

Strategic Plan

2015/16

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1. Introduction

This Plan is my first as Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, having taken up the post in August 2014. It is a one year Plan that has been deliberately rolled on from the previous Three Year Strategic Plan as I believe that the Vision: To put things right for users of public services and to drive improvement in those services and in standards in public life using the learning from the complaints we consider remains as relevant and appropriate as ever, not least given the to the current public policy context.

The first Ombudsman was appointed in Sweden more than 200 years ago. The idea caught on and Ombudsmen schemes spread from Scandinavia and are now world-wide. The Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 established the first Ombudsman scheme in Britain and since then other public sector Ombudsmen schemes have been introduced, with the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales in its current guise being established in 2006. Some things have remained constant such as the need to ensure that the Ombudsman is independent and objective. These values are at the core of our work. However, the role of the Ombudsman has not remained static and has continued to evolve by responding to changing political, social and economic developments. This is as true today as it ever was, and these factors have to be taken into account when considering what it means to deliver a modern Ombudsman service.

We have been acutely aware of the need to anticipate and respond to the changing role of the state, recognising the greater part being played by private organisations and social enterprises in the delivery of public services and the need to ensure that people continue to have recourse to the Ombudsman. We also believe that in addition to considering individual complaints, Ombudsmen should work to secure improvements in public service delivery based on the lessons arising from their investigations. Increasingly too, there is an expectation that ombudsmen should inform public policy based on the knowledge that they gain from their work. All this is in a context of continuing economic pressures and 'austerity' with its associated pressures on public

funding. This in turn is likely to put an even greater demand on public services at a time of reducing public funds.

It is against this background that this current Plan has been developed. Further, since I took up the post as Ombudsman, the office has undertaken an 'innovation review' to consider what we might be able to do better against the background of the ever increasing complaints workload in the office.

A key consideration for rolling on the previous three year Strategic Plan for a further year is that it is hoped that, with the advent of the tenth anniversary of the Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Act 2005, the National Assembly for Wales will agree to its modernisation. Should this come to fruition, it would seem more appropriate for the office to develop a new Three Year Strategic Plan at a time when the position on these potential changes to the Ombudsman's legislation is known.

Staff were fully involved in the development of the original Three Year Strategic Plan. They have also positively engaged with the Innovation Review which took place during 2014/15, and which has contributed to this Plan for 2015/16, and I am grateful to them for the commitment and enthusiasm that they have shown.

Nick Bennett
Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

2. The Role of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

The office was established under the Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Act 2005. There are two specific roles. The first is to consider complaints made by members of the public that they have suffered hardship or injustice through maladministration or service failure on the part of a body in my jurisdiction. The second role is to consider complaints that members of local authorities have broken the Code of Conduct.

When considering complaints about public bodies in Wales, we look to see whether people have been treated unfairly or inconsiderately, or have received a bad service through some fault on the part of the public body providing it. The bodies that come within jurisdiction are generally those that provide services where responsibility for their provision has been devolved to Wales. More specifically, the organisations we can look into include:

- local government (both county and community councils);
- the National Health Service (including GPs and dentists);
- registered social landlords (housing associations);
- and the Welsh Assembly Government, together with its sponsored bodies.

The role in relation to considering complaints alleging that members of local authorities have broken the Code of Conduct is slightly different to that for complaints about public bodies. This type of complaint is considered under the provisions of Part III of the Local Government Act 2000 and also relevant Orders made by the National Assembly for Wales under that Act. In the circumstances where we investigate a complaint and conclude that there is likely to have been a breach of the code requiring action against the member concerned, there is a requirement to submit the investigation report to either the relevant local authority's standards committee or a tribunal of the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

It is for them to consider the evidence we have found together with any defence put forward by the member concerned. Further, it is for them to determine whether a breach has occurred and if so, what penalty, if any, should be imposed.

3. Governance and funding

The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales is appointed by The Queen on the recommendation of the members of the National Assembly for Wales. He is independent of government and has statutory responsibilities and powers to report directly to the National Assembly for Wales. The Ombudsman reports annually to the National Assembly on the discharge of his functions, on the service provided and the use of public money.

Whilst responsibility and accountability for the activities carried out by the office must remain with the Ombudsman, it is intended to enhance the current Audit Committee arrangements by introducing an Advisory Panel. The aim will be for the Panel to provide added transparency to the work of the office and also provide support and advice to the Ombudsman in providing good governance and to offer an external perspective on the Ombudsman's service.

In recognition of the independence of the office of the Ombudsman, funding is received through the National Assembly for Wales (that is through the Welsh Consolidated Fund) and not the Welsh Government. In thinking about our priorities and targets we needed to be realistic and mindful of what could be achieved within the existing staffing establishment and within the office's level of funding. The continued increase of enquiries and complaints to the office (with the highest ever number received in any one month since the inception of the office occurring in July 2014) is of some concern. Much work had already been done to streamline the office's complaint handling and investigations processes; the innovation project sought to identify ways to enable us to be even more efficient and effective, without compromising the quality of the complaints handling service we provide. This Plan is set against our undertaking to the National Assembly for Wales of retaining the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales's budget to 0.03% of the Welsh Block grant.

4. Strategic Plan 2015/16

Our Vision

To put things right for users of public services and to drive improvement in those services and in standards in public life using the learning from the complaints we consider.

Our Values

Accessibility – we will be open to everyone and work to ensure that people who face challenges in access are not excluded. We will be considerate, courteous, respectful and approachable, and do our best to communicate with complainants in the way they tell us they prefer.

Fairness – we will safeguard our independence and reach decisions objectively having carefully considered the evidence.

Learning – we will improve through learning from our experiences, and encourage all public service providers to learn from their own experiences and those of others.

Effectiveness – we will make sure that we work in ways that make the best use of the public money we receive.

Being a good employer – we are committed to providing a positive environment in which to work and to continue to develop and support our staff, to ensure that we continue to remain professional and authoritative in all that we do.

Our Purposes

To consider complaints about public bodies.

To put things right. When we can, we will try to put people back in the position they would have been in if they had not suffered an injustice, and work to secure the best possible outcome where injustice has occurred.

To recognise and share good practice so that public bodies can learn the lessons from our investigations and put right any systemic weaknesses identified, leading to continued improvement in the standards of public services in Wales.

To help people send their complaint to the right public service provider or complaint handler.

To consider complaints that members of local authorities have broken the code of conduct.

To build confidence in local government in Wales by promoting high standards in public life.

Strategic Aims

Strategic Aim 1: To offer a service where excellent customer care is at the forefront of all we do, where we work to raise awareness of our service and do our best to make it is accessible to all and easy to use

Key priorities for 2015/16

- Consider the feasibility of progressing the pilot exercise undertaken in 2014/15, which explored the possibility of increasing the number of complaints where details are captured over the phone and written for the complainant.
- Review the outreach strategy (which currently seeks to support Aim 1 and Aim 3 of this Strategic Plan) and produce a suitable programme of activities for 2015/16.
- Undertake research, via focus groups, to obtain feedback on service user experiences of the complaints handling service we provide.
- Review the effectiveness of the 'new' equality monitoring and satisfaction survey processes introduced in 2013/14, and further develop and refine the statistical reports and analyses to obtain meaningful information and trends, including in relation to people within the various protected characteristic groups (as defined in the Equality Act 2010).

Strategic Aim 2: To deliver a high quality complaints handling service, which considers and determines complaints thoroughly but proportionately, and conveys decisions clearly.

Key priorities for 2015/16

- Implement the agreed actions arising from the 'innovation project' undertaken during 2014/15
- Review the existing complaint handling procedures, to include ensuring that:
 - they reflect the outcome of customer care deliberations
 - they are particularly reviewed with the Human Rights aspects of the Ombudsman's role in mind
 - decision letters and reports produced are proportionate to the complexity of the case in question.
- Review the effectiveness of the arrangements introduced in 2014/15 in relation to the extension of the Ombudsman's jurisdiction to independent care providers (i.e. hospices and care homes where people self fund their care)
- Implement enhanced arrangements for monitoring compliance with Ombudsman's recommendations.
- Achieve our key performance indicators for 2015/16. Then, particularly in view of continued increase in caseload, review whether those key performance indicators remain appropriate for the future. New or additional performance indicators then to be introduced for 2016/17.

Strategic Aim 3: To use the knowledge gained from our investigations to contribute to improved public service delivery and to inform public policy.

Key priorities for 2015/16

- Enhance our data capture capability to bolster our ability to identify trends in relation to specific areas of public service delivery.
- Consider innovative ways of communicating the messages that lie behind the data already held by the office.
- Continue to produce the Ombudsman's Casebooks so that the learning from casework can be widely shared, and consider whether it would benefit from introducing additional content.
- Continue to contribute to proposed Welsh initiatives where lessons from the Ombudsman's investigations can be useful to deliberations (including Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales's consultations).
- Introduce additional activities in relation to working with bodies in jurisdiction to improve complaint handling practice and effective implementation of the Model Concerns and Complaints Policy, Putting Things Right and the new social services complaints process, with a view to reducing the number of complaints being made to the Ombudsman and sharing the learning.
- In relation to the Code of Conduct, continue working with relevant representative organisations with the aim of further developing arrangements for resolving 'low level' complaints at a local level.
- Keep both versions of the Guidance on the Model Code of Conduct under continual review and update as necessary.

Strategic Aim 4: To continue to analyse and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our governance, business processes and support functions, to further demonstrate transparency and ensure the best use of the public money entrusted to us.

Key priorities for 2015/16

- Provide evidence to the National Assembly for Wales as necessary in support of the proposals to revise the Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Act 2005, particularly in relation to:
 - own initiative investigations
 - access – oral complaints
 - complaints standards authority
 - extension and reform of jurisdiction - private health care (in limited circumstances)
 - links with the courts.
- Engage with the Ombudsman’s Advisory Panel and all staff in developing the next Three Year Strategic Plan (2016/17 to 2018/19).
- Ensure that expenditure is managed so that the office spend is contained within the approved budget for the financial year 2015/16.
- Continue to improve our information and communication technology provision by:
 - realising the commitment to become a paperless office
 - assessing whether further enhancement is required.
- Review the effectiveness of human resources management processes and software.

- Undertake a wholesale review of the Ombudsman's existing training strategy.
- In accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and Equality Act 2010 (Statutory Duties) (Wales) Regulations 2011, produce a report on the past year's equality considerations and activities (as part of the PSOW's statutory Annual Report).
- Streamline procedures for people who wish to comment on the Ombudsman's service.

5. Main Outcomes

The aim is that at the end of the year 2015/16 the following key outcomes will have been achieved:

	Relevant to strategic aim
We will have developed an even better understanding of what our service feels like from the perspective of those people who use our service and responded appropriately to further improve our approach to how we accept, consider and investigate complaints	1 and 2
We will have implemented the agreed actions arising from the 'innovation project' undertaken during 2014/15 enabling us to achieve our complaint handling key performance indicators against the background of an ever increasing caseload.	2 and 4
We will have taken the necessary steps to improve our data mining capability in relation to the complaints we receive. This will enable us to derive greater knowledge and insight from complaints and investigations so that we can better inform public policy and improve public service delivery.	3 and 4
We will have engaged with the National Assembly for Wales in a way that enabled the successful progress of a Committee Sponsored Bill revising the Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Act 2005 in a number of areas.	4
And, depending on the outcome, put in place arrangements for successful introduction of new areas of jurisdiction.	All Strategic Aims

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