

## **Office of the Pensions Ombudsman Accessibility policy**

The Office of the Pensions Ombudsman recognises that some of our customers may have particular difficulties in accessing our service. Such difficulties might be as a result of, for example, language, literacy, disability or mental health issues.

We are committed to providing an accessible service within the constraints of the legislation which governs the way we work. We take steps to ensure that our service is accessible to those who may wish to or need to use it, in accordance with our Aims and Principles and commitment to equal opportunities. In addition, when we develop and implement new policies we conduct an Equality Impact Assessment to ensure that no one should be disadvantaged in using our service as a result of their disability, race or gender. We have a Welsh Language Scheme and Action Plan and a Disability Equality Scheme.

We are open to reasonable suggestions about how we can provide a more accessible service, and all complainants and respondents are given the opportunity to appoint a representative if they wish to (although we do not offer to pay the cost of engaging a representative such as a solicitor). This policy explains how we deal with customers who might have particular difficulties accessing our service.

### **Access to our Office**

Our processes are such that, generally, the parties to a complaint to the Ombudsman do not meet each other or the staff investigating the complaint. However, in the event that this should be necessary, our building is equipped with step-free access, lifts and accessible toilet facilities.

### **Literacy**

By law applications to us must be made in writing. We also, generally expect complainants to send us (or be able to send us) any relevant evidence and/or further information in written format. We are committed to taking reasonable steps to ensure that those who find this difficult are able to use our service.

Where a complainant requires help to make their complaint and/or complete an application form, we will normally refer them to the Pensions Advisory Service for advice and assistance. However, in very exceptional circumstances, we may make an appointment to take a complaint by telephone and send this to the customer for agreement and signature. In such circumstances we will take no further action to deal with that complaint until we receive signed agreement.

### **Language**

Wherever possible, we will communicate clearly with our customers in English. We give customers the opportunity to tell us if they have particular language needs early on in our dealing with them, and we expect them to tell us if they require information in another language than English. Our leaflet(s) says that we are able to

provide copies in other languages and our application form asks applicants to let us know if they need us to communicate with them in other languages or formats.

Where we receive requests for general information about our service / leaflet(s) in languages other than English, these are passed to the Business Manager. The Business Manager ensures that each request is logged and that a translation of the requested document is obtained (where necessary and appropriate) and provided to the customer as soon as possible (usually within 10 working days).

Where parties request that we correspond with them in another language or provide translations of documents that are relevant to the investigation of their case, the investigator will liaise with the Business Manager to ensure that these are logged. The investigator will also ensure that relevant documents and correspondence are passed to the Business Manager or, at her request, a designated member of her team who will obtain translations and pass these back to the investigator to be issued as normal.

When we receive correspondence in other languages, a copy will be passed to the Business Manager, who will ensure that this is logged. Where necessary, the Business Manager will arrange for a translation to be obtained and passed to the staff member responsible for dealing with it as quickly as possible.

The Office will keep a record of staff who are able to speak, read or write in languages other than English, and who are willing to provide assistance in dealing with telephone calls, callers and correspondence in that other language. The Business Manager will ensure that any assistance given with this work is recorded.

## **Format**

We recognise that some of our customers require information in different formats, in order to properly access our service. We give complainants the opportunity to tell us if they require information in a different format early on in our dealing with them, and we expect them to tell us if they require information in a different format.

Where we receive requests for general information / leaflet(s) in different formats, we will take reasonable steps to provide this within a reasonable timescale. Such requests will be passed to the Business Manager, who will ensure that they are logged, along with whether we are able to meet the request.

We take telephone calls through Typetalk, and deal with our customers via e-mail (where this does not involve unencrypted personal information) and fax. Where requested, we can provide information / correspondence in Braille, large print or on audiotape for customers who require this. Such requests are passed to the Business Manager, who will log them and arrange to obtain information in the necessary format, for issue to the customer in the normal way.

Where we receive requests for information or correspondence in other formats, we will take reasonable steps to provide the required format, providing that the request is relevant to our business. However, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to meet every need or request.

## **Meetings**

Where we ask customers for a meeting (including oral hearings), we will check with them whether they have any special access requirements, or require an interpreter. We will take reasonable steps to ensure that such requirements are met and, if necessary, pay reasonable costs to ensure that such needs can be met.

Where customers ask to meet us in our office and we agree to that request, we will ask whether they have any special access requirements. If they require an interpreter, we will normally expect that they should provide and pay for that interpreter.

## **General**

Wherever possible, we endeavour to ensure that there are no unreasonable delays in dealing with matters where there have been requests for information / correspondence in other languages or where correspondence is received in other languages and requires translation.

Where we log a significant number of requests for information / leaflet(s) in a single language, we will consider obtaining a print run for that language or for a bi-lingual version of that publication. We will also consider increasing information in other languages on our website. Where we receive a significant number of telephone calls from customers who have difficulty dealing with us in English, we will consider engaging a simultaneous telephone translation service.

If we receive complaints about our response to requests for information in other languages or formats or our response to our customers' other particular access requirements, we will deal with them in the same way as we deal with other complaints about our service.

We will log complaints and respond promptly to them. We use information received in the course of dealing with any such complaints to actively seek ways to improve our service in future.