



**Ombwdsmon
Ombudsman**
Cymru · Wales

Ask for: Michelle Morris

Our ref: MAM/CV



Date: 24 January 2025



Peredur Owen Griffiths
Chair, Finance Committee
Welsh Parliament
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Dear Peredur

Responses to Finance Committee's reports

I refer to the Committee's recent reports on its 'Review into the operations, processes and investigations carried out by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales' and its 'Annual Scrutiny of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales'.

I am pleased to attach my responses to the recommendations in each report.

Yours sincerely

M.A. Morris.

Michelle Morris
Public Services Ombudsman

Encl.

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Response to Finance Committee's 'Annual Scrutiny of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales' - November 2024

I refer to the Committee's recent report on its '**Annual Scrutiny of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales**'. I welcome the Committee's report and its recommendations, and I write to respond to the report and to each recommendation. All the recommendations are accepted.

Recommendation 1. The Committee recommends that future Annual Reports provide an overview of why KPI targets have been adjusted and that KPI data for each year of the Strategic Plan is included to allow for meaningful comparisons between years.

Response: Agreed. It is intended that KPIs are retained for the life of the Strategic Plan, with targets for each KPI agreed annually. The Annual Report will include an explanation of any changes to KPI targets and will show the year's actual performance together with that for previous years.

Recommendation 2. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman:

- reconsiders how it disaggregates the data in the Annual Report with a side by side comparison of complainant satisfaction levels subject to the outcome of the complaint; and
- provides further information on how it hopes to improve satisfaction levels for those who are not happy with the outcome of their investigation.

*Response: Agreed. Future Annual Reports will show complainant satisfaction levels a) for those satisfied with the outcome of their complaint, b) for those who were **not** satisfied with the outcome of the complaints and c) the total satisfaction levels. We will also extend future research to give more detail of satisfaction by detailed outcome/stage, and this will help inform our work to improve satisfaction. We will include the high-level findings of this further research and analysis in the 2024/25 Annual Report.*

It is acknowledged that complainants whose complaints are not investigated and/or are not upheld are unlikely to be as satisfied with our service as others. We will continue to work to improve complainant satisfaction levels. Our focus will be on improving communication, providing more regular updates to complainants and improving information provided about complaints that we do not investigate. We are exploring the use of a portal that could simplify correspondence and exchange of documents as well as providing simpler and more timely updates. The Annual Report will include a brief update on this work.

As the number of complaints we receive continues to increase, and the resources to consider them do not, a larger proportion of the complaints we receive will not be subject to full investigation. This is an added challenge in the work to improve overall complainant satisfaction.

Recommendation 3. The Committee recommends the Ombudsman provides information on any future plans she may have to alleviate workload pressures and the support that is available to staff.

Response: Agreed. As the number of complaints received increases, workload pressures, and pressures on staff, do increase. There is no single solution that will address these challenges. However, in managing these pressures we will be:

- *continuing complaints standards work and engagement with public bodies, encouraging candour, a focus on putting things right and on learning from complaints.*
- *simplifying and automating our processes for receiving and initial handling of complaints*
- *improving complaint handling processes and introducing further specialisation (where staff focus on particular stages of complaints consideration, or on specific types of complaints) where appropriate.*
- *continuing to resolve complaints at an early stage where appropriate, to deliver swift outcomes for complainants and to avoid lengthy investigations.*
- *focussing our investigations on the most serious and significant complaints, and, where a complaint is investigated, ensuring that*

investigations are focussed and cover only the more serious elements of the complaint.

- *continuing to use temporary/bank staff to back-fill staff vacancies pending appointments, to alleviate pressures.*
- *continuing to take a flexible approach and reassigning work across our casework teams to ensure balanced workloads, and we will reassign staff to different teams when this is necessary.*
- *continuing our focus on staff wellbeing, maintaining and improving manager support, continuing a programme of wellbeing activities, maintaining access to stress risk assessments, staff counselling and Mental Health First Aiders.*
- *ensuring that staff wellbeing is an explicit consideration, for all leaders and managers, in developing and applying our Leadership Charter.*

Recommendation 4. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman gives early consideration as to how resources can be effectively utilised to ensure the progress made in closing aged cases is maintained alongside the consideration of newer cases.

Response: Agreed. Good progress has been made in reducing the number of aged cases without undue impact on newer cases. There are therefore fewer aged cases, but we will continue to ensure that aged and newer cases are progressed. This will be through line manager oversight, improved display of investigator caseloads and the measures outlined in our response to recommendation 3. We will continue to focus our use of 'bank/temporary staff' to support staff to make progress on aged investigation cases with work such as drafting reports.

Recommendation 5. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman considers how the case load projection is calculated to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

Response: Agreed. We will review our approach to caseload projections. Whilst there is a clear upward trend, there is no consistent pattern of increase, but our Lead Data Officer will undertake further analysis with a view to improving our projections. We will also continue to engage with public bodies to understand trends in the number of complaints that they are handling, to inform our projections.

Recommendation 6. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman updates the Committee on the work being undertaken with housing associations to adopt the model complaints policy.

Response: The approach we have adopted in our complaints standards work has been to prioritise those organisations that generate most complaints. The organisations now subject to complaints standards, including the model complaints handling policy, are those that generate around 85% of the complaints we receive. We provide free training to these organisations, as we support them to improve complaints handling and learning from complaints.

As at 1 January 2025, the Welsh Government's register of Registered Social Landlords identified 33 current housing associations and an additional 11 identified as De minimis. The Committee will be aware that housing associations in Wales are subject to ongoing changes, with a number of mergers having taken place or in train.

There are currently 23 housing associations subject to complaints standards. Following discussion with the PSOW Advisory Panel, we plan to commence work with a further 5 housing associations in April 2025, and work with the remaining (significant) housing associations from October 2025.

Recommendation 7. The Committee recommends the Ombudsman considers how the Estimate is presented to ensure that the information included aligns with the details presented in its Annual Accounts, so that year on year comparisons can be made.

Response: Agreed. Whilst there are different requirements for budget information presentation to the Welsh Parliament (and the Welsh Consolidated Fund) on the one hand and audited year-end accounts on the other, we will work to facilitate comparisons between information presented in the Estimate and that in the Accounts.

Recommendation 8. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman informs the Committee of any proposed or confirmed changes to the April 2025 pay award and confirms whether it intends to submit a supplementary budget to cover any related increases in costs that cannot be absorbed within its current budget.

Response: Agreed. We will keep the Committee informed of developments on the April 2025 local government pay award for England and Wales, which applies to PSOW staff. In previous years this has not been settled until late in the year or early the following year. We will seek to cover the costs of the pay award within the agreed budget,

but are likely to need to submit a supplementary budget if the pay award exceeds the 3% provision in the budget.

Recommendation 9. The Committee recommends the Ombudsman considers the impact of the UK Government's budget on its estimate, including the rise in employers' national insurance contributions, and provides an update as soon as possible.

Response: The cost of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions cannot be accommodated within the budget and a supplementary budget will therefore be submitted. This will seek an additional £35k.

Recommendation 10. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman gives further consideration as to how Artificial Intelligence or automation can be used to further increase efficiencies, and provides the Committee with an update on progress.

Response: Agreed. We will provide an update on development of automation and use of artificial intelligence, to help manage growing workloads, in our Annual Reports. This is ongoing work, but we have already made changes to reduce staff administrative input required on receipt of new complaints, for example through use of automatic acknowledgements with links to relevant factsheets. Our website now includes a complaints checker to help reduce the number of complaints coming to us that we are unable to consider.

Recommendation 11. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman engages with staff at a regular basis to gauge how many agree that the PSOW is a good place to work.

Response: Agreed. We will arrange additional mini surveys, between the full staff surveys, to gauge staff perceptions. This will include measures to understand staff views on PSOW as a good place to work.

Recommendation 12. The Committee recommends that the Ombudsman publishes the results of its biennial staff survey as part of its Annual Report and Estimate.

Response: Agreed. We will include a summary of staff survey results in the Annual Report & Accounts.
