

RCN response to the Cabinet Office's Consultation A Public Service Ombudsman

Introduction

With a membership of over 425,000 registered nurses, midwives, health visitors, nursing students, health care assistants and nurse cadets, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the voice of nursing across the UK and the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world. RCN members work in a variety of hospital and community settings in the NHS and the independent sector. The RCN promotes patient and nursing interests on a wide range of issues by working closely with the Government, the UK parliaments and other national and European political institutions, trade unions, professional bodies and voluntary organisations.

Background

The RCN has participated in both the Clwyd Hart Review of Complaints in the English NHS, and in the Public Health service Ombudsman's work on reviewing its operation. As part of our contribution to the Clwyd Hart Review in 2014 we published guidance to help health care workers deal with feedback, concerns, complaints and compliments¹.

General Comments

We welcome the proposals contained in the consultation, and are pleased to see that they reflect in clear and simple terms both the findings and the recommendations laid out in the Gordon Review.

We feel, as did Robert Gordon, that the current arrangements for health and social care dispute resolution are hampered by organisations that are too constrained by regulations and practice that are rooted in the past. It has been heartening to see and participate in, the on-going improvements to the PHSO brought about by the current Ombudsman, however we recognise that these reforms can go only so far to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, where more and more care is delivered via integrated services, and often by organisations that only partially fall under the remit of an Ombudsman.

We look forward to continuing our work with the PHSO, and to helping shape the structure and operation of the proposed new body, in line with the recommendations of the Gordon review.

¹ RCN, 2014 - ' Good Practice for Handling Feedback'

http://www.rcn.org.uk/newsevents/news/article/uk/rcn_launches_new_guidance_for_handling_feedback

Responses to specific questions

1. Do you agree that these principles should underpin reform of the Ombudsman service?

We are fully supportive of the principles outlined in the Consultation, and welcome that they are closely drawn from those outlined in the Gordon review.

2. Would you welcome the creation of a single Public Service Ombudsman service and are these the right services to be included?

We would welcome, and support the creation of a single Public Service Ombudsman, and agree with the proposal that it embrace the remit and responsibilities of the Parliamentary, Health service, Local Government and Housing Ombudsmen.

3. If so, do you agree that these are the right founding principles for such organisation?

We agree that the principles, as laid out in the consultation and building on the recommendations set out in the Gordon review, are the right foundation principles for the new organisation.

4. Should a single public service ombudsman organisation also retain specific sector facing services and staff in e.g. Health or Housing?

We feel that retaining specific sector staff will be key to ensuring that the new organisation is able to both harness the full benefits of integration whilst also retaining the confidence of both the public and those institutions operating in the sectors that it will cover.

5. Should each sector within the organisation be led by a senior Ombudsman (or someone of equivalent status) e.g. a Housing, Local Government or Health Ombudsman?

We have no strong position on this matter, other than to note that the presence of a senior and responsible member of staff atop each distinct division of the new organisation might ensure that equal representation is secured, whilst also facilitating good working relationships across the organisation.

6. Is 'Public Service Ombudsman' the appropriate title for a new organisation?

We have no strong position on this matter, but would reflect that as public services become more diverse in their look and operation it will be important to ensure that the new Ombudsman service is able to easily describe its' role and function to the average citizen, something that should as much as possible be supported by its name.

7. Do you agree that there should be the widest possible routes of entry to a Public Service Ombudsman?

We agree with ensuring that it is as easy as possible to access the new organisation, whilst ensuring that as far as is reasonable possible complaints and disputes are resolved as close to source as possible.

8. In what ways could it be made easier for citizens to access resolution and redress?

We agree with the recommendations given in the Gordon review, that people should be able to access the new body via all common routes of contact, such as telephone, email, and via newer routes, such as social media.

We also agree with the proposal to remove the necessity for citizens to go through their MPs.

9. Would you support a wider role for a PSO as a champion of effective complaints handling across the public sector?

We strongly support extending the role of the new organisation to encompass promoting and supporting effective and efficient complaints handling across the areas that fall under its remit.

To this end we have already work with the PHSO in developing its guidance for NHS complainants, and would be very happy to continue this work in relation to the new 'integrated services' with any new organisation

10. What range of investigative tools do you think the PSO might need?

- To stay truly independent from Government and the NHS the Ombudsman must retain the powers to obtain any information they see fit.
- We would welcome an independent agency that has expertise in human factors and ergonomics. The application of investigative approaches from other safety-critical industries would enhance learning and promote evidence-based safety practices.

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