

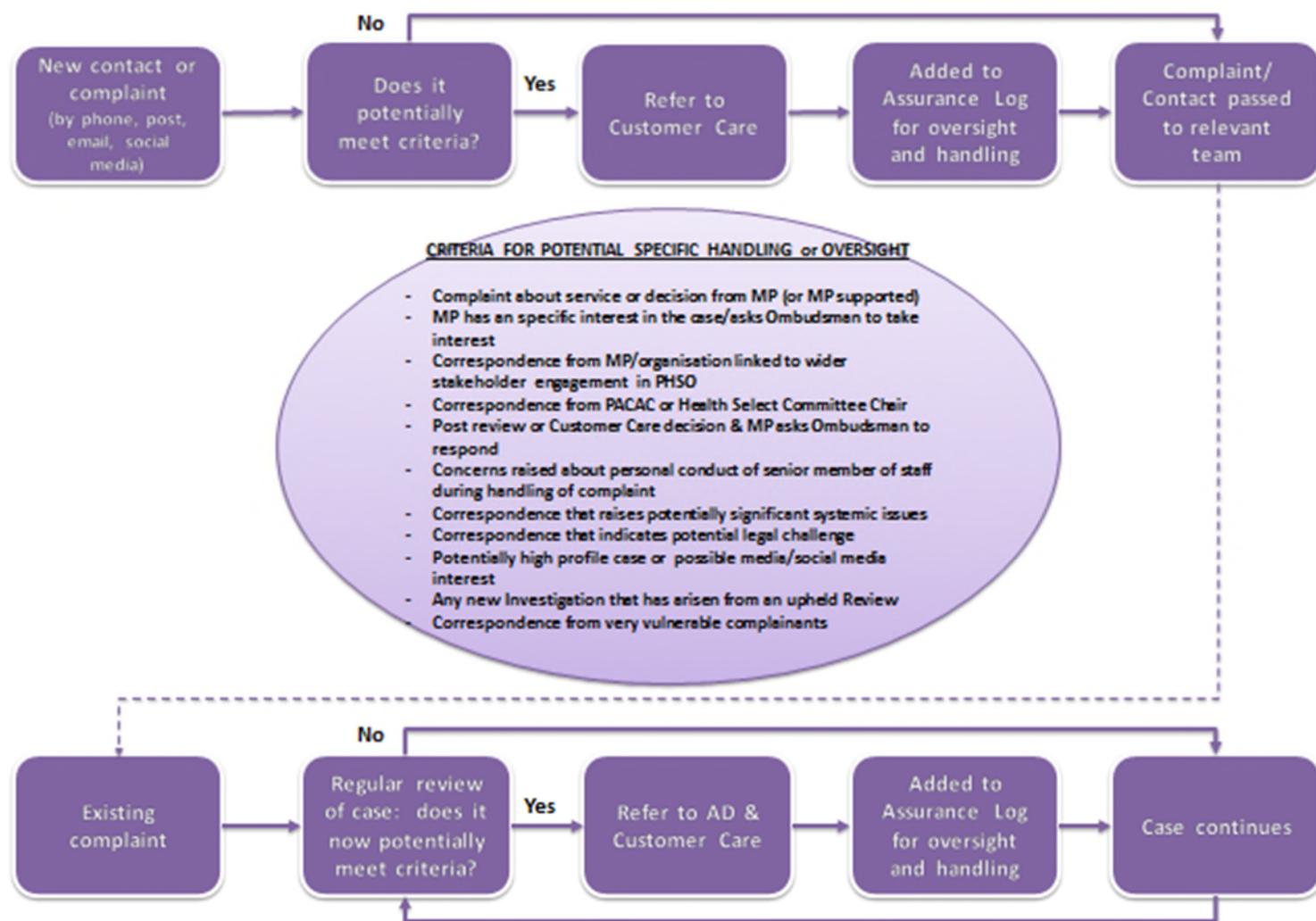


Ombudsman Casework Assurance process Oversight and handling arrangements

June 2017

Executive summary

- E.1 This guide provides the framework for how PHSO manages the spectrum of enquiries the Ombudsman and Chief Executive (CEO) receive about casework on a day to day basis, which includes enquiries received from Members of Parliament and other stakeholders (including enquiries made via social media). It outlines how PHSO will handle such enquiries and how Customer Care will provide oversight and assurance.
- E.2 The framework also outlines the process (and criteria) for how we identify any case that may require oversight by the Ombudsman/CEO. This will initially apply to enquiries coming into Private Office and Customer Care cases - but will also be used by Caseworkers to help them flag certain cases as they progress.
- E.3 The principles surrounding this framework are clear: PHSO needs to ensure that the Ombudsman and CEO are supported in handling enquiries that come in for their specific attention so that they are managed consistently and with maximum assurance. PHSO also needs to ensure that those making the enquiries know what is happening with their enquiry, who will be responding, and by when.
- E.4 Yet this needs to be balanced against ensuring flexibility: recognising that not every enquiry or 'high profile' case (including Customer Care work) will require the same level of oversight. In addition, this framework seeks to minimise additional bureaucracy for those cases that do require the Ombudsman/CEO's attention. Customer Care will not act as an extra quality assurance step for caseworkers when submitting their work to the Ombudsman or CEO. The responsibility for the quality and accuracy of such casework will remain with the relevant Assistant Director.
- E.5 The framework is divided into areas of relevance for how cases come into PHSO, and what happens to them. It also provides details for how we will communicate this process externally - see section 1.13 below.
- E.6 The chart on the next page provides a high level summary of this framework in action. Overall detailed process 'flow charts' for how enquiries are managed are provided at Annex A.



1. Process for managing incoming enquiries addressed to the Ombudsman/Chief Executive

1.1 Each day PHSO receives new enquiries from complainants and other stakeholders that are addressed for the attention of the Ombudsman and/or the Chief Executive. These can come in via numerous channels:

- Emails sent directly to the Ombudsman/CEO's email accounts;
- Emails sent to Customer Care's (or Intake's) public facing email account;
- Postal letters sent to PHSO's mailing address; or
- Tweets, Direct Messages, or other postings received via social media (either to PHSO's social media accounts or personal accounts for the Ombudsman/CEO).

In addition, PHSO often receives phone calls from complainants and other stakeholders, whereby the caller asks to speak to the Ombudsman/CEO directly, or to their Private Office staff. This is covered at section 1.17 below.

1.2 The content of these enquiries are varied, but usually consist of the following:

- New complaints (from complainants or referred by a Member of Parliament);
- Requests for the Ombudsman/CEO to take a personal interest in a complaint;
- Follow up correspondence that relates to a previous communication or decision issued by PHSO;
- Complaints about PHSO service and/or decision;
- Follow up correspondence relating to Customer Care's response/decision to a complaint about PHSO's service and/or decision;
- Enquiry regarding FOI/DPA request; or
- Decisions made by the Information Commissioner's Office.

This list is not exhaustive.

New complaints referred to by MP

1.3 Given that new complaints about Government Departments must be referred to PHSO by an MP by law, it is recognised that much of this type of incoming correspondence (usually received by hard copy) is not intended to be for the personal attention of the Ombudsman, as it is a 'routine referral' of a complaint in order to meet PHSO's legislative requirements¹. Therefore, PHSO's post opening team will review the correspondence to see if there is anything that indicates that this is not a routine referral. This would include reading the MP's correspondence to gain context.

1.4 If the post team believe that it is not a routine referral, they will pass to Customer Care for their review. Otherwise, the post team will pass the new complaint to Intake for their consideration. However, any referral (routine or otherwise) passed to PHSO by the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee, or the Chair of the Health Select Committee, will be referred to Customer Care automatically in any event.

¹ In addition, PHSO will often receive routine referrals from MP on Health complaints too, although such complaints do not need to be referred by an MP by law.

New complaints: existing handling arrangements

- 1.5 In addition, Customer Care may identify times when all correspondence from an MP or complainant should be referred to them as per existing handling arrangements². When this happens, Customer Care will notify the post opening team & Intake to ask them to refer any such correspondence up to Customer Care before any further action is taken. Customer Care will then determine what (if any) handling arrangements apply on the enquiry (see section 1.10).
- 1.6 If a new complaint is referred to PHSO via the Ombudsman/CEO email account, Private Office will automatically refer these to Customer Care, who will decide what action should be taken.

All other written or email enquiries

- 1.7 All other written or email enquiries all other written or email enquiries addressed to the Ombudsman/Chief Executive listed in section 1.2 above must be referred directly to Customer Care.

Oversight of incoming enquiries

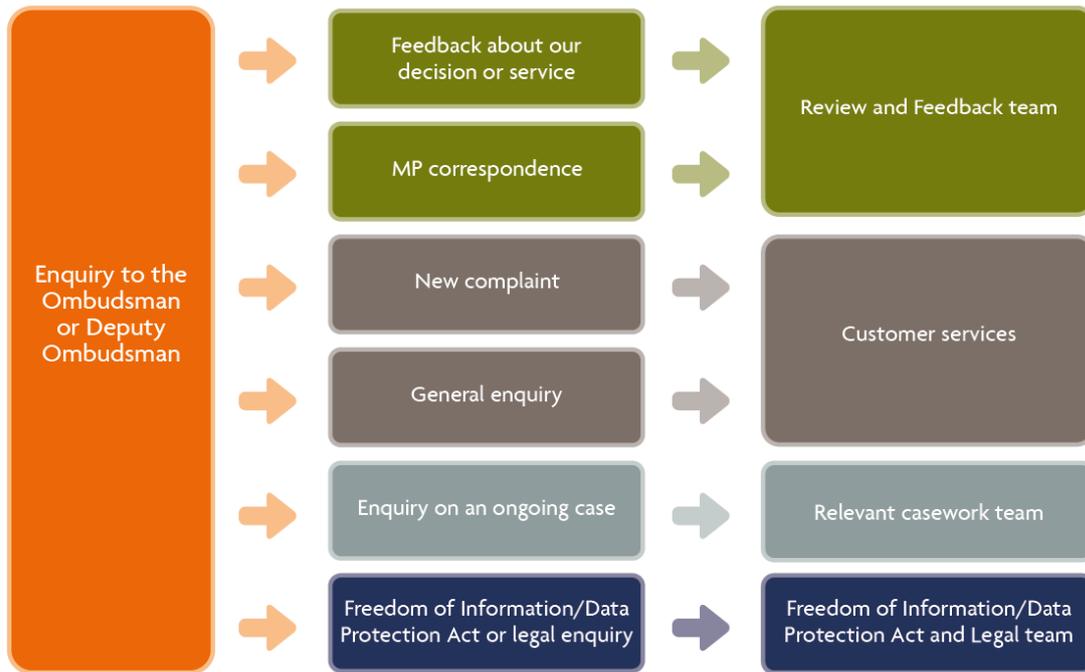
- 1.7 If Customer Care confirm that a new complaint received is not a routine referral (or is from a stakeholder with existing handling arrangements in place), they will log the new complaint onto a central 'assurance' spreadsheet, which is overseen by Customer Care and regularly reviewed by the Ombudsman/CEO.
- 1.8 Customer Care will also log any other enquiry listed under 1.2 onto this spreadsheet as they come in.
- 1.9 Customer Care will then send an acknowledgment email³ to the enquirer.
- 1.10 Customer Care will then review whether any existing handling arrangements are in place, or whether the enquiry may require new arrangements. To decide, they initially refer to set criteria, devised in accordance with the Ombudsman/CEO's instructions. See section two for further details.
- 1.11 As part of this criteria, any enquiry made by an MP that is not considered to be a routine referral of a new complaint, will be automatically added to the 'MP Central Oversight' spreadsheet, which is overseen by Customer Care and regularly reviewed by the Ombudsman/CEO. Any such enquiries will be subject to a target of issuing a response to the MP within 28 days of receipt.
- 1.12 Any other enquiry that requires specific handling or oversight will be added to the 'Casework Customer Care Central Oversight' spreadsheet, which is also overseen by Customer Care and regularly reviewed by the Ombudsman/CEO.

What happens next with enquiries

- 1.13 Once Customer Care have acknowledged and reviewed any specific handling or oversight arrangements, they will assign the enquiry to the relevant part of the office as follows:

² This would relate to times when the Ombudsman/CEO has requested sight of all relevant correspondence from an external stakeholder as part of ongoing stakeholder engagement arrangements.

³ Or, if no email is available, a written acknowledgment.



1.14 This diagram will be included within PHSO’s acknowledgment to the enquirer. The image (and high level description) is available on PHSO’s website⁴ and so can be used as a hyperlink to provide enquirers with more information.

Enquiries received via social media or by telephone

- 1.15 External Affairs and Operations jointly monitor (and respond to) social media activity relating to PHSO. This includes oversight of any tweets, direct messages or other postings received for the attention of the Ombudsman/CEO from either PHSO’s official social media accounts or through the Ombudsman/CEO’s own personal accounts.
- 1.16 Any such correspondence relating to individual cases will be passed to Customer Care and logged onto the central ‘assurance’ spreadsheet following the process listed above. Customer Care will also review whether any existing handling arrangements are in place or whether there should be.
- 1.17 Sometimes PHSO will receive telephone calls from complainants (via the general advice line or the Customer Care helpline) asking to speak directly with the Ombudsman/CEO or to be put through to Private Office. As Private Office does not have access to PHSO’s casework database (and are not trained to deal with casework enquiries), Intake and Customer Care will advise that it will not be possible to be put through to Private Office directly as a matter of course. Intake and Customer Care can take contact details and forward on any such request to Private Office for their consideration, but will remind the caller that any decision to initiate a call back from the Ombudsman/CEO themselves will for Private Office to agree.

⁴ <https://www.ombudsman.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/making-enquiry-ombudsman>

- 1.18 In certain circumstances, as part of any specific handling arrangements, the Ombudsman/CEO will identify complainants who Intake/Customer Care can pass through to Private Office, so they can arrange to speak directly to the Ombudsman/CEO as requested. In these cases, specific handling instructions will be added to the complaint file (on MSD and, on older cases, VisualFiles) and Customer Care will make staff aware of this specific arrangements.
- 1.19 MP's have access to a dedicated line for PHSO enquiries and this is monitored by Intake. In any event, Intake and Customer Care will pass through an MP request for a call back from the Ombudsman/CEO to Private Office for their consideration.

Ongoing monitoring of enquiries and other regular assurance activity

- 1.20 Any case that is listed on any of Customer Care's assurance spreadsheets will be continuously monitored and updated by Customer Care. All relevant teams responsible for the handling of each case must routinely update Customer Care on activity and next steps at relevant milestones.
- 1.21 Customer Care will hold monthly assurance meetings with the Ombudsman and CEO to discuss progression of activities on each of the following spreadsheets:
- Customer Care's 'central assurance' spreadsheet, which lists all relevant incoming enquiries addressed to the Ombudsman/CEO;
 - Case referrals: any cases referred to the Ombudsman/CEO for their decision or input. This includes certain review cases⁵ and any other casework referred by Operations teams. Any such referral must be done via the relevant Assistant Director.
 - MP correspondence: includes details about specific enquiries raised by an MP, and action being taken to respond to those. This includes monitoring of our commitment to respond to such enquiries within 28 days.
 - Specific handling oversight: this spreadsheet contains any ongoing case or investigation that the Ombudsman/CEO has agreed should be overseen, in line with PHSO's specific handling criteria (see section two). This may or may not require the Ombudsman/CEO to make any decision on the cases in due course.
 - Social media: a list of social media entries made about specific cases that the Ombudsman/CEO has asked to be monitored.
 - Phone calls: a list of complainants that the Ombudsman/CEO has agreed can be put through to private office if they wish to speak to the Ombudsman/CEO directly.
- 1.22 During these regular assurance meetings, the Ombudsman/CEO will may request for further assurance activity to take place on specific cases, which will be actioned and overseen by Customer Care.

Flowcharts

- 1.23 Annex A provides a detailed overview of how incoming enquiries (across different channels) will be progressed in accordance with this framework.

⁵ This will usually be a review proposal to uphold a complaint about our decision, where Customer Care are recommending that PHSO carries out a new investigation.

2. Criteria for deciding that cases require specific handling/oversight

- 2.1 As described in section one, PHSO will apply a set of criteria to evaluate whether a case (or enquiry) requires specific handling and/or oversight by the Ombudsman/CEO via Customer Care.

Overall process

- 2.2 As described in section one above, Customer Care will initially apply this criteria (including a review of whether there are existing handling arrangement in force) to all new enquiries they receive. Customer Care will also apply this to all feedback received about PHSO's service or decision.
- 2.3 If Customer Care believes that relevant criteria have been met, they will refer the case to the Ombudsman/CEO (via the regular assurance meetings) for their approval. Please note: this will not apply to MP enquiries, which are automatically selected for oversight (see section 1.11 above).
- 2.4 Likewise, all caseworkers will be expected to apply these criteria throughout the life of a case and provide updates on any case that is flagged for specific handling/oversight.
- 2.5 If a caseworker believes that the criteria have been met, they will refer the case to their Assistant Director, who review and then (if appropriate) refer the case to Customer Care to be discussed by the Ombudsman/CEO in their assurance meeting.
- 2.6 Any referral to the Ombudsman/CEO must include proposals for what handling or oversight is required in line with the circumstances of the case. This could vary in order to manage the particular needs of the case. For example, handling may take the form of a 'watching brief' (where the Ombudsman/CEO gets an update at each relevant key milestone) and also a requirement that the Ombudsman/CEO will approve any decision or correspondence before it is issued.

Agreed actions

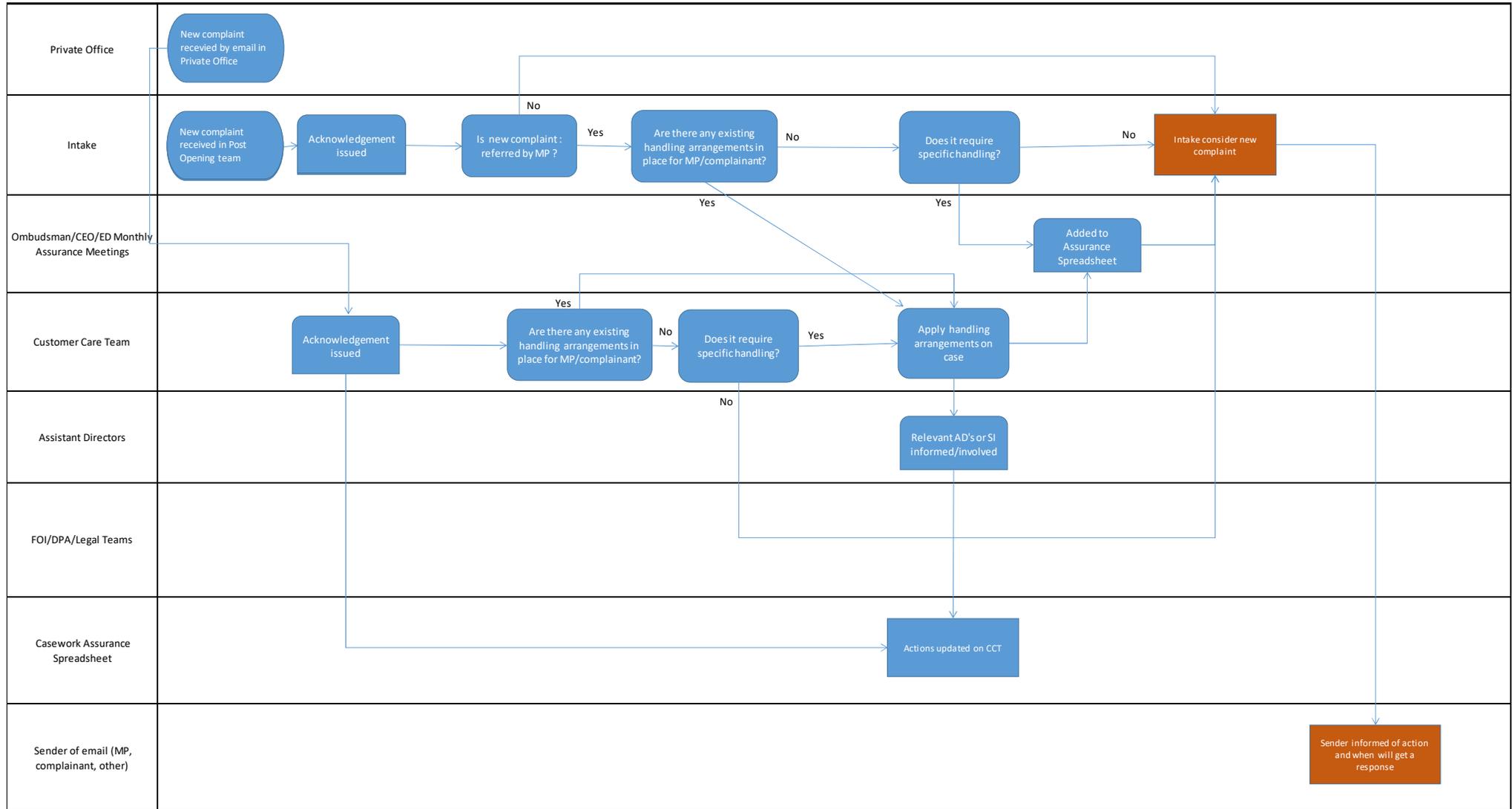
- 2.7 When the Ombudsman/CEO approves specific handling instructions these will be recorded and added to the relevant assurance spreadsheet. Customer Care will then be required to update the spreadsheet in accordance with the agreed actions - with any relevant Operations teams required to keep Customer Care updated.
- 2.8 The initial criteria provided overleaf will be continuously developed and shared with staff.

Criteria for specific handling/oversight cases

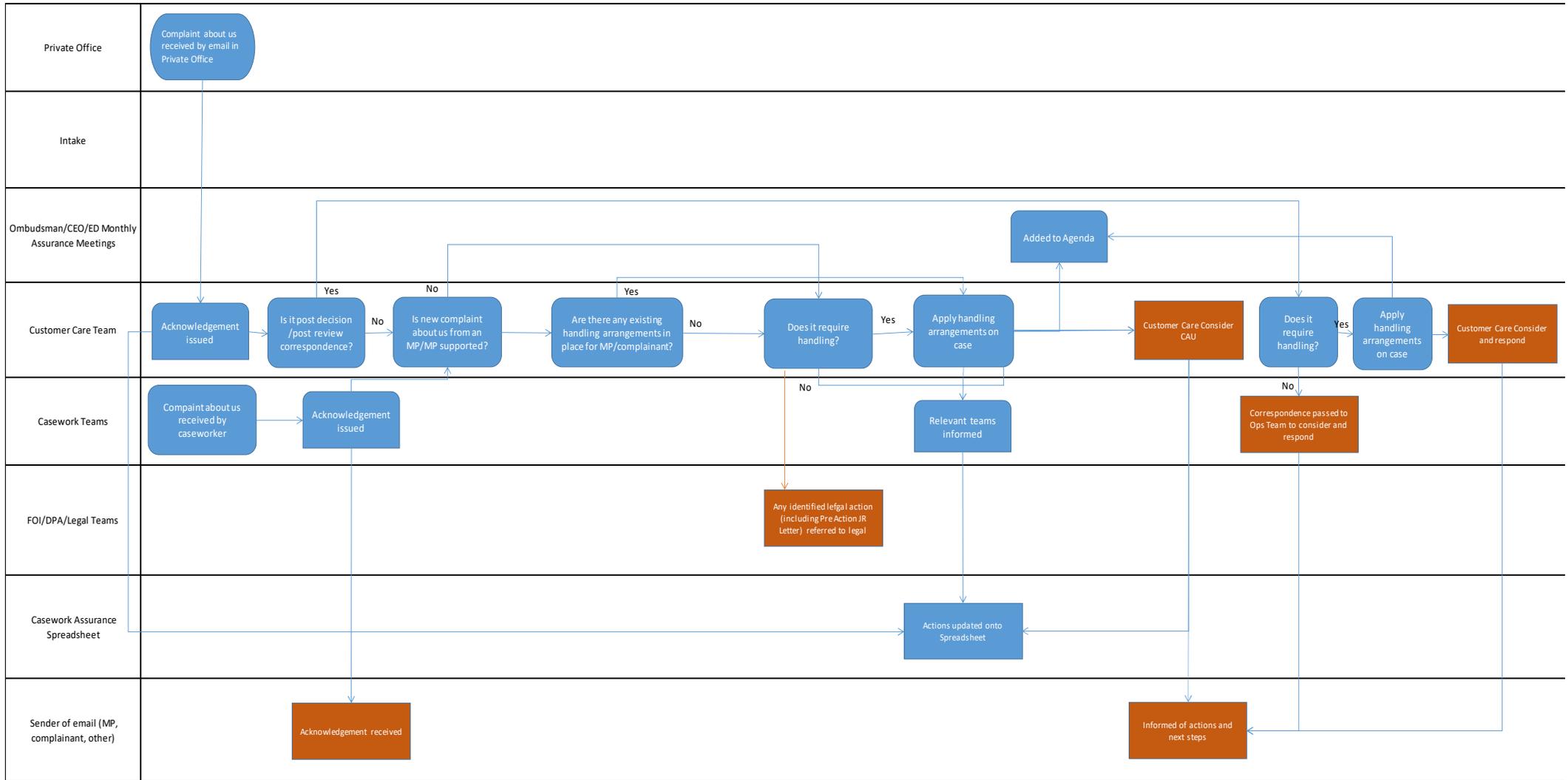
Unless expressly stated, the following criteria would not automatically result in a requirement for specific handling or oversight. Each case would be considered individually and it will be for the Ombudsman/CEO to decide.

- All correspondence from MPs that is not a routine referral of a new complaint. This includes complaints about our service made by MPs, or where the MP is directly supporting the complainant about the decision or service (automatically accepted for handling);
- Correspondence on a case from any MP or complainant who is of interest to Ombudsman/CEO as part of ongoing stakeholder engagement or to which the MP or complainant is linked to a particular theme (i.e. campaigning or advocating on a specific theme or issue);
- Any correspondence (including routine referrals of new complaints) from the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee or the Chair of the Health Select Committee (automatically accepted for handling);
- Post review/ Customer Care decision correspondence from MPs, where the MP personally requests further information or explanation or asks the Ombudsman/CEO to take a personal interest;
- Complaint or concern raised about the personal integrity or conduct of a senior member of staff (Director level or above) during the handling of a complaint;
- Correspondence from any party that raises potentially significant systemic service issues;
- Correspondence from any party that indicates potential legal challenges;
- Potentially high profile cases (including those noted as high risk) with potential media interest, social media interest;
- Any new investigation that has arisen from an Upheld review; and
- Correspondence from very vulnerable complainants, including threats to self-harm.

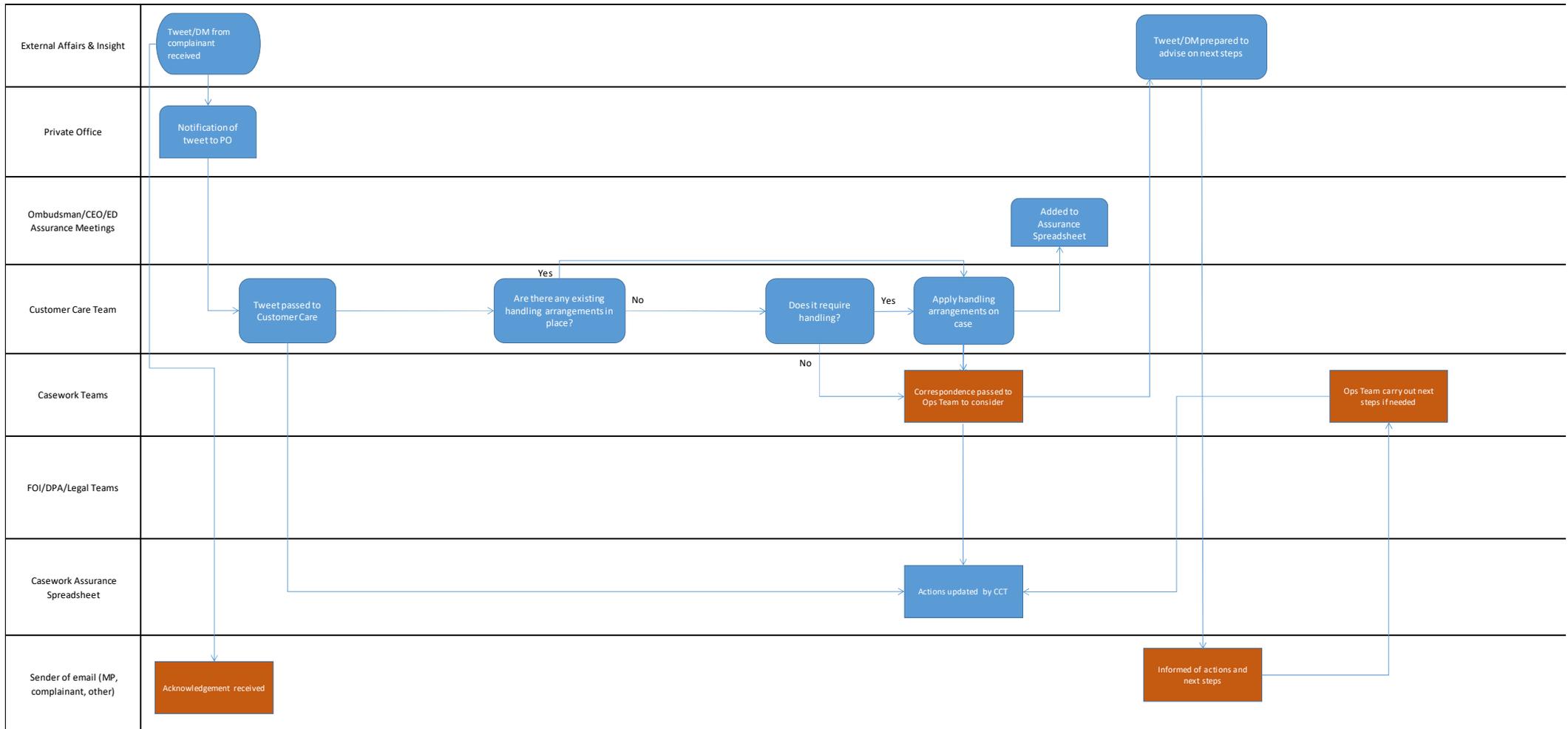
Process Map 1: Specific Map on new incoming complaints



Process Map 2: Specific Map on incoming complaints about our service or decision



Process Map 3: Tweets/DM's from complainants sent directly to PHSO's or Ombudsman/CEO's twitter account



Process Map 4: Global overview of handling arrangements

