

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

Advisory Forum notes - meeting 30 May 2018

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

1. Welcome and Introduction

Members of the Advisory Forum were welcomed by Nigel Ellis (NE) and thanked for attending the third and final meeting of this membership cycle.

2. Discussion 1: Customer Communication

Jayne Spence (JS) led the session and thanked forum members for taking the time to consider the material sent in advance. The forum was presented with three separate letters (and some supporting factsheets) which are currently sent at different stages of the process to people who have come to the Ombudsman with complaints.

These stages are:

- a) when the person has come to the Ombudsman but it is too soon for us to consider their complaint (for example if the authority has not yet had chance to remedy the complaint) – this is called premature;
- b) when the complaint is being forwarded to the assessment stage, and;
- c) when the complaint is decided at assessment stage and is not upheld.

The forum was also presented with sample updated letters and information leaflets which have been drafted following previous discussions and using the experiences of the forum members and the feedback they had given.

Comments from the forum included:

Forward to Assessment stage factsheet and letter

- The language was softer and less formal and helps to get our message across in the new letters
- We could include a summary or links to the summary of their complaint in the letter to ensure the complainants know we understand the basics of their complaint; eg a section called 'You complained about' or similar at the start of the letter
- Some forum members preferred the 'slimmed down' versions, while others would prefer to have the full information contained in the current letter. It was suggested we include both – the stylised easy-to-understand version as a front cover and the longer leaflet for those wanting more
- The road map version might work better online with hyperlinks
- We need to put the important info in bold in whichever version we decide upon
- All agreed the visual approach was an improvement

Decided and not upheld at Assessment letter

- Remove words such as 'unfortunately'
- Managing expectations: we also need to be mindful of not going too far with some of the letters in encouraging people to challenge our decisions/provide extra information where certain cases we really cannot help
- If we are telling people we are not going to investigate in the intro – tell them why
- We need to get the decision at the top. People may not read anything else
- We should rephrase the 'what you should do now' heading to be less imperative
- We need to rephrase the data retention paragraphs to say we will only keep information for 12 months – and any other similar ones where we should change the sentence to be positive not negative in getting the point across
- We need to look at softening our language but we should not take this to extremes, be clear and realistic and manage expectations

- We should tweak any references to expecting people to be disappointed – maybe change to ‘we appreciate this may not be the decision you will have wanted’
- Add the reason for why we are not investigating too rather than just – we have decided not to investigate
- Signpost if we can if there is an alternate form of redress

Premature complaint letters

- Members really liked the top tips leaflet and thought it was useful
- People didn’t mind the formal ‘the law says’ in this context
- We should include information on when we would look at a case even if the council had not finished looking at a case (eg when the council is not responding, or where there has been unnecessary delay)
- We need to be clearer about what people should do if they don’t hear back
- Top tips – stress digital/phone contact over writing
- We should include timescales in the top tips
- We should include a line on preparing people to have to send in evidence/evidence gathering

3. Discussion 2: Learning Organisation update

NE spoke to the forum about transforming the Ombudsman into a ‘Learning Organisation’ and what that means for the next three years.

He said he found the advisory forum meetings were incredibly useful. We can get learning from interactions if we are alert to it and can use it to change our behaviours as an organisation

Learning Organisation will encourage investigators to share learning from their complaints and share best practice, for example through ‘lunch-time learning’ sessions.

This will inform all areas of work, including recruitment and the structure of the organisation.

NE also spoke about the Corporate Strategy and the plans it includes for the Learning Organisation.

4. Closing remarks

MK thanked everyone for their input and reiterated how invaluable the advisory forum is for the organisation, and how much he enjoyed attending.

MK reminded the forum of the tangible inputs and contributions they have made, and the changes that will be taken forwards including to our digital principles, customer satisfaction survey and letters to complainants.

He encouraged members to contact us if they had any further input they wished to give.