
Strategic Plan

2008/09 to 2010/11

Foreword: A First Class Ombudsman Service for Wales

This is the third strategic plan for the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW), following the creation of the office on 1 April 2006. It is also the last Strategic Plan that I will produce for the office in view of my retirement in April 2008.

I look forward to presenting in my Annual Report for 2007/08 how the vast majority of the objectives that I set for the past year have been met and achieved. Good progress has been made on the aims and objectives that I set for the office. Given the fact that no new external factors have occurred that call for my original aims and objectives to be changed, this plan will build on the foundations set in the first two years. In producing the Plan, I have taken account of the fact that the upward trend of the number of complaints received by my office in previous years still continues. During the past year, I witnessed the negative effect this increase was having on speedy decisions on cases at the early stages of the process. Thus, in order to try to tackle this problem, a revised complaints procedure was introduced in September 2007, with a further development of this introduced in January 2008. The number of cases closed at an earlier stage in the process has increased since September and it is hoped that this improved performance at the earlier stage will now continue. However, this position will be kept under review in the months to come.

This Strategic Plan also takes account of research into complainants' opinions of my service and also the outcome of a survey of the bodies within my jurisdiction that was undertaken during 2007/08.

I have issued several guidance documents to public bodies in Wales on principles of good complaints handling, good administration and redress during the past two years. This Plan reflects the intention to continue with activities of this nature, in particular by contributing to the work of the Welsh Assembly Government on its *'Making the Connections: Building Better Customer Service - A Framework for Improvement'* initiative, which in particular gives attention to the issue of redress; and through its NHS *'Putting Things Right'* Project Board, whose work includes reviewing the NHS complaints procedure and the development of the NHS Redress Measure.

Finally, I am conscious that this Strategic Plan is one that my successor, Peter Tyndall, will inherit. It may well be that he may wish to adopt a different approach once he has settled into his role. My aim upon taking office was to provide a first class Ombudsman Service for Wales. The commitment of my staff has been essential in helping me make such great progress towards meeting that aim. I wish to recognise here the support I have received from them over the past few years; for this I sincerely thank them. Peter Tyndall will inherit a talented and dedicated team, and I wish him and my staff every success in the future.

Adam Peat

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

March 2008

The Ombudsman's Role

My primary role is to investigate independently and impartially complaints made by members of the public about the way they have been treated by a public body. I expect public bodies to treat people fairly, considerately and efficiently. If I uphold a complaint I will recommend appropriate redress. I also have an important role to investigate complaints that local authority members have broken the Code of Conduct.

I aim to provide a first class Ombudsman service to Wales by:

- 1. investigating complaints as thoroughly as necessary and as quickly as possible**
- 2. raising awareness of the Ombudsman service and making it easily accessible to potential users**
- 3. using lessons learnt from my investigations to promote good practice and good governance by public bodies**
- 4. ensuring good governance and effective management within my office.**

The pages that follow set out how I propose to achieve these aims.

Aim 1

To investigate complaints as thoroughly as necessary and as quickly as possible.

In support of this aim, I will:

- make a quick and effective initial assessment of whether a case will be accepted for investigation.
- promote speedy informal resolution of complaints in appropriate cases.
- maintain an efficient system for case handling and investigation.
- when a complaint is upheld, make recommendations for redress which fairly reflect the harm suffered by the complainant.
- carry out rigorous but proportionate investigations into allegations that a local authority member has breached the code of conduct.

I have set the following objectives for the forthcoming year:

- **Investigative Processes:** To regularly monitor the effectiveness of the complaints investigation process (both in respect of complaints about public bodies and Code of Conduct complaints) and seek opportunities in the light of experience to:
 - develop processes so that speedier decisions are made;
 - set more effective individual targets; and
 - develop and improve the quality of contact with complainants without adversely affecting the overall timeliness and quality of investigations.
- **Case Management System:** Review the effectiveness of the revisions introduced to the database system during 2007/08.
- **Performance Standards:** The targets for 2008/09 are:
 - To tell complainant within 4 weeks whether the Ombudsman will take up their complaint (from the date that sufficient information is received from complainant).
 - To conclude cases within 12 months from the point that a decision is taken to take up the complaint.
- **Satisfaction Surveys:** Review the practice of conducting research, especially to establish its cost-effectiveness and usefulness in providing feedback on how the performance and practices of the Ombudsman service could be improved.

Aim 2

To raise awareness of the Ombudsman service and make it easily accessible to potential users.

In support of this aim, I will:

- continue to reach out to the many vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society, including minority ethnic communities.
- further promote the guidance I have issued to public bodies in Wales about good practice in dealing with complaints and their statutory duty to inform complainants of their right to go to the Ombudsman.

I have set the following objectives for the forthcoming year:

- **Publicity leaflets:** Issue revised publicity leaflets, in particular to reflect the fact that there is a new incumbent as Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.
- **Outreach:** Continue to implement the outreach strategy, which includes the aim of increasing usage of the PSOW service by marginalised and vulnerable groups, through a programme of events for 2008/09. This will include a series of seminars throughout Wales that will enable the new Public Services Ombudsman for Wales to explain his vision for the service.
- **Website:** Continue to develop the content, functionality and accessibility of the website.
- **The Media:**
 - Seek opportunities to produce statements and articles for various press on the service provided and, where appropriate, on the outcome of investigations.
 - Contact television/radio stations where it appears that investigation lessons may be of interest to them.
- **Talks:** Take advantage of invitations by voluntary/advisory/public bodies and community groups in Wales, and pro-actively seek out opportunities, to address their organisations on the work of the Ombudsman.

Aim 3

To use lessons learnt from my investigations to promote good practice and good governance by public bodies.

In support of this aim, I will:

- ensure that reports of my investigations make any appropriate recommendations to public bodies to tackle systemic weaknesses uncovered, as well as making redress to the individual complainant.
- publicise lessons learned from our investigations, and those of other Ombudsman services, so that knowledge can be shared among relevant public organisations in Wales.
- from time to time, produce special reports on areas that investigations have identified as having wider implications in terms of the public interest.
- in respect of local authorities, advance better understanding of the Code of Conduct so that local authority members are aware of the ethical standards that they need to observe.

I have set the following objectives for the forthcoming year:

- **Welsh Assembly Government:**
 - Draw the attention of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), to lessons that might be applicable to WAG itself, to NHS Wales or to the other public organisations accountable to it.
 - Participate in Welsh Assembly Government initiatives that seek to implement common customer service standards (including, redress) that have been developed for public bodies in Wales.
 - Participate in Welsh Assembly Government fora relating to the establishment of the new Local Service Boards to ensure that LSB's have appropriate complaints handling procedures in place.

- **Local Government:**

- Ensure that lessons learnt from investigations about improvement of procedures and practices are systematically followed up.
- Be alert to any emerging trends from complaints received which might suggest that a special report is called for.
- Undertake effective communication and dialogue with local authority standards committees and monitoring officers to assist them in promoting high standards in relation to the Code of Conduct.
- Following the issue of the revised Code of Conduct by the Welsh Assembly Government:
 - seek opportunities to assist in delivering training sessions for local authority members, and
 - consider whether it would be appropriate to issue guidance on the Code of Conduct.

- **National Health Service:**

- Ensure that lessons learnt from investigations about improvement of NHS procedures and practices are systematically followed up.
- Contribute to the Welsh Assembly Government 'Putting Things Right' project.

- **Social Housing:**

- Ensure that lessons learnt from investigations about improvement of the procedures and practices of social landlords are systematically followed up.

Aim 4

To ensure good governance and effective management within my office.

In support of this aim, I will:

- recruit, train and develop all staff in a manner that will maintain and develop excellence in all aspects of our work.
- ensure financial and other resources are managed efficiently and effectively, and are safeguarded.
- ensure risk management procedures are in place.
- continue to review and, where necessary modernise, our use of information and communications technology.
- ensure that I am aware of, learn from and contribute to best practice developments within the Ombudsman sector.
- be open, transparent and accountable concerning the service that I provide.

I have set the following objectives for the forthcoming year:

- **Staff:** In recognising that my staff is my most valuable resource -
 - Assess the effectiveness of the annual appraisal system introduced in 2007/08, whereby individual training needs are identified and personal development plans are produced, which reflect the aims and objectives of the Strategic Plan.
 - Consult staff on decisions which affect them via the Staff Representative Council.
 - Continue with the work commenced in 2007/08 in relation to working towards achieving the Investors in People Standard.
 - Keep under constant review health and safety considerations, ensuring that staff are provided with good and safe working conditions.
- **Governance:**
 - Undertake a wholesale review of the strategy for the Ombudsman's office for the next three years.
 - Continue to hold regular Audit Committee meetings, whose remit is to support the Ombudsman as Accounting Officer in monitoring the adequacy of my corporate governance and control systems.
 - Implement the internal audit programme produced for the current year.

- **Finance:**
 - Publish accurate and reliable financial statements and achieve an unqualified audit of our annual accounts.
 - Introduce a more formal budget setting process.

- **Knowledge Management**
 - Decide upon the immediate priorities in relation to the content to be produced for the complaints knowledge management system introduced at the beginning of 2008.
 - Introduce the new intranet system under development during the early part of 2008.
 - Review the effectiveness of internal communications within the office, and consider how this might be developed further.

- **Information and Communication Technology:** Introduce the new hardware identified as being necessary following the IT Systems Audit undertaken during 2007/08.

- **Risk management:** Review the risk management strategy developed in early 2008 and keep the risk register under constant review.

- **Professional standards:** Further develop constructive relationships with other Ombudsmen schemes to share issues of best practice.

- **Protocols:** Seek to develop a protocol with the Commissioner for Older People in Wales in order to avoid double handling in instances where complainants could complain to either or both offices.

- **Accountability to the public:**
 - Ensure that people are treated equally and with respect, and that no person receiving a service by my office will receive unfavourable treatment on the grounds of their gender, marital status, ethnicity, religious denomination, sexual orientation, disability or any other irrelevant consideration.
 - Review the effectiveness of the formal procedure, which was revised during 2007/08, for considering complaints from members of the public about the service they have received from my office.

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