

From the Ombudsman **Robert Behrens CBE**

William Wragg MP,
Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee



Sent by email only

28 January 2021

Dear Mr Wragg,

I am writing to update you on PHSO's plans for 2021-22 in light of the one-year funding settlement from Government, as I committed to do in my previous letter of 8 December 2020.

PHSO's priorities for 2021-22

You will recall that PHSO held a public consultation on a draft new three-year corporate strategy between July and September 2020. We received broad support for these proposals, but PHSO's ability to deliver the new the strategy was always contingent on securing the necessary funding settlement from HM Treasury.

Since we closed the consultation on the draft strategy, the Government has postponed the next three-year funding settlement and made clear that the one-year funding allocation for next year should be used to address the impact of demand and COVID-19. As a result, we have had to change PHSO's plans for the next period.

In reviewing PHSO's plans, we have also taken into account the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on PHSO's service and the ability of the organisations we receive complaints about to respond to us, as the NHS and the Government focus their resources on responding to the ongoing crisis. These combined pressures continue to have a significant impact on how many cases PHSO is able to close.

Accordingly, and with the endorsement of PHSO's board, we will postpone the launch of PHSO's new three-year strategy until we can secure the three-year funding settlement necessary to deliver it. Instead, we will use 2021-22 as a bridging year to lay the foundations for the new strategy and focus on addressing the significant operational challenges facing PHSO's service.

This means we will prioritise the quality and productivity of PHSO's core complaints-handling service. We will also use 2021-22 to carry out preliminary work to support the new three-year strategy, such as improvements to some of PHSO's core systems and processes, and highlighting opportunities for Parliament to make essential improvements to PHSO's legal framework, such as removing the MP filter.

Over the remaining weeks of 2020-21, we will proceed with a number of key commitments, such as publishing the final version of the NHS Complaints Standards and endeavouring to pilot their implementation.



PHSO's casework service

As I set out above, PHSO's service has been severely affected by the ongoing COVID-19 situation in a number of ways, from the impact of school closures on the availability of staff, to pressures on the NHS that mean services are taking longer to respond to PHSO's requests for information. As a result, PHSO is closing substantially fewer cases than usual and, in turn, this means a growing number of complainants are waiting for their case to be allocated to a caseworker.

Although we have started to recruit some more caseworkers, it takes a minimum of six months to train new staff and even with additional caseworkers, it is clear that complainants will face increasingly long wait times unless we take further action.

We are considering carefully what changes would enable PHSO's casework service to help complainants presenting the most serious issues to get an outcome to their complaint at the earliest opportunity. I will update you again once we have decided and worked through the best way to do this.

PACAC's report on PHSO's performance in 2019-20

On Monday 25 January, PACAC published the report of its scrutiny inquiry into PHSO's performance in 2019-20. We will respond to this in full separately I acknowledge your response of January 26 2021 to my letter of 25 January 2021.

Yours sincerely,

Rob Behrens

Rob Behrens CBE
Ombudsman and Chair
Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman



Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

Telephone: 0300 061 4308

Email: Rob.Behrens@
ombudsman.org.uk

www.ombudsman.org.uk