

In Conversation With: Property Ombudsman Christopher Hamer

You have worked in both the private sector and public sectors throughout your career – how has experience in each sector complemented the other?

I was in the Civil Service at a time when costs were not quite so rigidly controlled and it is true that there was a lot of slack. Nonetheless, the Civil Service gave me a good grounding in understanding how government works, how policy develops, and comprehensive training in management and so on. I was fortunate in having some very interesting positions, Private Secretary to the Parliamentary Ombudsman and as a member of the Cabinet Office Management and Efficiency Team (that was at a time when costs and containment of costs were becoming a big issue – and we were charged with identifying significant savings, from what I have said you will understand that this was not difficult). I believe the general grounding in Civil Service equipped me well for my



current role in trying to influence legislation and regulation and of course I have held positions in other Ombudsman schemes so the concept of the Ombudsman role has long been familiar to me.

Are there any trends emerging that you have noticed through your role?

The scheme has expanded significantly over the last four years with my work split about 45% sales, 55% lettings although the newer areas of jurisdiction – commercial, residential leasehold management, and international sales – have yet to be a big commitment.

The main trend is that many disputes are not about malicious intent or deliberate action by agents but simply and largely down to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Consumers don't necessarily equip themselves properly to enter into the property market and do not always comprehend the liabilities they are taking on. That does not mean they can avoid their responsibilities, but the agent is the professional in the transaction and it is his job to make sure his terms of business are clear and that the consumer understands the process.

How do you see the Property Ombudsman role evolving over the next 5 years? What are your aspirations for the service?

In five years' time I would like to see the service perhaps expanded into other areas of property related matters with consumers having one place for them to refer any property dispute (in relation to the service received from a property professional). I think also that the experience of the TPO over 20 years of dispute resolution can contribute strongly towards development of Ombudsman schemes throughout Europe, something which the German and Austrian estate agency trade associations have been in contact with me about.

Where might you be on a daily basis? Inside the office / at external meetings / speaking at conferences etc. What does a typical day look like to you?

Generally I will be in the office in Salisbury considering cases that have been prepared by my Case Officers although perhaps two days a week I will be in London or elsewhere attending, for example, an NAEA branch meeting or speaking to consumer groups or relevant government departments about policy towards

regulation or a property-related matter.

What are the main day-to-day challenges you face as Ombudsman?

Mainly with (smaller) lettings agents who, although obligated as a member of TPO to meet any awards, conform to my directions, will argue beyond reason about my decisions or be slow to meet their commitments and Complainants who will simply not let the matter go even though I have explained the reasoning for my decision to them many times.

What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?

The human element of the job. Every case we deal with is about a real life story and sometimes we please one side or the other to the extent that they write and thank us for our objective consideration of the matter and for resolving it.

What would you say is your most memorable moment or proudest achievement?

Beyond saying getting married or producing, with assistance, three sons and giving rise to four grandchildren as The Property Ombudsman it is helping bring the scheme to the forefront, contributing to the way the property sector views customer service, and enabling the development of TPO with its wider brief out of the old OEA (Ombudsman for Estate Agents).