



# **Report on Four Focus Groups conducted for the *Citizen Redress* NAO report**

**Patricia Bartholomeou, Rosie Campbell,  
Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts  
and Jane Tinkler**

We are very grateful to the 52 people who agreed to take part in these focus group discussions. We also thank the staff at ICM Research who helped us set up the events.

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### The Purpose of this Report

1. During June and July 2004, a team from LSE Public Policy Group and the School of Public Policy at University College, London carried out four focus groups in Leeds and Watford, along with an initial small pilot group in London to investigate how citizens perceived citizen redress processes in England. Citizen redress is defined here as the full range of options open to citizens to try to get changed or put right decisions or situations which they regard as wrong and for which a government department or agency is responsible. The groups were devised to inform the construction of questions for a national omnibus survey of citizens' attitudes towards government redress arrangements. The groups and survey formed part of a 'value for money' study carried out for the National Audit Office and published by them as *Citizen Redress: What citizens can do if things go wrong with public services* (London, The Stationary Office, 2005), published 9 March 2005. The report can be downloaded free from the Publications pages of [www.nao.gov.uk](http://www.nao.gov.uk) or from the site at [www.GovernmentOnTheWeb.org](http://www.GovernmentOnTheWeb.org), which is run jointly by LSE and UCL.

### How the Focus Group Discussions were Conducted

3. Focus groups offer a way of systematically acquiring qualitative data on specific topics. Each group included 12 people whom we recruited using the services of ICM Research. ICM staff contacted a large number of possible group members and worked from a small screening questionnaire (which we defined with them) to select rough cross-sections of the population with slightly differing characteristics. In both locations we divided the groups on an age basis, holding one group with 18 to 44 year olds, and another with people aged 45 to around 65. The two Leeds groups were designed to reach people with some recent experience of using government redress systems. The two Watford groups were designed to reach people who had no recent experience of using redress systems but who were relatively typical of the general population. We recorded each group using audio and video recorders and additional members of staff sat in on the discussions in the background and made detailed notes

of what was said and of how discussions developed. All quotes from participants given below are verbatim. The groups took place in smart local hotels with appropriate light refreshments. We paid participants who took part in our focus groups a small fee for their time because our sessions were quite lengthy (taking 1.5 hours of discussion) and took place in the early evenings.

5. Our approach followed a standard pro forma across all the groups with our facilitators beginning by getting people to think how they would contact a government department or agency if a problem arose and how they might try to get things put right. The facilitators followed this initial discussion through and then asked participants to think through in turn three hypothetical scenarios designed to elicit more specific ideas about how to get things put right. The scenarios covered having a problem with a tax coding, with a welfare benefit and with treatment in an NHS hospital, and we rotated the order of examples across the groups (see below paragraph 7). We next asked each group more questions about a range of other redress options, including contacting an MP, contacting an ombudsman and contacting independent complaints handlers. We asked additional questions about how people saw tribunals and appeals systems. We concluded in each case by asking participants to suggest reforms that they would think useful and in the three later groups we asked their view of a suggestion originating in the first group that there should be a general customer care centre that would help people with the early stages of making a complaint or an appeal by putting them in contact with the right officials in the right agency to handle their problem.

6. During the group sessions participants would often ask why and how government agency redress arrangements were set up as they are. Our facilitators never attempted to explain or justify arrangements but would ask other group members to comment on the questions raised. This approach was necessary for our facilitators to maintain their neutrality and to avoid any chance that a might inadvertently 'lead' participants by giving a response. Avoiding any apparently 'authoritative' answers being given is also necessary in order not to undermine the discussion nature of the sessions.

7. Our approach in the hypothetical scenarios was designed not to suggest that particular problems are prevalent but simply to 'seed' discussion by asking our participants about more specific situations –getting an income tax code corrected; complaining about the treatment of relative in an NHS hospital; and getting a benefits decision reconsidered and put right. We chose these examples because we hoped that they might be relevant for a wide range of people but we were careful to present problems in a neutral way and not to suggest that problems occurred differentially in these policy areas. And indeed the response from all of the groups was thoughtful and detailed with many people contributing stories and anecdotes of their interactions with the departments or agencies concerned. We have reported only a small selection of these more specific comments below, chiefly to show the range of experiences that people have across different services. It is important for readers to bear in mind that groups were responding to purely hypothetical scenarios, which we used solely to help people think through more specifically how they might be able to get a problem sorted out. It is also important to stress that in reporting views offered by members of the public, neither the study team nor NAO is in any way endorsing these views or putting them forward as correct or saying anything about whether similar views are widely held by the public or not. We additionally asked participants to tell us about

real instances of their seeking redress in the past and many people in all the groups had useful stories to tell. In this report we have concentrated on information that we hope will be helpful for government departments, public bodies or agencies *in general* in thinking about their own redress arrangements and the problems that they may pose for some citizens. The analysis here should be read in conjunction with Parts 3 and 4 of the *Citizen Redress* report, also available for free download from the websites above.

### **What Participants Would do to Initiate Seeking Redress**

8. We began by asking people in a general way: *If something went wrong in your dealings with a government agency, what would you do?* Reactions varied a good deal from group to group. The older Leeds group quickly reached consensus on the importance and usefulness of involving their local MPs, but in the other three groups reactions were much more mixed, with some people advocating trying to find the official responsible at lower levels and others recommending writing to the chief executive or even to the minister most responsible for the topic. Participants in the small London pilot group of young people had little idea what to do.

9. A minority of people said at the outset that they were uncertain or pessimistic of having any chance of success, especially in the two Watford groups where people did not have recent experience of complaining or appealing to draw on:

- ‘I wouldn’t know where to start’.
- ‘I wouldn’t do much about a central government problem’.
- ‘I’d probably give up... it’s not worth it’.
- ‘Just accept it... If it’s a legal thing... you can’t do anything, can you?’
- ‘At the end of the day, it’s sometimes not worth your while complaining’.

10. Amongst participants who felt more positive, some of the most confident respondents suggested contacting managers or officials directly responsible:

- ‘I’d start with the government department that it happened with, then I would move on a step’.
- ‘You’d phone some admin officer’.
- ‘Depends on the department...’
- ‘Whatever the scenario... start at the bottom and move up...’
- ‘In the department I’d try to speak to someone a bit senior’.
- ‘You’d want to speak to the hierarchy of the staff you originally spoke to’.
- ‘I’d appeal in a letter’.
- ‘You’d phone to start with and then write some letters afterwards’.
- ‘They’d tell you who you need to write to’.
- ‘I’d find out who their superior was and take it from there’.

11. Others favoured going straight to their local MP (especially in the Leeds groups):

- ‘You’d write to your local MP’
- ‘I used to work in the Inland Revenue... the MP used to galvanize people [there] into action’.

- '[Visit the] MP's surgery... you can go in and voice concerns there..'
- 'It's [the surgery] like a drop-in ... You can say what you feel.'
- 'I'd go back to my MP'.

At least one or two people in each group reported good experiences of asking MPs to help with problems, although usually at least one person also mentioned cases where an MP wrote letters to little apparent effect:

- 'I got a great response [from the MP]. Nothing happened, mind you'.  
[*Another participant*] 'I've written a couple of times and all I get is a bog-standard letter'.
- 'We wrote letters to the Local Authority, we spoke to the MP and he looked at it but couldn't do anything about it'.
- 'I think I'd see that as the first step [writing to an MP]'.  
[*Another participant*] 'I just don't think that would do any good either'.  
'I don't think it would do any good. But I think they should know'.

The Watford groups both discussed the extent to which MPs' behaviour seemed to have changed in recent years to put more emphasis upon constituency work.

12. There were also other suggested intermediaries. Attitudes to the Citizens Advice Bureaux were very positive in the Leeds groups but more ambivalent in Watford, where the service was seen as overloaded and not answering phone calls:

- 'Try the Citizens Advice Bureau'.  
[*Another participant*] 'I don't know what they are or what they do'.  
'They are really good if you do ring them'.
- 'Go to a social worker or a nurse or something... or someone you know'.
- 'You could also write to Tony Blair...'

In each of the groups a minority of participants stressed 'it's who you know' kinds of themes:

- 'My neighbour knew one of the local councillors and we went to see them'.

A minority of people believed that individuals could have little impact unless they could get together with others sharing similar problems:

- 'It'd be better if a big group went down – they'd probably take a bit more notice'.
- 'If you went to the papers, the government would be more worried.'
- 'I'd be writing to the paper'

### **Means of Initially Contacting Government Agencies and Departments**

13. In the discussions about getting started on seeking redress it quickly became apparent that making an initial contact with the department or agency concerned was seen as difficult by many participants. People especially expressed dislike about having to write or phone a large and apparently faceless organisation.

14. We also asked participants in which precise way they would try and contact a department or agency. Some older people stressed writing a letter:

- ‘If I felt strongly, I would write a letter, then find out where to send it’.
- ‘Initially you’re going to write to the department’.
- ‘I’d write and keep a copy of the letter...’
- ‘If it’s a large organisation it might be better to write a letter, as it’s a faceless organisation’.
- ‘I’d appeal in a letter’
- ‘They’d tell you who you need to write to’.

15. Other people were more sceptical, with some doubting their ability to say what they wanted in writing and letters being lost or ignored in large organisations. There were also worries about the speed and reliability of the postal services, especially for documents:

- ‘Its all right writing, if you have got time on your plate’.
- ‘It’s a whole another issue, the post’.
- ‘I think it would be very slow’.
- ‘I think you’d get a letter [back] but I don’t know what else would happen’.
- ‘They must receive a lot of complaints...’
- ‘There’s always the worry that you’ll be ignored... just a regular person making a complaint... They get loads’.

16. Some critics of writing favoured going in person to a local office instead:

- ‘It’s always better if you can speak to someone you know’.
- ‘Going in person makes a difference – you can see what they are doing’.

But there were also objections to the sheer impracticality of visiting government offices in the modern era, where spatial access was clearly seen as harder than in the past:

- ‘So many things are centralised now... You used to be able to pop down to the local office...if you don’t have an email and you don’t like talking on the ‘phone and not everyone has forceful writing skills’.
- ‘It’s like the banks...sending work off to China...they won’t know what you mean when you have a problem’ [*Someone else said*: ‘I think that is just the private sector’].
- ‘And the tax office is in Shipley, so you have to traipse up to Yorkshire’.  
[Watford respondent].

The physical state of government offices was criticized by a few people who had visited them:

- [About DVLA office] ‘Notices –“If you are here for this, queue here”, all these forms, smoky dingy room....It’s an intimidating situation....It puts you one the wrong foot’.
- [*Another participant*] ‘It makes you doubt yourself’.

17. Some older people also saw phoning up organisations as the most convenient solution:

- ‘I’m not hot on email – speaking on the phone I’m better, as long as you remember to get a name’.
- ‘Telephone – but you never know who you are talking to... I always forget to say “Who are you?”’
- ‘Sometimes it’s worth ringing up again... How embarrassing can it be ... speaking to someone else? Some times it does work’.

18. But there were also many different dissatisfactions with phone services, including a dislike of call centres, a feeling that officials may give people the run-around from one number to another or deny that conversations have taken place, as well as doubts about there being no record at the citizen’s end of phone conversations having taken place:

- ‘But it’s only a call-centre anyway, so you don’t know if you’re talking to an expert or not’.
- ‘They’re [call centre staff] reading from a script, they can’t deviate’.
- ‘They always pass you on... they pass you to another bit... You feel like saying “I’m sorry I don’t fit into any of your boxes”’.
- ‘It’s not a personal thing, you’re just another customer’
- ‘Especially having a problem, you need someone at the other end of the phone who is sympathetic’.
- ‘You go in a queue... press this button.’
- ‘All this “I’m committed to serving you” and you are hanging on...’
- ‘Telephone systems are not conducive... People get fed up... they just put the ‘phone down’.
- ‘Once you connect, you are paying, most of them’.

Most people were stymied about what to do if phoning proved unproductive, and there were only a few suggestions for going further here:

- ‘I spoke to this woman, I got her name and after that I didn’t speak to anyone else, I refused... It’s too aggravating to keep going through the same spiel’.
- ‘Speak to someone higher in the call centre’.

19. Younger people tended to favour looking on the Web for information and also emailing. Advocates stressed that despatch of emails could not be denied while officials might simply deny that letters had ever been sent, leaving you with little recourse:

- ‘I’d use the internet and use a search engine’.
- ‘I’d look on the internet – to find telephone numbers or an email address’.
- ‘I’m sure if you look on website there’d be a complaints page’.
- ‘I think email as well... It’s more instant, rather than waiting for the post’.
- ‘I’d never heard of surgeries, I’d probably go through email’ (*younger person*).
- ‘It [an email] feels more legitimate... It’s recorded... it feels like you are in control...’

- ‘Its faster, it saves you on stamps’
- ‘You know they have received it... They can’t tell you they haven’t received it’.
- ‘Maybe email...’
- ‘Email – it’s more likely to get to the right place.’
- ‘They don’t give a person’s name for the general enquiries number, but for the enquiries email, they generally reply and then you’ve got a name’.
- ‘If it was emailed, you would know it had been received’.
- ‘Text messages...’

A few people liked the facility of copying in several people that emails gave, in tandem with other tactics:

- ‘Complain to the relevant office, then probably a superior office to that too’.
- ‘Go to top person [in the organisation] and to your MP’.
- ‘It’s important to copy people into the letter.’
- ‘...That’s easy on email’

20. However, some participants felt that emails could be lost or denied as easily as phone calls. There was also a great deal of discussion in several groups about whether emails were accepted and seen as legitimate by government departments and agencies or not:

- ‘You could fax them and send it automatically [via PC]. I’ve heard that an email is not counted as being legal’.
- ‘Lot of [government organisations’] web sites like that are not very helpful.
- You have to go through email and it’s easy to ignore an email’.
- ‘Send a letter to the Department of Health [about our NHS example, see below]. I’d like to think that at least they would acknowledge your letter. But with an email, I think it is very unlikely they will get back to you... they must get loads of internal emails.’
- ‘I think an email might get lost in the system’
- ‘If you email to a department, there might be 6 people in the department, with an actual letter it’s very rare for it to be ignored...it’s physical’.

Some older people also said that they would not know how to email or would be uncomfortable doing so.

### **How Participants Would Tackle an Income Tax Problem**

21. Our hypothetical tax problem, which was put in the same way to all groups, asked people to suppose that they had moved jobs and were on emergency coding and needing to get income tax refunded but the employer required information from the tax office to restore money over-paid. You were having trouble getting this done. What would you do? People’s responses varied a good deal here. In some groups around half the participants reported that the issue would be solved quickly and over the phone:



- ‘Ring up. It’s straightforward’.
- You have to call them - it takes a long time.  
‘No, you can usually resolve it with one ‘phone call.  
[Facilitator:] ‘What if they say something wrong?’  
‘Phone again, probably get a different answer’.
- [Another participant] ‘Speak to a friend who’s an accountant’.
- ‘I think there is a form that you can get and fill in and send it to them with recorded delivery’.
- ‘Put it down in writing...outline what you are owed, wage slips and everything... send that off to the tax office’
- ‘It would depend on how sure I was of the ground I’m on. If I was absolutely sure this was an injustice, I would pursue it’.
- ‘I’d want a full explanation as to why I wasn’t entitled to it, in writing and then carry on from there. The problem with these departments, if they say we’re not [entitled to rebate] to some people, they’d just accept that’
- [Another participant] ‘Or other people would pay a lot of money for an accountant’.

22. Some people advised visiting a local tax office but others were uncertain if that was any longer feasible:

- ‘I’d go in personally to the office’.
- ‘Go round to the tax office...’  
[Another participant] ‘But it depends on where you are working. Sometimes your tax office is not near you’.
- ‘There’s usually a tax office in major towns and you can contact them and find your relevant office’.
- ‘If it was local, I’d go and see them face to face, but like you just said the tax office is a bit far to go to’.

23. In discussions it emerged that respondents had a mixed image of tax offices, some seeing them as efficiently run and sorting out problems quickly, others as a very large, remorseless and faceless organisation. Favourable comments stressed that Inland Revenue were businesslike, accessible and had straightforward procedures:

- ‘I’d write and keep a copy of the letter...’
- ‘You’d go to the office with your payslip’.
- ‘Put it down in writing...outline what you are owed, wage slips and everything... send that off to the tax office’.
- ‘Go round to the tax office...’
- ‘They’d tell you who you need to write to’.
- ‘I think there is a form that you can get and fill in and send it to them with recorded delivery’.

Critical comments included

- ‘I’d expect more response [from the NHS] than for the tax office’.
- ‘Easier than tax offices’: ‘anything to do with money is hard’
- ‘Everyone has accepted that the tax office is crap’.
- ‘Students shouldn’t be taxed’

[*Student participant*] ‘We know that... but they don’t... They send me this thing saying I won’t be taxed but they’re lying... and it takes a year [to get money refunded].’

- ‘The tax office is such a huge organisation... one in every town... Ask if we’re going to complain to the local supermarket... and we might... But a massive empire like tax... from the standard complaints office you’d probably just get a letter six months down the line’.

24. Some participants found Inland Revenue staff helpful and polite on the phone, but a minority complained of the difficulties in understanding tax matters and tax forms:

- ‘Half the time you end up going down there as they make it so complex as to how you become eligible to get tax credit or whatever... You still don’t really understand if you’re eligible’.
- [*Facilitator*] ‘How do you think of the tax people?’  
‘As a big bureaucracy’.
- [*Another participant*] ‘General feeling - they’re wronging you but do it well, efficiently’.
- [*Another participant*] ‘Had dealings with them, taken one call’.
- ‘If you call the Inland Revenue office and ask for advice, you get some spotty youth. You probably know more than him’
- ‘They don’t make it easy; you can see why some people don’t bother. Just trying to sort out the Tax Credit’.
- ‘You’re also entitled to an answer that your happy and that you understand. I think that’s what most people want. They want an explanation why something happened or what is going to happen in certain situations’.
- ‘With the tax system, it’s a convoluted system anyway’
- ‘You don’t really know if it its right or not’

25. There were some sharp differences in the time that participants expected tax offices to take in sorting out issues. Some people gave very prompt estimates relating to the specific example we had asked them to discuss:

- ‘Two weeks’
- ‘I’d expect them to come back within 7 days to tell me it’s being looked at, and then give them another 2 weeks to get it all sorted’
- ‘I’d expect it straight away, it’s not difficult, because they have a computer screen and they’ve got all your information on there, your national insurance number. I’d expect an answer then and there’.

26. However, other people answered more pessimistically. Most of those giving long estimates spontaneously referred to their own experience of long delays in the handling of tax credits or tax refunds on self-employed income:

- ‘The tax example... that could take several months... 13 or 14 months’.
- ‘Last year it took me 6 months to get my money back, something to do with a back-log they said. It’s unacceptable. Luckily I wasn’t desperate for the money, but can you imagine if I was?’
- ‘Just because they have a back-log, it’s still unacceptable, it’s their problem, not mine’.

- ‘If it’s a NHS thing, it might take longer than 6 months, but if it’s a tax thing 6 months is far too long’
- ‘I think they should privatise the tax office. They should have private managers who say “Put away that cup of tea, get off your ass and get on with some work’.
- ‘I had a nightmare last year with the tax credits. I filled out all the forms. But no one tells you can get tax relief on what you spend on your child’s nursery. It’s not until you ask 3 or 4 people for days... in fact weeks the [phone] line was engaged. There’s probably a lot people out there who just gave up and didn’t even claim’.

By contrast, one or two participants stressed that Inland Revenue perhaps took a long time because it was a large and careful organisation:

- ‘My understanding of the Inland Revenue, as I had some dealings with them... and we would we get letters from them, but the date was always handwritten. Because it was probably dictated and it wasn’t probably typed for 3 or 4 weeks afterwards, so I know they do take a long time. It has to filter through all the different stages. Somebody’s got to open it, and then it probably has to go to someone else who decides where it’s got to go, and then it has to go to another department, where there are probably 5 different people’

### **How Participants Would Tackle a Welfare Benefits Problem**

27. The welfare benefits scenario that we put to participants envisaged that you rang up the Department of Work and Pensions to see if an elderly relative was eligible for attendance allowance and the official you spoke to said ‘No’ – so you didn’t apply on their behalf. Two years later you find out from another source that your relative would in fact have been eligible and they begin to be paid the allowance – but because no formal application was made at the time of the original enquiry the relative can’t get any backdated benefit. What would you do? Some participants were quite optimistic that progress could be achieved by being persistent:

- ‘You have to ask for forms, fill them out and ask them to backdate it’.
- ‘I would go down there and demand it’.
- ‘It should be dealt with in a short space of time’.
- ‘Look on the internet... look at why the claim wasn’t recognised’.
- ‘Maybe I’d speak to a social worker or someone, like a third party’
- ‘I thought that the social security people had a particular department that dealt with that sort of thing, because you do see adverts for all these unclaimed benefits and get what you are entitled to. So I don’t think it would be as hard [as dealing with the tax office]’.
- ‘Work on the principle that he who shouts loudest gets most’.

28. Others argued that the DWP would not be easily budged from its initial stance:

- ‘Nobody’s going to believe it... very distressing...’
- ‘You probably can’t claim it. If you don’t claim your pension for 3 or 6 months, you can’t get it back dated’.
- ‘Depends on how much... how much money it is, how sick the relative’

is... then you will make an effort’.

[*Another participant*] ‘I’d be put off by feeling it is going to take so long’.

- ‘Procedures are not clear, they’re very bureaucratic’.

[*Another participant*] ‘You’ve got to use your common sense, there is no standard process’.

‘They think “the more obstacles we put in their way the more likely they are to give up”’.

[*Second participant*] ‘That’s what they think isn’t it?’

[*Third participant*] ‘They are not user friendly.’

- ‘I think these days you expect government departments are under-staffed and over-worked’.

[*Another participant*] ‘I think there are too many managers’.

29. Some comments reflected a rather general pessimism about the welfare system:

- ‘The worst thing is you work and work and pay your taxes and then when you might want something, there’s always a loophole’.

- ‘I’d actually go down to the offices’

[*Another participant*] ‘The impression I get is that I wouldn’t want to go inside a benefits office because you’d feel like you’re scrounging. You’re looked upon [by staff] as if you’re asking for money and you’re not even sure if you’re entitled to it’.

- ‘You get these big advertisements ....you can claim this or that.....but it’s not true - you can’t.’

30. Other rather downbeat comments were buttressed with more concrete points:

- ‘Some of the questionnaires ask you some really personal questions’.

- ‘I went for capacity benefit and there was a 6 month back-log’

One woman’s mother had died and the DSS (as it then was) had asked for £2000 back from her estate:

- ‘It was weeks and weeks before it cropped up... they wanted 10 years back payments... In the end we just had to say pay the money and we are finished with it... You couldn’t put her [the mother] to rest’.

31. But in general fewer participants commented that the benefits system would take a lengthy time to work than in the tax case:

- ‘I suppose a couple of weeks’.

- ‘Again, you’d expect an acknowledgement within a couple of days’.

### **How Participants Would Tackle a Problem in the NHS**

32. The NHS scenario which we put to participants asked them to envisage that they had an elderly relative in a hospital ward, which they visit and find to be not satisfactorily cleaned. The relative subsequently acquires an infection of some kind. What would they seek to do to correct matters? During the time that the five groups

were conducted there was national publicity for an NAO report on hospital acquired infections and the Department of Health response to it, including publicity about the MRSA super-bug and TV appearances by John Reid (the Secretary of State at the Department of Health). In our two last groups in Watford, participants were very concerned about this issue nationally, and some suggested that it bore particular reference for the local hospital. Many participants were much more confident about what they would do in this case than in earlier cases, due to the perceived higher accessibility of medical staff:

- ‘I’d talk to the Sister’
- ‘Ward managers now...and that should be sufficient’.
- ‘Nurses and doctors are more visible’.
- ‘Easier than tax offices... After all you know where hospitals are’.
- ‘Speak to the ward clerk, the ward looker-after’ [*laughs*].
- ‘Speak to the senior nurse’.
- ‘I think now [after publicity on infections] you’d be shouting while you were in there [to staff]’.
- ‘The person at the top...the ward manager’
- ‘I’d speak to the Head Nurse...then if she said it was because of cutbacks...I’d go the Head of the Trust’.

We asked what people might do next if an initial answer given did not seem satisfactory, and some people felt that bringing in a doctor (instead of nurses or ward managers) would help progress:

- ‘If I was unhappy, I’d go to any doctor and ask them where I’d go from there’.
- ‘Maybe you could go through your doctor [i.e. GP]?’

One person suggested phoning NHS Direct.

33. Yet some participants took a more pessimistic (or potentially ‘realistic’) view of the difficulties of securing redress in medical or NHS problems. Some of these worries were a little generic but others drew on specific experiences:

- ‘If you went to the ward supervisor, they’d be looking to cover their back, so it is better to go to the top.’
- ‘It’s so difficult with the NHS because doctors won’t criticise each other’.
- ‘Each hospital is a contained community, so it is even more difficult to get through to the hospital’.
- ‘They might say it’s an infection, they wouldn’t want to say it is a superbug’.
- ‘Many people would be very reluctant to question authority’.
- ‘Especially hard for old people, they’re used to respecting doctors and they would find it very hard’.
- ‘My husband got this e-coli bug in the hospital, in the theatre.’
- ‘Trouble is, that it is happening all the time now, isn’t it – this MRSA?’
- ‘Would you try and move your relative out of hospital?’

34. People had relatively vague ideas about the further steps open to them if they were still unsatisfied, although there was a clear appreciation that hospitals had some form of hierarchical management:

- ‘You’d want to talk to someone pretty high up straight away’.
- ‘[Contact] the person running health and safety for the hospital.’
- ‘Go straight to the top. Complain about the whole hospital’.
- [*Second participant*] ‘But there’s hundreds of different departments?’
- ‘Who is overseeing the building? I don’t know who it is now. The surgeon won’t be in charge will he?’
- ‘I wouldn’t know what to do at this stage’.

35. Relatively few people had more information on next steps and could point to the chief executive or other potentially relevant post-holders, or to other resources open to citizens thinking of complaining:

- ‘You’d have to go through departments – whoever said No the first time, then the Chief Executive or Head of the Trust’.
- ‘I think it’s [hospital-acquired infection] quite topical now....so if you spoke to the Chief Executive he probably would take notice’.
- ‘NHS helpline... newsletters... You could find the number round the hospital... There are notices: “If you have any concerns phone this number”...’
- ‘I’d make a complaint straight to the director of the hospital’.

A couple of other administrative resources were suggested:

- ‘Strategic Health Authority....but most people haven’t heard of it’.
- ‘I’d go to Environmental Health [in the local authority]’.

36. Appealing to a local MP for help and trying to contact the media were cited by some participants as almost the first thing they would try, and by many people as an important resource later on if an improvement or explanation could not be obtained.

- ‘I would go and see my MP... He should know where to go next’.
- [*Second participant*] ‘I’d hope he wouldn’t tell me what to do. I hope he’d do it himself.’
- ‘If the hospital hasn’t dealt with it then its an MP... and maybe the newspapers’.
- ‘Local paper’
- ‘Write to my local MP’
- ‘I’d be writing to the paper’.
- ‘Go to the papers’.

A few people were sceptical that involving an MP could much good:

- ‘I wouldn’t go to my MP first, if I wasn’t getting anywhere, at a later stage. I don’t see the point of going to an MP, as they’re already aware of it... [MRSA]. The fact is you have to make them [hospitals] change their practises; and secondly if the patient pulls through you’d want compensation, as it’s malpractice at the end of the day’.

The Secretary of State for Health was also frequently cited by participants by name, perhaps reflecting recent TV coverage of the hospital infection issue:

- ‘You’d go straight to the top and write to the government’
- ‘Contact John Reid, the MP in charge’
- ‘I’d go to John Reid’.
- ‘I’d go to the Minister in charge. Dr Reid’.

37. Some participants introduced anecdotes about their own experiences in making complaints within the NHS, none of which was especially positive. Some participants reflected on these stories, again fairly pessimistically:

- ‘NHS can take years. But might be quicker now, what with John Reid on television?’
- ‘We spoke to several people and they just said “It was one of those things”, and then writing letters and they gave us a form to fill in and said they’d look at it for us... It went up through the Trust level. I still think we were fobbed off. They had an inquiry and they just said “It happened”. Anyway that was a bit of a task, finding the right people, you know, the doctors’.
- ‘No one accepts liability. It’s very hard because they’re so frightened of being sued that no one will just accept and say sorry. Everyone is on the defensive. People don’t want to drain money out of the NHS’  
[*Second participant*] ‘Yeah, if you haven’t got enough time or energy to go through the motions...’  
[*Third participant*] ‘Sometimes you don’t have time to complain’
- ‘I think most of us are lazy on issues like that [NHS]. We should be bombarding the MPs so that they know exactly how their constituents feel’.
- ‘You’ve just got to be patient but the motivation dwindles’.
- ‘If you complain about a big issue like MRSA or whatever you want to, you feel, if you get a standard letter, it’s such a big thing and you’re such a small person. That’s why you think “What’s the point really?”’

One group discussed a recent high-profile case in one newspaper where a senior doctor’s wife contracted a super-bug [MRSA] infection but was having difficulties in proving her legal case:

- ‘...If they’re not getting any results, what sort of chance do you have?’

38. Other topics raised in discussion included the incidence of infections in private hospitals, using solicitors and two examples of participants’ having sued over medical issues:

- ‘In a BUPA hospital... they ask you as you go in: Is there anything you want to complain about?’
- ‘I’m surprised you’d get it from private hospitals’ [response to stories of bugs in private facilities also].
- ‘You have to get a solicitor that deals in medical cases... I got legal aid so I didn’t have to pay... It got settled out of court’.
- ‘A lot of it is who you know, not what you know’.

39. At the end of the NHS example we asked participants more specifically about the complaints procedures in the NHS, and past and present organisations assisting patients, such as Community Health Councils (recently abolished) and PALS (Patient

Advisory and Liaison Services). There was little recognition of these elements in the NHS redress arrangements:

- ‘NHS Complaints Procedure....I’ve heard of that or saw it on the Internet, It’s just something at the back of my mind’.
- [about Community Health Councils] ‘They’re an independent body where complaints against the Health Service can be addressed’.
- [about Patient Advisory and Liaison Services] ‘I wouldn’t know anything about it. I think I’ve heard it on the news’.

### **People’s General Views of Government Redress Systems**

40. After the hypothetical examples we asked participants a small number of general questions to assess how they saw government arrangements. In current civil service practice there is a key difference between *complaints* about how a case was handled or a service provided and *appeals* about substantive decisions that the citizen believes to be wrong. A few participants did describe this distinction:

- ‘With an appeal, you have got to have something to appeal against.
- ‘An appeal is when you get that letter through and it said you can’t have that. You would appeal against a decision...this would be an appeal’.

But most participants rarely made or recognized the distinction between complaints and appeals in the official terms:

- ‘That makes it black and white... while really it’s a grey area, isn’t it?’
- ‘Like in the hospital, you might complain, then complain about the decision or why the complaint was handled’.
- [Second participant] ‘Very confusing to have to do both at once.’
- ‘Bit worrying if they [citizens] are not sure about that’.
- ‘Bit splitting hairs that.’
- ‘Yes, a complaint is something and if you don’t like the answer to what they’ve given you, then go to appeal’.
- [An appeal is] ‘when you want to speak to the hierarchy of the staff you originally spoke to’.
- ‘They should be as equally as serious’
- ‘A complaint is more serious but an appeal, we don’t care who looks at it, as long as they get it resolved and it’s in your favour. But a complaint might be looked at by a manager or something’.
- ‘Why do they make it so complicated?’

41. In one group two participants had experience of attending an appeal hearing:

- ‘I appealed to get my son into a school... I took along a councillor... who advised me what to say. Me and my husband in front of four people... It’s horrible. I felt like a kid... even though I wasn’t’.

The other person had been to an appeal and lost, but had a different view:

- ‘it made me want to laugh’.



In another group someone commented:

- ‘You are on your own, you don’t know what the procedures are’.  
[*Second participant*] ‘An appeal would be quite stressful for a lot of people’.  
[*Third participant*] ‘I wouldn’t want to have to do it’.

42. We asked participants what it meant to go to a tribunal and there was a fair recognition of the term and a consensus that tribunals were serious institutions:

- ‘A tribunal is a bit more official, isn’t it? It’s like a court’.
- ‘A tribunal is like a court’  
[*Second participant*] ‘It’s the next stage after an appeal’  
[*Third participant*] ‘I would imagine a tribunal to be quite formal’
- ‘Isn’t it looked at by someone independent rather than government: it hasn’t been resolved [by normal processes] and it can’t be’.
- ‘...mine [tribunal case] was settled before it got to court. They rang me the day before and paid me. It took ages’.

43. Tribunals were seen as difficult occasions, requiring a personal appearance and answering questions and so perhaps a ‘last resort’ procedure:

- ‘Loads of people would be put off [taking an issue to a tribunal]’.
- ‘It’s also time, getting something to tribunal stage. And you probably need to take time off work’.
- ‘Sometimes you just can’t afford to do it and that’s where the system is wrong. There is no legal aid now: I thought they stopped that’.
- ‘I think I’d feel a little bit scared to go that far. But if it really annoyed me...’
- ‘It’s so official’.
- ‘You’d have to feel very strongly to take it this far, you’d have to really feel you were in the right’.

44. Tribunals and appeals were also seen as lengthy processes:

- [*Facilitator*] How long to you think it would take?  
[*First participant*] ‘I think it would be drawn out...’  
[*Second participant*] ‘At least six weeks’
- ‘Person could die in the mean time... It could take years... up to 2 years?’
- ‘Six months – it’s ridiculous’.

45. There was also considerable discussion about the uncertainty surrounding how long appeals or tribunals processes take. Participants in one group compared being able to track the progress of a parcel being delivered by Royal Mail favourably with being quite unable to get officials to give any clear timelines:

- ‘If you could get things organised and back again in a sensible time... it would make life much more pleasant’.  
[*Second participant*] ‘They are hoping you will forget about it’.
- ‘They put it on a pile that is so massive... they can’t get through everything’  
[*Second participant*] ‘So many complaints’.

- ‘That’s why they should tell you how long it will take’.
  - ‘They give you a specific amount of time to complain or appeal. But it doesn’t work the other way round’.
  - ‘They said to my husband: “We’re six months behind”. But the rebate was with us in a few days.’
  - ‘People like being told how long it will take. Then you can just leave it... think OK, put it aside, I won’t be ringing up or worrying about it.’
  - ‘Well practically you’re not going to have the staff to do that but perhaps just a letter of “We’re dealing with your claim but due to a back-log however it will take a few weeks. And the person who is dealing with your complaint is Mary Bloggs”, for example. Just put a name. It’s something more concrete’.
- [*Second participant*] ‘Saves them [officials] phone calls too.’
- [*Third participant*] ‘Someone should be there doing that’.
- [*First participant*] ‘If someone’s doing their job properly, it gets done’.

46. We also probed participants’ attitudes to the payment of compensation by government organisations if something should have been proved to go wrong. The predominant response was not generally in favour, with most believing that it would reduce the money available for mainstream service provision, in the NHS for instance:

- ‘Companies yes... but government no. I wouldn’t think that you’d be looking for money as far as the government is concerned.’
- ‘A pleasant helpful touch is what you are looking for’.
- ‘Its public money isn’t it? You want them to get the service right’

Even the payment of costs for complaining found little support:

- ‘I wouldn’t be happy with public money being spent on people saying “Here’s a few pounds”’.
- ‘How would you cost that up?’
- ‘No, having to count up stamps and phone charges’.

However, a minority of people in each group did nominate cases where perhaps payments were justified, such as serious medical mistakes:

- ‘If you have to pay someone to help you with your case you should [be compensated]... if you paid a solicitor.’
- ‘You should at least get back the cost of complaining’
- ‘Backdating of claims yes...’
- ‘Repairs to vehicles from bad roads... I would expect compensation’.
- ‘You would think “it’s taught them a lesson now, they’ve lost the case, so if they compensate me, won’t have to compensate other people”’
- ‘I’d quite like to be compensated’
- ‘[On medical negligence] If it was one of my children I’d do it’
- ‘Why shouldn’t we [be compensated] really... if you’ve put the effort in?’

## Knowledge about Ombudsmen

47. Awareness of the ombudsman varied a great deal across our focus groups. In the Leeds groups, consisting of people who had made recent complaints or appeals, some participants spontaneously cited the role of ombudsmen, both in relation to our tax example:

- 'I'd start with the tax office, then I'd go on to their manager and then with the Ombudsman'.
- 'Must be easier to speak to someone higher up, like the Ombudsman, than talk to the tax office.'

48. In other groups the concept was recognized by perhaps two or three people out of twelve. These participants also saw public sector ombudsmen as a kind of ultimate recourse, only to be used in the most serious cases. Only one person (in the Leeds group) knew who or what the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration was: everyone else had no idea. One person saw John Reid as the relevant ombudsman in the health case we discussed:

- 'Ombudsman - that's quite a long way up the chain'.
- 'You are pretty well up by then'.
- 'I'd have thought an ombudsman goes into a lot of detail... his decision is what reverses all the other ones. He's top of the pile'.
- 'They're independent but they obviously have a lot of knowledge'.  
[*Second participant*] 'They're the last resort'.
- 'They're just independent. aren't they?' ...  
[*Second participant*] 'Allegedly'.  
[*Third participant*] 'They should use the word independent' [with reference to better suited names].
- 'I know he's there but I've never used one... I'd ask for the address from whoever refused me.'
- 'I assume an Ombudsman would be like an arbitrator'
- 'At least we've got an ombudsman, at least he's there... Probably 50 years ago we didn't have one.'
- 'I thought an Ombudsman won't sort a problem out... but could tell you if it's fair or not... can reverse a decision if they don't think it's right.'
- 'Doesn't the Ombudsman come from Sweden?'

49. Once discussion got going most people aware of ombudsmen ran together public and private sector offices and offices at different tiers or in different parts of government:

- 'They're an independent body, so if you don't get anywhere'  
[*Second participant*] 'There's one for the police isn't there?'  
[*Third participant*] 'There's a financial ombudsmen. The endowment thing'.
- 'Some of the industries seem to have a sort of watchdog... ombudsmen or something'.
- 'There's one for each department, pensions... and so on'.
- 'There's an ombudsman for everything these days'.
- 'I was having a lot of problems with my mortgage, endowments and so on... They sent me a letter saying I could go to the Ombudsman... I think

- it's good'.
- 'I went to an insurance ombudsmen and they had absolutely no effect. And there was nothing parliamentary about him!'
- 'I had an appeal rejected by the CSA, then got a letter from the Ombudsman... but I didn't trust the CSA, didn't trust the Ombudsman, I didn't want anything to do with it'.
- 'I dealt with the local ombudsman but it was closed'.

50. When we asked specifically about the ombudsman notion later on in the group discussions, substantial numbers of participants said frankly that they had never heard of the idea and did not understand what the word meant:

- 'Ombudsman?! What's that?'
- 'I haven't got a clue'.
- 'Doesn't ring any bells'.
- 'A decision maker of some sort?'  
[*Second participant*] 'They are like mediators'.
- 'I assume he's independent?'
- 'It sounds neutral to me'.
- [Second participant] 'Who pays his wages?'
- 'You get knocked back so many times – you just mistrust everybody then?'
- 'I suppose the problem is that we don't know'.
- [Second participant] 'But if you haven't got a problem you don't think about it'.
- 'I assume it's free'.
- [Second participant] 'I hope it is'.
- [First participant] 'It must be!'
- [Third participant] 'That's awful if it isn't'.
- [Facilitator] What does 'ombudsman' mean?  
[First participant] 'Rings a vague bell'.
- [Second participant] 'I've heard it in the media'.
- [Third participant] 'They audit departments?'

51. People in three of the four groups were also critical of the 'MP filter' whereby complaints can only be referred to the Parliamentary Ombudsman via an MP:

- [Facilitator] To get seen by the ombudsman, you need to go through an MP- is that good or bad?  
[Second participant] 'Seems a bit unfair... subjective opinion'.
- [First participant] 'Shouldn't matter but...'
- [Third participant] 'I'd prefer not to have to go through an MP'.
- [First participant] 'It's an additional layer of bureaucracy'.
- [Fourth participant] 'It's an old thing that hasn't changed'.
- 'Which MP do you go to..[to get to the Ombudsmen]?'  
[Second participant] 'I wouldn't even know how to contact my MP'.
- 'See I always thought that the MP and the Ombudsmen worked together?'  
[Second participant] 'It's better to go straight to the Ombudsmen. If the MP's having an off day, he might not even bother to read the letter'.

However, participants in the older Leeds group, who often said that they would go to MPs for help, had no problem with the MP filter.

52. There was a considerable amount of criticism of the ombudsman label itself and that for the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, when explained:

- ‘The word “Ombudsman” really doesn’t mean anything.... It needs to be something around what he or she does’.
- ‘It’s a terrible name, because it is not obvious what their job is’.  
[*Second participant*] ‘Most people wouldn’t have a clue’.  
[*Third participant*] ‘Never heard of it’.
- ‘I don’t know what it means’  
[*Second participant*] ‘It’s a funny name.’
- [On the title, Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration]  
‘We want a snappier name’  
[*Second participant*] ‘Could it be made more public? No-one’s heard of him’.  
[*Third participant*] ‘Is he the Ombudsman of ombudsmen?’ [*Laughter*]  
[*Fourth participant*] ‘It doesn’t mean a thing, does it?’
- [On the title, Health Services Ombudsman]  
‘I’ve heard the name but no idea what they do’  
[*Second participant*] ‘NHS Mediator would be better’.

### **Awareness of Other Redress Arrangements**

53. We asked participants to compare arrangements for making complaints or getting things put right in the public sector with private sector companies’ arrangements. Most discussion suggested that companies were easier to deal with. Two groups compared Marks and Spencer favourably with government organisations:

- ‘There are not so many steps to get to the top of a company, compared to a public organisation.’
- ‘Private sector is a lot quicker’
- ‘With a firm its easier to see what products you’ve bought... its more physical’.
- ‘With the government you don’t feel like you are paying for them.’
- ‘With a firm you can take your custom elsewhere’.
- ‘There is a chance of going higher easier than with the public.’
- ‘Shops are better but we expect shoddy service from government. whereas if you have paid for something...’
- ‘Private company, because they’ve got business hanging on the back’.
- ‘Private companies are in a competitive environment, so if they lose you as a customer there’s someone else to scoop you up. There’s only one government’.
- ‘I don’t think you’d ever get individual attention from the government, because they’re massive aren’t they?’
- ‘Private companies tend to be local to you anyway, whereas as if you go to the tax office, where do you go?’

Some people felt that government service giving rise to complaints a lot locked officials into being dour in their approach:

- When you have government bodies who purely deal with complaints and aggravation, you know it must be very difficult to get a positive response’.
- ‘Departments like job centres, they’re having to deal with violence’.

54. But some people pointed out reasons why dealing with companies could also be difficult, mentioning banks, travel or holiday firms, and suppliers of PCs as being very difficult to deal with over problems that arise:

- ‘A private company is playing their own game aren’t they?’
- ‘I think it depends, some banks are as bad as Government departments’.
- ‘They have set procedures of how they have to respond...but whether they will actually do anything about it... then I would not be so sure’.
- ‘With a private body, you’d probably have to employ a solicitor, public bodies there is more chance you could do it on your own bat.’

Private sector call centres were also strongly disliked by some participants:

- ‘It’s not a personal thing, you’re just another customer’
- ‘Especially having a problem, you need someone at the other end of the phone who is sympathetic’.

55. We closed discussions by asking participants if they had any suggestions for improving government organisations’ redress arrangements. The first focus group came up with the concept of a centralized ‘customer care centre’ for government, to help people find the right agency and section to handle their complaint or appeal. Subsequently we asked the other groups to comment on this idea. The reaction was uniformly positive, with analogies drawn with NHS Direct:

- ‘It’s bad enough when you have a complaint that you have to sit on the phone for 10 minutes talking to an answering machine. You should get straight through to someone straight away, and they put through to the department and you get some sort of action within 10 minutes of you being on the phone. And then probably after the telephone call you get some sort of letter confirming that your complaint is being dealt with and within 14 days to 21 days you’ll get in touch with a result. That would be an ideal situation. There’s no reason why it shouldn’t be like that’
- [Another participant] ‘Yeah, just set up a central complaint department for any of the government departments’.
- ‘That NHS Direct is good’.
- ‘But something like that would be great and maybe if they had a website’.
- ‘Even the paving outside your house, you have to think: “Which way do I have to go to sort that out?”’
- ‘They’d need to advertise it, we all know about NHS Direct’.
- ‘Oh yes, like the Citizens Advice Bureau and NHS Direct’.
- ‘It might just tempt the people that couldn’t go through with the agony of all the letter writing, but they will just walk into an office. I mean, sometimes I find the forms difficult to fill in’.

- ‘It would better... at least you’d gone to the right department in the first place’
- ‘If anytime you made contact with them, you’d always know where you could go.’
- ‘They could advertise the number..... there should be a number like that for government, like 999. There is a number on the side of police cars to phone – the government could do that’.
- ‘A leaflet when you go in to any government office, that would be good , explaining the complaints procedure’.
- ‘They should have an efficient customer services department. If private companies manage it, I don’t see why they [government] can’t’.

56. A number of people did raise possible practical problems with a centralized customer care centre for government and stress that such a centre would need to concentrate on just getting people started with redress:

- ‘They might be get snowed under [with complaints]’.
- ‘Is it really going to be independent impartial advice if it’s run by the government?’
- ‘It would be jammed, wouldn’t it?’
- ‘Would it be a waste of money?’

## **Conclusions**

54. Overall in all five groups the discussion of redress issues was lively, serious and constructive, rarely if ever flagging. Attitudes evolved a good deal during discussions amongst participants, with people remembering relevant examples and reconsidering their views in the light of other people’s comments. Government redress arrangements clearly mattered to participants and most had a reasonably clear and principled idea of what arrangements they would expect to see, but relatively vague ideas about specific sectors or institutions.