

Parliamentary Ombudsman criticises government agencies for data sharing blame game

In a new report published today (12 January 2011), Parliamentary Ombudsman Ann Abraham criticises three government agencies for collectively failing to put things right when a data sharing mistake led to a woman's personal and financial information being wrongfully disclosed to her former partner and her child support payments being reduced without her knowledge.

The report, *A Breach of Confidence*, is the outcome of the Ombudsman's investigation of Ms M's complaint about HM Revenue & Customs, the Child Support Agency and the Department for Work and Pensions, and their handling of her personal information. The chain of events leading up to Ms M's complaint to the Ombudsman dates back to 2006 when one of the government agencies involved incorrectly updated her records to show her living at her former partner's address, although she had in fact never lived there.

After discovering her details had been changed, Ms M tried to find out why and sought an assurance they had been corrected. She was passed from one government agency to the next, each denying responsibility. She then took the matter to her MP who subsequently referred it to the Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman upheld Ms M's complaint. In her report, the Ombudsman expresses her concern that:

- The network of computer systems used by HM Revenue & Customs, the Child Support Agency and the Department for Work and Pensions could make changes to Ms M's personal data without her knowledge or consent yet an interrogation of that network cannot now locate the source of any errors.

The agencies were unable to give Ms M the reassurance she sought about her personal information.

- Each of the agencies blamed another for the mistake and took the view that as the mistake had been made by '*the system*', there was nothing they could do. None of

the agencies involved accepted responsibility for what had happened to Ms M until the Ombudsman became involved.

- While these government agencies have computer systems that are networked and communicated with one another, the agencies themselves clearly do not.

Speaking about the investigation, the Ombudsman said:

“Ms M understandably found this experience extremely distressing. She was compelled to spend a good deal of time and money ensuring her records were correct, and she still lives with the fear of a recurrence. Ms M told us that her ultimate objective in pursuing her complaint was to have peace of mind that the source of the problem has been found and resolved so that she can be assured the same problem will not happen again. Although the lack of an audit trail means it will never be possible to understand fully what happened, I hope that my report will go some way towards giving Ms M the peace of mind she seeks.”

The Ombudsman has recommended that Ms M is given an apology, £2,000 compensation and an assurance that her details have been checked on every database owned by the three agencies involved. She has also recommended that the three agencies, in discussion with the Cabinet Office, agree a customer-focused protocol to deal with complaints of this kind. The Ombudsman has also taken the significant step of recommending that the Cabinet Office takes steps to ensure that lessons are learnt from Ms M’s experience and that appropriate guidance is disseminated to all government departments.

All the recommendations in the Ombudsman’s report have been accepted.

The Ombudsman added:

“There is an important warning here for all public bodies. The lessons from Mrs M’s experience and my investigation are not only about information sharing. Public bodies need to learn to get their administration right, to be customer-focused, be open and accountable and to work together to put things right when mistakes occur. Unless all this happens, public bodies run the risk of making other people feel the way Ms M told me she feels: that she will never be able to trust a government agency again.”

The full report is available from the Parliamentary Ombudsman's website

(www.ombudsman.org.uk).

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Notes to Editors:

1. Ann Abraham holds the post of Parliamentary Ombudsman and is also Health Service Ombudsman. She is appointed by the Crown and is completely independent of Government and the NHS. Her role is to provide a service to the public by undertaking independent investigations into complaints that government departments, a range of other public bodies in the UK, and the NHS in England, have not acted properly or fairly or have provided a poor service.
2. The Child Support Agency was an executive agency of the Department for Work and Pensions until October 2008 when they became one of the services provided by the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission. Given the timing of the events under investigation, for ease of reference the Ombudsman refers to the Child Support Agency throughout her report.
3. For media enquiries, please call the Press Office on 0300 061 4996 or email press@ombudsman.org.uk.