

RESEARCH REPORT

Stakeholder Research

Prepared for:
Public Services Ombudsman for
Wales





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Executive summary

Introduction

Beaufort conducted eight in-depth personal interviews with a sample of stakeholders of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW). The eight respondents were recruited from a list of senior stakeholders provided to Beaufort by the PSOW. Interviews break down as follows: three interviews with representative from Local Authorities; three interviews with representatives from Health Boards, and two interviews with representatives from Housing Associations. All stakeholders who took part were Chief Executives or were part of the senior leadership team within the organisation. The depth interviews lasted for around thirty minutes and were carried out online over Microsoft Teams between the 24th February and 20th March 2025.

Key findings

Complaints handling

- Stakeholders interviewed across all sectors expressed a positive perspective on the PSOW's complaints handling, citing its effectiveness, fairness, and timeliness.
- The PSOW's pragmatic and reasonable approach led stakeholders to conclude that the process was efficient, balanced, and beneficial to both the public and the organisations involved.
- There was a high level of trust in the Ombudsman's decision-making and recommendations.
- Implementing recommendations promptly was often noted as one of the main challenges.
- The communication and engagement between the PSOW and public bodies was seen as constructive, fostering a generally collaborative environment for resolving complaints.

Own-initiative investigations and thematic reports

- PSOW's own-initiative investigations were, on the whole, seen as an appropriate and constructive power, particularly in areas lacking regulatory oversight, by providing an external eye on public interest issues.
- Local Authority representatives who had experienced the PSOW's own-initiative investigations had mixed responses, noting both positive and critical aspects.
- The engagement by the PSOW and the overall process was praised by some, but stakeholders sometimes found the experience difficult, time-

consuming and, occasionally, overly critical due to the use of strong terminology like 'maladministration'.

- There were concerns about the clarity of objectives and occasional duplication of regulatory oversight.
- Despite these challenges, the oversight was seen as an opportunity for meaningful service improvements.
- Opinions on the value of thematic reports varied but were on the whole broadly positive. Some praised the insight and oversight they provide on known issues within the sectors.

Complaints handling standards and training support

- Stakeholders reported high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the training provided by the PSOW in this area. The training was felt to help organisations to better adhere to the Complaints Standards as well as improve staff's understanding of the PSOW's processes.
- Introducing the Complaints Handling Standards had led to improvements in organisations' complaints handling according to all stakeholders interviewed across the different sectors.
- However, resource and workload pressures, as well as inconsistencies in complaint recording data, remain key issues.
- Stakeholder suggestions for the future included continuing to offer training and the sharing of approaches to enable consistent handling of complaints. Organisations interviewed expressed the desire for a more cooperative partnership with the PSOW and a collaborative development of new approaches, in addition to limiting bureaucracy as far as possible.
- Stakeholders stressed the importance of the PSOW continuing to foster positive and constructive relationships with them.

Background and methodology

The situation

The office of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) was established in April 2006 by the PSOW Act 2005. That Act gave the Ombudsman the power to consider complaints about providers of public services in Wales, including:

- local government (such as county and community councils)
- the National Health Service (such as Health Boards, Trusts, GPs and dentists)
- registered social landlords (housing associations)
- Welsh Government and its sponsored bodies.

The Public Service Ombudsman for Wales's main role is to look into complaints about something that has gone wrong with Welsh public services; look into complaints that Welsh councillors have breached their Code of Conduct and ultimately to work with public bodies to improve public services and standards of conduct within local government across Wales.

In May 2019, the Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Act 2019 gave the organisation new 'proactive' powers to:

- accept complaints other than in writing
- undertake investigations on its own initiative
- establish complaints handling standards for public bodies in Wales
- consider aspects of privately funded healthcare in specific circumstances.

The Act states that, after 5 years from the date of Royal Assent, the Senedd must prepare and publish a report on the operation and effect of the Act. Therefore, The Public Service Ombudsman for Wales commissioned Beaufort Research to explore these topics qualitatively with a small selection of highly senior stakeholders.

Research objectives

The overall objectives for this research were to explore stakeholders' views on:

- the PSOW's handling of complaints including effectiveness, fairness, timeliness and impact
- the challenges of implementing recommendations by the PSOW
- the PSOW's own-initiative investigations and the application of this power
- the value of thematic reports
- the PSOW's complaints handling standards and its impact on organisations
- the training and support offered by the PSOW.

Research method

Given the nature of the objectives, a qualitative research approach was used to allow participants to provide in-depth views on the topics of interest.

The budget available for this project allowed eight interviews with stakeholders to be conducted and analysed. The eight interviews break down as follows: three interviews with representatives from Local Authorities, three interviews with representatives from Health Boards and two interviews with representatives from Housing Associations. All stakeholders who took part were Chief Executives or were part of the senior leadership team within the organisation. The PSOW provided Beaufort Research with a list of senior stakeholder contacts from a range of different organisations, who had agreed to be approached by Beaufort. Beaufort then contacted stakeholders directly via email to invite them to be interviewed at a time and date convenient to them.

The depth interviews were carried out online over Microsoft Teams between the 24th February and 20th March 2025.

It should be noted that the sample for this research was small and was not, by design, representative of all public bodies. However, qualitative investigation is intended to provide in-depth understanding which was required for exploring the research objectives. Its strengths lie in the ability to identify themes, provide illustrative examples of experiences and opinions and indicate the convergence or divergence of views or reported experiences.

The topic guide for stakeholders was developed in partnership with the client (see Appendix). Each depth interview lasted around 30 minutes. The discussions were digitally recorded with participants' consent and transcripts were produced as the basis for the analysis.

An inductive approach to the analysis was used whereby the researcher categorised the data to develop themes that emerged from the content of the interviews. The categories and themes were broadly framed within the key research objectives and topic areas. The analysis of data uses quantifiers (e.g. some, a few) to help determine patterns of opinions among participants. However, these quantifiers should not be generalised and must be interpreted only as applicable to the research sample.

Anonymous verbatim comments made by participants are included in the report. These comments should not be interpreted as defining the views of all. Instead they give insight into individual views on the themes identified. Not all

stakeholders interviewed hold the same opinions which means that the views summarised in the report naturally vary.

Main findings

The Ombudsman's complaints handling and impact of recommendations

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the PSOW's complaints handling process was acknowledged across sectors, with stakeholders finding it "slick" and appropriately selective. Organisations felt that complaints were proportionately investigated and the rationale for decisions were clear and instructive. The quality of feedback from the PSOW provided clarity for decision-making and learning points for future cases, according to those who took part.

There are some intrinsically difficult complaints which the Ombudsman is dealing with, which I think in the main the Ombudsman deals with well. (Local Authority)

I think the reports that you get back from the Ombudsman are very good. They put in the rationale, in terms of why they've upheld, why they've partially upheld, why they've not upheld so that it helps us understand the reasoning for the decision and to go back and check against our own decisions. (Health Board)

I'm very positive about it. They seem to get the balance right between the things they decide to investigate and those things that they kick back and say go to the landlord and go through their complaints process. (Housing Association)

A sense of pragmatism and understanding from the PSOW in dealing with complaints was also appreciated by stakeholders across sectors, which contributed to the perception of overall effectiveness.

I think we've always had a very sort of mutually cooperative approach... So on the whole they are very pragmatic and very willing to see if the compromise can be reached. (Local Authority)

I think when I read the decision letters they are quite pragmatic. Often these cases are quite complex clinical cases that need quite a lot of external specialist input from experts. So I think they go and seek the right expertise

when they need to, to get an opinion that is going to be useful to them in informing their decisions. (Health Board)

I think the Ombudsman in Wales is very effective. There are patients who are frustrated because they still don't get the answers. I think they are quite pragmatic sometimes because you will get people who are unhappy with the response. But actually it's the essence of the response that has been dealt with appropriately. So I think they are very fair and balanced. (Health Board)

Although the process was considered highly effective, one Local Authority representative commented they wished the public better understood the Ombudsman's role and processes. They believed this would help manage the public's expectations which in turn would minimise the volume of cases the PSOW would have to review. This was a sentiment echoed by other stakeholders.

Fairness

Fairness and balance in complaint handling by the PSOW were unanimously reported, indicating high confidence and trust in the PSOW's work. On the whole, most representatives believed that the Ombudsman understood the constraints within public bodies, leading to reasonable and well-reasoned decisions.

Very fair. They recognise the constraints for local government. Everything is pretty much fair and transparent and no major concerns there. (Local Authority)

I think broadly they are pretty fair. I've not read a decision and thought, "oh, that feels a bit odd that they've made that decision". Where they found issues, I would probably acknowledge that they're right. (Health Board)

Fortunately we haven't had many complaints that have escalated to the Ombudsman, which is really good. And the couple that we've had though, from our perspective, we've always found the Ombudsman intervention to be sort of fair and reasonable and we don't see it as a negative thing to have that external insight and input. (Housing Association)

Even when organisations disagreed with the PSOW's decisions, solutions such as compensation were discussed further and the PSOW provided its rationale for the decision, which was often enough to resolve the disagreement.

Timeliness

On the whole, the PSOW was perceived to handle cases in a timely manner, without unnecessary delays. Stakeholders acknowledged that complex cases took longer but they generally did not attribute these delays to the Ombudsman or believe they were excessive.

I'm not aware that we are picking up concerns about the Ombudsman delaying issues... I'm aware of one [case], which is really problematic and probably is not something that lends itself to a swift resolution. But I'm not sensing that there's a shortcoming or shortfall in the Ombudsman's services which are causing delays. (Local Authority)

Pretty good. I think the time frame they work to is pretty much adhered to. So I think it feels that that that process works pretty efficiently. (Health Board)

The ones we've had recently here, I'd say very timely as in it's not dragged on. (Housing Association)

Some noted that their own organisations' constraints could be the source of delays, especially in terms of resource availability.

It's often the criticism that we are not being timely, which I would completely agree with. So I think generally we haven't got any issues with the Ombudsman's time schemes. (Health Board)

However, one Local Authority representative expressed concern about the PSOW's timeliness regarding Councillor conduct complaints. They believed that prolonged investigations and delayed resolutions could have a potentially negative impact on the Councillor's wellbeing.

In addition, a second Local Authority representative believed the PSOW was sometimes slow in responding to complaints made by the public.

When I see the letters come in which tell me they've chosen to investigate or, in a majority of the instances, chosen not to, it tends to be a fairly significant time gap between when the member of the public contacted them and they get that letter saying in the main we're not going to investigate. (Local Authority)

Impact

The impact of the PSOW's involvement was clear to all, as senior stakeholders explained that recommendations made by the PSOW in the vast majority of

cases led to refined internal practices and responsiveness to feedback. Organisations across sectors said their exact responses varied based on the severity of the issues, with system-wide weaknesses undergoing scrutiny and follow-up reporting. All representatives said the learning from the Ombudsman's recommendations was taken seriously, as changes were embedded into operations. Most stakeholders interviewed could not give specific examples of changes they had made as a result, however.

We have been able to refine practices in different ways and we've been able to look at the way in which we communicate and deal with matters internally. And I think it provides a sort of food for thought ultimately for officers by having somebody independent tell them about different ways that they could have done something in a slightly different manner. (Local Authority)

I think it depends on the issue and the severity of the failing, to be honest... If they are system weaknesses with recommendations attached, we make sure they go through the appropriate scrutiny committee. So you know, we attempt to learn from them. [But some] might be individual weaknesses on a part of an individual, rather than systematic failings. (Local Authority)

As an organisation we take learning very seriously. So we will embed the Ombudsman learning into our normal learning processes... I think the learning and improvement is probably the most important part. It can be very useful because it's almost a third eye, isn't it? The Ombudsman is very good at seeing it from the complainant's lens and sometimes helps you to think a little bit differently about the learning and the recommendations. (Health Board)

They've got the advantage of being outside the system looking in. So that's helpful. They've got potentially the advantage of knowing what other organisations do, but there are disadvantages. They're not specialists in the fields they're dealing in, so we may know more than they do about what the resolution should be. But sometimes a critical friend role is helpful. (Housing Association)

Overall, it was felt the process fostered accountability, learning, and continuous improvement.

I think it's fair to say it still carries a fair amount of gravitas. You don't want to be found wanting by the Ombudsman. I think it's got a certain amount of added weight to it as opposed to perhaps by the inspectorate or another agency. (Local Authority)

Challenges

When asked what, if any, challenges they faced when implementing the PSOW's recommendations, most raised concerns with the prescribed timeframes for implementation. A Health Board representative was disappointed that the PSOW had criticised them for not meeting time scales and had not shown sufficient understanding of their resource limitations or capacity issues.

[The challenge] is normally the timeliness of that response in terms of whether we've done it quick enough for the Ombudsman or quick enough for our elected members. And that's often about resources. (Local Authority)

We had some changes in capacity in our internal team that were managing Ombudsman inquiries. The Ombudsman felt we weren't reacting quickly enough in responding to their inquiries, and also taking the actions necessary to close down after the event... It did feel a little bit that they weren't being particularly reasonable in understanding some of the capacity issues... Absolutely not saying that we didn't have issues and we needed to get our act together and get the responses done more rapidly. But it didn't feel there was much of a sympathetic ear to some of the issues that we were dealing with. (Health Board)

It's always a resource issue, isn't it? What we're already committed to doing in terms of our own corporate plan, service improvement and then there's something that comes from left field... but it's not something we've directly experienced yet. (Housing Association)

One Health Board said their main challenge was embedding any recommendations across the whole organisation, because any changes needed to be communicated to a high volume of staff working in different sectors.

I think we take the learning seriously. I think we seek to embed it as far as possible. I think one of the challenges in the NHS is embedding anything, I mean my organisation's scale is enormous... So communicating with all those people if we make a policy shift or change is not straightforward. (Health Board)

A Housing Association representative was frustrated that the PSOW could not pass complainants' details to their organisation when the PSOW instructed the

complainants to deal directly with the Housing Association. They understood the data protection constraints, but felt it was a missed opportunity that the PSOW did not obtain complainants' permission to pass their details on so they could resolve the issues more speedily.

Relationship Management

All stakeholders described their relationship with the PSOW as positive and collaborative on the whole. They stressed the importance of having open and frank discussions with the PSOW in order for them to be constructive, effective and allowing for the mutual resolution of cases.

But overall the whole relationships have been positive. No issues of any major concern in the context of how complaints are dealt with. (Local Authority)

Generally when we deal with some really tricky cases, I really value the ability to say, well, I want you to go to the Ombudsman. So I think it demonstrates a level of confidence in them as an independent body. (Health Board)

A Local Authority representative believed their relationship with the Ombudsman had improved since their organisation enhanced their own complaints handling.

One of my reflections is the importance of the Council itself having in place effective corporate complaints handling arrangements. So we took steps several years ago to strengthen our complaint handling and as a consequence I think our engagement with the Ombudsman is better. (Local Authority)

Two representatives attributed their more effective relationship with the PSOW to their positive personal relationship with the incumbent Ombudsman. Similarly, one Local Authority representative was 'struck' by the current Ombudsman's willingness to deal with an issue personally, which was appreciated.

The current Ombudsman has sought to develop more effective relationships with the health board leaders because I think we do constitute a lot of their work. I could communicate directly with her. She has connected directly with me. And that's very helpful. And we meet at least once a year to have a proper conversation about how things are going and what her observations of where the opportunities are for us to improve. I think that's extremely useful. And I really welcome that. (Health Board)

I've been quite struck by the refreshing willingness of the current Ombudsman to engage personally with an issue if it's appropriate.... And therefore, the Ombudsman is sort of open to having a conversation. And I think that's really helpful. (Local Authority)

The Ombudsman's use of own-initiative investigations and thematic reports

General views on PSOW's own-initiative powers

Own-initiative investigations were, on the whole, seen as an appropriate and constructive power, particularly in areas lacking regulatory oversight, by providing an external eye on public interest issues.

I think it's good, I think it's important that they have that level of autonomy and that they have statutory backing to undertake those investigations. I think I've only seen one, possibly two since I've been here where they've instituted the publication piece where they, you know, make it public. (Health Board)

I think for example, damp and mould and fire safety. It is well known in the press and media that the housing sectors perform poorly for tenants [on these issues] and it'll be very reasonable for the Ombudsman to decide to investigate those in a bit more depth. (Housing Association)

Stakeholders across sectors strongly believed the PSOW should collaborate with public sector bodies when conducting own-initiative investigations to ensure a constructive approach. One representative from a Housing Association believed it was appropriate for the Ombudsman to investigate issues but that good practice guides needed to come from inside the sector itself given the requirement for sector-specific expertise.

I think it would be useful for the Ombudsman to liaise with like our sector body, like Community Housing Cymru, say, if they pick up an issue so that it's done collaboratively rather than the Ombudsman goes away and then comes back to the sector. This is where you go wrong... I would want it to be done in partnership. So it would be like actually we recognise that's an issue as well. So we're working with the Ombudsman to try and improve rather than we're being investigated. (Housing Association)

I think there is a danger in people with a policy background writing good practice guides when they haven't actually done it themselves. You know, they really do need to come from a background where they've done it at the front line. (Housing Association)

Nevertheless, stakeholders across all sectors warned that the PSOW's own-initiative investigations could risk duplicating work that had already been carried out by other agencies such as Audit Wales, Welsh Government, Health Inspectorate Wales, Care Commission Wales and other regulatory agencies that reviewed organisations' activities and produced reports sharing good practice.

I guess in our world obviously there's already quite a lot of people who can come and look into our services. You know, we have Health Care Inspectorate, we have Welsh Government, we have various speciality, you know, royal colleges.... My nervousness would be how do we make sure that the Ombudsman isn't doing something that is already being done by somebody else or replicating or duplicating work because there's no shortage of recommendations about. (Health Board)

I think hopefully everyone can learn from having gone through these two processes. I think it's still probably at the very early days of this process. Then the next one, I think I would just suggest looking perhaps at an area where there is no overarching regulator overseeing it. (Local Authority)

In addition, stakeholders stressed the importance of having clear objectives and an evidence base to explain the PSOW's rationale for the need to focus on the topics and organisations it chose to investigate.

Sometimes my experience of Ombudsman generally, is that they will pick up a sort of an independent review because of political noise for example, or because a patient is very loud in their criticism. And I know this has happened in England. I think the Ombudsman has to be proportionate and they have to make sure that in exercising that power they are proportionate... I think sometimes the political nature of things will drive an investigation, not necessarily the evidence base. That's more of my experience from England, but I think there's a risk in Wales of that. (Health Board)

Experience of the PSOW's own-initiative investigation

Local Authority representatives with direct experience of PSOW's own-initiative investigations in the past had mixed responses to the process, noting both positive and critical aspects.

Positively, two Local Authority representatives believed the own-initiative investigation process had been handled well by PSOW, as it was clear and their Councils had been given the right to comment on the first draft.

I think it's appropriate and I think the Ombudsman is finding the right balance and he's not exercising those responsibilities in a way which might be considered to be overbearing and adding to resource pressures. (Local Authority)

I think the way they went about doing it was quite positive. They engaged with people at the start of the process. They gave an idea of terms of reference. They gathered all the information that ultimately was needed. They gave an opportunity to comment on the draft. So from a process perspective, no major issues at all. (Local Authority)

Less positively, one Local Authority representative found the experience 'tricky' and 'time-consuming'. They did not believe the PSOW had clear aims at the start of the process, which led to it being laborious and taking longer than needed.

I don't think they were clear on what they were trying to achieve when they went into it. We had lots of meetings with them around sort of terms of reference, representations, time frames. The thing ended up taking 18 months plus to bring to a conclusion... by the time they got to the end of it, a lot of the impetus had been lost. We were sort of almost beginning to make improvements because we were aware of what their concerns were as we were going through the process. (Local Authority)

Moreover, two Local Authority stakeholders interviewed felt the PSOW investigation had been overly critical and too ready to use terminology like 'maladministration', which they believed was misleading and not an accurate reflection of the service as a whole. According to these stakeholders, when these concerns were raised with the PSOW, the initial response from PSOW staff had been 'quite defensive'. These Local Authorities did not believe the PSOW fully appreciated at the time the consequences of using such terminology, but were grateful that the PSOW subsequently agreed to review the language used as part of the process.

I think the initial finding was one of maladministration, which quite frankly would have opened us up to all kinds of litigation and concerns. And it was almost like they didn't quite understand the consequences of that recommendation. I'm not sitting here saying our care services were perfect

and couldn't be improved. I'm not saying that at all. We knew when they picked it that we'd be found wanting in some respects. So we were, we were ready for that. (Local Authority)

Furthermore, some highlighted inconsistencies and 'mixed messages' arising from different investigations conducted by different regulators. For example, sector regulators such as Care Inspectorate Wales were said to have approved Local Authorities' health and social care services whilst the PSOW in its investigation had described the services provided as 'maladministration'. Some of the Local Authority representatives therefore concluded it would be beneficial for the PSOW to use its own-initiative investigation powers to plug any gaps, rather than go over the same ground.

I think the other element that I picked up on is there are lots of statutory regulators in the background in respect of that particular area of work, like Care Inspectorate Wales and other national associations. Here you had Care Inspectorate Wales saying the service was functioning, it was meeting all the various standards and the Ombudsman was saying no, there was maladministration. So I think one of the things that I sort of took away from it is it what would be really helpful if the Ombudsman picked areas in which there are no sort of regulators, there are no other organisations. (Local Authority)

There were recommendations that came out that were contrary to recommendations that we'd previously had from Care Inspectorate Wales.... That's a pretty invidious position to find yourself in. (Local Authority)

One Local Authority representative also questioned whether the PSOW was clear as to whether the recommendations at the end of the review were mandatory or good practice recommendations. They did not believe the recommendations should be mandatory for the four Local Authorities that were investigated if these same recommendations were not mandatory for the other eighteen Local Authorities that were not involved.

Despite these challenges, the oversight was seen as an opportunity for meaningful service improvements. There was a desire for the PSOW to frame their own-initiative investigations as a means to aid service improvement rather than criticism.

I always understood own-initiative investigations ultimately to be to look at areas of practice and how can we make them better, not criticise people for not doing things. And you know, we have taken on board those and we are

now looking to implement them as part of our service review. (Local Authority)

Value of thematic reports

Opinions on the value of thematic reports varied but were on the whole broadly positive. Some praised the insight and oversight they provide on known issues within the sectors e.g. accessibility in public services and damp and mould in the social housing sector.

They've got intrinsic value, I think, because of the insight that the Ombudsman can bring to a particular set of issues. And you know, what's been focused on here are some vital issues in relation to access, concerns by members of the public about levels of accessibility and communications... Absolutely drawing together some of these concerns into these thematic reports can improve service delivery. The Ombudsman is in a pretty unique position to shine a light. (Local Authority)

So we will go through a process of sending those reports out. We'll ask for a response from our operational teams or our central teams on the content and we'll make sure that that's built into our improvement programmes. So they're, you know, they're very helpful in terms of reflecting on the evidence base, reflecting on the experience of people, the safety of people and then putting in place the improvements. So there again, they're another key arm of our assurance framework. (Health Board)

[Living in Disrepair report] was quite sort of high profile and came out at a good point in time when we were looking to improve and change. We just shared it with our senior leadership team. I think we then took it to our resident panel with a supporting document and then used that alongside some others .. to come up with an internal action plan. (Housing Association)

However, a Health Board representative felt the thematic reports risked adding to the 'white noise' of existing reviews. One Local Authority representative did not recall seeing any thematic reports that focused on Local Authority issues specifically so believed more relevant thematic reports were needed for them to be more impactful in their organisation. Stakeholders acknowledged that the PSOW had a valuable and different perspective on issues so a few believed it would be important to highlight this added value in order to differentiate their reports from similar documents on the topics.

So I suppose at this stage maybe they're not given the attention probably within the wider networks of the Council. So, for example, I read them when they come in and you look at the different issues and what they're suggesting

but there hasn't been anything that Local Authorities can take some tangible benefits from at the moment. It would be good to see more focus on local government issues and some of the day-to-day elements so people can then look to see how they're going to implement them. And they can be seen, as, you know, opportunities of good practice across the board. (Local Authority)

I guess it's about being clear what's the purpose of doing a thematic report. If we take the top topic of hospital discharge, there must have been four or five different bodies that have done reviews on hospital discharge across Wales. And there is a danger then that it becomes almost like white noise a bit and people don't even spend the time to read it because they think it will just say the same things the other people said but in a slightly different format. (Health Board)

One Housing Association representative, who used resources provided by the English Housing Ombudsman, was not aware of any thematic reports produced by the PSOW relating to their sector. They did, however, express an interest in receiving more general information from the PSOW, recognising the potential relevance of its recommendations across different sectors.

I haven't been very conscious of the sort of bigger picture around their work on local governments and health service... It'd be quite good to get a bit more from them in terms of communication with me as Chief Executive around, you know, public services. What are the issues coming up? Because the way we handle stuff or don't handle stuff is not that different from local government or the health service really. It's all about communication and systems and processes and how well people are trained and all those sorts of things. (Housing Association)

The Ombudsman's role in setting complaints standards and training support

Complaints standards and improvement

Overall, the PSOW'S Complaints Standards were welcomed by all organisations interviewed across all sectors. Some stakeholders felt the Complaints Standards and the PSOW's support had helped organisations make significant improvements in complaints handling processes. The improvements mentioned included ensuring corporate visibility, coordinating complex complaints, and revising internal processes to align with established frameworks.

About X years ago, we were stung by Ombudsman feedback about the way in which particular areas of the council dealt with specific cases. It absolutely highlighted the need to get a much better grip of the way in which the council was dealing with complaints. And that's what we did. We've improved our handling of complaints significantly since then. (Local Authority)

The conversations we've had with the Ombudsman I think gave us a clear focus about how we handle those complaints that do go into Ombudsman, how do we make sure that they are as effective as possible? But also how do we make sure our overall process for all complaints and concerns is as inclusive and easy for people to use as possible so that we try and minimise the sort of numbers that will end up going into an Ombudsman process. (Health Board)

So we had a two stage process already and it wasn't massive changes, it was tweaks to the policy rather than anything fundamental. So that was fine. (Housing Association)

For some, the adoption of Complaint Standards had facilitated a clearer focus on complaint handling and encouraged proactive use of the Ombudsman's resources.

I think it's made it visible ultimately that there are different rules and processes. So when we've had the opportunity to be able to revise and review our internal processes, we've always got a framework now ultimately in which to measure it against to ensure that we're meeting those requirements at the same time. So yes, naturally it has. (Local Authority)

There's really good communication between the Ombudsman and organisations and for us to make the most of that relationship as well, not wait for the Ombudsman to knock on our door, be more proactive. I think we need to do that, which I do think the Complaints Standards has helped.
(Housing Association)

Challenges

Although stakeholders were positive about the PSOW's Complaints Standards, most did experience some challenges with meeting the PSOW's requirements in practice. The main challenges cited were resource and workload pressures, notably the lack of dedicated complaints officers for some smaller organisations and the additional demands from the PSOW.

It's just resource implications ultimately on local government because as a Council, we do not have any dedicated complaints officers whose sole role it is to actually [deal with] complaints... So obviously the more requirements that ultimately factor in from the PSOW, the more resource heavy it becomes ultimately on officers to be able to take forward. So that's really the only point. (Local Authority)

It's usually resource challenges in terms of, you know, what sort of prominence precedent you give that, compared to the other issues you're dealing with at a given time. (Local Authority)

Local Authorities who were sometimes struggling with resource were grateful to the PSOW for their understanding when the Council notified the PSOW that they would be late submitting their response.

Health Board representatives also commented on the 'challenging' timescales set by the PSOW as a constraint, but it was acknowledged that it was important not to overextend the complaints process. However, one Health Board representative felt the PSOW put too much emphasis on a quick resolution and meeting timescales. They believed it was important to bear in mind the complex nature of the complaints in their sector in particular. They strongly believed the emphasis should always be on arriving at the correct outcome for the complainant rather than on the speed of the resolution.

It's just perhaps appreciating the environment in which we're operating in. Some of these areas are always quite complex and do require coordination of

lots of different bits of information, which can often take a bit of time to get. And sometimes there may be a perception, I think, that people don't quite appreciate that sometimes it's not all just about getting it through in the timeline. Actually, it's better to get the right people to review the complaint because if we're going to make any learning, they've got to be part of that process. (Health Board)

Representatives from Housing Associations mentioned difficulties in standardising complaints recording across the sector, thereby impacting the reporting of complaint rates. Both Housing Association representatives were concerned about the possible reputational damage inflicted by data published in the future on complaints levels which were not measured in a standard way across the sector.

We can't publish data which is measuring apples and pears, which is what will happen again in the summer if they don't insist that people will do it the same way. (Housing Association)

It is helpful to be in line with everybody else in terms of the way that we're handling complaints. I think [recent events] highlighted this kind of issue. It's probably an issue for our organisation and making sure we capture that informal complaint resolution as formal complaints...So that probably this is something we're a little bit nervous about at the moment because we haven't reached a consensus as a sector on what the Ombudsman is looking for from us and when, what they want to do with that data and for what purpose. (Housing Association)

Training and engagement

There was overall satisfaction evident with the current training provided by the PSOW, with almost all organisations interviewed having taken up the offer of training. Stakeholders believed the PSOW proactively offering to provide training had helped to foster good relationships between organisations and the Ombudsman. In addition, stakeholders believed it was beneficial for organisations to help align their approaches with the standards and that the training helped to improve staff's understanding of the process and of the PSOW's requirements.

I think it's been good, and I think we've had some good support. As I said, when we were going through a bit of a transition, I know that our team were working very proactively with the Ombudsman's case team to try and make

sure that we all were on the same page and working to the same standard. So I think that's worked well. (Health Board)

My team have attended the training. As I say, my complaints team have a very good relationship with the Ombudsman. They meet with her regularly. We've certainly drawn the training into the organisation. I've had no concerns raised about the training. In fact, it's been a positive aspect of the development of our team. (Health Board)

We had a big batch of training probably about six months ago now and we've just reached out recently. So part of us looking at trying to improve again is to get some more training, repeat for some people, new for people who have joined the organisation. So yeah, the training was good.... The training has been a step in the right direction in breaking down barriers and fears about the Ombudsman. (Housing Association)

In addition, some stakeholders believed the training included useful materials and was accessible, which contributed to their team's development. Although positive overall, one Local Authority representative believed it would be beneficial if the training could be tailored to the organisation's needs and be more focused, so that staff could benefit fully.

There was material, shared sense of good, bad letters. It was, you know, easy to understand and engage with no issues at all with that. And it's good that we can just say actually we'd like some more free training please. (Housing Association)

On the whole, the training is very good, a good relationship. It would be beneficial to see in some cases if it can be made a little bit more bespoke to the issues individual authorities are dealing with. (Local Authority)

Most stakeholders could not think of any additional training needs or did not believe they were best placed to answer this question. However, a few participants had suggestions for additional training they felt could be beneficial for their organisation. One Local Authority representative believed additional training would be beneficial for staff in more senior roles, while another Local Authority representative wanted those who were involved in the complaints process to better grasp the Ombudsman's handling of conduct-related complaints. Also one Health Board representative suggested targeting training towards GP practices to align improvements specified by the Ombudsman with their practices.

Considerations for the future

Continuing to have open communication and engagement with the PSOW were thought to be important by representatives across the sectors. Stakeholder suggestions included continuing to offer training and the sharing of approaches to enable consistent handling of complaints. Organisations expressed the desire for a more cooperative partnership with the PSOW and a collaborative development of new approaches, in addition to limiting bureaucracy as far as possible.

The Ombudsman continuing to engage positively with stakeholders is important. ... Having good levels of discussion and conversation with the authorities themselves. So that they're not operating, you know, there's a bit of a no surprises approach, which is important. So, yeah, there's fundamentals here which need to continue I think. (Local Authority)

Overall we have a really positive relationship, ... hopefully we can develop further and I think it's if we can work in more partnership. We're all coming at this from the same aim from a complaints perspective; we want to reduce the number of campaigns to make sure there are improvements ultimately in the system. So if we can find that way to gel together that little bit more and find ways where we can share good practice. So instead of it being the Ombudsman comes up with a new approach, could they work with Local Authorities... So yeah, more collaboration I think would be a very useful approach. (Local Authority)

By definition it's a bureaucratic process, but we don't want it to be unnecessarily bureaucratic. (Local Authority)

A sort of a collaborative approach to it, basically. Yes, of course they've got statutory responsibility, but the best outcomes can be achieved if you work together to try and get a better outcome for the individual if they've gone to the Ombudsman. (Health Board)

One Local Authority representative was concerned about the volume of complaints increasing due to service cuts in the local area. They believed the PSOW should be aware that the narrowing of eligibility criteria for certain public services would cause the number of complaints to increase and that this would likely, in turn, have a knock-on effect on the number of complaints made by the public to the PSOW.

Appendix

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Stakeholders topic guide FINAL

The main areas of interest are views on the Ombudsman's:

- complaints handling and the impact of recommendations
- use of own-initiative investigations and thematic reports
- role in setting complaints standards and the training and support offered by the Ombudsman.

A. Introduction (5 mins)

1. *Thank participant for helping out. Introduce self and Beaufort as an independent company.*
2. *Explain aims of discussion:* The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales wishes to gather insights on the quality of own services and impact, with particular focus on the office's power to undertake own-initiative investigations and promote good complaints handling.

The Ombudsman intends to use any insights from this research to inform response to the ongoing review of the office by the Senedd's Finance Committee and to identify opportunities to improve services.

As we said in the email invitation, these discussions are confidential. We follow the Market Research Society Code of Conduct which means among other things that we look after the data we collect and aim to preserve your anonymity. Just a quick reminder:

- The Public Service Ombudsman gave us a shortlist of stakeholders they wanted to hear from, and we've selected participants from that list. So, they'll know who we're approaching but when we report back, we won't attribute comments to individuals or name organisations. However, we will attribute comments and points raised by type of organisation e.g. health board, local authority or housing association.
- During the conversation you can flag if there is any feedback that may need careful wording to ensure anonymity, as far as possible.
- The process is entirely voluntary.

- I'd like to digitally record our discussion. This is for Beaufort's analysis. We don't share it with the Ombudsman. Afterwards, we'll make a transcript for analysis. Any questions?
3. Now the **recording has started**, can I check that you're still happy to continue?

B. The Ombudsman's complaints handling and impact of recommendations (10 mins)

Overall perceptions for context

4. What are your views on how the Ombudsman handles complaints about your organisation? *Probe including*
- How effective were they when dealing with the complaints?
 - How fair were they with your organisation?
 - How timely were they when dealing with the complaints?
5. When the Ombudsman upholds a complaint, **what impact** do the recommendations have on your organisation? *Probe for examples of improved service user satisfaction / service improvements*
6. What, if any, **challenges** have you come across in implementing the recommendations received from the Ombudsman?

C. The Ombudsman's use of own-initiative investigations and thematic reports (10 mins)

Moving on to focus specifically on the Ombudsman's systemic work, such as use of own-initiative investigations and thematic reports.

Ask any remaining organisations

7. The Ombudsman has the power to investigate an issue even when they have not received a complaint. What are your thoughts on this?
8. Do you believe that the Ombudsman is using this power effectively, or could it be improved?
9. And what impact, if any, do the Ombudsman's thematic reports have on improving your services?

10. Is there more that the Ombudsman could be doing to promote systemic improvement of public services?

D. The Ombudsman's role in setting complaints standards and training and support (5 mins)

11. How would you rate **the training and support** offered by the Ombudsman to your organisation to improve complaints handling?
Probe:
- What additional training or support would be useful?
12. Has the Ombudsman's complaints standards work **led to improvements** in how your organisation handles complaints?
For example are there any improvements in:
- Data collection practices?
 - Reporting?
 - Experiences for service users?
13. What are the **challenges**, if any, in complying with the Ombudsman's complaints standards?
14. What would help your organisation to further **improve** how it handles complaints?

D. Wrap up (2 mins)

15. Before we finish is there anything else you'd like to add that would be useful for Public Services Ombudsman for Wales to know?

Thank and close