

Service Standards Framework

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Foreword

The Ombudsman Association Service Standards Framework was developed by the Ombudsman Association, with draft development facilitated by BSI Standards Limited. It came into effect in May 2017.

The Ombudsman Association's members¹ include all major public services ombudsman, private sector ombudsman schemes and complaint handling bodies in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Britain's Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories.

Acknowledgement is given to the following organisations that were involved in the development of this Framework as members of the Steering Group.

- Citizens Advice Scotland
- Citizens Information Board (Ireland)
- Chartered Trading Standards Institute
- Financial Ombudsman Service
- Institute of Customer Service
- Legal Ombudsman
- Legal Services Consumer Panel
- Local Government Ombudsman
- Office of the Ombudsman, Ireland
- Ombudsman Services
- Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman

- Public Services Ombudsman for Wales
- Scottish Public Services Ombudsman
- The Adjudicator's Office
(for HM Revenue and Customs and Valuation Office Agency)
- The Furniture Ombudsman

Acknowledgement is also given to the wider membership of the Ombudsman Association who were consulted in the development of this Framework, and all those who responded to the public consultation.

Use of this document

This document is for use of members of the Ombudsman Association. It sets out what both the Association's members and stakeholders consider to be good practice, and may also be of interest to the public, academics and other stakeholders.

The Framework takes into account existing standardisation documents and charters, including those of members and external organisations.

This Framework takes the form of recommendations and guidance. Members should take care to ensure that claims of compliance with it are not misleading.

Members who choose not to adopt this Framework are expected to publish the standards they operate to instead.

This Framework does not replace or modify any relevant regulations or legislation that members already have regard to.

¹ A list of the Ombudsman Association's members can be found here: www.ombudsmanassociation.org/association-members.php

Introduction

The Ombudsman Association

The vision of the Ombudsman Association is that throughout the public and private sectors:

- it is straightforward and simple for people to complain;
- people making a complaint are listened to and treated fairly;
- a complaint is dealt with quickly, fairly and effectively at the earliest stage by suitably trained staff;
- people have access to an ombudsman in all areas of consumer and public services; and
- the learning from a complaint is used to improve services.

Our members provide an independent and impartial service to resolve complaints, through individual redress and systemic investigations. It is crucial that they provide a fair and effective service to all their service users, both complainants and the organisations complained about, and are transparent about their own performance.

Our members feed back the lessons learned from complaints to the organisations complained about to help them to improve complaints management and, ultimately, service delivery for the wider public.

Aim of the Service Standards Framework

The Association's Service Standards Framework provides a 'roadmap' that members can use to raise their own performance, embed good practice in their organisation, and demonstrate the quality of the service they provide.

In meeting these standards members can be more effective in providing both individual redress and improving the service of organisations complained about.

In clarifying what service users can expect, the Framework acts as a tool with which to manage expectations and build trust and confidence in the services that members provide.

The Framework enables members to report on their performance to the public and to the organisations they are accountable to.

1 Scope

This Framework sets out the public commitments and service standards that can be expected when using a member's services. It identifies criteria members can use to assess and report on their performance and ensure they are providing a good service.

The Framework agreement specifically relates to the service that Ombudsman Association members provide to both complainants and the organisations complained about.

The Framework provides measures for members on five commitments to service users:

- a) accessibility;
- b) communication;
- c) professionalism;
- d) fairness; and
- e) transparency.

The Framework supports the Ombudsman Association's validation process and can be used by all members of the Ombudsman Association, including statutory and voluntary complaint handling and ombudsman schemes, and those in the UK, Ireland, the British Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories.

Adherence to this Framework is not mandatory. Members can also meet the Association's membership criteria requirement by publishing their own service standards if those set out in this Framework are not appropriate.

2 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this Framework, the following terms and definitions apply.

2.1 Accessibility

Usability and availability of a product, service, environment or facility by people within every range of capabilities

Note: The concept of accessibility addresses the full range of user capabilities and is not limited to those who identify themselves as disabled

2.2 Complaint

Expression of dissatisfaction made to a member about an organisation within its jurisdiction, related to that organisation's products, services or staff, or the complaints-handling process itself, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected

2.3 Member

Member of the Ombudsman Association

2.4 Service user

Complainant or organisation complained about

2.5 Complainant

Individual or company approaching a member to make a complaint or seek advice

2.6 Organisation complained about

Organisation within a member's jurisdiction that an individual or business has expressed dissatisfaction about

2.7 Remedy

Recommended or proposed action to resolve a complaint where failings have been identified

3. Ombudsman Association member commitments

3.1 Accessibility

- Members' service should be free to complainants.
- Members should ensure that their procedures are customer focused.
- Members should work with complainants to understand their needs, in order for complainants to access their service easily.
- Members should make reasonable efforts to support access to their services for any user, including working with representatives and others to support complainants through their service, and publish their procedures for doing this.
- Members should listen to what complainants want from them and ensure they understand their complaint. If a complainant is complaining about an organisation or issue that the member cannot consider complaints about, where possible they should direct the complainant to the relevant Association member, or another organisation who may be able to help.

3.2 Communication

- Members should treat service users courteously, respectfully and with dignity.
- Members should communicate with complainants through complainants' own chosen method where possible.
- Members should explain their role to service users.
- Members should let complainants know what they can and cannot do, and, if they are unable to help them explain why.
- Members should clearly explain to service users their process for handling complaints about organisations and likely timescales.
- Members should keep service users regularly informed of the progression of their case, and how long things are likely to take.
- Members should tell service users who they can contact if they have any questions at different stages in the handling of the case, and how they can do so.
- Members should be accurate in their communications with service users using plain and clear language.

3.3 Professionalism

- Members should ensure that the staff who consider complaints have the relevant knowledge, training and skills to make decisions, or have access to suitable professional advice.
- Members should deal with complaints in a timely manner, taking into account the complexity of the case.
- Members should ensure that remedies are appropriate and take account of the impact any identified faults have had on the complainant.
- Members should use the outcomes of complaints to promote wider learning and improvement to the service and the sector complained about.
- Members should ensure their record keeping is accurate and that they hold data securely.
- Members should ensure that if and when sharing of information is necessary, it is done appropriately.
- Members should follow their published processes when dealing with complaints about their own service, and they should acknowledge and apologise for any mistakes they make.
- Members should actively seek feedback about their service and use it to improve.

3.4 Fairness

- Members should work with service users without discrimination or prejudice.
- Members should make decisions on cases based on their independent and impartial evaluation of the relevant evidence.
- The reasons for decisions should be documented and explained to relevant parties.
- Members should publish information concerning any opportunities that may exist for service users to challenge their decisions.
- Members should make clear to service users their approach to unacceptable behaviour.

3.5 Transparency

- Members should publish information about the most senior staff in charge of decisions on complaints within their organisation, including the rules under which members operate.
- Members should have procedures in place to deal with any conflicts of interest around the handling of complaints.
- Members should be transparent about their investigation with the relevant service users.
- Members should publish the learning that can be drawn from the complaints they handle in order to drive service improvement across the sector.
- Members should provide service users with information explaining the approach they take to handling complaints about their own service.
- Members should explain to complainants the procedures in place about what action can be taken if remedies are not implemented by the organisation complained about.

4 Meeting these service standards

- Members should assess and report on their performance towards meeting the service standards set out in clause 3 above and publish this on a regular basis, at least annually.
- As part of this reporting, members should be able to demonstrate how performance information is used to support learning and improvement in the organisation.

Further Reading

Guide to principles of good complaint handling. BIOA, 2007,
www.ombudsmanassociation.org/docs/BIOAGoodComplaintHandling.pdf

Guide to principles of good governance. BIOA, 2009,
www.ombudsmanassociation.org/docs/BIOAGovernanceGuideOct09.pdf

Ombudsman Association

PO Box 343

Carshalton

SM5 9BX

T: 020 8642 6143

M: 07442 496024

donal.galligan@ombudsmanassociation.org

www.ombudsmanassociation.org

@OmbudAssoc

'Ombudsman Association' is the
public name of the British and
Irish Ombudsman Association

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