

Local Government & Social Care OMBUDSMAN

Advisory Forum notes - meeting 10 February 2020

Name	Representing
M King (MK)	Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
N Ellis (NE)	Chief Executive
J Spence (JS)	Head of Policy and Communications
AB	IT Manager
ID	Communications Manager
RM	Policy and Stakeholder Relations Manager
SP	External Communications Officer
SK	Insight and Data Officer
MB	Service User
AP	Service User
LE	Service User
AB	Service User
DS	Service User
PM	Service User
AMB	Service User
AR	Service User
CA	Service User
EB	Link Officer
HKS	Link Officer
JF	Citizens Advice

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

Michael King (MK) told the forum this was the sixth year that the forum has run, it's a fundamental part of the work we do and helps us to understand the people we serve. There's always room for improvement and the forum has a genuine impact on the work we do. MK spoke of the impact that previous meetings have had on the service we provide – eg website and standard letters. MK spoke about how the current members were chosen, with different experiences of our work, different types of complaint, and complaints which reached different stages of the process. He then gave the forum a brief history of the organisation and where we want to be in future.

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

NE led the discussion and asked the forum to provide good and bad experiences they have had with the organisation.

Forum members were positive about the way we corresponded with them, and the frequency with which we did this to keep them updated.

Other positives included:

- The investigation process was objective, and people felt they were listened to and taken seriously
- Training, newsletters/published decisions were very helpful to understand what has happened with other authorities who might have faced similar issues and that enables learning
- Forums for council officers offer a good chance to discuss problems and share experiences
- Thoroughness of the investigation gave people trust that it would be a fair outcome
- Investigators were prompt and courteous
- Decision letters are good – clear, structured in ‘chunks’ and explain our thinking
- Website is very good with clear information, lots of information to work through and good signposting
- Web complaint form was very good

Areas for improvement:

- Members shared their concerns about the delays they had experienced in getting through the system, particularly at allocation stage
- Those being supported through funded advocacy schemes could find the funding not available to see the through the complaint process
- They felt it was important they could have confidence councils would do what the Ombudsman recommended and would learn so the same thing wouldn't happen again to someone else

Other ways to improve included:

- Better information in the annual letters to councils
- Financial remedy information could be made available and the reasons behind the level
- Encouraging councils to publicise decisions locally
- Help councils to improve their complaint handling processes
- Encouraging councils to respond meaningfully and specifically, with data-based evidence to support their decision, to every recommendation
- Wording of final decision had further implications in one individual case
- Remedies map could have better explanation of figures – particularly for those authorities with few complaints

- Greater clarity around consent form and process for people who lack capacity to complain themselves
- Recognising the emotional impact of having to complain
- Explore how to use the Ombudsman's data to better understand the complaints and trends and identify common problems
- FAQs/checklist on the website to help people understand the complaints process
- Create a template that makes it clear what the Ombudsman needs to be able to investigate an individual's complaint

3. Discussion 2: Submitting complaints to the Ombudsman online

ID and AB spoke to the group about our planned website update – an online complaint form and customer portal.

They described how the portal would work, with the options available to people and how it would be accessible on numerous devices/platforms. They also:

- described the benefits the new portal will have for complainants – being able to track a complaint and have all correspondence and documentation in one place
- described the different stages the portal would go through, including that eventually councils would be able to access it to submit information and evidence too

The forum split into two groups and discussed what they had heard, and what they would want to see as service users from an online tool like this.

Key points were:

- retain other channels such as phone and paper
- a timeline visual would be helpful
- presentation on the website balanced between a button to get information and a button to complain
- track when people drop out of the online service to help future development
- test different versions before making a final decision
- include a checklist of what you need to have ready
- must be able to save along the way and go back to it
- timeout long enough so people don't lose information

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.

He highlighted the points we would be taking away to improve on and explained how the organisation was already working on some of the concerns or working with others to improve.