

Issue 2 – September 2017

Welcome to The Pensions Ombudsman News

This is the 2nd edition of our Stakeholder Newsletter, we have been very busy since the first edition was launched in April. In July we published our Annual Report – see below.

Our Stakeholder Managers have been travelling around the country visiting you. We are currently working on two new important projects, to improve “Signposting” to our service and promoting a move towards one stage Internal Dispute Resolution Process (IDRP).

Our first Legal Forum takes place in September and this will improve communication with our stakeholders’ legal teams so we can discuss how changes in legislation and significant rulings impact upon all of our work.

In October we will be inviting people to our first Stakeholder Event. We want to know what you want from us, so if you have ideas for: an article for the Newsletter, topics for the agenda at Stakeholder Event or ways in which we can support to your work, please contact: mairi.spiby@pensions-ombudsman.org.uk.

Our Annual Report

In May we published our [Annual Report](#), it includes information on our operational and financial performance, some summaries of completed cases carried out during the year and highlights the continued rise in pension complaints with pension transfer complaints increasing over the past year.

Anthony Arter, Pensions Ombudsman

“We have had another busy year with a 22% increase in enquiries. This is perhaps a result of the increasing awareness of the value of pensions and the difficulty in understanding whether the rules, and/or legislation, has been applied correctly.

The past year was a time of consolidating our new approach for the resolution of disputes, 70% of which are now informally resolved. This approach is also aligned with our communication strategy to ensure that the customer journey is further improved. Another strategic development has been our increased focus on stakeholder engagement – in particular with the large public sector schemes, insurance companies and others involved in the pension industry.

By working together pension disputes can be resolved much earlier in the process which can enhance the public’s trust in pension saving and in the providers, this is surely what we all want to achieve.”

Our Caseload - 2016/17

- We handled over 6,000 enquiries, 22% more than in 2015/16.
- 70% of all enquiries are now received electronically since the launch of our on-line application in April 2016
- We took on 1,333 cases for investigation, slightly less than in 2015/16.
- We completed 1,404 investigations, 7% more than 2015/16.
- 70% of cases were resolved informally by our adjudicators and 30% formally with an Ombudsman's decision.
- 33% of cases formally decided by an Ombudsman were upheld or partly upheld.
- Cases about the actions of the Pension Protection Fund continue to form a small part of our work, with 17 new cases for investigation accepted in the year.
- Pension liberation cases reduced significantly – these account for 8% of new investigations compared to 16% in 2015/6.
- Complaints about transfers (such as the calculation or payment of transfer values) and complaints about overpayment of benefits (usually that the overpaid benefits are being clawed back) have increased.

Talking to Complainants

From reading our Annual Report you will see that we are resolving a greater portion of our complaints. We have changed our communications approach from mainly issuing written correspondence and we now pick up the telephone to talk to people. We explain what we can do and cannot do, manage people's expectations and listen to their stories.

Talking to people requires a different skill set from our traditional technical analytical strengths. We have to gain trust and establish credibility before any kind of meaningful discussion about a complaint can happen. Training by the mental health charity Mind and in the use of "Plain English" has been helpful in acquiring the necessary skills.

We have found this approach incredibly rewarding and get positive feedback even when we do not uphold complaints:

- "This is the **first** time anyone's spoken to me"
- "I now understand things much better"
- "I'm not happy with the outcome but now I understand".

It has required a cultural shift to value verbal communication as much as the comfort zone of a well-written tome. Talking to people and resolving complaints is time consuming and there are often several telephone calls, backed up by emails and letters. Talking to people works. It isn't always easy but we are seeing it improves the customer journey and it is resolving significantly more complaints.

Talking to Stakeholders

An integral element of our Corporate Plan is our increased focus on Stakeholder Engagement. With our dedicated team of Stakeholder Managers we are working hard to enhance our relationships with the large public sector schemes and private providers.

We have been busy visiting and talking to our key contacts, promoting 'Signposting' to our service and "one stage IDRPs". We now have 20 Stakeholder Managers working directly with our key stakeholders to identify and share emerging issues more quickly, and to reduce and avoid complaints. Here is a flavour of some of our meetings with some of you.

LV=. We visited the offices of LV= in Hitchin in July. They were very interested in the changes we have made in our approach to casework, are keen to share good practice and have joined our Signposting Project.

Willis Towers Watson (WTW). WTW are one of the largest pension scheme administrators (delivering a service to over 200 pension schemes) in the private sector. In July we met with members of their Senior Team at their offices in Redhill, they are very keen to work with us collaboratively and we are now working on a couple of interesting initiatives."

James Hay Partnership. We made our first visit to a SIPP provider. They were so interested in what we had to say that our Stakeholder Manager, Kaj Selvarajah, nearly missed his train! They do not signpost to us following the FCA

Regulation to signpost to FOS, however they want to work with us and have joined our Signposting Project.

We also recently visited a couple of the large public sector schemes we deal with – the Teachers' Pension Scheme and the Armed Forces Pension Scheme (AFPS).

AFPS. We visited the AFPS Offices in Scotland and had an extremely productive meeting with staff from Veterans UK (part of the Ministry of Defence) who are responsible for the assessment, award, payment, and maintenance of all pensions relating to the armed forces, with around 600,000 individual serving and former service personnel and dependents making up their customer base. The AFPS were very interested in how we triage complaints, resolve complaints informally, use the phone to talk to people and manage unreasonable behaviour. They plan a visit to us to learn from our experience. The AFPS are considering working towards one stage IDRPs and are currently in the consultation phase and are keen to work with us and others to share their insight and experience.

Teachers' Pension Scheme. We visited their very experienced team in Darlington and agreed ways of improving communication, helping us both to speed up the time taken to close cases and hopefully resolve more cases informally.

Public Sector Pension Boards. We have established a very fruitful relationship with the Police, Firefighters and Local Government Pension Boards, they have been open to the idea of a move to one stage IDRPs and further meetings are planned to pursue this initiative.

Our stakeholder work is proving exciting and interesting and is expanding rapidly. We are seeing a genuine interest by schemes, providers and pension administrators to work with us, sharing ideas and intelligence

New apprenticeship scheme at TPO

We have recently launched a new apprenticeship scheme and are currently assessing applications with a view to a new apprentice starting with us in September.

The apprentice will be working towards a Workplace Pensions apprenticeship – a standard we know many of you were involved in working up. While this standard was mainly designed for those working in pension administration we have been able to make this particular apprenticeship scheme work for us too.

The apprentice will take part in a series of rotations around the organisation. In the first year the apprentice will work with our Business Support Team to gain a good understanding of how the organisation is supported; then to our Jurisdiction Team to learn the first stages of an investigation such as collecting information from applicants, telephone enquiries and the rules around whether or not we can accept a case for investigation; and finally to one of our

and support our corporate objectives to resolve more complaints at source, improve the customer journey and increase customer satisfaction.

Casework Teams where they will see first-hand what is required to be a successful adjudicator.

In the second year the apprentice will work on a part time basis while they study for a number of qualifications including some from the Pensions Management Institute. The apprentice will follow a mixed number of cases, including ill health, death benefits and refusal to pay, from beginning to end. They will use their experience from the previous year to make decisions on the next stage of the investigation, working alongside the assigned adjudicator of that case.

This is the first time we have taken on an apprentice so it will be a learning curve for us as well as the individual. We know that many of you also have similar schemes, some of which are very well established, and we would be interested to hear about your experience. We will keep you updated about how our scheme develops.

For more details about our Apprenticeship scheme contact: adam.pokun@pensions-ombudsman.org.uk