

**Corporate Plan
2019-22**

Making a difference

Foreword

Welcome to our new three year corporate plan, setting out our strategy for the period 2019-22.

This is an exciting time to be the Housing Ombudsman. Redress in social housing continues to be a key issue for residents and landlords alike and is high on the political agenda. Our new plan addresses the key demands of all stakeholders: faster and effective redress, hearing residents' voices and increased transparency.

The overall aim of the strategy is '**Making a difference – on individual complaints and across the sector**' with four new objectives to:

- Deliver a fair and impartial service, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity
- Promote positive change in the sector
- Provide a service that is professional, accessible and simple to use
- Ensure our service is open and transparent.

We consulted widely on our plan, receiving very strong support and valuable input from landlords, residents and all key representative bodies as well as from our staff and our Panel of Advisors. The consultation response is available on our [website](#).

The biggest challenge to realising our ambitions over the three years will be tackling the on-going rise in demand for our service – we have seen an average 17% year-on-year increase in demand for formal investigations since 2013-14. Given the longevity of these increases, we do not expect that demand will reduce in the future. We have achieved substantial service improvements over the same period, but anticipated further gains will not be enough to deliver the desired level of service.

Our plan contains a two-pronged change programme to deal with this issue: first, we will review our operating models so that when a resident contacts us, we deal with their complaint in the most effective and efficient way possible; and secondly, we will review our strategy for supporting landlords to deliver swifter, more effective dispute resolution for residents at a local level to manage the demand on our service.

While we complete this work in year one, we will hold our subscription rate at £1.25 per housing unit to meet our previous commitment to the sector. The outcome of the change programme will inform our subscription rate for years two and three and we will provide more detail when we consult on our annual business plans, but an increase will be required. Our need for more resource was recognised in the government's social housing green paper and was supported in many of the published responses.

While the change programme addresses the delivery of faster and effective redress from the start to the end of a complaint journey, we will hear residents' voices by putting them at the heart of our review into how we deliver our service. For example, by creating a new customer panel as well as continuing to take action on our customer feedback. And we are increasing our transparency with the publication of

all determinations, individual landlord complaints data and our policies. Not only will this better enable residents to hold their landlords to account for the services they deliver, but it will also make us more accountable to those who pay for our service.

Overall, our plan is ambitious and exciting. I look forward to reporting back to you on our progress, and I would like to thank everyone who contributed towards its development.

Andrea Keenoy
Interim Housing Ombudsman

Who we are and what we do

Our role	<p>Our role is set out in the Housing Act 1996 and the Housing Ombudsman Scheme approved by the Secretary of State.</p> <p>The role of the Ombudsman is to resolve disputes involving members of the Scheme, including making awards of compensation or other remedies, where appropriate, as well as to support effective landlord-tenant dispute resolution by others.</p> <p>The service is independent and impartial.</p>
Our vision	Housing Matters: Fairness Matters
Our three-year strategy	<p>To make a difference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• on individual complaints• across the sector

Our strategic objectives



1. Deliver a fair and impartial service, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity



2. Promote positive change in the sector



3. Provide a service that is professional, accessible and simple to use









4. Ensure our service is open and transparent

Our membership

Membership of the Scheme is compulsory for social landlords (primarily housing associations who are or have been registered with the Regulator of Social Housing) and local authority landlords. Additionally, some private landlords are voluntary members. We have just under 2,500 members representing over 5 million housing units.

The scheme is funded by subscription from members on a per housing unit basis. We see ourselves as accountable equally to residents, landlords and Parliament for our service - the per unit fee not only represents the charge to landlords but also the annual cost to each household in our remit for the provision of an Ombudsman service which they can access at any point in their complaint journey.

Our process

-  **Enquiry:** An enquiry is a request for information, assistance or advice where no formal complaint has been made to the landlord. We may provide information about our service, give advice on making a complaint or signpost to other organisations as appropriate.
-  **Local resolution:** Once a complaint has been made to one of our member landlords we enable its local resolution between the complainant and landlord. Our role at this stage is to support landlords and residents to resolve complaints themselves within the landlord's procedure. We do this by using our dispute resolution principles and focusing on outcomes.
-  **Our formal remit:** When a complaint has completed the landlord's procedure it moves into our formal remit once the designated persons requirements are met or eight weeks have passed.
-  **Assessment and jurisdiction:** We assess whether the complaint is within our jurisdiction, and how we will handle the case.
-  **Early resolution:** We offer an early resolution process working with complainants and landlords to try to agree negotiated solutions within a time limited procedure.
-  **Formal investigation:** If a complaint cannot be resolved through our early resolution approach, then it will go forward for formal investigation.

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

Key drivers:

As an Ombudsman, fairness and impartiality go to the heart of what we do. But dispute resolution in social housing needs a different approach in comparison to other sectors. The quality of a person's housing can have a significant impact on their life chances. So, when something goes wrong it is important that this is put right as soon as possible to reduce the stress and frustration residents feel living inescapably with an issue every day, and to preserve the on-going landlord resident relationship. That is why we have a unique remit which allows us to support the local resolution of complaints between landlord and resident while they are going through the landlord's complaints procedure, as well as undertaking formal Ombudsman investigations.

The tragedy at Grenfell Tower has significantly raised the profile of social housing, bringing concerns about the effectiveness and speed of redress to the fore. We have been working to reduce our average determination times over the last three years and have shown consistent improvement. These had deteriorated due to a historical backlog alongside significant year-on-year growth in demand for formal investigations (17% on average each year over the last five years). Our determination times must continue to improve, and this has been echoed by landlords and residents in both our consultation exercise and in their formal responses to the two key government consultations – *A new deal for social housing* and *Strengthening consumer redress in the housing market*.

Strategic priorities	Outcomes achieved
1.1 Support greater local resolution of complaints (ie supporting the resolution of more complaints while they are within the landlord's complaints procedure)	<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
1.2 Enable faster access to redress once a complaint enters our formal remit for investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faster complaint investigations within our formal remit
1.3 Improve the quality and consistency of our service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our work remains fair and impartial

Strategic Objective 2: Promote positive change in the sector

Key drivers:

Calls for improvements to the speed and effectiveness of redress apply to landlords' processes as well as our service. We have more than 20 years of experience in resolving housing disputes. We want to use our knowledge and insight to help the sector improve its complaints handling and housing services.

We are a small organisation and we cannot achieve change in the sector alone – we need to work in collaboration with others to maximise our impact.

We also want to use our expertise to influence the current debates over the future of redress in social housing to get the best outcomes for landlords and residents.

Strategic priorities	Outcomes achieved
2.1 Continue to work directly with landlords and residents to improve complaint handling through a range of sector development and engagement activities	<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
2.2 Use our knowledge to improve housing services	<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
2.3 Influence the sector and shape the landscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence debates to achieve the best redress outcomes for residents and landlords
2.4 Work effectively with the Regulator of Social Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate data is shared to support effective regulation and dispute resolution

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

Key drivers:

All member landlords and their residents should be aware of our service and able to access it in a way that is convenient to them.

Once complaints have reached us, it is important that our process is straightforward and clear, and that we provide good customer care throughout. It is important that we hear the voices of residents and landlords directly to understand how they experience our service and what we can do to improve.

Strategic priorities	Outcomes achieved
3.1 Increase access to, and the availability of, our service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased routes into our service and a trial of longer opening hours to increase our accessibility • Outreach to geographic and demographic groups that access our service proportionately less
3.2 Improve signposting to our service/ the Housing Complaints Resolution Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-referral arrangements with other Ombudsman 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
3.3 Improve our customer journey, customer care and communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We deliver a high-quality service to residents and landlords, guided by their feedback
3.4 Invest in the learning and development of all colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We recruit and retain sufficient colleagues to deliver our service effectively and efficiently • Our staff are appropriately skilled

Strategic Objective 4: Ensure our service is open and transparent

Key drivers:

We believe openness and transparency are fundamental to our role. Social housing residents have limited choice over their landlord, so it is important that information is available to help them hold their landlord to account for their service delivery.

Transparency was a clear theme emerging from both the *Strengthening consumer redress in the housing market* consultation response and *A new deal for social housing* green paper. Publication of Ombudsman decisions and data meets best practice and other Ombudsman schemes covering the public sector either already publish, or are planning to publish, decisions and data over their current corporate planning periods.

Strategic priorities	Outcomes achieved
4.1 Publish the Ombudsman's decisions, individual landlord's complaints data and our policies, procedures and guidance	<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
4.2 Appoint an independent reviewer of complaints against our service and publish their findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are transparent about areas where we need to improve and we learn from outcomes
4.3 Benchmark our performance against relevant best practice	<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

Housing

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