heavily in developing our staff to deliver a consistently high quality service.

We have also restructured our organisation and re-located most of our operation to Manchester, to help us meet our savings targets. The new strategy will build directly on this foundation.

Working with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

It is now over 50 years since Parliament passed the legislation that created the UK's first public sector ombudsman scheme.

Recent opportunities to reform the legislation and create a single public service ombudsman have been put on hold - although we stand ready to work with government and parliament to progress the delivery of this important reform when parliamentary time allows.

Nonetheless, we already work closely with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) where our jurisdictions overlap, such as complex cases involving health and social care, and we intend to continue to work closely together and to learn from each other. This includes publishing clear information that sets out the range of work we do and how well we are doing against agreed standards, which can be compared with other similar organisations.

Our new strategic objectives 2018-21

Our vision is to be an exemplary public services ombudsman by providing an independent, impartial and fair complaints resolution service, while using our casework to help raise standards and improve public services.

Objective 1

To improve the quality of our service, while remaining independent, impartial and fair

We will introduce new ways of working that resolve cases more quickly, improving both the quality and timeliness of our decisions and the overall experience of people making complaints.

We will invest in our staff so they are equipped to deliver a professional casework service that remains sensitive to the complex, often tragic, issues that are brought to us.

Objective 2

To increase the transparency and impact of our casework

We will publish more information about our casework online to help improve public services, while enabling complainants, the public and organisations we investigate to have confidence in what we do.

We will target our insight reports so that important lessons from our casework and systemic reviews contribute to raising standards in public services.

Objective 3

To work in partnership to improve public services, especially frontline complaint handling

We will strengthen our relationships with other ombudsman services, and collaborate with others to improve how the public sector responds when things go wrong, from sharing good practice to offering training to complaint handlers.

Drawing insights from our casework, we will work with those best placed to apply the lessons learned to improve public services.

Our strategy at a glance

2018-19

Objective 1

- Embed our new operating model
- Build on our staff training programme

Objective 2

- Publish quarterly data about the health complaints we receive
- Publish more information about our findings

Objective 3

- Build on and strengthen existing external relationships, while developing new partnerships

2019-20

Objective 1

- Pilot the use of mediation and other early resolution methods
- Introduce changes following our governance review

Objective 2

- Publish our first annual report on the complaints we receive about the health system
- Deliver an online solution that facilitates publishing more casework

Objective 3

- Work with our partners to develop and publish a number of new tools and training
- Begin to roll out tools and training materials

2020-21

Objective 1

- Begin accreditation of caseworkers
- Build the approach from our pilots into our training and accreditation programme

Objective 2

- Complete our plans to publish much more of our casework online

Objective 3

- Roll out of those tools and training approaches we find work best

- Explore how we can share the experiences we have had delivering Our strategy 2018-21 with ombudsmen colleagues

Objective 1

To improve the quality of our service, while remaining independent, impartial and fair

Our aim is to deliver a consistent, high quality, ombudsman service that makes fair, final decisions for both complainants and the organisations we investigate.

People who bring their complaints to us expect to have them taken seriously, to be listened to and treated with respect, and to be dealt with fairly and in a timely fashion. We will hold ourselves to these standards by implementing a new operating model that streamlines our processes, helps us manage the demand for our service and improves communication and accessibility. It will also transform our approach to casework, while making sure we remain sensitive to the complex and often tragic cases that are brought to us. Learning from good practice in the wider ombudsman sector, we will pilot the use of alternative dispute resolution methods, ranging from early complaints resolution to formal mediation. In addition, we will review how and when we draw upon clinical advice when resolving complaints.

We will create a culture supportive of continuous improvement that encourages staff to live our values in their day-to-day work and behaviours. It is important for us to continually learn from each other at all levels of our organisation to improve how we deliver our

services. Over each year of our strategy we will invest in developing our professional casework staff so they have the right skills, knowledge and judgement to work effectively with both complainants and the organisations we investigate. In addition to delivering a comprehensive staff training programme, we will develop an accreditation scheme.

Improving how we communicate with people who complain to us is at the heart of our development. Building on the standards in our Service Charter we will explain how we work, how our decisions are reached and what they mean in practice. Complainants rightly expect to have confidence in our decisions and for them to be clear and understandable. They also expect our staff to be professional and consistent in how they reach decisions. We will address these behaviours through continuing professional development and will improve access to our service by publishing clearer guidance.

We will also make sure our website and online resources are understandable and accessible, including to the most vulnerable in our society. We will be clear that once we have made a decision it is final, helping to give people closure.

Our transformation will also focus on being a well-run and well-led organisation, with staff at all levels having the right tools to do their jobs properly. As part of our strategy, we will review our governance to make sure it is fit for purpose. In addition, we will consider different ways we can involve complainants and other people and organisations that use our service to help improve how we work and shape the changes we are introducing.

In 2018-19 we will:

- Complete the delivery of our new operating model and initial staff training.
- Identify early complaints resolution methods we can easily introduce and incorporate into staff training.
- Build on our staff training programme by taking steps towards acquiring professional accreditation.
- Review and implement any necessary changes to operational policies.
- Develop our Service Charter to broaden how we monitor and measure performance, improving our accountability by publishing clear information about the range of work we do and how well we are doing against agreed standards, which can be compared with other organisations.
- Review how we draw upon clinical advice for resolving complaints, adapting our operating model and training as needed.
- Review our governance and begin to introduce the changes we think are needed.
- Develop options for involving complainants in improving our service, to improve confidence and trust in our decision making.
- Begin scoping how we will pilot and evaluate mediation and other early resolution methods, in consultation with our stakeholders.

In 2019-20 we will:

- Pilot the use of mediation and other early resolution methods.
- Introduce changes following our governance review.
- Prepare our Spending Review bid and deliver current saving commitments.

In 2020-21 we will:

- Begin accreditation of caseworkers.
- Evaluate mediation and other dispute resolution pilots, implementing the most successful as part of our new 'Ombudsman toolbox'.
- Build the approach from our pilots into our training and accreditation programme, so staff are fully equipped to use these methods.

What will be different at the end of the three years?

- We will be resolving cases more quickly while delivering better value for money having achieved savings of 24%.
- Investment in our staff will have equipped them to deliver a high quality casework service, while changing our organisational culture, with our staff survey showing we have a more engaged workforce.
- Our Service Charter will show clear improvements in how we are performing with higher levels of trust and confidence in what we do.

- Our Spending Review bid will have made clear what we plan to achieve in this new period and the impact our settlement will have on this strategy.
- We will have improved our governance to make sure it is fit for purpose.
- While we have maintained the highest demonstrable standard of impartiality, complainants will be more involved in helping to improve our service.

Objective 2

To increase the transparency and impact of our casework

Being an exemplary ombudsman service means holding ourselves accountable to the same high standards we hold others to. For the public to have confidence in us and what we do, we need to become a more open, accessible and transparent service. Improving how we communicate - with complainants, organisations we investigate, partners and the general public - underpins each of our planned activities.

We know from complainants' feedback that one of the reasons they are motivated to complain is to prevent harm to others in the future.

Consequently, we want to make sure that the recommendations and action plans that flow from our decisions are more visible so people can see the impact they make and other public organisations, such as regulators, can better use this information.

First, we will publish the outcomes of our casework online. This will include where we have found against the organisations we investigate

and set out what steps they have taken to comply with our recommended actions. Often, people who make complaints to us have been injured, or may have suffered a tragic loss and be experiencing bereavement. Publishing what we have found can help those running public services learn from what went wrong and help them to restore trust while making sure others do not face similar experiences.

In the short term we will explore how we can publish casework data so it is useful for public services, regulators and complaint handlers as well as complainants. Longer term, we plan to publish much more of our final casework online so everyone can see more clearly the impact of our work on public services, and complaint handlers can improve their understanding about good practice. We will become a more transparent organisation, which will also better align us to the current practice of the LGSCO.

In addition to publishing our casework, we will target our insight reports so that important lessons from our casework and systemic reviews contribute to raising standards in public services, especially within the NHS. This does not mean setting arbitrary targets, but making sure we make constructive proposals for change when our casework indicates this is needed. We will also continue to explore what more we can do in this area with the LGSCO through the insight gathered by our joint working team and emerging issues from the intersection of health and social care.

We plan to continue improving how we engage with complainants by further developing the open meeting we first held in November 2017 and the Radio Ombudsman podcast launched in September 2017. We will

continue the programme of annual Ombudsman lectures launched in December 2017. We will identify new opportunities to get direct feedback from those who use our service, in addition to the quarterly feedback we get from our survey of people who use our service.

In 2018-19 we will:

- Start publishing quarterly data about the health complaints we receive.
- Develop an approach to enable us to publish more information about our findings and the level of compliance with our recommendations.
- Publish a transparent set of principles and case studies about the use of financial remedy and work with national organisations to explore how we can better explain who we are and what we do to organisations we investigate.
- Build on our training programme to improve the quality of our investigation reports.
- Scope a project for publishing the vast majority of our casework online, as well as exploring what other material we should publish.
- Start a review that explores new ways to get feedback from those involved in our casework and begin introducing the most effective methods we identify.

In 2019-20 we will:

- Publish our first annual report on the complaints we receive about the health system, highlighting trends and key insights as we already do for parliamentary cases.

- Deliver an online solution that facilitates publishing much more of our casework in the most effective way possible.
- Begin publishing some of our casework online.

In 2020-21 we will:

- Complete our plans to publish much more of our casework online, drawing out insights for the organisations we investigate.

What will be different at the end of the three years?

- We will be routinely publishing our casework online along with levels of compliance in implementing our recommendations, enabling complainants and organisations we investigate to have greater confidence in what we do and how our decisions have made an impact.
- Through open meetings, improvements in digital and other communications, we will be engaging regularly and openly with the public, deepening their understanding of what we can and cannot do, and better managing expectations.
- By improving the targeting of our insights, we will be showing how important lessons from our casework and systemic reviews have demonstrably contributed to both informing parliamentary debate and raising standards in the health system and the wider public sector, including government departments.

Objective 3:

To work in partnership to improve public services, especially frontline complaints handling

Our complaints resolution service is at the end of what can be, for many people, a traumatic and emotional process navigating the public sector complaints system. While we must be unquestionably independent - and no activity we carry out to deliver this objective will compromise this - we recognise that we are part of a larger group of public sector organisations seeking to improve quality and prevent harm in public services, especially in healthcare. Being more externally focused requires us to strengthen our relationships and collaborate with strategic partners to influence how all levels of the NHS and the wider public sector respond when things go wrong, so that where mistakes are made they are learned from.

We already work closely with a number of organisations to do this. They include NHS England and NHS Improvement, and regulators like the Care Quality Commission, NHS Resolution, and Health Service Safety Investigation Branch. Other partners include the HMRC chaired Cross-Government Complaints Forum and we have already begun highlighting good practice in complaint handling in this area. We will also work with advocacy organisations, bodies like the National Guardian and Healthwatch and gather views from complainants to develop our approach. We want to expand the work we do with all our partners in this area without duplicating their role, so that complainants know at what stage they should come to us and we make our service as accessible as possible.

We will prioritise partnerships that help shape how complaints are initially handled by frontline complaint handlers. In the spirit of ‘getting it right first time’, we plan to work with a number of strategic partners to explore whether there are tools we can produce or help to develop that will enable frontline complaint handlers to more effectively deal with and resolve what are often complex and sensitive issues. This might include finding ways to share good practice, developing curriculum materials for use by others or offering e-based training such as webinars.

Working with these partners, we will explore if there are ways we can better support leaders to create the culture we know is necessary to make sure government and NHS organisations learn from mistakes.

The ongoing policy shifts that are bringing health and social care together - such as integration, new care models and joint commissioning - underscore the need to strengthen our existing partnership with the LGSCO. During the next three years we will build on our close working relationship to align further how we resolve complex health and social care complaints and publish critical insights together.

To stay abreast of ombudsman good practice, we will also contribute to the growing field of ombudsman activity in this area, working with our colleagues internationally to learn from them and share our own expertise.

In 2018-19 we will:

- Build on and strengthen existing external relationships, while developing new strategic partnerships with the shared aim of setting common standards and expectations for resolving

complaints, starting with the NHS, identifying tools and training opportunities to help meet these standards.

- Review the challenges to casework posed by the structural changes and new organisational arrangements being introduced across the health and social care sectors, working with the LGSCO, as needed.

In 2019-20 we will:

- Work with our partners to develop and publish a number of new tools and training options for improving frontline complaint handling, consulting with target audiences and piloting different delivery methods to test what works.
- Begin to roll out tools and training materials where we think they are most needed.

In 2020-21 we will:

- Complete the roll out of those tools and training approaches we find work best, and re-launch a new version of 'My expectations' to reflect any changes we think are needed as part of this process, ensuring the revised guidance is co-produced with both the people who use our service and our partners.
- Explore how we can share the experiences we have had delivering our strategy 2018-21 with ombudsmen colleagues and invite them to share their views on what we should include in our next strategy.

Measuring our progress

The strategy we have set ourselves is challenging and will take hard work, energy and collaboration to deliver. But with the commitment of our staff and effective leadership and planning, we are confident we will deliver our vision to be an exemplary ombudsman service.

Over the next three years, we will judge our strategy's success in relation to the changes it is expected to deliver. We expect to use a wide range of data to monitor our progress and achievements.

As our strategic changes are introduced, we expect to show clear improvements in the quality, consistency and timeliness of our decisions, along with improvements in how we communicate and interact with complainants and the organisations they have complained about.

Feedback from staff, complainants and organisations we investigate will inform us of how well our investment in training has equipped staff to deliver an improved ombudsman service. At the same time, stakeholder feedback will let us know that our relationships are strengthening and that we are working more effectively with other organisations to raise standards in public services.

By the end of the three year strategy we will also show how the recommendations and insights from our casework and reports have influenced specific improvements across the public and health sectors. We will undertake a research project to inform how we can best do this.

Therefore by the end of 2020-21, we aim to:

- Make quicker decisions on our casework (demonstrated through published data)
- Improve the quality of our casework (illustrated through a balanced scorecard approach, linking casework process, outcomes and feedback)
- Improve the perception and experience of our service by complainants who come to us (demonstrated through increases in our Service Charter scores)
- Improve the perception and experience of our service by the organisations we investigate (through increases in the scores of a new annual stakeholder survey)
- Demonstrate the impact and value for money of our service on the wider public services (with a measure developed through a research project looking at measuring the wider impact of our work)
- Make our service as accessible as possible (through greater analysis of who uses our service and addressing any potential barriers complainants face)

Specific key performance indicators will be developed as part of our business plan in each year of the strategy.

Find out more

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

Visit our website at: www.ombudsman.org.uk

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