

**Corporate
Plan**

**Housing
Matters:
Fairness
Matters**

2016 to 2019

Ombudsman's Foreword

Since my appointment in March 2015, my priority has been to ensure that we provide the best possible service. Housing is central to every aspect of people's lives. Problems relating to our homes can have a huge emotional impact, as they affect us and our families every day. Our customers need to have confidence that any issues they raise will be dealt with fairly, effectively and efficiently.

This year, I have led an organisation review to ensure that the Housing Ombudsman Service business model continues to be fit for purpose in light of changes in the housing sector and that we continually review and improve our performance.

Hence our new Vision Statement **Housing Matters: Fairness Matters**. The new vision, strategic objectives and core values have been developed with colleagues and stakeholders, most importantly our landlords and tenant organisations. Together, they underpin everything we do and how we do it. They set the framework for a change programme which is already enabling the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) to deliver continuous improvements. We aim to role model the service we expect of others.

In recent years, HOS has coped well with a very large increase in the volume of enquiries and complaints. We resolve a high number of cases locally in line with our vision and the policy of the Localism Act 2011, and have a strong reputation for fairness and good customer service. However, further measures are required to deal with the volume of older, more complex cases. We need to employ additional staff as our team has not increased to match demand but we also need to ensure that our processes are even more effective and efficient. We are building from a strong base, however, as our productivity increased significantly in 2015-16.

Ongoing changes within the Housing Sector are likely to continue to impact on the volume and nature of our casework. It is widely anticipated that, in light of the 1% rent reduction over the next four years, some landlords will be reducing non-core services. These changes will need to be handled sensitively if landlords are to avoid an increase in complaints. Communication with residents will be the key to maintaining good landlord and tenant relationships. I have already seen some examples of very good practice and I hope more landlords will take this approach. HOS is also likely to take on responsibility for some new areas of complaints, e.g. individual complaints relating to Housing Association voluntary right to buy policies. Increases in the volume of leasehold and shared ownership properties within our remit will also change the balance of our caseload. We need to ensure that our staff are properly trained to support landlords and leaseholders to resolve disputes in all areas both on an individual basis and through our wider Sector Development work.

This Corporate Plan sets out how we will build on our existing achievements to continue to develop our people, processes, systems and working environment over

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the next three years to enable us to meet these challenges and continually improve the service for our customers. We are introducing a new HR, Learning and Development Strategy, new IT systems and new, more effective processes throughout the organisation. We are outsourcing tasks where necessary to facilitate the most flexible, efficient use of our resources.

From May 2016, we intend to recruit a new team of adjudicators and are introducing a new dispute resolution policy and process to provide greater consistency, clarity and efficiency. This will continue to support the local resolution of complaints and will also enable more timely decision making within our formal remit. Key to this will be a new process to support the prompt resolution of disputes after completion of the landlord's complaints procedure.

In addition, we will continue to work with landlords and residents organisations to facilitate improvements to complaint handling and service delivery. This empowers landlords and residents to resolve more complaints locally, reducing dependency on our service. In addition to our own activities, we will increasingly seek to work with other organisations where possible and appropriate to use our resources efficiently and maximise our impact. I was particularly glad this year to work, alongside LEASE, with the Tenant Participation Advisory Service on their publication, *"The Leaseholders Engagement Guide"*. I also very much enjoyed my discussions at Housemark's Customer Excellence Club. These collaborations extend the reach and scope of our own activities.

Addressing serious service failure is also a priority for me. We have a close working relationship with the Social Housing Regulator. If a landlord does not comply with my determination or if we identify issues which appear to point to systemic failure, I may report the landlord to the Regulator who can then consider if there has been a breach of their standards. I will also consider using the full range of my own powers including publishing a report of our findings or requiring the landlord to undertake publication of the report.

I have worked closely with a number of other Ombudsmen this year. I have been very grateful for the support and encouragement I have received from other Ombudsmen, particularly through the Public Services Ombudsman Group. A highlight this year has been my visits to other jurisdictions to find out how different Ombudsman schemes operate. I have gained a great deal from others' knowledge and experience, e.g. when considering the role and remit of HOS's new Panel of Advisors or our principles for remedies. This year, the Government consulted on the establishment of a new Public Service Ombudsman and draft legislation is expected to be published in 2016. The initial proposed remit includes the functions of the Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman (PHSO) and the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). HOS will remain outside the new arrangements for now but we look forward to working collaboratively with the new entity if established. In the meantime, we will continue to collaborate with other public and private sector Ombudsmen on joint casework, to share knowledge, expertise and to explore efficiency savings where possible. A key area for exploration is the potential for a single point of initial contact for complainants.

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This year, we substantially improved our systems for governance, assurance and control including new systems for analysing and reporting our performance. I am committed to increasing transparency and accountability to Government, Parliament and our stakeholders. We act in the public interest, our members and the residents we serve are under financial pressure and they pay for this service through the per unit subscription. We must use our subscription fees wisely to deliver an accessible, efficient and effective service.

This year, I held a series of 'round table' discussions with landlords, tenant organisations and other stakeholders on our new Vision and Values. Next year, we will set up an Advisory Panel and from 2017-18, the intention is to consult stakeholders in advance on our business plan each year.

I believe that this Corporate Plan provides a realistic framework to deliver our strategic objectives. I would like to thank those who have helped us deliver our work this year, in particular those who responded to the Public Services Ombudsman consultation or engaged in our consultation on our new Vision and Values.

Denise Fowler, Housing Ombudsman

Our Role

The purpose of the Housing Ombudsman as set out in the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Localism Act 2011, is to enable tenants and other individuals to have complaints about members investigated by a Housing Ombudsman in accordance with a scheme approved by the Secretary of State.

Under the terms of the scheme approved by the Secretary of State which took effect on 1 April 2013 the role of the Ombudsman is to:

- a) Resolve disputes involving members of the Scheme, including making awards of compensation or other remedies when appropriate
- b) To support effective landlord-tenant dispute resolution by others

Our Vision

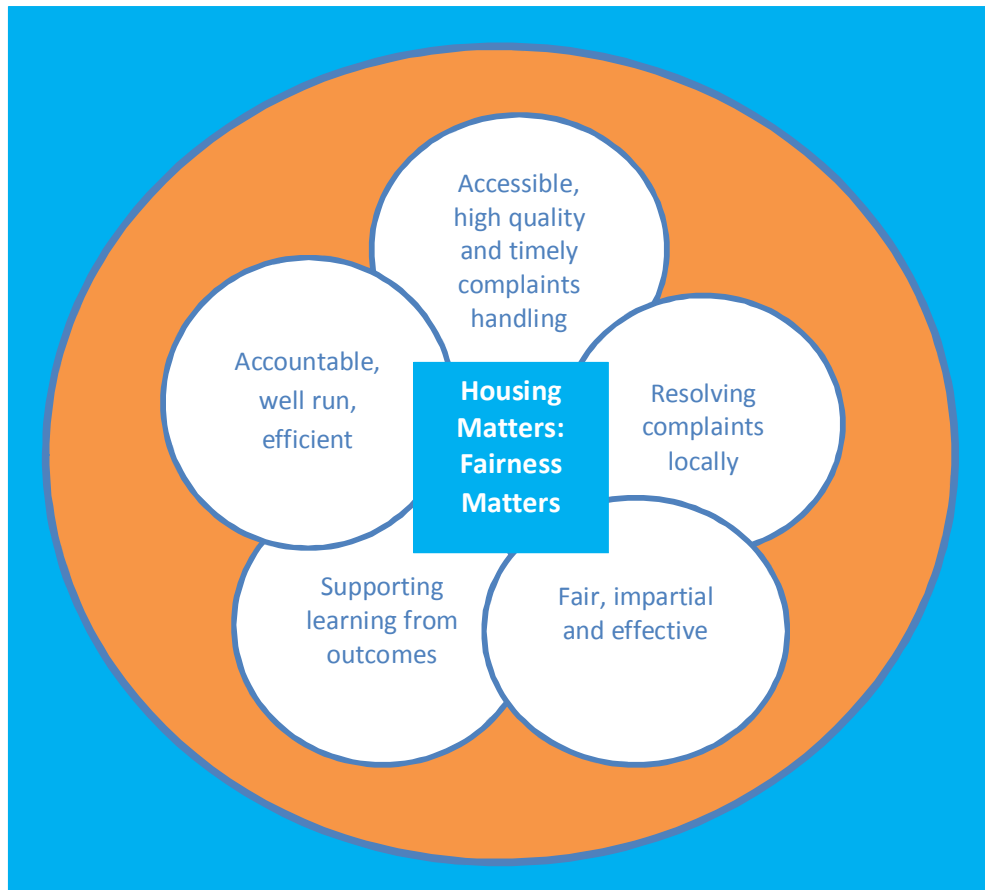
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We understand the importance of housing to people's lives. We ensure the fair and impartial resolution of housing complaints, locally where possible. When things go wrong we put things right and encourage learning from outcomes. We help improve landlord and resident relationships. We role model the service we expect of others.

Everyone's home is a personal, private space, which is central to every aspect of our lives. Housing complaints are unique. Problems relating to our homes can have a huge emotional impact, as they affect us and our families every day. Landlords and residents have an ongoing relationship. If things go wrong, issues can escalate and relationships sour. Residents need to have confidence that any issues they raise will be dealt with fairly and impartially, whether by us or by their landlords.

We cannot guarantee the outcome but we can ensure a fair process. We recognise the importance of people's homes, treating individuals with dignity and respect. We seek to enable issues to be resolved at the earliest opportunity, building trust and improving landlord and tenant relationships. We will encourage landlords to have a positive view of complaints, seeing them as feedback, helping to improve complaint handling and housing services.

Our Strategic Objectives 2016- 2019



1. We will deliver an accessible, high quality and timely complaints handling service
2. We will support Landlords and Residents to resolve more complaints locally
3. Our decisions will be recognised as fair, impartial and effective
4. We will support Landlords to learn from outcomes
5. We will be an accountable, well run organisation, using our subscription monies wisely

Our Core Values and Behaviours

We will act fairly and impartially

Fairness and impartiality is central to all we do. We are committed to acting without discrimination or bias, fairly and ethically at all times and implementing fair systems and processes.

We will be open and accountable

We act in an open and transparent way. We are accessible, ensuring information is made widely available using multiple channels. We create a climate of support and accountability which helps us to be open to challenge and scrutiny, answerable for our actions, and to take individual and collective responsibility. We are held to account by Parliament, government, our customers and other stakeholders for the quality of our service and for delivering on our commitments.

We will empower and respect those we work with

We respect and value those we work with. We respect the skills and experience of others. This helps us to offer the right level of support and guidance to empower those we work with, enabling responsibility to be taken, informed decisions and choices to be made and high standards to be achieved.

We will be proactive and take responsibility for achieving results

We take a proactive approach, taking responsibility to deliver the best results we can and to achieve our goals. We are always striving to exceed expectations and targets.

We will work as One Team within HOS and collaboratively with others

We work together as one team to a shared vision, common goals and targets. We maintain consistency in our actions, messages and behaviours. We work with others, nurturing a collaborative approach, respecting others' views and sharing ideas.

We will be curious, always seeking to learn and improve

We learn from outcomes to make continuous improvements. We ask probing questions invite and act on feedback and are consistently striving to learn and improve, seeing learning as central for improvement.

Delivering our Strategic Objectives

The vision puts an understanding of the importance of housing and fairness at the heart of what we do and our objectives and values will drive our day-to-day activities.

SO1: We will deliver an accessible, high quality and timely complaints handling service

We want to make sure that complainants can access the right service at the right time in the right way. We will continue to enable the widest possible routes of entry to our organisation, including by email, telephone and online.

We will develop a new communications strategy to ensure that complainants understand how to access our service and our role. This will include improving our website and social media presence. It will also include further work with tenant organisations to explore how best to increase our reach with residents.

We take a 'no wrong door' approach to enquiries and complaints to assist those who contact us to navigate the complaint journey, signposting them to other Ombudsmen, complaint handlers or advice agencies where appropriate. Our collaboration with other Ombudsmen and other agencies, e.g. Shelter or LEASE (the Leasehold Advisory Service) enables us to offer a supportive service even where the complaint is not for us.

We will continue to outsource our initial telephone inquiries to an external provider. We work closely with this provider to ensure that they share our Vision and ethos and that they meet our service standards. We will develop this approach further to allow us greater flexibility to develop our service, including potentially exploring a shared first point of contact with other Ombudsmen.

Our new Dispute Resolution Policy and Process will begin in April 2016. This is based upon our existing dispute resolution principles but will be a more transparent and open process, providing a better service to customers and increasing our accountability.

Key intended outcomes of the new approach are:

- Earlier decision making in relation to jurisdiction
- A clearer explanation of our role pre and post the landlord's complaint procedure including local resolution, resolution with intervention and investigation
- A stronger focus on ensuring the timely determination of complaints within our formal remit
- Well-defined choices for complainants
- Greater clarity re process and outcomes
- Increased efficiency

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We will resolve complaints early, wherever possible, but where this is not possible we will investigate and determine cases with clarity and efficiency. We will work closely with other Ombudsmen where complaints impact across the boundaries of our jurisdictions.

We will use continuous feedback throughout the year to improve the quality of our service, asking customers “Did we treat you well” every two weeks and using this information to drive performance at an organisational, team and individual level.

How we will measure success:

- Profile of complainants (to assess accessibility) to include demographic and geographic analysis.
- Customer feedback
- Average case time and age profile targets

SO2 We will support Landlords and Residents to resolve more complaints locally

Local resolution ensures that issues are resolved at the earliest opportunity; it builds trust and confidence, and prevents issues from escalating and relationships souring. Once a complaint has been made to one of our member landlords, we try to support local resolution between the complainant and the landlord.

Before the landlord’s complaint process is complete, our role is to empower landlords and residents, giving them the tools to resolve complaints themselves within the landlord’s procedure. We help complainants shape and form their complaints. We provide advice about potential resolutions. We manage expectations of both parties.

Once the landlord’s procedure is complete and complaints have entered our formal remit, we will offer to work with residents and landlords to try to agree amicable solutions wherever possible, within a new time limited dispute resolution process. We will be offering support, exploring options for resolution during the specified period (initially two months) based on our experience of complaints handling. Any agreed settlement will be reflected in a determination and monitored for compliance.

If this option is not chosen or the complaint is not resolved then the case will go forward for investigation as usual. However, we expect this approach to facilitate the resolution of many more complaints, with better outcomes for both complainants and landlords.

We will also continue to work with landlords to facilitate improvements in complaint handling processes to encourage local resolution. Our Sector Development activity includes work with individual landlords, our e-learning package, guidance, seminars, workshops and a range of other activities to support learning from outcomes which should enable more complaints to be resolved locally. We will increasingly work in

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partnership with others to maximise the reach and scope of our Sector Development activities.

We will also explore the use of online complaint resolution systems to facilitate local resolution.

How we will measure success:

- Customer feedback on individual cases
- Feedback from landlords about the proportion of complaints resolved within their own processes
- Proportion of complaints we consider within our formal remit which are resolved without a formal investigation.

SO3: Our decisions will be recognised as fair, impartial and effective

Fair, impartial and effective complaint resolution recognises the importance of people's homes, treating individuals with dignity and respect. We are impartial, so we cannot guarantee an outcome. We do not take sides but look at every complaint with an open mind. We decide on the basis of what is fair in the individual circumstances of the case.

To continue to achieve this objective, we set out clear quality standards for our team. We invest in our colleagues' learning and development, provide clear guidance (revised in line with our new policy and process) and implement effective quality control and quality assurance processes. This is an area where we will continue to work with other Ombudsmen to agree common approaches where possible, e.g. to the principles underpinning remedies available to an Ombudsman.

We will monitor compliance with decisions systematically to ensure effectiveness. We will work closely with the Social Housing Regulator on issues of potential systemic failure to see whether there could be breaches of their regulatory standards.

How we will measure success:

- Customer feedback on individual cases
- Our reputation in the sector and with other stakeholders
- Number of successful judicial reviews of our decisions
- Level of compliance with orders.

SO4: We will support landlords to learn from the outcomes of complaints

Information from complaints can be extremely valuable feedback. Learning from the outcome of complaints helps businesses to thrive and improves housing services.

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Where appropriate, we will support landlords to learn from individual complaints by making recommendations which could reduce complaints in the future. This may include changes to complaint handling procedures or to service delivery.

We will also provide a variety of interventions, activities and tools to support landlords based on our experience of handling complaints. Over the last 18 years, we have considered thousands of disputes and seen many examples of good and bad practice. This experience informs our dispute resolution principles and encourages landlords and residents to share knowledge and experience with us and each other, e.g. at landlord and tenant engagement events, workshops and action learning sets.

We will continue to publish anonymised summaries of key cases on our website. Where we find examples of particularly good or bad practice, we may publish complete reports online. We will provide guidance on complaint handling and will further develop our popular e-learning package which is available to all member landlords. We will work with individual landlords in the context of complaint handling to provide targeted support where we think we can make the most impact.

We will aim to increase the impact of our Sector Development activities without increasing the amount of resources we need to devote to them. One way of doing this will be to develop our website and IT systems to encourage more self-service activity, e.g. by improving our website content and guidance, by increasing our social media presence to promote activities, by providing a portal through which landlords can benchmark performance against anonymous equivalent comparators or arranging self-booking to complaint handling workshops. We will also seek to arrange more activities in partnership with others to increase the reach and scope of our activities while reducing administrative burdens.

How we will measure success:

- Customer feedback on individual cases
- Feedback from landlords about impact
- Analysis of complaint trends, particularly for landlords taking part in targeted activity, e.g. volumes, proportion of complaints regarding complaint handling
- Compliance with recommendations

SO5: We will be an accountable, well run organisation, using our subscription monies wisely

We will be accountable and transparent to Parliament, government and our customers. We will make the best use of our resources and demonstrate continuous improvement in our operational efficiency. We will observe high standards of corporate governance.

We will continue to consult with stakeholders, including both landlords and residents on key developments in the service. We also intend to recruit an advisory panel. This panel will be similar to the panel which supports the Public Services Ombudsman for

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Wales. The intention is that the panel would provide specific advice and support to the Ombudsman on strategic direction and planning. The Ombudsman is also supported by an Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

To support greater public accountability, we will publish more information on our website and are developing our reporting capability in order to facilitate this. We will develop our HR strategy, policies and processes to ensure that we recruit the right people to the right jobs, using their strengths, talents and experience effectively and supporting their professional development.

We will implement our new people strategy, ensuring that we recruit and develop the right people in the right roles. We are moving to a new structure, integrating our Sector Development and dispute resolution activity to ensure that each is driven by an understanding of the other. We will embed the new ways of working within the revised structure in accordance with our new Vision, Values and Behaviours. Key to this is the embedding of our value of One Team to ensure that all colleagues have a shared culture and understanding of our ways of working. We will develop a new pay and reward strategy and enhance our performance management framework. We have introduced and will embed a new centralised learning and development approach. We aim to introduce a new HR system which will increase self-sufficiency and efficiency.

We will continue to embed the new structures and processes for governance, internal control and risk management across the organisation. We will also appoint an advisory panel to advise and support the Ombudsman in planning and developing strategy.

We will ensure that we have the right internal processes, systems and working environment to support the business. We will ensure that our IT systems are upgraded so that they are fit for purpose and appropriately integrated to support all aspects of our business. With the move to new accommodation, our systems will also enable smarter, more flexible working.

We will look to share services with other organisations, including other Ombudsmen wherever this is possible and cost-effective.

How we will measure success:

- Audit findings
- Financial performance measures
- Performance against our other KPIs each year.
- Colleague engagement survey
- Implementation of projects, e.g. IT procurement to cost and schedule
- Our reputation in the sector, with DCLG, the DCLG Select Committee and with other stakeholders

Our Accountability and Scrutiny



Corporate Enablers at a Glance

	Safeguarding and Building	Embedding	Realising and Improving
	Year 0 (2015-16)	Year 1 (2016-17)	Years 2-3 (2017-19)
Strategy	<p>Reviewing options around the suggested PSO reform</p> <p>Developing new vision, values and strategic objectives – ‘how we work’</p>	<p>Implementing our strategy</p> <p>Engaging with partners and new ways of thinking</p>	<p>Maximising our impact across the sectors we serve</p> <p>Broadening our reach in the housing sector, including private landlords</p>
Processes	<p>Ensuring effective governance, assurance and risk management</p> <p>Reviewing our dispute resolution policy and processes</p> <p>Reviewing all corporate policies and procedures</p> <p>Refining relationships – sector and stakeholders</p>	<p>Widening and improving governance and assurance</p> <p>Embedding new dispute resolution policy and process into ‘how we work’</p> <p>Embedding all new corporate policies and processes into how we work</p> <p>Measuring and monitoring the impact of all activities and processes – outputs; outcomes; related outcomes</p> <p>Implementing and aligning our sector development approach</p>	<p>Continuing to measure and monitor the impact of all activities and processes – outputs; outcomes; related outcomes</p> <p>Realising the benefits of sector development activity</p> <p>Evaluating changes and learning lessons, formulating our next steps</p>
People	<p>Defining ‘new ways of working’ and performance outcomes required</p> <p>Reviewing organisational structure to support ‘new ways of working’</p> <p>Defining our capacity, capability and competence requirements – recruit and induct; new HR and Learning and Development strategy</p>	<p>Building our capacity and capability to ‘new ways of working’ supported by new systems</p> <p>Managing our people through change</p> <p>Embedding ‘new ways of working’ across the employee life cycle - attract and select; induct, grow and develop; new employee relationship; pay and reward</p>	<p>Maximising our expertise and experience</p> <p>Realising potential and growing our people to embrace new opportunities</p> <p>Planning our future capability and capacity needs</p>
Systems & Environment	<p>Reporting performance KPIs making best use of current systems</p> <p>Planning the technology needed to support all aspects of our business and new ways of working</p>	<p>Commissioning more effective technology – managing complaints; customer relationships and sector development; people management; records management</p> <p>Relocating our office and changing our working environment</p>	<p>Making more effective use of technology – managing complaints; customer relationships and sector development; people management</p> <p>Maximising systems learning to realise effectiveness and efficiencies</p> <p>Improving our working environment through realising the benefits of technology investment</p>

