

Sent by email only to consultations@legalombudsman.org.uk



25 January 2019

Dear Sir/Madam

The Legal Ombudsman's Business Plan 2019/20.

The Panel welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Legal Ombudsman's draft Business Plan for 2019-20. The Legal Ombudsman is a very important partner organisation for the Legal Services Consumer Panel (Panel). It forms a vital part of the consumer protection machinery through its twin functions of providing a dispute resolution service and using the intelligence from complaints to help raise standards.

The Panel is pleased with the overall direction of the Business Plan and supports its central goals to improve the quality of work and further develop dispute resolution skills; improve performance; maximise impact through sharing of data; and improve infrastructure e.g. the website and digital service. However, it would be helpful to understand the balance of resource allocated to each goal or how this may shift during the lifespan of the plan. This would help the Panel to make a more focussed contribution to the plan. As it stands, the absence of specific initiatives and timescales for delivery hinders the Panel from engaging and offering its opinion on the finer details of this Business Plan.

The Panel continues to see standards-raising as fundamental to the ombudsman redress model. Therefore, we support the Legal Ombudsman's emphasis on feeding back learnings from complaints as one of its four priority areas. We would like to see the Legal Ombudsman develop and publish a dedicated sub-strategy in this area. Such a strategy should outline the activities and timescales for delivery against the desired outcome. It is equally important that the Legal Ombudsman acknowledges more robustly that it has an important role to play in the market wide drive towards improved transparency, and that this also has the capacity to raise standards in the sector. There should be clear activities to support the transparency agenda.

The Legal Ombudsman has a statutory duty to have regard to best practice among ombudsman schemes. We would like to see this permeate the priorities outlined in the consultation document. The Panel understands, through its bilateral meetings with the Legal Ombudsman that it does engage with best practice and developments in the wider ombudsman world. Nevertheless, we would like to see more clarity around the review of these best practice, including the range of techniques used by other schemes, such a review should embrace public and private sector schemes both in this jurisdiction and internationally. The learnings from these types of review will support the Legal Ombudsman's aspiration of providing more diverse services, for example mediation, and of resolving some issues much more quickly.

The Panel would have liked to see clear activities around the Legal Ombudsman's determination to reduce the average time it takes to start and finish a complaint. We are in full support of the Legal Ombudsman exploring other informal means of dispute resolution, particularly if this leads to a reduction in unit cost, though the Panel notes that reduction in unit cost is not a strong focus of this strategy.

Greater efficiencies will benefit consumers in terms of speed and the cost of legal services, but it is equally important to note that some changes might be at the expense of the quality of investigations or decisions which would be of concern, particularly for vulnerable consumers. Ultimately the service is there for its users. The tension between quality of outcome and speed of decision-making process should be addressed. We would like to see details around how the Legal Ombudsman proposes to respond to the needs of different types of user in the nearest future.

I hope these comments are helpful. Please contact Lola Bello, Consumer Panel Manager, with any enquiries.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "S Chambers".

Sarah Chambers

Chair, Legal Services Consumer Panel