

Ombudsman upholds complaint about Trust's delay in carrying out carer's assessment

The Public Services Ombudsman has upheld a complaint from a woman who waited 20 months to have a carer's assessment carried out by the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

Carer's assessments are aimed at seeing how a carer's life might be made easier. The woman had been acting as a carer in her family over a period of time before asking the Trust for the assessment. She complained to the Ombudsman about the length of her wait and about the time taken by the Trust to respond to her complaint to them.

The Investigating Officer obtained all relevant documentation from the Trust and discussed the case with the Trust's Clinical Psychologist and an Assistant Director.

The documents showed that in response to the request a Trust Social Worker recorded that an assessment was to be completed. However, despite the carer's ongoing contact with Trust staff from a number of disciplines over the next number of months, the assessment did not take place.

The Trust stated it had no specific carer's assessment policy during the period being reviewed. It provided copies of "Information and Guidance" for staff on completion of the carer's assessments, and guidance from the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) setting out the legislative context.

However, there was no record of direct communication with the carer about her assessment until eight months after the initial request. The Trust did not acknowledge her request, explain the delay, nor propose how the assessment would be provided. The assessment was finally completed in August 2014.

The Trust said that the long delay was because the process was relatively new and there was no clinical practitioner to lead on the case. However, the Ombudsman concluded that the Trust was aware at the time of the importance of acknowledging the role of carer and that it had failed in its statutory duty to act on the complainant's request. This part of the complaint was therefore upheld.

The Ombudsman also criticised the way the Trust handled the carer's complaint. The Trust did not provide a full response until July 2015, a full 21 months after the initial complaint.

Although there were issues relating to consent which the Trust sought to deal with, the Ombudsman's investigation found that limited information about the delay was provided to the carer. The Trust did not attempt to arrange to meet her to discuss the consent matter, or other matters.

The Trust's complaint policy states that there should be a 20 working day response time, with a possible extension not normally exceeding another 20 working days. Although the complaint file contained a large volume of material there was no clearly recorded explanation for almost all of the delays.

The Ombudsman recommend that the Trust's Chief Executive apologize to the carer for the injustices identified in her investigation, and that the Trust review its policies and procedures to ensure requests for carer's assessments are properly captured.

She also recommend that the Trust should conduct a review of its complaints process, particularly with a view to meeting complainants where appropriate and in the interests of avoiding unnecessary delays.

The full investigation report can be viewed [here](#).