

Business Plan 2020-21

March 2020

Foreword

Homes are about lives and communities, so when something goes wrong it is essential to put it right. For five million households, the Housing Ombudsman Service provides redress when an issue remains unresolved. Our service is available to every single social tenant in England; as well as many leaseholders and some private renters whose landlords are voluntary members.

Our service is changing – it is becoming faster, more accessible and open. From April 2020 we will introduce a new, more efficient operating model. Our goal is to deliver a step-change in providing timely, effective and high-quality redress.

Last year we consulted widely on our business plan to support this operating model, together with a revised Housing Ombudsman Scheme. We received strong support for our ambitions.

These changes are being made with a talented team and from a strong starting point. Whilst our average determination rate is a significant focus for our model, we also want to ensure we are a complete service: this means investigating and reporting systematic failures where they occur, raising awareness of the lessons from our casework and the data we record, and promoting positive change in the housing sector. We are an Ombudsman service as well as a redress scheme.

Nonetheless, we remain focused on reducing the time taken to determine cases; the service has made significant progress reducing determination times and this business plan proposes our fastest average determination rate on record. We are planning to achieve this in two stages, with an average time of 4-5 months in 2020-21, moving to an average of 3-4 months in 2021-22 at the end of the change programme – effectively half our current determination rate.

There are two challenges to realising this ambition. Firstly any unexpected rise in complaint volumes – we have experienced average year-on-year increases of 17 per cent across the last five years. While this is challenging enough, the increase in 2018-19 alone was 26 per cent. Secondly delays in providing evidence to the Ombudsman. This is a significant issue; we estimate that at least one-in-four cases do not have the information provided on the first request. Our plan sets out how we propose working with landlords to address this issue when it occurs and working more widely with them to improve complaint handling where necessary.

Our new operating model will bring many other benefits. We want to improve the resident's experience of our service and make it more open and accessible to them. We want to support the resolution of more disputes at a local level, in turn reducing demand on our formal service. We will support landlords by sharing our expertise and being active when we see something going wrong. We will have a strong focus on producing high-quality decisions. These improvements require more resources but the cost of unresolved complaints is personal as well as financial.

We firmly believe this plan will produce a more positive climate for redress.

Richard Blakeway
Housing Ombudsman

Our work

Our role is to:

▶ resolve disputes involving members of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, including making awards of compensation or other remedies when appropriate

▶ support effective landlord-tenant dispute resolution by others

Our members



Our impact

In 2018-19:



We dealt with 16,883 complaints and enquiries



We determined 2,214 cases in our formal remit, an increase of 29% from 2017-18



39% of complaints were about repairs – the largest category



Average case time for determinations reduced to 6.7 months from 8 the previous year



97% of orders were implemented by landlords within three months



100% of cases determined within 12 months



Residents benefited from 1,990 orders and recommendations



500 people took part in our workshops

Our plans for 2020-21: implementing the change programme

The next two years of our corporate planning period are critical for the Housing Ombudsman Service. Our role has never been more important. Both complaint volumes and customer expectations of how quickly we resolve these are rising.

Our service has sought to meet this challenge. It is more efficient and productive, continuing to reduce the length of time taken to issue determinations with improved feedback on the service. But a step-change in performance will require more. These ambitions have been set out in our three-year corporate plan.

Delivering sustainable change will take time and more resources. This plan sets out:

- how we intend implementing the change programme, including a more efficient operating model
- a subscription rate at £2.16 per home in 2020-21 and maintaining it at the same level for 2021-22, unless there are exceptional changes in circumstances, allowing landlords and ourselves to plan ahead
- new, stretching performance indicators to meet the expectations of residents and members.

What change will achieve

Our change programme addresses the issues that all stakeholders have raised: faster and effective redress, hearing residents' voices and increased transparency. It will also enable us to be a full Ombudsman service; identifying and investigating systemic failures and supporting positive change in the housing sector.

We are proposing new or more challenging performance indicators in the following areas:

- faster casework timescales – targeting an average case determination time of 4-5 months in 2020-21 and 3-4 months in 2021-22, effectively halving the current determination rate, as well as a reduction in the average open case time for complaints that are within the landlord's process

- a new KPI on the quality of our casework with 95% to be assessed as acceptable or better
- more demanding performance indicators on resident and landlord satisfaction, for example, aiming for at least 85% of residents being satisfied with the service we provided on complaints within the landlord's process and 85% of landlords agreeing that our sector development tools and interventions helped improve their complaint handling or housing services.

We intend for these changes to be supported by:

- new powers through a revised Scheme, including identifying potential systemic failures
- expanding our sector development programme
- being proactive when we see something wrong with complaint handling by individual landlords
- publishing our own complaint handling best practice for members
- increasing transparency by publishing individual landlord complaint handling performance data and all determinations on our website in 2020-21
- raising awareness of and accessibility to the Housing Ombudsman Service for residents.

How we will deliver this

Our staff have been integral to developing the change programme, with decades of experience in successful dispute resolution. For several months we have been exploring new ways of working across all stages of complaint handling; prior to it entering our formal remit, adjudication and sector development work.

Our plan is to introduce a new and more efficient operating model from the start of 2020. At its core are improvements to the resident and landlord journey through the process. This will see us doing some things very differently, for example 'triaging' cases to determine their complexity and encouraging landlords to resolve more complaints in their own procedure. We will be:

- working effectively with landlords before a complaint enters our formal process; by encouraging residents and landlords to successfully resolve complaints themselves
- determining cases more quickly when they enter our formal remit; by requiring the provision of timely information from landlords and triaging cases more effectively
- integrating our sector development activities across the service; by aligning them with our work on resolving complaints at a local level, working closely with landlords experiencing higher volumes of complaints and providing more tools for all landlords to access on our website.
- establishing an insight and improvement team to promote positive change in the sector; internally prioritising quality assurance and externally sharing more insights (including data) into our casework, investigating systemic failings where they occur, and expanding sector engagement.

Stage 1 – resolving complaints earlier

Our remit is distinct from other redress providers, by allowing us to work with residents and members to support the resolution of complaints whilst they are within the landlord's procedure. We do this impartially and it supports the faster resolution of complaints.

We want to:

- encourage landlords to resolve issues directly whilst they are within their complaints procedure
- ensure residents who contact our service have the information they need to progress their complaint effectively and understand what should happen next
- use our insights from this early resolution work to inform our sector development and engagement programme to improve landlord complaint handling, both individually and overall.

Stage 2 – determinations

We want to achieve faster determination times for cases entering our formal remit. To enable this we plan to:

- ‘triage’ cases depending on their complexity, keeping the landlord and resident informed of progress
- encourage cases to be resolved through mediation, where both parties agree to the process, to preserve the landlord/tenant relationship
- set clear timescales for the provision of evidence to us so we can make a decision, typically 15 working days unless there are exceptional reasons. If evidence is not provided in a timely manner we will issue a determination based on the information available and make a finding of complaint handling failure
- prior to issuing determinations we will contact the parties to explain the decision so they can understand how it was made.

Stage 3 – insight and improvement

We are not only a redress scheme; we are an Ombudsman service. This means promoting positive change in the housing sector; through sharing the insights into our casework, creating more tools for landlords to improve their complaint handling and sharing our data publicly. Furthermore, one complaint could indicate a systemic issue; either within that landlord or more widely. We need to be proactive identifying and investigating those cases and, where necessary, reporting them to the Regulator.

Feedback from landlords shows that our work to promote positive redress is valued; we want to develop this by working more proactively with some landlords with higher volumes of complaints or particular issues, whilst providing more tools for all members to improve complaint handling. Presently our sector development activity is largely informed by our formal determinations; strengthening its relationship with our work on complaints within landlords’ procedures will provide more ‘real time’ insight and activities to support the faster and more effective resolution of complaints. All of these activities will be supported by strong communications. To deliver this we will:

- identify issues that could be systemic and subject to wider investigation and reporting, including escalating to the Regulator where appropriate
- publish more guidance and insight reports

- publish annual, individual reports for landlords online, allowing them to assess their performance and address issues identified in our casework
- ensure our complaint handling tools and resources align to issues being identified through our earlier resolution work, including emerging themes
- work with up to 20 landlords with higher complaint volumes or particular issues to improve their complaint handling and issuing fewer determinations of complaint handling failures against them over time.

What we need to deliver

Following a three-year freeze to our subscription rate – despite an unprecedented rise in case volumes – we will be increasing our fee in 2020-21. This was recognised as necessary during the consultation in order to achieve further service improvements and received widespread support. Unresolved complaints incur additional costs for both landlords and residents as well as having a personal impact on households and undermining the landlord tenant relationship. It has also been widely recognised across the sector that our service has been under-resourced for some time and investment is needed.

The consultation was clear that in addition to the new operating model, we will continue to look for ways to increase productivity and efficiency; however, it also set out how, as our reserves are now at a prudent level, delivering the service improvements would not happen without additional resources.

This business plan sets a rate of £2.16 for 2020-21. In return, our new, more efficient operating model will allow us to deliver the aspirational level of performance set out in the consultation document with average determination times of 4-5 months in 2020-21 as well as the wider range of benefits for residents and landlords.

To support landlords with their financial planning, our intention is to maintain the subscription rate at £2.16 in 2021-22, unless exceptional circumstances arose, with an average determination rate of 3-4 months, and this remains the case. Such exceptional circumstances could include changes in demand or changes in government policy. If the proposed rate was above £2.16, this would need to be approved by the Secretary of State.

Revised Housing Ombudsman Scheme

We have always promoted positive redress and we believe that our new operating model will help us deliver a complete Ombudsman service supported by a revised Scheme.

Our revised Scheme is published alongside this business plan. It includes:

- a new power so that if a complaint is failing to progress in the landlord's internal complaints process, the Ombudsman can issue a finding of complaint handling failure and order the landlord to resolve it
- a new power to issue complaint handling failure finding in our formal remit where landlords do not provide information to support formal investigations within a reasonable timeframe. We estimate that in over 25% of cases, landlords do not respond first time to evidence requests. This power would put us on a similar footing to other Ombudsmen schemes
- being proactive where we identify possible systemic failure and seeking the power to investigate issues further. We would refer concerns of potential systemic failure to the Regulator, as part of a process of closer working between the two organisations
- develop best practice for complaint handling with residents, in partnership with others, with the aim of achieving greater consistency across landlords' complaint procedures.

Open Ombudsman

We are committed to openness and transparency. In 2020-21 we will publish:

- quarterly updates on our casework and performance
- individual landlord performance reports
- data-led insight reports to support sector development

- publish our decisions, including the name of the landlord, the nature of the complaint and our findings, but excluding any details that would identify the complainant.

We are also committed to continuously monitoring and improving our decision-making. We have recently set up a Customer Panel with landlords and residents, who provide feedback on our service with suggestions on how we can improve it. We will continue to seek feedback on our work from residents and landlords throughout the year. During 2020-21 we will appoint an independent reviewer of complaints against our service, publishing their findings annually.

Our team

We are committed to being an exceptional employer. Our change programme has been developed and led by colleagues and will offer new opportunities for career development. We are updating our recruitment and induction procedures to ensure they are effective and inclusive, including expanding our learning and development resources. In addition we will continue to promote well-being at work, allowing colleagues to flourish and achieve their potential.

Strategic objective 1: Deliver a fair and impartial service, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities (2020-21)	Measures of success
<p>1.1 Support greater local resolution of complaints (ie supporting the resolution of more complaints while they are within the landlord's complaints procedure)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landlords and residents are supported to resolve more complaints within landlords' procedures • Earlier mediated redress within our formal remit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the new operating model, embed changes and realise benefits • Implement the new Scheme • Provide regular feedback on complaint handling to the 20 landlords with whom we have agreed to work more closely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set a baseline for the time we take to deal with complaints going through the landlord's procedure • 85% of residents thought our advice or assistance was helpful in moving their complaint forward • 85% of landlords thought our complaint handling work improved their complaint handling or housing services • Set a baseline for reduction to complaint handling failure findings
<p>1.2 Enable faster access to redress once a complaint enters our formal remit for investigation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster complaint investigations within our formal remit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the new operating model, embed changes and realise benefits • Implement the revised Scheme, including new delay prevention powers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average determination time for cases in our formal remit reduces to between 4-5 months* * Target is given as a range to accommodate the demand-led nature of our service. • 99% of cases are determined within 12 months • 95% of orders are implemented within 3 months

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities (2020-21)	Measures of success
1.3 Improve the quality and consistency of our service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our work remains fair and impartial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to regularly quality assure a sample of our work at all stages and act on findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 99% of orders are implemented within 6 months • 95% of quality assurance reviews find casework was acceptable or better

Strategic objective 2: Promote positive change in the sector

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities (2020-21)	Measures of success
<p>2.1 Continue to work directly with landlords and residents to improve complaint handling through a range of sector development and engagement activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise the profile of our work in the sector • Directly support improvements to the speed and effectiveness of landlord redress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide regular feedback on complaint handling to the 20 landlords with whom we have agreed to work with more closely • Evaluate bespoke development programmes with five target landlords and determine whether to continue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set a baseline for reduction to complaint handling failure findings
<p>2.2 Use our knowledge to improve housing services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support improvements to housing services across the sector • Complaint handling standard developed, promoted and accepted as best practice across the sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish our best practice complaint handling procedure in partnership with a new stakeholder steering group • Publish a 'spotlight on' report covering complaints about complaint handling and associated tools, best practice and guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85% of landlords thought our sector development and engagement work improved their complaint handling or housing services • 85% of residents thought our sector development and engagement work was helpful • 20% increase in website page views
<p>2.3 Influence the sector and shape the landscape</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence debates to achieve the best redress outcomes for residents and landlords 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish individual landlord complaint handling data • Publish more data on the complaints we receive 	

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities (2020-21)	Measures of success
<p>2.4 Work effectively with the Regulator of Social Housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate data is shared to support effective regulation and dispute resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate data is shared between the Regulator and the Housing Ombudsman Service 	

Strategic objective 3: Provide a service that is professional, accessible and simple to use

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities (2020-21)	Measures of success
<p>3.1 Increase access to, and the availability of, our service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased accessibility for residents and landlords • Increase awareness of our service amongst residents and landlords 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure landlord and resident categories (landlord: size, geography, type; resident: age) are covered by at least one intervention or event in the year with targeted activities at those that access us proportionately less • Roll out webchat and extended service hours if trials are successful • Continue to engage with MHCLG and other housing redress providers to improve access to redress 	
<p>3.2 Improve signposting to our service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-referral arrangements with other Ombudsman / redress schemes support a 'no wrong door' approach for residents • Improved sign-posting to our service/the Housing Complaints Resolution Service by advice and support agencies, and designated persons for residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue awareness raising work with advice and support agencies and designated persons • Continue to discuss cross-referral arrangements with other Ombudsmen / redress schemes to enable immediate transfer and 'no wrong door' approach 	

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities (2020-21)	Measures of success
<p>3.3 Improve our customer journey, customer care and communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We deliver a high-quality service to residents and landlords, guided by their feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to gather insight into the customer journey through the Customer Panel • Continue to act on customer feedback and complaints to improve our service • Review our customer communications to ensure consistency and clarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85% of residents were satisfied with the service provided at local resolution • 80% of residents whose complaint was upheld were satisfied with the service provided • 60% of residents whose complaint was not upheld were satisfied with the service provided
<p>3.4 Invest in the learning and development of all colleagues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We recruit and retain sufficient colleagues to deliver our service effectively and efficiently • Our colleagues are appropriately skilled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to invest in our colleagues' learning and development • Continue to invest in our systems 	

Strategic objective 4: Ensure our service is open and transparent

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities	Measures of success
<p>4.1 Publish the Ombudsman’s decisions, individual landlord’s complaints data and our policies, procedures and guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of the Ombudsman’s decisions increases transparency about the outcomes our service can deliver • Data on landlord complaint handling helps residents to hold their landlord to account • Our approach to delivering our service is transparent and increases our accountability to stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue preparatory work for the publication of decisions from the start of 2021-22 • Publish individual landlord complaint handling data • Publish data on our enquiry and complaint volumes, determination outcomes and complaint categories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set a benchmark for positive feedback on individual landlord complaint handling data
<p>4.2 Appoint an independent reviewer of complaints against our service and publish their findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are transparent about areas where we need to improve, and we learn from outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint the Independent Reviewer of Complaints against our service and publish their first report 	
<p>4.3 Benchmark our performance against relevant best practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to benchmark our service against Ombudsman Association 	

Strategic priorities and outcomes	Year two activities	Measures of success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We can demonstrate where our service meets best practice and actions we are taking where we need to improve 	best practice and take action to address areas for improvement	