

## Summary of the IA report to the OS Board 2017

The Independent Assessor (IA) can review complaints about OS service which have been fully reviewed by the OS service complaint process. The IA has no jurisdiction over the decisions of the Investigation Team, including their weighting of evidence, assessment of what is relevant in a case or final remedies, which remain the responsibility of the Ombudsman.

### Caseload and outcomes in 2017

One hundred cases were escalated to the IA in 2017; a third fewer than in 2016. These 100 cases comprised more than 500 separate elements of complaint, as there are often multiple issues within one case.

For the first seven months of the year the outcomes of cases continued to be categorised as 'upheld' or 'not upheld', but most 'upheld' elements had already been apologised for in the OS internal complaint process. From August 2017 a 'justified' finding was added to the IA 'upheld' or 'not upheld' categories and is used where a complaint has merit, but has already been acknowledged.

The most common elements of complaint to be justified or upheld by the IA this year were about communication, followed by process error and then delay – these categories together represented around 70% of the complaints made which had merit. The further 10% of complaints made which had merit were small in number and quite evenly distributed between concerns about goodwill payment, rudeness or inappropriate treatment, remedy implementation, premature case closure and failure to make reasonable adjustment to meet a vulnerable customer's needs.

Recent years' data show that the number of delay cases have declined markedly, but that process error cases are increasing.

### IA Case Recommendations

Recommendations are made for apology, goodwill payment and other actions to restore a complainant to the position they would be in had there been no service error. The total sum recommended in goodwill payment in 2017 is lower than in 2016 reflecting that fewer IA cases, and that more cases have been well reviewed with appropriate goodwill already offered before reaching the IA.

| <i>Additional IA goodwill payments</i> | <b>No. of cases</b> | <b>% of cases</b> |
|--|---------------------|-------------------|
|--|---------------------|-------------------|

|   |    |     |
|---|----|-----|
| None (previous goodwill sufficient, apology only or none merited) | 39 | 39% |
| £50 or less   | 46 | 46% |
| £51 to £100   | 12 | 12% |
| More than £100  | 1  | 1%  |

Complainants often want OS to learn from their poor experience and the IA now meets regularly with OS staff to review the root cause of individual cases to avoid the repetition of avoidable problems.

### **Conclusion**

The new 'justified' category for IA findings makes it clearer that most of the elements of complaint with merit have already been acknowledged and apologised for in the internal complaint process. Of those that have not, and are upheld by the IA, almost half are for process error.

Although the number of cases that have focused on failure to make reasonable adjustment for vulnerable customers is small, the distress they can cause is significant. I have identified this is an area that OS could focus efforts for improvement to ensure all customers get the same level of service and the organisation can be flexible to accommodate their needs.

I continue to be grateful to the complainants for bringing their concerns to me and to OS for being so open to the feedback that I offer.

**Joanna Wallace**  
**January 2018**