

Our strategy

2025 to 2026



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Who we are

We independently investigate complaints about the NHS in England, UK government departments and some other UK public organisations.

Our service is completely free, focused on fairness and open to everyone.

We champion higher standards of behaviour to help inspire a better relationship between people and public services. We look into complaints where an individual believes there has been injustice or hardship because an organisation has not acted properly or fairly, or when it has provided a poor service and not put things right.

When we find failings, we can make recommendations on what the organisation needs to do to put things right. This can involve explanations, apologies and taking steps to learn and improve.

Our website has more information about [our casework process](#).

We believe in the power of complaining to bring lasting change. We share findings from our casework to help improve public services and complaint handling for everyone. This can include presenting reports to Parliament so it can make sure organisations act on our recommendations.

We are a parliamentary body that is accountable to Parliament and our work is scrutinised by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC).

Foreword

Our organisation performs an important role in our democracy, providing a voice to users of public services who have experienced failures or injustices.

Over the last year, it has been a great honour to lead the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) as the interim Ombudsman. It is a privilege to be at an incredible organisation that has an important public service mission, with a talented and motivated team that are committed to public service improvements.

This document sets out our strategy for the next year and sits alongside our business plan, which contains further details on how we will deliver it. It is purposefully not a long-term strategy. That will follow next year once the permanent Ombudsman has been appointed.

In the development of this strategy, we have set out to achieve a few key principles. They are continuity in our overall approach, to consolidate and simplify our overall framework and, most importantly, to complete the journey that we started in 2022.



The development of a new strategy provides an opportunity to look back at what has been achieved by the organisation over the last few years. In 2022 we set out an ambitious plan with three objectives and we have made substantial progress against each one. This included:

- introducing our flagship NHS and Government Complaint Standards
- major investigations such as the communication of changes to women's State Pension age
- securing compensation for victims of the Windrush scandal and changes to the compensation scheme
- establishing our Public Engagement Advisory Group to bring the voice of users into the design and delivery of our service.

We have used our evidence base to highlight issues in patient safety and care, including producing reports on failures in maternity care, sepsis diagnosis and imaging. We have also used our media profile to push for changes in the NHS and improvements in public services.

We have also faced some significant challenges. Like other ombudsman schemes in the UK, we have seen an unprecedented increase in the demand for our service. The number of complaints we receive about NHS services has almost doubled over the last decade. Our 20% improvement in efficiency has been vital in our efforts to keep pace with demand.

All public services face significant pressures and tough financial constraints that will likely produce even greater demands on PHSO. We need to have an organisational model that can respond to increases in demand and help focus our resources on the issues where we can deliver the most impact. This year we will introduce a major change to our operating model, the Public Value Model, that will better support us to respond to increases in demand.

Our service will always be available to everyone who needs it most. It will continue to be our objective to open up access to our service and remove any barriers. We need to be user-focused in how we deliver our service and use technology wherever possible. Society rightly expects more from public services, including that their voices are heard in the way that services are designed and operate.

We need to deliver impact from our casework for individual complainants and organisations that we investigate. The vast majority of people who come to us want an apology from the organisation they are complaining about and for the organisation to act to make sure others do not experience the same mistakes.

To achieve this, we need a shift from being reactive to demand to being proactive and focused on delivering impact in the most important areas. In future we want to undertake more systemic investigations and we will set out publicly a small number of priority themes or areas of focus.

This one-year strategy will lay the foundations for a more effective service for people and organisations, and ultimately achieve our objective of supporting public service improvements. It will lead to a different-looking PHSO in future years and I look forward to the journey ahead.

Rebecca Hilsenrath,
Chief Executive Officer

Introduction

This one-year strategy will provide the foundations for our approach in the long-term that will be developed when a new Ombudsman is appointed. As part of the planning for this strategy we engaged widely with our colleagues and stakeholders on how we should approach our service and move towards a more proactive approach with an improved user experience for organisations and people.

This included:

- holding a webinar with stakeholders from the NHS and government departments
- undertaking interviews and surveys with former complainants and analysing previous research
- consulting with our Public Engagement Advisory Group
- holding internal employee focus groups.

This consultation confirmed that our previous objectives were the right ones, but suggested that we needed to clarify, simplify and focus our efforts. As a result, our strategy is framed around [three streamlined objectives](#):

- improving **access** to our service
- providing an exceptional **user experience**
- delivering **impact** from our casework.

Delivery of these objectives will be supported by [four enablers](#):

- our people and capability
- digital and data: harnessing technology and data
- communication: using our voice
- working with stakeholders: collaborating effectively and working in partnership.

[Our business plan](#) sits alongside this strategy and sets out further detail on the steps we will take this year to deliver our strategy.



Our values



Independence

From complainants and from organisations that we investigate, holding organisations to account where there is service failure.



Fairness

Listening carefully to complainants and the organisations that we investigate and making impartial and fair decisions based on relevant evidence.



Excellence

Learning from engagement with complainants and organisations that we investigate to improve accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness, as well as the quality of our decisions.



Transparency

Communicating with those who use our service. Publishing information about our findings on how we are performing and how organisations that we investigate are implementing our recommendations.

Our strategy: an overview

Our objectives



Helping us to deliver our strategy

Our objectives

Improving **access** to our service

The people who need our service have often been through traumatic experiences. It is vital that they are able to find us in the moments that matter and that we make it as easy as possible for them to submit complaints.

Improving awareness of our service has been an objective in previous strategies. We have made good progress through increasing our media presence, developing our stakeholder engagement approach and undertaking research into the users of our service. These activities will continue to be core activities for the year ahead.

Over the next year, we will focus on developing our relationships with the advisory sector that helps people day to day on issues relating to public services. We want closer partnerships with these organisations to make sure that they are effectively equipped to signpost people to our service when they need us. In doing so, we hope to gain insights into emerging issues before they become complaints.

It will continue to be our objective to remove or reduce potential barriers to our service such as the 'MP filter' which means a government department complaint has to be submitted by a Member of Parliament (MP).

For many years we have lacked a detailed understanding of the characteristics and demographics of the users of our service. Over the next year, we will increase the data that we collect and undertake analysis about who submits complaints and who does not. From this, we will be able to develop strategies and implement them to target engagement and to help those who do not currently use our service to access it when they need to.

Our aims on access for 2025 to 2026 are to:

- continue our engagement programme and media work so that people and stakeholders understand what we do and the service we provide
- make it easier for people to send complaints directly to us by redesigning how people submit them
- extend our data collection to understand who submits complaints and who does not
- use data to develop a targeted approach to help those who do not currently use our service.

The MP filter

The MP filter is a piece of legislation that makes it compulsory for complaints about government departments or their agencies to be referred to us by an MP. As a parliamentary body, we believe this needs reforming so that individuals have the option of submitting complaints directly to PHSO. MPs could continue to work closely with us to make the best use of our experience in navigating the complex web of complaints systems to help the public.

Providing an exceptional **user experience**

Our values of impartiality and fairness drive everything that we do. In living those values it is vital that we give people and organisations the best possible experience of working with us.

Our previous strategies placed a greater emphasis on improving the quality of our decisions. We now have a mature quality framework and produce high-quality decisions.

Over the next year, we want to place greater emphasis on delivering a better overall user experience. This will largely be driven by our digital transformation which will make it easier to submit complaints to us and track their progress.

We will expand our Early Consideration approach to speed up decisions on whether we will investigate complaints. We will communicate these directly to complainants over the phone or through virtual meetings.

We know many people have to navigate complex processes and steps before we can consider their complaint. We will continue our work to raise standards of complaint handling through our Complaint Standards and create partnerships to help public service users receive a better complaints experience.

Our aims on user experience are to:

- expand our digital self-service offer to encourage submission of complaints and evidence online
- develop our highly trained workforce further to increase the focus on overall user experience
- create partnerships to help public services improve their handling of complaints to rebuild trust
- incorporate the latest thinking of behavioural science to improve our processes
- create a new framework for the effective measurement of user experience
- enable automatic notification of complaints to the organisations we investigate.

Early Consideration approach

The Early Consideration approach is a set of different actions a caseworker can take to resolve a complaint in a proportionate way. This may involve focusing on the issues that matter most to the person complaining, considering what evidence we need to reach the right decision, or sharing decisions on the phone.

Delivering **impact** from our casework

Every year we make over 1,000 recommendations to NHS bodies and government departments and agencies to improve the services that they provide, including how they handle complaints.

Many of these recommendations are steps that all organisations should take, such as effective communication to improve services and avoid failures. This year we want to review whether we are making the right types of recommendations and if they have the impact that we want to see when we make them.

Learning from complaints can bring change and help improve public services and the relationship between people and the state. This requires us to be transparent and open as an organisation, publishing our casework decisions and our data. Over the next year, we will increase the number of decisions that we publish.

We will establish a strategic priorities framework and identify a small number of themes where we can achieve a measurable impact. By taking a more strategic approach towards these themes, we hope to be able to work in partnership with stakeholders to deliver greater impact.

Our aims on impact are to:

- review whether we are making the right types of recommendations and if they have the impact that we want to see, while aligning with other key stakeholders
- work in partnership to co-produce reports and recommendations to avoid duplication and align with other key stakeholders
- increase the number of decisions that we publish
- increase the amount of data and information we make available
- embed the digital change to allow us to analyse our casework and clearly identify systemic issues where we can make a difference.

Strategic themes approach

To progress to a more proactive service we need to look at where we can achieve the most success. By focusing our efforts on a small number of strategic themes we can prioritise where we want to hold systemic investigations and make thoughtful policy recommendations to improve public services.

Public Value Model

Our Public Value Model helps us prioritise cases with the highest potential impact. It is a scored test that asks four key questions, focusing on the seriousness of the impact on the affected person and whether investigating the complaint could lead to a wider public benefit.



Helping us to deliver our strategy

Our people and capability

The people at PHSO are dedicated and passionate about improving public services. Continuing to attract, retain and develop an engaged and high-performing workforce is central to the delivery of this strategy.

During the next year, we will bring on board approximately 80 new caseworkers and senior caseworkers as part of our plan to respond to increases in demand for our service.

Our training and development plans will have greater focus to meet the changing needs of our service, creating the skills for current and future needs. We will make sure our learning activity programme is clear about how it links to delivery and organisational success.

We will continue to listen to our employees and act to further develop our culture. Our existing values and behaviours framework was developed in 2017 and now is the time to look at these again to make sure they reflect and support the direction and culture we need in the coming years. Over the next year, we will be revising our values and behaviours framework to meet this need.

Digital and data

Our ambition is to be a leading Ombudsman in digital transformation and our planned technology improvements will be at the heart of delivering our strategy.

Over the next year, we will accelerate progress on digital transformation to increase our efficiency and provide a better user experience for people and organisations.

We have secured the investment that we need for next year and have the plans in place to turn our digital ambition into a reality.

As a separate strand, improvements to data collection and sharing will help improve what we can offer our partners, as well as informing us about where to focus our efforts for maximum effectiveness.



Communication

We must be completely independent and focused on fairness in our work. It is important that people and organisations understand what we do, how we do it and how we reach decisions.

Our values of independence, fairness and transparency guide our communications and engagement. We will continue to use our voice when failures happen and highlight the change needed through practical policy recommendations supported by a robust evidence base.



Working with stakeholders

Partnership working will be the focus of the change to our approach. Our relationship with the health service, and its key stakeholders and regulators, is important if we are to share the learning from our casework, of both good practice and what needs to be improved. Equally as important for its effect on people is our work with government departments and agencies. By working together we can help improve service delivery and rebuild trust in public services.

We will build lasting relationships with key stakeholders in the advisory sector as well as closer working with Parliament and MPs, particularly the vital relationship we hold with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. We will also work in partnership across the wider public sector and interested groups to improve public services.



Evaluation

We will continue to evaluate the success of our one-year strategy based on existing operational metrics, as reported in [our annual report and accounts](#).

During the course of the year, we will refine our approach to evaluation to consider further measurements of user experience, access to our service and the impact we have. This requires a fundamental rethink of our approach to evaluation and will lay the foundations to align our measures of success with our longer-term strategy.

Our business plan sets out what we will achieve in this reporting year.





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