

TPO Undergoes Staff Exchange In New Initiative To Deliver Best Practice

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Two members of staff, one from The Property Ombudsman the other from Northwood UK, switched roles for a week in order to gain greater experience and knowledge of each other's positions within the industry.

The exchange was instigated by Property Ombudsman Christopher Hamer as part of TPO's ongoing application to raise standards within the industry. Hamer commented "It is important to emphasise the need for agents to deal promptly and professionally with complaints and equally it is hugely beneficial for my office to be aware of the practical issues agents face when trying to resolve matters themselves. This exchange will, I hope, help bring about a good understanding of the challenges agents might come up against before unresolved disputes are referred to me. It will also help educate on the meticulous process which occurs in my office prior to determining resolution of a dispute."

Gemma Currie, First Contact Evaluation Officer at TPO, spent a week at Northwood in Fareham and Portsmouth learning about a typical day as a letting agent and how the company handles complaints. She commented "Complaints are only a small element of an agent's business, but a time consuming one. It was extremely interesting to attend inspections and see cases from an agent's point of view. Minimising the chances of issues escalating is what we at TPO strive for, so it was reassuring to see how thorough Northwood's procedure was and how much work goes into resolving cases in the first instance."

Lauren O'Neill, Complaints & Legal Support at Northwood, spent the week between the Complaints Operations Department and the Assessment Resolution Team at TPO. She learnt of the kinds of grievances handled by TPO from consumers who are buyers, sellers, landlords or tenants of residential property, what causes those disputes and how agents could stop them being brought to the Ombudsman's attention in the first place.

Eric Walker, Northwood's Managing Director, said: "We were absolutely delighted to take part in this initiative. TPO has provided the industry with an immense service, which we agreed would be enhanced by demonstrating front line issues experienced by agents. In return, we gained a better understanding of the challenges faced by the Ombudsman's team. Lauren has brought back some excellent ideas and we are certain Gemma has gained a better understanding of what letting agents face on a daily basis together with an appreciation of how hard the vast majority of agents work to protect consumers' interests. I wish to record my appreciation to Chris Hamer for this great opportunity".

Christopher Hamer, Property Ombudsman concluded "This exercise was invaluable in creating an awareness for both TPO and Northwood of each other's roles and realism in handling disputes. It would be extremely helpful to visit all TPO members so we can educate staff further and continue to provide relevant and practical guidance on best practice. Unfortunately, that is a practical impossibility, but if more members were interested in an exchange, subject to resources, I would certainly consider it. I wish to thank Eric Walker for his positive and constructive approach to this initiative".

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