

# Departmental response to the Adjudicator's Office 2019 annual report

The Adjudicator's Office published its [annual report](#) in June 2019. The report sets out a number of recommendations based on insight from investigated complaints, topical reports, thematic reports and real-time tracking that was conducted in 2018 to 2019.

In July, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury's Written Ministerial Statement on HMRC Powers and Customer Safeguards confirmed the department's commitment to provide a published response to the report. This is provided below in relation to the 5 over-arching themes that emerged from the annual report.

## **Learning from complaints**

The annual report emphasised the need for the department (HMRC and its executive agency, the Valuation Office Agency (VOA)), not only to recognise and promote the importance of learning from complaints, but also to use that insight to inform the way it responds to complaints and to bring about transformative as well as transactional change.

Over the past year HMRC has taken a number of steps to respond effectively to the Adjudicator's feedback. A Complaints Insight Board was established in July in recognition of the need to address strategic issues arising from complaints more effectively and embed learning from complaints. Both the Adjudicator and Head of Office are independent members of the board. The board has already helped raise the visibility and promote the importance of learning from complaints.

The Adjudicator also attends the Customer Experience Committee (a subcommittee of HMRC's Board) and the committee has given its advice on how to best use complaints insight.

HMRC has existing processes to promote and utilise learning from complaints, such as monthly insight reports and bulletins disseminated to frontline staff. However, HMRC will conduct a deep dive exercise to assure and, if needed, improve further the use of insight from customer complaints that are not escalated to the Adjudicator. The assurance will be completed and any new approach established by September 2020.

## **Culture**

The Adjudicator emphasised the need for a cultural shift within HMRC, so that there is a greater focus on taking a customer-centred approach alongside recognition of the importance of good complaint handling. In particular, the

Adjudicator emphasised that HMRC should: (a) develop a greater appreciation of the need to prioritise the customer experience; (b) ensure customers and complaints are handled with empathy and accuracy; and (c) provide greater encouragement for HMRC's people to take ownership for errors.

HMRC already has a number of programmes in place to support staff in being customer-focused – for example, the 'Walking in the Customer's Shoes' programme. It is also making modifications to guidance and continuous improvement to the language and tone of correspondence. In addition, HMRC has undertaken a number of actions to support customers who need extra support. These include Customer Compliance Group establishing an Extra Support service for compliance checks, which builds on arrangements already in place within Customer Services Group.

HMRC's Customer Services Group is exploring a new approach for complaints handling, and Customer Compliance Group is carrying out a programme of work focused on professionalism and improving customer experience. This includes refreshing HMRC's professional standards for compliance work as well as a number of operational improvements to the management of casework.

The Customer Experience Committee is currently overseeing the review of the Customer Charter, which sets out what customers can expect from HMRC.

HMRC expects that these programmes of work will help bring about the desired shift in organisational culture.

## **Complaints handling**

The annual report highlights 2 high level issues for improving the way HMRC handles complaints. These are: (a) the need to take a holistic view of a customer's concerns by providing HMRC staff with the skills and flexibility to resolve issues at the first point of contact; and (b) digitising the complaint handling process

HMRC is currently developing a new operating model for complaint handling which aims to ensure complaints are identified and resolved at the first opportunity across HMRC. This builds on findings from performance data, insight from customers, Adjudicator Office feedback, as well as a comprehensive end-to-end review of the complaints process. The main objective is to streamline existing processes to improve the customer experience and ensure the right outcome for the customer is achieved as quickly as possible. The design phase and staff training have been completed with the pilot expected to run through early 2020.

HMRC has also made progress on ensuring there is digital access to the Adjudicator. In the summer the Adjudicator's Office website went live on GOV.UK providing clear signposting to customers on when and how to escalate complaints. HMRC has also developed a secure digital channel to allow customers to contact the Adjudicator's Office by email. This service launched in January 2020.

The annual report highlighted a number of issues related to specific topics

for HMRC consideration, many of which were the subject of topical and thematic reports such as the NHS Widening Access Scheme, the transition from tax credits to Universal Credit, and treatment of delays.

Over the last year, HMRC has responded to feedback on these issues by: (a) updating and disseminating guidance; (b) providing training; and (c) conducting deep dives to understand issues better and use the findings to make operational improvements.

HMRC has also made steps to demonstrate improved decision-making in response to the learning that the Adjudicator offers through using the Customer Insight Board to better monitor actions and learning.

## **Collaborative working**

The annual report noted that ways of working between HMRC and the Adjudicator's Office have developed over the past 2 years. This is partly through the publication of the Service Level Agreement, which clarified the roles and responsibilities of the Adjudicator's Office, alongside the establishment of HMRC's Customer Experience Committee in December 2018, and more recently the Complaints Insight Board. All of which have provided opportunities for HMRC and the Adjudicator to build relationships and work collaboratively together on improving the customer experience and complaints handling.

To capitalise on these opportunities, HMRC has reviewed the effectiveness of its governance arrangements in relation to complaints insight, to ensure there is effective internal oversight of complaints and assurance to senior officials. Membership of the Complaints Insight Board has also been extended to VOA to enable all key stakeholders to participate in strategic decision-making in relation to complaints. VOA will also work more closely with HMRC on many of the actions mentioned in this response, in relation to its customer complaints.

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## **[YMCA Bournemouth's Chatterbox Project visit Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council CCTV control room](#)**

The Chatterbox group spent their time learning about why the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Community Safety Team (BCP) have CCTV, how to use the cameras, mapping, producing evidence and respecting people's privacy by masking images.

The Chatterboxes is a youth action project run by young people with

disabilities aged 11 to 25 years old from Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset. Within all groups there is a focus on transitions and supporting members to build skills to help them in the future. Young members also deliver awareness workshops/ training in the community, create youth friendly literature and organise community awareness events.

Poppy who works within the project said:

Being able to visit BCP council's CCTV unit has been a fantastic experience for the young people from The Chatterbox Project. With a range of disabilities, many of these young people feel unsafe when venturing into the town centre so having the opportunity to observe Bournemouth through the eyes of a CCTV camera and speak and ask questions to such friendly and kind camera operators has been a fantastic way to enable young people involved to gain a deeper understanding of how BCP Council's CCTV unit operates and in turn feel safer.

BCP welcomed the Chatterboxes into their control room as part of the Surveillance Camera Day 'doors open' initiative so they could see, first hand, how they operate CCTV.

Tony Gleason, CCTV Manager at BCP, said:

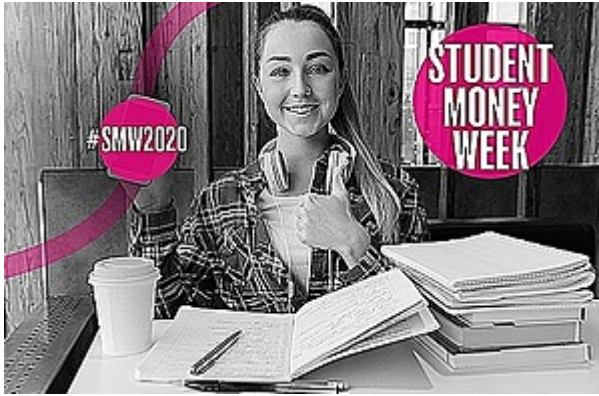
We really enjoyed the visit. We discussed why we have CCTV, how it makes people feel safer and how it helps the police. They learnt how to use the cameras, identified digital masking of private properties and the areas where we have CCTV cameras. Some of them had excellent computer skills and a good eye for detail.

Surveillance Camera Day is a national event to encourage a conversation about the use of surveillance cameras in modern society. The day is one of the deliverables of the civil engagement strand of the National Surveillance Camera Strategy and is a world first. To raise awareness about surveillance cameras and generate a debate about how they are used in society.

This year Surveillance Camera Day is taking place on 19 May. More information about the day and how to get involved can be found on the [Surveillance Camera Commissioner's website](#).

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## **[Student Money Week 2020](#)**



Student Finance England's annual Student Money Week (#SMW2020) will run from Monday 24 – Friday 28 February 2020 and include a series of live Q&A sessions on Student Finance England's Twitter and Facebook channels.

The sessions will cover a range of student finance related topics including; applying for student finance, eligibility and information for students who may be entitled to extra funding. Parents and partners are also being encouraged to get involved and find out how they can support their child or their partner's application and make sure they get all the finance they are entitled to.

Derek Ross, SLC Executive Director of Operations said:

"Our team of student finance experts will be on our social media channels throughout Student Money Week to explain how the student finance application system works and answer any questions. Whether students are getting ready to apply for student finance for the first time, or are returning to studies, we are here to help them."

The latest information on Student Money Week can be found by following SFE on [Facebook](#) and Twitter @SF\_England.

Published 24 February 2020

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## **Investigation Support Specialist (Electronic Data) – Southampton**



Your responsibilities will include:

- support inspectors in the identification, recovery and analysis of technical evidence relating to marine accidents
- work closely with inspectors on each case to identify relevant sources of evidence throughout the investigation
- provide forensic data recovery and analysis of complex data, including imaging and cloning of memory and the use of forensic analysis tools to recover embedded, protected or deleted data
- preparation of information and figures for the branch's published media
- supporting internal, external and international partners on matters relating to electronic data recovery and analysis

For further information about this position and how to apply see [Civil Service Jobs, Investigation Support Specialist \(Electronic Data\), Ref: 40848](#).

Closing date: 18 March 2020

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## [Annual report of the Chief Schools Adjudicator for England](#)

The annual report of the Chief Adjudicator, Ms Shan Scott, to the Secretary of State for Education, covering the period 1 September 2018 to 31 August 2019, is published today, 24 February 2020. The report records the progress made by admission authorities in England in complying fully with the School Admissions Code, and achieving fair access to schools for all children.

In her report, Ms Scott states that, as in past years, the overall impression from adjudicator casework, and reports from local authorities, is of an admissions system that as a whole works effectively in the normal admissions rounds, and in those rounds the needs of vulnerable children, and those with particular educational or social needs, are generally well met. There remains

concern about how well some vulnerable children fare when they need a place at other times.

The Chief Adjudicator said that, for many of the challenges or problems identified by a school, academy trust or local authority, there will be accounts elsewhere of schools, trusts or local authorities that have successfully addressed those same challenges or problems. In the course of their case work, adjudicators see much good practice, as well as some failures to comply with requirements. She has sought to reflect good practice from local authority reports and adjudicator casework in this report.

As in previous years, there are concerns that parents looking for determined admission arrangements on school and, in particular, council websites, may have difficulty finding the most up to date documents, effectively reducing their opportunity to make an informed choice of school place, or challenge those arrangements. More positively, many local authorities provide advice and guidance to other admission authorities in their areas, before those other admission authorities determine their own arrangements. Such an approach is likely to mean that any concerns the local authority has, or any questions the admission authority wishes to raise, can be dealt with before arrangements are determined. This in turn avoids the situation of a local authority's having to challenge arrangements that it believes do not comply with the Code.

Notes to editors:

- read the [annual report 2018 to 2019](#)
- Ms Shan Scott was appointed as an adjudicator in 2013, and to the post of Chief Adjudicator on 4 April 2016
- there are currently 10 adjudicators, including the Chief Adjudicator. All are part time and paid only for the work they are asked to undertake
- adjudicators resolve differences over the interpretation and application of legislation and guidance on school admissions, and statutory proposals concerning school organisation

In relation to all state-funded schools, adjudicators:

- rule on objections to, and referrals about, determined school admission arrangements

In relation to maintained schools, adjudicators:

- decide on requests to vary admission arrangements
- resolve disputes relating to school organisation proposals
- resolve disputes on the transfer and disposal of non-playing field land and assets
- determine appeals from admission authorities against the intention of the local authority to direct the admission of a particular pupil

The Chief Adjudicator can also be asked by the Secretary of State to provide advice and undertake other relevant tasks.

The Office of the Schools Adjudicator is a tribunal and its published

decisions can only be challenged through the courts.

Adjudicators do not deal with complaints from parents whose child has not been offered a place at a particular school.

DfE enquiries:

- central newsdesk: 020 7783 8300
- general enquiries: 0370 000 2288