

Summary Annual Report of the Independent Assessor - 2018

Fewer cases were escalated to the IA in 2018 (83 cases) than in 2017 (100 cases) continuing the downward trend since 2016 (149 cases). Referrals to the IA sit in the context of complaints about OS overall and I feel that the quality of Customer Relations' replies to service complaints at what was the second stage has been generally excellent. I rarely see straightforward complaints of poor service that have simply not been properly investigated by OS themselves, although the complexity and timespan of the cases that are referred to the IA is increasing.

As IA I can only consider concerns about OS' service or administration of a case and have no remit over the decisions of the Investigation Team in the provider case, including the assessment and weighting of evidence or the final remedies and awards.

The 83 cases I considered this year comprised around 420 separate elements of complaint, ranging from one to 13 in any case. Since the middle of 2017 my findings for each element of complaint have been classified as **Upheld**, **Not upheld** or **Justified** - if the complaint has merit but has already been acknowledged during the earlier complaints process.

78% of the elements I considered this year were upheld or justified, so had merit; more than two thirds of those were justified and had already been acknowledged before IA review. I was most likely to identify new issues of process error in cases.

In 2018 the most frequently concerns (83% of elements raised) were:

- Communications/Inaccuracy (40% of elements);
- Process Error (33% of elements);
- Delay (10% of elements).

There were other individual cases of concern, regarding remedy implementation and premature case closure – which whilst distressing for the complainants did not seem to indicate systemic problems in the OS business.

I flagged three particular issues of concern for the Board's attention:

- A continuing failure to show improvement in making reasonable adjustment for disability or vulnerable customers;
- Failure to adjust timeframes for complaints conducted by post, creating an equal service for complainants who are often elderly or more vulnerable;

- Data Breaches, which though small in number are a cause for concern in terms of impact.

To try to make amends for poor service, IA case recommendations can include:

- Apology;
- Goodwill payment;
- Systemic or case specific actions; or
- Operational staff review so lessons can be learned.

I recommended additional goodwill payments in 39% of cases I saw, most frequently of £50 or less. I also asked OS in 2018 to include in their final response to service complaints that if a case is escalated to the IA, I look at that afresh and independently and as such a goodwill award offered by OS may not be maintained when I reach my own conclusions on a case.

I close this summary again by thanking the complainants for bringing their cases to me and to OS for being open to the feedback I give.