

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

Advisory Forum notes - meeting 18 September 2017

Name	Representing
M King (MK)	Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
N Ellis (NE)	Chief Executive
J Spence (JS)	Head of Policy and Communications
JB	Customer Services Manager
SP	External Communications Officer
DK	Policy and Research Analyst
TS	Service User
MG	Service User
CW	Service User
LN	Service User
AA	Service User
TG	Service User
CP	Link Officer
BF	Link Officer
JF	Citizens Advice Coventry

1. Welcome and Introduction

Members of the Advisory Forum were welcomed by Mick King (MK) and thanked for attending the inaugural meeting of this membership cycle.

MK invited members of the Forum to introduce themselves, and briefly outline the nature of their involvement with the Ombudsman to date, as well as any other relevant experience to share with the group.

MK explained that although we cannot resolve individual complaints through the meeting, their experience of the service will be invaluable to hear. He explained how information and feedback would be used to improve services.

NE explained the Terms of Reference for the Forum. He explained membership of the forum is for a year, during which three meetings will be held. Although this session would also feature feedback on recent experiences of using the Ombudsman, the Forum remit would focus through the year on 'online services'.

NE confirmed views given during the meetings will be used externally but comments and experiences will not be attributed to individuals. He explained the history of the forum and the impact previous forum groups have had, including beneficial changes to our website.

2. Discussion 1: From your experience of our service, what does the Ombudsman do well and what needs to improve most?

A frank and candid discussion was held with members highlighting their experiences with the Ombudsman service - both good and bad.

Issues raised included:

- There is inconsistency in approach by individual investigators – some more empathetic while others more dismissive and detached
- Letters are professional but some people find them intimidating and too bureaucratic
- The letters and written responses were often very complex and intimidating, particularly those involving a challenge to the decision
- Thorough investigation but missed points that should have been covered or given more importance. The compound effect of individual issues hadn't been considered
- Should improve the way hard messages, such as a complaint being out of time to be investigated, are delivered
- Even if the complaint is upheld, it still doesn't seem like a victory, as the process can be emotionally draining, most people don't want to complain
- Some investigators are better than others at getting to the bottom of investigations, and understanding the questions that need asking
- It's not clear how the Ombudsman follows through on recommended remedies to ensure they are carried out, or what happens when the recommendations aren't taken forward by the council – 'where's the bite?' It was suggested this could form the focus of a future session by the Advisory Forum
- Coming to the Ombudsman can be an intimidating and daunting experience for some – not everyone would have the knowledge or courage to approach the service, and be able to give information in the way the Ombudsman requires
- Would like the opportunity to give all the information at the start of the complaint and this isn't possible using the current online complaint form
- Advocates need to be able to use phone and online, not just post. JB confirmed this would be happening very soon.
- There needs to be more empathy, compassion and appreciation of what's important to people who go to the Ombudsman – need to feel listened to
- Local authorities don't always get things right, but when they do not they need to be accountable, take the Ombudsman's investigation seriously and learn from a complaint to stop it happening again
- The balance of probabilities seemed to swing too far towards the authorities. The fact decisions are made using a balance of probabilities approach should be explained more clearly

Positive comments included:

- Confidence in the investigator who had a good grasp of the complex issues
- It was a professional, timely and reliable service
- Correspondence had a clear summary of the complaint, what was in scope and not, and questions to be answered - thorough
- First contact with the Ombudsman was good and responsive

- Ombudsman recommendations are good for scrutiny committees to use
- Felt 'listened to', confident the complaint would be challenged by the Ombudsman
- The investigator was good at keeping in touch – the service was 'very responsive'
- The Ombudsman was approachable with a good focus on making recommendations for service improvements
- Overall the Ombudsman did a good job in what was quite a difficult case
- Investigator laid out the complaint clearly and explained what was going on
- The investigator had good people skills and was empathetic. It was good to have that support mechanism
- Very good investigator – felt listened to, called regularly to make sure things were moving. Had email every step of the way. Very positive experience

3. Discussion 2: An online complaints service – initial thoughts

- The website is clear but almost TOO simple – does not allow you to upload documents – it's quite hard to get all your points across
- Website says 'be brief' but this is hard when you are starting from the beginning and have a complex story to tell
- Replaying the case back would help clarify understanding and allow you to check all the right information is there
- Would be helpful to have the timescales it would take set out on the website
- Security could be an issue for those using libraries or internet cafes
- People with no internet at home will struggle – need other methods of communication
- A second advocate needs to be able take over a complaint if they are helping someone – JB confirmed they could if they had the proper authorisation from the person making the complaint
- Need to be able to send more information in from the start – was explained we might sometimes get too much information and we have to store this or send it back
- A checklist for local authorities online would make them more accountable – so they know what information they have to provide and can't ignore providing it
- People DO need to vent at the initial stage so need an alternative to online to do this, or scope online to provide a lot of information
- Want to be able to update a complaint after the initial contact
- Things that worked well in people's experience of the service were the human responses and quality of the interaction, not the automation. Wouldn't like to lose that
- An online chat was seen as a positive thing
- A case tracking timeline would help people see what stage of the process they were at without bothering the investigator

4. Closing remarks

MK closed the meeting, thanking every one for coming. MK noted the emotional content of the meeting and confirmed how the Ombudsman follows up on complaint recommendations. He expanded on our High Court level powers to demand evidence from local authorities if it is not forthcoming.

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 30 January 2018.