Honesty Objectivity Openness Selflessness Integrity Accountability Leadership

Public sector ombudsman review

Terms of reference

The Ethics and Integrity Commission is carrying out a review into the public sector ombudsman system.

Our predecessor, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, published a report in 2025 called ‘Recognising and responding to early warning signs in public sector bodies’. That report called on the public sector to get better at putting in place systems to identify institutional failings and develop a culture where people are ready and willing to take action.

While identifying problems within an organisation is the responsibility of the organisation’s leaders, public sector ombudsman schemes, with their remit to consider complaints that public authorities have not acted properly or fairly or provided a poor service, are in a unique position to draw attention to systemic issues within an organisation and to identify common themes across different bodies within their domain.

Over the years, Parliamentary Committees, expert bodies and independent reviews have recommended modernising public service ombudsman schemes but, to date, reform has not been seen as a priority for the Government of the day.

With a plethora of lengthy and expensive public inquiries in recent years revealing major organisational failures, the first review of the Ethics and Integrity Commission will look at whether public service ombudsman schemes should play an enhanced role in investigating systemic issues before they escalate and supporting public bodies to instigate swift and meaningful improvements to public services.

ETHICS & INTEGRITY Commission

Our review will:

1. inquire into the public's expectations of the role of the modern public sector ombudsman;

2. consider how ombudsman schemes should balance handling complaints made by individuals with identifying and investigating systemic failings and supporting public bodies with institutional learning;

3. identify the powers required by ombudsman schemes in order to be able to investigate systemic failings; and any barriers to initiating systemic investigations;

4. identify the appropriate oversight mechanisms required for any proposed changes;

5. examine whether advisory Complaint Standards are sufficient for encouraging high standards of complaints handling in the public sector or whether ombudsman Complaint Standards should be statutory;

6. consider whether the recommendations of ombudsman schemes should be binding; and

7. explore ways to make it easier for the public to navigate the public sector ombudsman landscape.