

# Caseworker Competency Framework

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## Foreword

This Caseworker Competency Framework came into effect in September 2018. It sets out what the Ombudsman Association's members and stakeholders consider to be good practice. While it is primarily for the use of the Association's members, it may also be of interest to the public, academics and other stakeholders.

### The Ombudsman Association

The Ombudsman Association's members<sup>1</sup> include all major public services and private sector ombudsman schemes and complaint handling bodies in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Britain's Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories.

The vision of the Ombudsman Association is that throughout the public and private sectors:

- it is straightforward and simple for people to complain;
- people making a complaint are listened to and treated fairly;
- a complaint is dealt with quickly, fairly and effectively at the earliest stage by suitably trained staff;
- people have access to an ombudsman in all areas of consumer and public services; and
- the learning from a complaint is used to improve services.

Our members provide an independent and impartial service to resolve complaints, through individual redress and systemic investigations. They feed back the lessons learned from complaints to the organisations complained about, to help them improve

complaints management and, ultimately, service delivery for the wider public.

### Creating this Framework

This Caseworker Competency Framework is the product of a detailed research and consultation exercise. It draws on existing competency models that are used by both members and external organisations.

It was developed by a Working Group of individuals with a range of expertise and perspectives, including caseworkers, learning and development professionals, and senior managers within member organisations. The development process was supported by engagement with the Ombudsman Association's wider membership as well as a public consultation. The resulting Framework reflects current international good practice standards.

### Using this Framework

This Framework takes the form of recommendations and guidance. It should be read in conjunction with other guidance published by the Ombudsman Association, including the Ombudsman Association's Service Standards Framework<sup>2</sup>. It does not replace or modify any relevant regulations or legislation that members already have regard to.

As set out in the Service Standards Framework, members of the Ombudsman Association should ensure that their staff who consider complaints have the relevant knowledge, training and skills. Whilst strict adherence to this Framework is not mandatory

<sup>1</sup> A list of the Ombudsman Association's members can be found here:  
[www.ombudsmanassociation.org/association-members.php](http://www.ombudsmanassociation.org/association-members.php)

<sup>2</sup> [www.ombudsmanassociation.org/docs/OA17%20Service%20Standards%202017\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ombudsmanassociation.org/docs/OA17%20Service%20Standards%202017_Final.pdf)

to meet the Ombudsman Association's membership criteria, members are expected to utilise the Framework or an equivalent or adapted model to ensure good practice. Members should make information publicly available about the model they use. Members should also take care to ensure that claims of compliance with any Ombudsman Association guidance are not misleading.

## About the Caseworker Competency Framework

### Purpose

The purpose of a competency framework is to identify the key capabilities that a person needs to be successful in a particular profession or role. It clarifies performance expectations and establishes a link between individual and organisational aims.

At a general level, the Ombudsman Association's Caseworker Competency Framework is intended to support the development of the caseworker profession and guide the way that caseworkers approach their role, including the way they make decisions and interact with others. There are many potential benefits of increasing alignment in this area, from new opportunities for joint working and secondments, to improved consistency of user experience across the sector.

More specifically, the Framework can be used by the Association's members to inform a variety of internal processes such as:

- developing tools for recruiting individuals who have the potential to excel in a caseworker role;

- setting caseworker objectives and reviewing personal and team performance;
- commissioning or delivering targeted caseworker training programs;
- ensuring that caseworker roles are aligned with organisational values and aims;
- identifying longer term development pathways to facilitate career progression.

The Framework may also help service users to understand what they can expect from a caseworker, driving transparency and reassuring users that they will be treated fairly and professionally.

### Embedding the Framework within your organisation

This Framework provides a model that the Association's members can use to embed good practice within their organisations. However, Ombudsman schemes and complaint handling bodies inevitably have different structures and objectives, reflecting variations in size, sector and stakeholder needs. Members will need to carefully consider how the Framework can best be used to inform and improve their existing ways of working.

In doing so, it is important to keep in mind that this Framework is not intended to be used as a check-list of fixed attributes against which caseworkers should be assessed. It is also not a minimum standard that must be met.

Rather, competencies can be possessed in varying degrees and can be enhanced over time with experience and training. The Framework should be used to help individuals – regardless of their

level of seniority – to identify areas for ongoing development that will aid their progression and contribute to success.

## Who is a caseworker?

Ombudsman schemes and complaint handling bodies support service users in a variety of ways. A particular complaint handling journey might be relatively short, for example where an enquiry is resolved by preliminary telephone advice. Alternatively, the process might be more detailed and involve the full investigation and resolution of a complaint. Different staff within the complaint handling body will become involved depending on the journey in question. A service user might interact with multiple staff members throughout the process of resolving a single complaint.

For the purposes of this Framework:

A caseworker is a member of staff who has a direct role in helping to resolve a complaint.

This could include individuals who give advice, carry out investigations, draft written determinations and/or issue decisions.

Members are encouraged to consider which roles within their own organisations could be characterised as caseworker roles and could therefore benefit from the application of this Framework. Members should also consider whether additional personnel would benefit from having regard to the competencies in this Framework, given the impact of their roles on the caseworker function.

## What is a competency?

A competency is a professional strength that helps a person to do their job well. Different competencies are necessary for different job types. This Framework identifies the foundational

competencies that are valuable across all caseworker roles.

Competencies are related to, but distinct from, organisational values such as transparency and accessibility. They are also distinct from the tasks that caseworkers are required to perform and the technical or subject-specific knowledge they possess. Rather, competencies underpin the way in which a person approaches a workplace situation, driving their behaviour and thus guiding their level of success.

This Framework sets out six core competencies that are demonstrated by effective caseworkers. Each core competency is accompanied by a short description of how it contributes to a caseworker's ability to provide a quality service. In addition, each core competency is broken down into several competency areas, which together assist a caseworker in displaying the relevant core competency. A summary diagram of the competencies appears on page 6.

## What is an indicative behaviour?

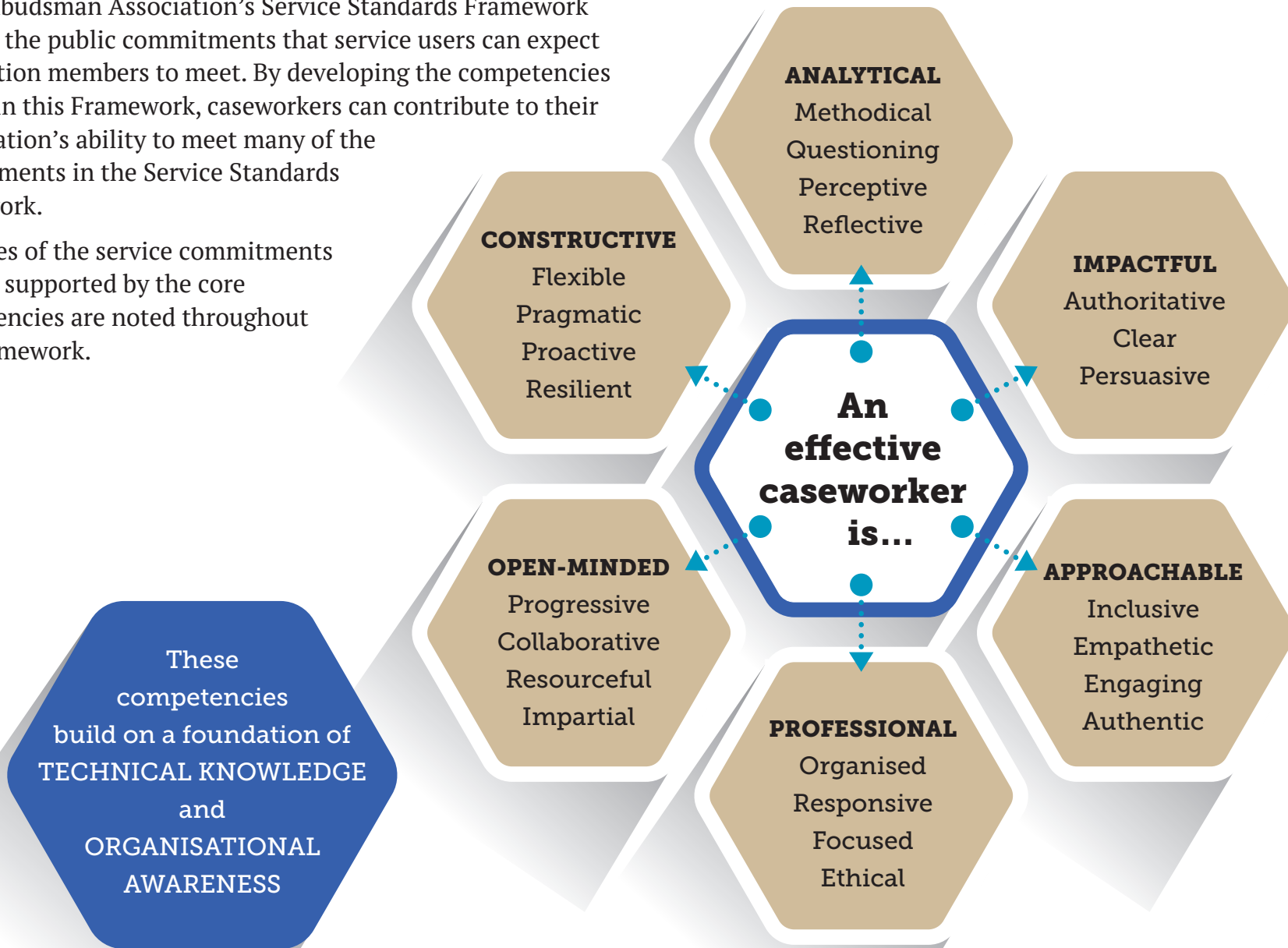
The competencies identified in this Framework are accompanied by indicative behaviours. These provide examples of how a competency might be demonstrated (effective behaviours) or not demonstrated (ineffective behaviours) by a caseworker.

The indicative behaviours are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Competencies can be exhibited in various ways and these might change and develop throughout a professional career. Ombudsman Association members might therefore wish to build on or adapt the indicative behaviours in line with specific organisational priorities. They might also find that additional behaviours are appropriate for more senior staff.

### Link to the Service Standards Framework

The Ombudsman Association’s Service Standards Framework sets out the public commitments that service users can expect Association members to meet. By developing the competencies set out in this Framework, caseworkers can contribute to their organisation’s ability to meet many of the commitments in the Service Standards Framework.

Examples of the service commitments that are supported by the core competencies are noted throughout this Framework.



## Caseworker competencies

### Core competency 1:

### ANALYTICAL

An effective caseworker critically examines information and issues to arrive at well-reasoned and appropriate decisions that stand up to scrutiny.

I am...	Methodical	Questioning	Perceptive	Reflective
Effective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carries out tasks systematically</li> <li>• Distils complex problems into manageable parts</li> <li>• Gathers and assimilates information efficiently</li> <li>• Engages with expert advisers where relevant</li> <li>• Draws reasonable conclusions from complicated or incomplete data</li> <li>• Applies sound reasoning to reach logical decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looks at problems and evidence with a critical eye</li> <li>• Probes to identify the key issues, separating opinion from fact</li> <li>• Actively listens and clarifies understanding</li> <li>• Identifies knowledge gaps and seeks to address them</li> <li>• Checks the meaning and source of information where appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considers problems in their wider organisational and external contexts</li> <li>• Identifies and acts upon trends across data and experiences</li> <li>• Understands when to escalate issues or seek input</li> <li>• Recognises the validity, relevance and limitations of different types of evidence</li> <li>• Detects and guards against risks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitors progress against plans and objectives</li> <li>• Identifies and learns from mistakes</li> <li>• Measures and evaluates the success of a decision or approach</li> <li>• Seeks feedback and acts upon it</li> <li>• Considers how others within or outside the organisation might benefit from learnings</li> </ul>
Ineffective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overlooks potentially important details</li> <li>• Begins tasks without a clear plan or objective</li> <li>• Quickly jumps to conclusions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepts information at face value</li> <li>• Is reluctant to clarify understanding</li> <li>• Lacks the confidence or ability to challenge assumptions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on detail without considering the bigger picture</li> <li>• Approaches issues in isolation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignores or avoids feedback</li> <li>• Moves on from mistakes without assessing what went wrong</li> </ul>

#### Relevant Ombudsman Association Service Standards:

- The reasons for decisions should be documented and explained to relevant parties
- Members should actively seek feedback about their service and use it to improve



## Core competency 2:

## IMPACTFUL

An effective caseworker uses their communication skills to influence a diverse range of people, building consensus and understanding.

I am...	Clear	Persuasive	Authoritative
Effective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses plain language that is easy to understand</li> <li>• Communicates complex issues in a concise and straightforward manner</li> <li>• Drafts well-structured, comprehensible documents</li> <li>• Provides explanations before misunderstandings occur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusts communication tone and style to suit the audience</li> <li>• Presents information in a way that is evidence-based and convincing</li> <li>• Strikes a sound balance between directness and diplomacy</li> <li>• Communicates using appropriate methods and timing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quickly builds credibility</li> <li>• Displays confidence in own ability and decisions</li> <li>• Interacts confidently with others and appropriately articulates points of view</li> <li>• Takes robust decisions as appropriate for role level</li> </ul>
Ineffective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produces incoherent or ambiguous written documents</li> <li>• Uses jargon without explaining its meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes no attempt to generate buy-in to an approach or idea</li> <li>• Responds in a generic way irrespective of the situation</li> <li>• Relies on their position to overcome objection rather than sound analysis communicated well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot clearly explain the rationale for decisions or actions</li> <li>• Becomes defensive when challenged</li> <li>• Readily concedes when faced with opposition, even if it is poorly reasoned or evidenced</li> </ul>

**Relevant Ombudsman Association Service Standards:**

- Members should be accurate in their communications with service users using plain and clear language
- Members should explain their role to service users
- Members should clearly explain to service users their process for handling complaints about organisations and likely timescales



## Core competency 3:

## CONSTRUCTIVE

An effective caseworker successfully navigates changing and sometimes challenging environments to respond dynamically to service users' needs and achieve personal and organisational goals.

I am...	Flexible	Pragmatic	Proactive	Resilient
Effective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusts priorities to reflect the demands of customers, both internal and external</li> <li>• Shows awareness of how an approach impacts on others and adapts accordingly</li> <li>• Embraces change and seeks opportunities from it</li> <li>• Responds nimbly to changing work practices and situations</li> <li>• Is willing to take on new tasks or roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaches sustainable decisions, taking into account their practical implications</li> <li>• Provides usable results and outputs</li> <li>• Looks for mutually beneficial solutions</li> <li>• Undertakes investigations of appropriate depth relative to all the circumstances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes initiative in achieving and improving outcomes</li> <li>• Takes ownership of tasks and decisions</li> <li>• Thinks ahead and prepares for the future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows tenacity in pursuing goals and managing workload</li> <li>• Accepts that situations are sometimes uncertain and continues to strive for excellence despite this</li> <li>• Knows when to ask for help and support</li> <li>• Deals calmly with conflict and meets the challenges of difficult complaints</li> </ul>
Ineffective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loses focus when priorities change or the situation is pressurised</li> <li>• Is unable to accommodate a variety of needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on processes to the exclusion of outcomes</li> <li>• Proposes impractical or unrealistic solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepts the status quo</li> <li>• Expects others to identify or create professional development opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is easily disillusioned by setbacks, missing opportunities for growth</li> <li>• Focuses on the worst case scenario</li> <li>• Waits until circumstances are overwhelming before seeking support or guidance</li> <li>• Avoids conflict</li> </ul>

**Relevant Ombudsman Association Service Standards:**

- Members should ensure that their procedures are customer focused

## Core competency 4:

## APPROACHABLE

An effective caseworker creates an open and reassuring culture to earn the trust of others and generate confidence in the case-handling process.

I am...	Inclusive	Empathetic	Engaging	Authentic
Effective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treats others with courtesy, dignity and respect</li> <li>• Adopts an open and appropriate communication style</li> <li>• Works to make the service accessible to all</li> <li>• Contributes to a positive organisational culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sees things from other people's perspectives, recognising and accounting for the barriers they might face</li> <li>• Quickly builds trust and rapport</li> <li>• Delivers difficult messages with tact and sensitivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approaches situations with enthusiasm and positivity</li> <li>• Presents information in a way that fosters genuine understanding</li> <li>• Uses relevant illustrations and comparisons to explain complex concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acts with integrity</li> <li>• Leads by example</li> <li>• Is sincere and candid in interactions with others</li> <li>• Sets high personal standards</li> </ul>
Ineffective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not recognise diversity and difference</li> <li>• Makes others feel uncomfortable or marginalised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows insensitivity, indiscretion or intolerance towards others</li> <li>• Expects unrealistic levels of knowledge or objectivity from service users</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents views negatively or without conviction</li> <li>• Is unable to balance busyness with the need to be accessible to others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes personal credit for a team effort</li> <li>• Is not open and honest</li> </ul>

**Relevant Ombudsman Association Service Standards:**

- Members should work with complainants to understand their needs
- Members should make reasonable efforts to support access to their service for any user
- Members should treat service users courteously, respectfully and with dignity

**Core competency 5: OPEN-MINDED**

An effective caseworker approaches problems and new ideas without prejudgement to generate fair solutions that maximise the potential of available resources.

I am...	Progressive	Collaborative	Resourceful	Impartial
Effective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Embraces innovation and looks for ways to get the most from new approaches</li> <li>Identifies and suggests improvements to ways of working</li> <li>Keeps abreast of relevant professional developments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develops strong working relationships and networks</li> <li>Seeks input and insights from others</li> <li>Works effectively in a team</li> <li>Delivers timely and constructive feedback to others</li> <li>Shares knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develops options and considers alternatives</li> <li>Weights costs and benefits of possible approaches, taking into account the interests of all parties, to maximise the effectiveness of the process</li> <li>Manages limited resources efficiently to achieve results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acts with neutrality and objectivity</li> <li>Is willing to reconsider decisions in light of new information or ideas</li> <li>Is aware of how decisions are affected by unconscious bias and openly interrogates decision-making processes to minimise its impact</li> <li>Is able to make difficult or unpopular decisions when necessary</li> </ul>
Ineffective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remains attached to outdated processes and technologies</li> <li>Rejects opportunities to learn and develop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is closed to proposals and contributions from others</li> <li>Works in a silo, duplicating effort and resisting input</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lacks creativity in problem-solving</li> <li>Uses the same resources or approach by default</li> <li>Is unable to integrate information and ideas from different perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Makes assumptions about others without considering their unique circumstances</li> <li>Takes decisions that are not supported by evidence</li> <li>Easily succumbs to pressure or insistence</li> </ul>

**Relevant Ombudsman Association Service Standards:**

- Members should work with service users without discrimination or prejudice
- Members should make decisions on cases based on their independent and impartial evaluation of the relevant evidence

## Core competency 6:

## PROFESSIONAL

An effective caseworker strives for excellence in all their individual and team endeavours to meet other people's expectations and deliver a high-quality service.

I am...	Organised	Responsive	Focused	Ethical
Effective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plans and prioritises workload effectively</li> <li>Follows relevant systems and policies</li> <li>Successfully manages interconnected processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delivers on promises and meets agreed deadlines</li> <li>Responds to others in a timely manner</li> <li>Demonstrates customer focus</li> <li>Operates at pace</li> <li>Revisits plans when circumstances change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sets objectives and has direction</li> <li>Pursues personal and organisational goals with energy and determination</li> <li>Shows commitment to and pride in high quality service delivery</li> <li>Strives for continuous improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Upholds the organisation's values</li> <li>Acts in accordance with fundamental principles such as fairness, equality and respect for individual rights</li> <li>Pursues justice in both outcomes and processes</li> </ul>
Ineffective behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keeps incomplete or unclear records</li> <li>Adopts working practices that put security or confidentiality at risk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fails to keep service users or colleagues informed</li> <li>Responds to queries in a generic manner, failing to account for individual needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is disengaged</li> <li>Shies away from challenges</li> <li>Procrastinates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoids addressing errors or poor behaviours</li> <li>Rigidly adheres to standard processes regardless of appropriateness</li> <li>Abuses the power of the role or office</li> <li>Only assists others in exchange for personal gain</li> </ul>

**Relevant Ombudsman Association Service Standards:**

- Members should keep service users regularly informed of the progression of their case, and how long things are likely to take
- Members should deal with complaints in a timely manner, taking into account the complexity of the case
- Members should ensure their record keeping is accurate and that they hold data securely



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'Ombudsman Association' is the  
public name of the British and  
Irish Ombudsman Association

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