nationale ombudsman

Outreach practices from Ombudsman around the world

Connecting with communities

IOI Best Practice Paper – February 2025

INTERNATIONAL OMBUDSMAN INSTITUTE

This paper is an outcome of the 13th IOI World Conference and reflects the exchange on outreach practices among IOI members. It was written by Bo Beke, Ayeh Zarrinkhameh and Ira van Keulen from the Office of the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands and published in the framework of the IOI Best Practice Paper series.

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Introduction

The importance of outreach

Outreach, literally *reaching out* to people, is the most rewarding part of my job as an Ombudsman. While people often come to me to share their stories, many times I take the initiative to go out myself and listen. Often, it marks the beginning of an ongoing conversation and a two-way exchange. Sometimes, I support them in whatever way is necessary, and at other times, people help me by allowing me to use their stories to encourage the government to improve its performances.

If our goal as Ombudsman is truly to improve the relationship between the government and citizens, outreach is crucial. We need to understand the people for whom participation in society is not self-evident and comes with challenges. I am talking about people in vulnerable living conditions, whose voices are not being heard. Too often, these groups are forgotten, left behind, or even systematically disadvantaged by policies. These groups may vary from country to country. As Ombudsman, we must bring the needs of these different groups to the government's attention and make them a priority to foster an inclusive society worldwide. Therefore, it is essential that we, as Ombudsman, are well connected with these groups and communities. The more consciously we, as Ombudsman, focus our strategies and methods on reaching out to the ones who need us most, the more we can help create inclusiveness and improve the relationship between our government and our fellow citizens.

Every Ombudsman undoubtedly faces unique challenges when it comes to outreach, whether due to the geographical distances within our countries or the differences in our mandates. However, one thing remains the same for all of us: outreach — who we reach out to and how we do it — is never a fixed concept. It is an ongoing process that evolves as society changes. This is why it is essential for us, as Ombudsman, to discuss outreach together, to better understand what it entails, learn from each other, and inspire one another. So that each Ombudsman office, within the context in which they operate, can determine whether they want to scale up or implement these outreach activities. We initiated this exchange during the IOI World Conference in May 2024 in The Hague, and exchange is also the purpose of this IOI Best Practice Paper, *'Connecting with Communities: Outreach Practices from Ombudsman Around the World'*.

This paper is based on contributions from IOI members across various countries and offers a valuable exchange of ideas and practices about outreach, including numerous examples. I hope that this paper will serve as just the starting point for all of us to reflect on this topic together and to share our thoughts and experiences regarding outreach. I will certainly reach out to my fellow Ombudsman around the world to encourage this exchange!

Reinier van Zutphen
National Ombudsman of The Netherlands

Methodological approach

Collaboration

This Best Practice Paper is the result of the cooperation and valuable input from many participating members of the International Ombudsman Institute (IOI). In total, seventeen Ombudsman institutions took part. We, as the National and Children's Ombudsman of the Netherlands, also included our own practices in this paper. The final product is thus an international ombuds collaboration.

The following IOI members took part:

Federal Ombudsman of Belgium	Northern-Ireland Public Services Ombudsman
Flemish Ombuds Service of Belgium	Taxpayers' Ombudsperson Ottawa, Canada
Ombudsperson British Columbia, Canada	Provincial Ombudsman Sindh, Pakistan
Ombudsman of Israel	People's Advocate of Romania
Ombudsman of Kenya	Ombudsman Rotterdam-Rijnmond, Netherlands
Parliamentary Ombudsman Malta	Scottish Public Services Ombudsman
Mexico City Human Rights Commission	Public Protector South-Africa
Ombudsman of Namibia	The Control Yuan of Taiwan
National Ombudsman of the Netherlands	

Focus and aim

The paper focuses on three key questions:

1. What does outreach mean to the participating Ombudsman institutions?
2. Who do they want to reach out to, and how do they identify these groups or communities?
3. How do they organise outreach? And what factors do they consider when choosing their methods?

This paper aims to be practical and inspiring rather than academic. Therefore we did not categorise outreach practices by mandate, local context, or geographical location. Instead, we describe the practices in a way that can provide valuable insights for anyone's work.

Collecting data

To collect relevant information about outreach, we contacted members of the IOI. Before the IOI World Conference in May 2024 in The Hague, The Netherlands, online regional meetings[1] were organised. One of the main themes[2] of the conference was "Inclusiveness & Reaching Vulnerable and Marginalised Groups". During the online regional meetings this theme was discussed.
To explore this theme further, both for the conference and the IOI Best Practice Paper, we asked participants in the online meetings to share their outreach experiences and methods with us.

After the online regional meetings, we asked the participants[3] who shared information about their outreach practices to answer a set of questions[4] about outreach. We then followed up with online interviews to learn more about their outreach practices. During the IOI conference in The Hague, we organised two breakout sessions to discuss the early results of the paper. All the IOI members who were present during the IOI Conference could sign up for these breakout sessions. During these sessions, we received new and valuable insights from other Ombudsman institutions. After the conference, we invited them[5] as well to share more details about their outreach practices.

Reader's Guide

The paper is organised according to the three main questions. The first chapter describes the different views of participants on outreach. The second chapter explains how outreach is put into action by different Ombudsman institutions, including many interesting examples. The third chapter looks at the target audience of Ombudsman and how to identify them. We conclude the paper with some key takeaways.

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1 The IOI is organised in six regional chapters: Africa, Asia, Australasia & Pacific, Europe, Caribbean & Latin America, and North America.

2 The themes of the IOI conference 2024 in The Hague were Climate Change & Living Conditions, Value Dilemmas, Inclusiveness & Reaching Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups, and Future Generations.

3 Flemish Ombuds Service of Belgium, Ombudsman of Israel, Parliamentary Ombudsman Malta, Mexico City Human Rights Commission, Northern-Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, Provincial Ombudsman Sindh Pakistan, People's Advocate of Romania, Ombudsman Rotterdam-Rijnmond Netherlands, Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, Public Protector South-Africa, The Control Yuan of Taiwan.

4 1. How is outreach defined by your institute? Why would your Ombudsman institution want to have an outreach program? 2. Which groups/communities would you like to reach with an outreach program? How do you identify these groups? 3. How is outreach organized by your institute? Which (digital) methods do you use? What factors are considered in the methods you use for outreach?

5 Federal Ombudsman of Belgium, Ombudsperson British Columbia, Ombudsman of Kenya, Ombudsman of Namibia, Taxpayers' Ombudsperson Ottawa.

1 Different goals of outreach – why?

During the consultation of IOI members participating in the search for outreach practices, much of the conversation focused on what can be achieved through outreach. It became clear that there is a wide range of goals for outreach. Three main goals emerged in the participants' responses. These goals are: 1) raising awareness about the Ombudsman's existence and activities, 2) empowering the public, and 3) gaining a deeper understanding of societal issues. The overarching aim of these goals is to improve government functioning.

Raising awareness and empowering the public

For some, outreach involves raising awareness about the Ombudsman's existence and the work they do, with the aim of increasing recognition and familiarity among the general public. On a more practical level, it involves making the Ombudsman's services more visible and accessible, helping citizens to file complaints more easily when they feel mistreated by public authorities or organisations. As the Provincial Ombudsman of Sindh (Pakistan) explains:

"The purpose of the Ombudsman office is to provide the necessary platform to common people for administrative justice promptly and to remove inequality in access to justice. The Office of the Ombudsman Sindh is dealing with the complaints of the general public regarding maladministration prevailing in the government departments. Keeping in view the huge population with low literacy rate and mostly not aware of their rights and the avenues available for redressal of grievances, therefore, it is essential that the Ombudsman office reaches at their doorsteps for providing assistance in redressal of their grievances."

Beside guiding individuals through bureaucratic processes or assisting them in formulating complaints for specific cases, outreach efforts also aim to empower people by educating them about their fundamental rights.

Gaining a deeper understanding of societal issues

Participants noted that outreach activities also enable Ombudsman institutions to gain valuable insights into what is happening across different segments of society. Engaging with various groups allows the Ombudsman to better understand the challenges people face, thus strengthening their ability to gather relevant signals on social injustice. As the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman remarks:

"Some of the outreach activities can be specifically about awareness raising, others can just be about learning about what people are feeling and experiencing, or about trying to identify issues."

There is a mutual relationship between the public and the Ombudsman. This reciprocity is crucial for the Ombudsman's ability to gather information. Staying connected with the public not only empowers individuals but also provides the Ombudsman with valuable insights into what is happening within (specific parts of) society.

Improving government functioning

A single outreach activity does not contribute to just one goal. The opposite is true; an activity can contribute to multiple goals. However, the overarching aim of these goals — raising public awareness about the Ombudsman's role, empowering individuals to know and exercise their rights, and gaining a better understanding of societal issues — is to ultimately enhance the functioning of government. This is especially important when it comes to upholding human rights and ensuring fair treatment for citizens who rely on government services. There is a particular emphasis on protecting the rights and proper treatment of those in vulnerable situations in their interactions with the government.

The definition of outreach of the office of the Ombudsman of Kenya illustrates this at follows:

"Outreach is a proactive approach to engage with the public, raise awareness about the Ombudsman's role and functions, and empower citizens to assert their rights and seek redress. Outreach efforts are aimed to bridge the gap between the government and the people and is about proactive engagement, empowerment, and advocacy to ensure that all citizens have access to fair treatment, accountability, and justice within the government and public institutions."

2 Outreach practices – how?

For this Best Practice Paper, many examples of outreach practices have been gathered from IOI member institutions.

Different contexts may require specific factors to be considered when selecting an outreach method. There are several factors that Ombudsman offices take into consideration to determine their activities regarding outreach. For example, considering where the people are located. In many cases the geographical location demands from Ombudsman offices to reach out and visit the more remote and rural areas to see and to hear from the locals about the issues they are dealing with. In addition to geographical distance, the psychological distance between citizens and (government) institutions leads the Ombudsman to meet outside their offices, or to liaise with third sector organisations who have direct contact with groups or individuals, or who can speak on their behalf. Other characteristics, such as age, (digital) illiteracy, specific physical and mental challenges, language proficiency, and socio-economic status, also influence the outreach methods employed by Ombudsman offices. For example, language barriers can prevent understanding, while those with limited literacy may need simpler, more accessible communication. Cultural, financial, and psychological barriers, such as mistrust or socio-economic constraints, can further discourage engagement.

Below we describe various outreach activities, highlighted by the participating IOI members around the world. First, activities outside of the ombuds premises are highlighted. Second, activities inside the ombuds premises are dealt with. Third, the use of traditional and digital tools is highlighted. Lastly, the importance of third sector organisations and the ways they can be approached are explained.

Outreach by being outside of the premises

The most frequently mentioned approach by participants regarding outreach is physically stepping out of the office to connect directly with people and literally being close. Travelling to visit local residents and public authorities is a common activity for the Ombudsman. Additionally, participants mentioned visiting people in closed settings, such as prisons or elderly care facilities.

Being close

In areas that are difficult to access, such as rural or mountainous regions, special off-road vehicles are used to reach these local communities. Other examples of maintaining a presence outside the main office include establishing permanent regional offices, deploying teams or individuals throughout the country, and placing complaint drop boxes in remote areas for those unable to travel to the main offices.

Drop boxes in remote areas in South Africa

The Public Protector South Africa (PPSA) uses complaint drop boxes to make it easier for individuals in remote areas to file a complaint. Outreach officers have placed these complaint drop boxes at community centres in these regions, allowing people who cannot travel to the PPSA offices in urban areas to write down their complaints and deposit them in the locked boxes. The complaints filed at these boxes are then collected by the outreach officers at regular intervals.

Complaints drop boxes stationed In various strategic service points in state entities in South Afrika.

Focal persons for the San People in Namibia

The Ombudsman of Namibia uses a focal person in reaching out to the San people. The San people are the most vulnerable and marginalized community in the country, because most of them do not have their own land unlike the other groups who live at one place or area of their own. The San people are nomadic and they are scattered in most parts of the country. Due to the unique situation of these groups and recommendations from the UN Treaty Bodies and the Universal Periodic Review, the Namibian government was urged to recognise and support them more actively. In response, the Ombudsman's office decided to appoint a dedicated focal person or a desk officer. This person's role is to receive and investigate complaints and challenges faced by this specific group within the country.

The role of the focal person is to engage with communities in the field, listen to their complaints, and relay these concerns to management in the office for further action with the relevant government departments. Since the focal person speaks their languages, this person understands the nature of the complaints from the community. During these outreach programs, the focal person often educates and informs community members about the work of the Ombudsman in Namibia as outlined in the constitution. The office allows the focal person to be accompanied by other staff members when going to give feedback to the community on issues that have been investigated or presented at the government office.

Adv. Dyakugha (Ombudsman of Namibia) engaging San community during investigations into the alleged high death rate among San children in the Omaheke Region.

The Ombudsman of Namibia met with the Indigenous Community in the Kunene Region who lodged a complaint regarding themineral extracting activities (mining) in their area.

On the road to visit local residents and public authorities
Participants also highlighted a range of other outreach activities conducted off-site, focusing on visiting the public and engaging with local authorities. Examples include mobile clinics, provincial ombudstours, roadshows to meet with residents and officials, workshops, stakeholder information sessions, and both announced and unannounced supervision visits to institutions.

The 'Ombudsmóvil' in Mexico City and the 'Ombulance' in Rotterdam-Rijnmond
The Mexico City Human Rights Commission explains the use of their 'Ombudsmóvil' as vehicles adapted and equipped as mobile offices in places of public concurrence to promote the proximity of the Commission's services to the people.

Presence of a mobile Ombudsman from the Human Rights Commission of Mexico City to provide support to the migrant population in the territory. Activities with girls and boys in the camp areas to promote recreation and play in the spaces.

Mobile cinema to promote human rights activities among girls, boys and adolescents in schools and other spaces.

The Ombudsman Rotterdam-Rijnmond (ORR) in the Netherlands has also introduced the 'Ombulance'. The term 'Ombulance' combines 'Ombudsman' and 'ambulance' because they, as an institute, also provide assistance in legal or bureaucratic emergencies, similar to how an ambulance handles medical emergencies. They refer to it as "First Aid for Bureaucratic Accidents". With this mobile office, they bring assistance to the people and are ready to talk to people on-site. What makes the 'Ombulance' special is that it emphasises the need for human contact in a time when municipalities are increasingly digitising, and the distance between government and citizens seems to be growing. The 'Ombulance' can regularly be found at various busy locations in the city and the surrounding municipalities.

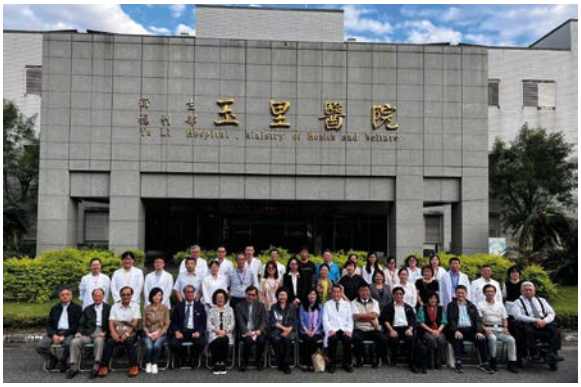
The 'Ombulance' on tour at the local market in Rotterdam-Keizerswaard. ORR ambassador Carrie Jansen, a well-known figure in the city, brings her extensive experience to the issues ORR is dedicated to addressing. Carrie Jansen engages with passersby to gather their concerns and signals. When necessary, she creates cases on the spot so the ORR team can take action.

Visiting the people of Gozo near Malta
The Parliamentary Ombudsman of Malta visits the people of Gozo every first Saturday of the month. This is an island twenty minutes away from Malta. They noticed that throughout the year, they did not receive many complaints from the people of Gozo. A reason for that seemed to be that residents preferred to speak one-on-one with someone. Since their Ombudsman office is on another island, crossing over posed a barrier for them. So, the Ombudsman office decided to try an experiment: on the first Saturday of each month, they visit Gozo. They advertise their visits on social media and through other channels, allowing people to make appointments with their official to discuss their complaints or inquiries. During these meetings, staff members explain the process and determine whether they can investigate their complaints. They hold these sessions every first Saturday of the month in a space provided by the public administration specifically for these meetings. As a result, they received more complaints and also noticed that they could often guide individuals on which entity to submit their complaint to.

Circuit supervisions with special attention for indigenous people in Taiwan
Through circuit supervisions the Control Yuan of Taiwan pays special attention to the 16 indigenous tribes, officially recognised in Taiwan. In January 2024, the Control Yuan members conducted circuit supervisions in Hualien and Taitung, two counties with a high proportion of indigenous populations in Taiwan. The indigenous people in these areas face challenges such as a lack of medical resources, transport disadvantage, population outflow, and uneven urban-rural development. The Control Yuan members aimed to gain practical insights and hear the voice of the local people, examine issues such as healthcare in remote areas and cultural preservation, and personally receive complaints from the local residents. Additionally, in the era of digitalisation, efforts were made to bridge the urban-rural gap and ensure people's digital access rights. The remote tribal areas in the past had problems of poor signal reception. The Control Yuan urged administrative agencies to improve by requesting the telecommunications bureau to set up more base stations, which aims to facilitate the use of digital technology, including introducing 5G telemedicine services in rural areas to enhance people's quality of life.

On June 27, 2022, the Control Yuan made an inspection at the Tribal Outreach Computer Center of Zhengxing Village, Jinfong Township, Taitung County, Taiwan.

On October 26, 2022, the Control Yuan conducted circuit supervision at the winner of 'Golden Village Competition'. - Chashan community (Chashan Tribe) in Alishan Township, Chiayi County, Taiwan.



On November 2, 2023, the Committee on Social Welfare and Environment Hygiene Affairs and the Committee on Judicial and Prison Administration Affairs of the Control Yuan conducted a joint supervision at Yuli Hospital of the Ministry of Health and Welfare in Hualien County, Taiwan, focusing on the health conditions of political victims.

On January 3, 2024, the Control Yuan conducted circuit supervision at Dawu Township Health Center in Taitung County, Taiwan, examining the healthcare resources in remote areas.

On May 22, 2023, the Control Yuan's Committee on Educational and Cultural Affairs conducted supervision at the College of Indigenous Studies of National Dong Hwa University in Hualien County, Taiwan.

Roadshows by the Public Protector South Africa
The Public Protector South Africa (PPSA) holds roadshows annually for each province. These visits are planned in advance, and a report with specific information about the province is prepared. The Public Protector herself attends these roadshows. During the visits, they meet with local government representatives to discuss specific reports, and they also hold meetings with non-governmental organisations to address challenges encountered on the ground and explore potential partnerships. Unannounced visits, such as to hospitals, are sometimes part of the roadshow. At the conclusion of the visit, they meet with provincial government officials to provide feedback based on their findings during the roadshow. This proactive approach helps prevent a flood of complaints about the same issues. Occasionally, these roadshows lead to systematic investigations.

Stakeholder engagement with people living with disabilities in Cape Town.

Stakeholder engagement with people living with disabilities in Cape Town.

Stakeholder engagement with the elderly in Limpopo Province.

Stakeholder engagement with youth/scholars in Eastern Cape and Limpopo Provinces.

Open house meetings by the Provincial Ombudsman Sindh (Pakistan)
At present the Ombudsman office Sindh uses beside social media, website, workshops and seminars, open house meetings to disseminate information regarding the work of their office. Besides that, the Ombudsman Sindh also established regional offices at district level of the province, covering far-flung areas. The concerned regional directors hold public meetings, site visits and communicate with society through NGO's, seminars and other such awareness activities.

Open house meeting of Regional Director Larkana with general public.

'Ombudstour' in the Netherlands

The National Ombudsman and the Children's Ombudsman of the Netherlands carry out an 'Ombudstour' twice a year. The Ombudstour is a proactive initiative aimed at directly engaging with citizens and communities across the Netherlands. It involves representatives of the Ombudsman's office traveling to different regions, towns, and cities to meet with residents, listen to their concerns, and address any issues they may have regarding government services or administration. The employees of the Ombudsman set up 'pop-up kitchens' at busy locations so that everyone can easily visit them in an informal setting. The tour serves as an opportunity for the Ombudsman's office to connect with the public, raise awareness about their rights, and promote transparency and accountability in governance. During the tour, the Ombudsman and his team also visit organisations that are in direct contact with residents. Employees and administrators of these organisations can provide valuable insights into what is happening in society. Through these interactions, the Ombudsman seeks to bridge the gap between citizens and the government, ensuring that everyone's voices are heard and their grievances and complaints are addressed.

The National Ombudsman of the Netherlands, Reinier van Zutphen, in a conversation with a citizen during the Ombudstour. A tour held twice a year in a different region in the Netherlands.

Conversations of employees of the Ombudsman with citizens in the so-called 'pop-up kitchen' at a busy location in the region where the Ombudstour takes place.

Visiting people in closed settings in Romania

Specifically, regular visits to people in custody or prison, soldiers in the military, and elderly individuals in residential care were mentioned by participants. An example was given by the People's Advocate Institution of Romania. Some groups are being systematically disadvantaged and discriminated or are even victims of violence and torture. The National Preventive Mechanism against torture in places of detention (NPM) is part of the People's Advocate Institution of Romania. The staff members monitor the treatment applied to people in detention. The NPM coordinates the organisation of information, education, and training campaigns for the purpose of preventing torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading punishments or treatments. This is done in addition to the (unannounced) visits made in places of detention (penitentiaries, detention centres and pre-trial detention, etc.), and formulating recommendations to the management of the places visited. The People's Advocate Institution of Romania does not consider these activities as outreach, since it acts according to their NPM mandate. However, according to the institution, these activities are the closest to the meaning of outreach in their work.

July 13, 2022 – Strengthening the monitoring skills of NPM Romania by conducting a practical visit to the Târgu-Ocna Educational Center, Bacău County, Slănic Moldova.

Educational talks and lectures for students in Malta

Another way of raising awareness about the Ombudsman's role and services is giving educational talks and lecturers to students. The Ombudsman of Malta does this by participating in Freshers' Week events at the University of Malta, Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST), and the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS). These events provide an opportunity to increase the institution's visibility among students and academic staff while promoting its mission and services. During the events, students received informational materials, publications, and branded merchandise. Visitors were also encouraged to follow the social media channels of the Ombudsman of Malta, fostering ongoing engagement in exchange for promotional items.

In addition, the Ombudsman of Malta organises educational talks and lectures, held in collaboration with public and denominational secondary schools and the University of Malta, and focuses on explaining the Ombudsman's role as a mediator between the people and public institutions. Key topics include the right to good administration, the importance of a transparent and accountable public sector, and the need to reinforce democratic values and governance.

The Parliamentary Ombudsman of Malta, Judge Joseph Zammit McKeon, delivering a lecture at the University of Malta.

The Parliamentary Ombudsman of Malta, Judge Joseph Zammit McKeon, meeting students during Freshers' Week.

Outreach from inside the premises

While outreach for all participants involves literally stepping outside the premises to meet people directly, many also mentioned activities conducted within the premises. This means that these activities take place inside the building or within the organisation's boundaries.

Being accessible

Activities inside the premises can often help to be more visible and accessible for individuals. As the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman said:

"We want the office to be accessible for anyone who needs to use it."

Enabling individuals to reach the Ombudsman by being accessible for the public was emphasised by all participants as one of the strategies for outreach. This strategy includes activities inside the premises. This entails opening your doors to the public and receiving people at the office, and it starts by simply being available both physically and electronically (via website, email, or video call).

Webpage 'We want to meet you' in Canada

The Taxpayers' Ombudsperson of Canada has a dedicated webpage titled 'We want to meet you.' The webpage provides information on who would benefit from meeting with the Taxpayers' Ombudsperson, what can be discussed, and what insights they can seek from the Ombudsperson. Their goal with this webpage is to meet with anyone who could benefit from their services, get feedback on their Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) service experiences and solicit their ideas on possible service improvements.[6]

6 See for more information: www.canada.ca/en/taxpayers-ombudsperson/programs/meet-with-you.html.

Toll-free 0800 number in Belgium
The Federal Ombudsman of Belgium invests in their brand awareness and accessibility. By phone, the Federal Ombudsman has had a toll-free 0800 number since 2008. Only for those, calling from abroad there is a 'regular' phone number. They monitor the calls using a specific software program, allowing for informed feedback and adjustments. In this way, they continuously work on optimising their phone service, including minimising wait times.

Using plain language and multiple languages
When discussing outreach, also the use of accessible information in plain language and various languages is frequently mentioned by participants. According to the Ombudsman of the Netherlands, you need to pitch your written and spoken communication level at B1 level[7], if you want to reach 80% of your population. Texts written at this level are simple ro read, get to the point quickly and do not require much interpretation.

Some Ombudsman employ staff who speak multiple languages, enabling them to offer services in different tongues. The Public Protector of South Africa even distributes information brochures, newsletters and other advocacy material in all official South African languages, including braille. Others also mentioned braille. At the office of the Flemish Ombuds Service of Belgium, there is an employee who knows sign language. By implementing these measures, Ombudsman institutions can effectively offer services to diverse groups and be connected with them.

Adapting communication styles
Additionally, some participants emphasised the importance of adjusting communication styles to match the individual's level of understanding and needs regarding communication. For example, it is evident that it is more effective to call someone who is illiterate by telephone rather than send an email. But it is not always easy to recognise the needs of the person. Illiteracy for example is something people are often ashamed of, causing people to hide it well. Therefore, this also requires staff who have the skills to recognise which communication style best suits the needs of the person. Many participants also highlighted the importance of taking the time for conversations with citizens and truly listening.

Investing in (child friendly) complaint handling
Another way to be more accessible within the premises is by investing in high quality complaint handling. Like the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman who is in the process of implementing a child friendly complaint procedure.[8] Regarding complaint handling the Ombudsman explained that Scotland has just passed a law that incorporates the UN Convention on Rights of the Child into Scottish law. It is a statutory requirement to have child friendly complaints procedures. They were able to start working on that before the law came into effect under their complaint standard powers. For the development of a child friendly complaints procedure the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman used a "co-design" approach. They sought early input from children, organisations that support them, policy makers and Scottish public service organisations.

7 In terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

8 See for more information: www.spso.org.uk/child-friendly-complaints.

This involved working with a specific council's education department to facilitate workshops with children and young people, so the Ombudsman could listen to children's "voices" to inform their process design.

A few other participants noticed that when citizens file a complaint that is incomplete or inconsistent, or when they only include their Ombudsman in the CC, these cases require additional effort from the staff to gather the necessary information for a thorough investigation. It was emphasised how important it is to look beyond the surface and take the effort to obtain a clear picture of the complaint. In this way, as an Ombudsman institution, you also reach people who may not have the skills or capacity to properly submit their complaint in a way that allows it to be processed.

Collecting feedback
To assess public awareness regarding the role of the Ombudsman and the accessibility of the Ombudsman institution's services, collecting feedback on these services is mentioned by most of the participants. While some institutions provide this feedback through different types of surveys, others also seek input from the so-called 'experts by experience'.

Experts by experience in Belgium
By integrating the perspective of people living in poverty into its operations, the Federal Ombudsman of Belgium works with experts by experience. According to the Ombudsman working with experts by experience is a positive and enriching experience, both for the organisation and for citizens. The experts by experience strengthen the citizen-focused approach of their Ombudsman institution on a daily basis. These experts can provide tips to better adapt the activities regarding people living in poverty. However, working with experts by experience requires a real investment in terms of support for these experts and significant preparation before their arrival at the institution. According to the Federal Ombudsman of Belgium it is also important to consider that experts by experience remain individuals in (or recently out of) a vulnerable situation, which can sometimes lead to prolonged absences. Such a project can only succeed if it is supported by the entire institution, which is committed to it and if there is sufficient attention to vulnerability.

Outreach by using media

The use of both traditional and digital media is perceived as a manner to reach out to the public and certain groups in particular. Disseminating information about the work of the Ombudsman and the rights of people through lectures, brochures, leaflets, newsletters, and magazines seems a common activity in the Ombudsman community. But also television and radio are used as channels to create awareness of the existence of the Ombudsman institution. Aside from the more traditional media, digital platforms and social media are used more and more often as well.

Traditional media such as television and radio
There are Ombudsman institutions that broadcast on a regular basis on television and radio, also on local community radio stations within certain provinces. The Public Protector of South Africa for example has a 60-minute radio slot per month in a community radio station within their respective provinces. The Ombudsman Rotterdam-Rijnmond Institute in The Netherlands broadcasts on a regular basis on local television, the so called 'OmbudsTV'. This program contributes to increasing their visibility, provides insight into the nature of their work, and answers questions such as what an (Children's) Ombudsman can do or mean for residents who experience problems with the government. The first season – in 2023 – consisted of nine episodes, and they continued in 2024.

OmbudsTalk in Rotterdam-Rijnmond
Beside the 'OmbudsTV' there is another initiative of the Ombudsman Rotterdam-Rijnmond, the 'OmbudsTalk'. The Ombudsman noticed that there was still a lot of ignorance among the city council members about the role and the work of the Ombudsman institution. So they started

the ‘OmbudsTalk’ in 2023. This is a (live) talk show that they produce four times a year for and with city council members in their region. The Ombudsman and the Children’s Ombudsman discuss currently relevant topics. They also ask two city council members from the region to join them. During the live connection, a chat is open and monitored. This way, questions can also be discussed live in the broadcast. According to the Ombudsman, ‘OmbudsTalk’ is a valuable exchange of information and knowledge, and is available for playback via a link for city council members on their YouTube channel. From 2024, they want to make this accessible to all civil servants in the region as well.

In this episode of OmbudsTalk, (children's) Ombudsman of Rotterdam-Rijnmond, Marianne van den Anker and Stans Goudsmit, speak with city council members from Rotterdam and Krimpen aan den IJssel about the so-called "bureaucratic jungle". ORR criticizes the maze of rules and service desks that often leave citizens lost within their municipality. The episode explores this issue from various perspectives.

Weekly column in the newspaper in the Netherlands

The office of the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands uses the newspaper to create awareness about their work. Every Saturday, one of the largest Dutch newspapers publishes a column by the National Ombudsman. The column describes how an office employee helped a citizen with their complaint. It is anonymised to ensure the citizen cannot be identified. However, the government agency involved in the complaint is mentioned. The column is written at a B1 language level, making it accessible to a broad audience. The purpose of the column is to raise awareness of the role of the National Ombudsman in the Netherlands. It highlights which institutions the Ombudsman can address complaints about, the types of complaints handled, and how the Ombudsman can assist citizens. The topics are chosen based on current events, their relevance to a large audience, and situations where citizens face significant challenges due to government actions.

Digital platforms and social media
All participants mention the use of social media, like Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube and some are exploring TikTok. As the Parliamentary Ombudsman of Malta said:

"We take a holistic, 360-degree approach to outreach, employing digital and traditional methods each tailored to effectively connect with different societal segments."

Besides the use of social media, also digital platforms are used as outreach instruments to raise awareness of the rights individuals have and gain a better understanding of what is going on in society.

The Virtual Tree House in Mexico City
One of the examples of an online initiative is 'The Virtual Tree house' of the Mexico City Human Right Commission. This is a playful interactive platform for children and adolescents with information about their human rights. The platform is also accessible for children with disabilities. It is a cross-cutting strategy for the participation of children and adolescents that constitutes a virtual and face-to-face space that summons them to reflect, give their opinions, participate and generate proposals for the promotion, protection and defence of their human rights.[9]

Presentation of The Virtual Tree House, a digital space with resources such as video library, playroom, library and others for girls, boys and adolescents.

It also houses a space for children's participation.

Online community for intermediaries in The Netherlands
The Ombudsman of the Netherlands set up a digital platform for intermediaries, which is a sort of counselling desk (Raadbaak in Dutch).[10] It is an online community where intermediaries can ask questions, share tips or identify any structural problems they encounter in their work. They can also talk to professionals of other organisations and of course the National Ombudsman staff. The employees of the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands share relevant knowledge from their experience that can help intermediaries in their work. In doing so, they help citizens in trouble more quickly and effectively. About 1.000 intermediaries are now using the platform (November 2024). The platform is constantly developing to a broader online community, which meets the demand of the intermediaries.

9 See for more information: lacasadelarbolvirtual.cdhcm.org.mx/.

10 See for more information: www.raadbaak.nl/welcome%20.

Digital illiteracy
In spite of many organisations using digital tools and platforms, there are also concerns raised due to the digital skills not possessed by all citizens and areas where access to internet is limited. The People's Advocate of Romania states:

"In these vulnerable communities, the notion of ''digitalisation'' remains an utopia for the time being, given that these communities, very often, do not benefit from utility connections. The computer remains a much too expensive and useless accessory in these conditions.''

Outreach by approaching third sector organisations

One of the important stakeholders for Ombudsman institutions are the so-called third sector organisations.[11] These entities serve as intermediaries who are in direct contact with citizens. Think of NGOs, civil society organisations, ambassadors, advocacy agencies, volunteers, religious organisations and key figures within communities. Through these third sector organisations, the Ombudsman offices aim to reach specific groups and communities. This approach also provides insights into which groups to target and the challenges these groups face. These intermediaries can help address structural problems. That is why most Ombudsman institutions emphasise the importance of maintaining contact with them. The importance of intermediaries and the ways in which Ombudsman institutions (can) make use of them is highlighted in this paragraph.

Engaging through intermediaries in the Netherlands and in Kenya
In the experience of the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands, it is nearly impossible to get in contact with all people in society. Various groups lead very different lives and use different communication channels (if any). The Ombudsman then realised that it is not necessary to always reach out to them directly. Many organisations are already in contact with these various groups. So, the Ombudsman decided that it is the people and organisations with special networks and the will to help these groups on a non-profit basis, who need to know about his existence. The National Ombudsman of the Netherlands calls them intermediaries and defines them as people, organisations or institutions who are in direct contact with citizens and provide them with support in their contact and interaction with authorities. For example: interest groups, general practitioners, psychologists, legal desks, lawyers. The National Ombudsman of the Netherlands makes use of these intermediaries, instead of trying to duplicate their work.

11 The third sector covers charity and voluntary work, and is also known as the 'not-for-profit' industry. The organizations it includes are neither public (owned by the state) nor private (owned by individuals), which is where the name third sector comes from. Registered charities, social enterprises, cooperatives, research institutions and NGOs all fall into this category. See for more information: Oxford Scholastica Academy.

The three main reasons for doing so are firstly that they know the target group and their problems like no one else. Secondly, they are often the first point of contact for the target group. And lastly, this approach saves the target group having to deal with another (public) authority.

According to the office of the Ombudsman of Kenya, collaborating with NGO's and civil society groups not only allows the office to extend its reach and engage with communities more effectively, but these partnerships also focus on joint advocacy, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building initiatives.

Awareness campaign of the Ombudsman of Kenya.

Advantage of having knowledge and trust in Belgium and Malta
Intermediaries often already possess knowledge of the target group and have established a trustworthy relationship. The Flemish Ombuds Service in Belgium focuses also primarily on fostering strong relationships with intermediaries who directly work with specific groups and individuals. These intermediaries possess not only the expertise regarding the specific challenges their clients face in interactions with governmental agencies but also have already established a foundation of trust with the affected groups and individuals. Furthermore, collaborating with intermediaries enables them to uncover misconduct within governmental agencies that may not be easily identified in isolated cases. Such issues often emerge only when multiple individuals report similar experiences with a specific governmental body.

The Ombudsman of Malta also met with ambassadors accredited to Malta, representing communities with significant populations in the country. These discussions emphasised the office's commitment to ensuring its services are accessible. Not only to Maltese and European nationals, but also people from other countries, reflecting an inclusive approach to upholding fairness and justice. The meetings with ambassadors provided opportunities to raise awareness about the Ombudsman's responsibilities while strengthening relationships with stakeholders to promote a more transparent and accountable public service. By addressing concerns directly and fostering trust, the office of the Ombudsman of Malta continues to position itself as a key advocate for equity and good governance.

The Parliamentary Ombudsman of Malta, Judge Joseph Zammit McKeon, during a meeting with refugees.

Traditional intermediaries in Namibia
The Ombudsman of Namibia uses, in case of local communities, traditional intermediaries like community leaders to reach out to the indigenous people. For example, to announce their visits to the area where indigenous people live, as in these areas newspapers, radio and digital technology are not available.

Chiefs of the Rundu & Otjiwarango offices of the Ombudsman of Namibia, participated in stakeholder engagement workshops on indigenous voices, pathways to a sustainable future at Otjiwarango.

'Ombudsman in the Community' in Israel
Another way of cooperating with third sector organisations is the 'Ombudsman in the Community' project, initiated in 2019 by the office of the Ombudsman of Israel, whereby staff members of the office of the Ombudsman visit third sector organisations and give lectures to the personnel of the organisations about the role and mandate of the Ombudsman. The information provided during these lectures enables the organisations to refer relevant cases to the office of the Ombudsman or even to file complaints on the complainants' behalf. The personnel of the reception offices of these organisations come from the local population and are thus able to speak the relevant languages - Arabic, Russian or Amharic. The staff of the office of the Israeli Ombudsman also visit the reception offices of the third sector organisation once a fortnight or once a month (depending on the location) and receive complaints directly. The office of the Ombudsman also makes use of media channels and social networks to encourage people to file complaints.

Outreach activity for the Bedouin community.

Outreach activity for the community of Jews of Ethiopian origin.

Identifying specific problems through intermediaries
The People's Advocate Institution of Romania explains, like others, that intermediaries can also be useful in identifying specific problems of groups and communities in vulnerable situations. According to the institution this can be achieved through the complaints they receive from people who know certain communities, for example the representatives of the Roma communities. These intermediaries know how to write and use digital methods and inform them about the situation of the Roma community.

Financial compensation
Despite the voluntary nature of the involvement of intermediaries, some (Ombudsman) institutes compensate them financially for their efforts. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) of the United Kingdom, for example, has chosen to compensate the intermediaries they work with financially. The consideration for compensating these (voluntary) parties is mainly based on the enormous efforts they make. Working with intermediaries offers a lot of possibilities for Ombudsman offices to reach out to their public and to get informed about important issues in (specific parts of) society.[12] Whether it is ethical to compensate these parties financially is perceived differently by different Ombudsman organisations.

Outreach activity for the Bedouin community.

Outreach activity for older persons.

12 Although the PHSO did not take part in the Best Practice Paper, we find their concept of financial compensation of intermediaries an interesting and relevant outreach practice to outline in this paper.

3 Targeted audience – who?

The nature of outreach activities is also related to the target audience. Therefore, it is important to consider whom you want to reach as an Ombudsman. Is it the general public, or should specific groups within society be prioritised? Are government organisations also part of the intended audience? And which challenges do Ombudsman face in connecting with people in society? Participants shared their view on who the targeted audience of outreach activities is and how this audience is identified.

Below we describe first who the targeted audience can be. Second, it is noted that it is an ongoing process. Third, the barriers in connecting with the targeted audience are mentioned. Lastly, the use of data to identify priority groups is explained.

Target groups

The public in general

When it comes to outreach, most Ombudsman institutions aim to engage with the broader public, initially welcoming everyone without directly focusing on specific groups. Their goal is to reach all citizens and be available for all segments of society. The Federal Ombudsman of Belgium illustrates this by saying that they are available to all citizens who, for any reason, have an issue with a Federal Civil service. The focus on low-threshold and accessible contact options for everyone is a concern that runs throughout the handling of complaints and whistleblower reports by the Federal Ombudsman. Therefore, he does not specifically target certain citizens or groups of citizens. Whereas everyone can approach the Ombudsman to protect or assert their rights against Civil service actions at all Federal levels, as well as against organizations responsible for providing public services.

Priority groups

Many participants indicate that, despite everyone being welcome at their Ombudsman institution, they still focus on specific groups. In some cases, these groups are recognised in the constitution or identified on the basis of the Ombudsman institution's mandate and in some cases the Ombudsman him or herself determines who these groups are. These groups are often described as hard to reach, marginalised, systematically disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or discriminated against. During the interviews, the office of Mexico City Human Rights Commission shared their perception on labelling certain groups. Instead of emphasising the characteristics, this Ombudsman institution prefers to use the terminology 'priority groups'.

"It's our duty as Ombudsman institutions to protect the human rights, especially the rights of specific groups. We have to focus on the duty of the government and the duty of the state to protect the population and its fundamental rights. This means that the focus should not be on the characteristics of the so-called 'vulnerable' groups. The focus should be that these characteristics have a special message and that is that specific groups require reinforced protection. That is why these groups are our priority. The priority is in them and that requires action from governments and the Ombudsman institutions."

Intermediaries
Intermediaries who have direct contact with citizens — such as NGOs, civil society organisations (often referred to as third sector organisations), ambassadors, volunteers, community leaders, and professionals — are also important stakeholders for the Ombudsman. As mentioned in the second chapter, the Ombudsman aims to reach priority groups and communities through these third-sector organisations. This approach also offers insights into which groups to target and the challenges they encounter. These intermediaries play a key role in addressing structural issues as well, which is why most participants view them as important stakeholders.

Elected officials and public authorities
Some Ombudsman institutions also include (elected) government officials and public authorities within their scope of key stakeholders. One of the participants who considers elected officials and public bodies as a group with whom they work together is the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman:

"We prefer the term 'engagement' to reflect the breadth of our activities which include engagement with both, the wider public and more focused work with particular groups who may experience challenges when seeking access to justice. Our engagement work also includes working with elected officials and public bodies."

Ongoing process
It is also important to recognise that contexts are constantly changing because of new government policies and social developments. In the words of the State Comptroller and Ombudsman of Israel:

"Outreach is an ongoing process. It's not just one time deciding which groups you want to reach out to, but each year we redefine when we look at the data and we decide what type of outreach work we want to do, and which population we want to reach."

These changes can require a different priority, attention and promotion of the rights of specific groups. Think of the situation for migrants and refugees, people with disabilities or people in closed settings (detention or healthcare institutions), homeless people and people with an indigenous identity.

Investigating border crossings Romania
Regarding refugees for example, the armed conflict in Ukraine makes the People's Advocate of Romania conduct investigations to assess the situation at the border crossing. Several colleagues visited the crossing point for Ukrainian refugees to evaluate the entire process. They focused particularly on how state authorities were operating. At the border crossing points, many organisations were active. There was a very good collaboration on the ground, both of the competent public institutions and authorities, as well as of the private and non-governmental sector. Additionally, they intervened with the central administration to advocate for better support for the volunteers working at the border, including measures such as compensation, paid time off, or replacement support.

Isaccea-Orlivka Border crossing, March 2022.

Accommodation spaces Isaccea-Orlivka Border crossing, March 2022.

Siret-Porubne Border crossing, March 2022.

Barriers to connect

Nearly all participants reported challenges in connecting with priority groups in their societies. Some participants noticed that closed communities and ethnic minorities are more challenging to connect with, for example the indigenous people in Taiwan, the (Arab) Druze in Israel or the Roma minority in Romania. The Control Yuan of Taiwan explained that there are ethnic minorities in Taiwanese society. Currently, there are sixteen indigenous tribes officially recognized in Taiwan, with a population of approximately 610.000 [Taiwan's total population is around 23 million]. Due to disparities in various social development indicators, indigenous people tend to lack behind non-indigenous groups. For example, average life expectancy, economic income, employment rates, education enrolment rates, etc., making them relatively vulnerable. Therefore, the government must implement proactive measures to bridge these gaps.

Participants also mentioned migrants, refugees, the elderly, children and youngsters, people in closed residences (pre-trial detention, penitentiaries, mental/psychiatric hospitals) and homeless people as priority groups. For the Ombudsman of Malta, citizens between the age of 25 and 34 were also hard to reach.

The reasons why it is challenging for Ombudsman institutions to connect with priority groups vary. This can involve a lack of trust, insufficient visibility of the Ombudsman, and other barriers that sometimes play a role as well.

Lack of trust

One of the factors mentioned is a general lack of trust in public authorities. Regarding this matter, the State Comptroller and Ombudsman of Israel mentioned that there are some communities, which have a basic suspicion of public authorities and therefore do not reach out and ask for help. This could also be because they do not wish to be seen as someone who needs help; they do not want to appear weak or they just do not believe in public authorities. The bureaucratic barrier also prevents people from exercising their rights, because it is very hard for them to navigate through the bureaucratic system.

Insufficient visibility of the Ombudsman

Besides the lack of trust, there are groups who face other significant barriers when it comes to approaching the Ombudsman for protection or the vindication of their rights. This is often due to the insufficient visibility of the Ombudsman, which leads to a lack of awareness or limited understanding in these groups of the Ombudsman's existence and the role and function. The People's Advocate of Romania describes this issue as follows:

"At the same time, we realise that the more educated a person is, the more likely it is to come to us. While on the other hand, people in poverty, people with less education, people from vulnerable communities, they are less inclined to come to us, because they do not know, because they do not dare. It can be a variety of reasons. This is why sometimes when we think of what you ask us about outreach, immediately we jump to that."

Other barriers

Other barriers to establishing contact with people include socio-economic status, geographical location (such as living in rural or remote areas), language barriers, illiteracy (including digital illiteracy), and disabilities — whether physical, such as motor limitations or sensory impairments like deafness or blindness, or mental, such as dementia or depression. Additionally, many participants highlighted cultural, psychological, and bureaucratic obstacles that further prevent some individuals from reaching out to the Ombudsman. All these factors influence the selection of outreach activities. For example, to address language barriers, organisations often hire multilingual

staff or offer services in braille. Geographical distance is often mitigated by bringing services directly to the people, for instance, through the previously mentioned off-road vehicles or by establishing regional offices. Furthermore, the importance of collaborating with intermediaries was emphasised, as they are already in contact with priority groups, thereby reducing barriers.

Using data to identify priority groups

Analysing data can provide more insight to identify the priority groups. Who do you reach? Who knows about the services of the Ombudsman? And who does not? What is the reputation of the Ombudsman in different groups and/or segments of society? But also, which systematic problems occur based on the received complaints or on other type of data? Most of the participants use different types of data to identify their priority groups. Both internal and external data is used by different participants.

Using internal data

Many Ombudsman offices use their own data such as complaint data, a record of recommendations or feedback given to public authorities, or 'customers' feedback. Some also proactively gain additional information by (online) forms or surveys. This includes feedback surveys regarding closed cases, other types of surveys regarding new complainants or for instance asking complainants how they have heard about the Ombudsman office. But also surveys among the general public are carried out.

The Public Protector South Africa illustrates this by explaining that they use their own data to see whether certain complaints occur multiple times which gives it a structural character and to identify groups that require protection. For the office of the Ombudsman of Malta two surveys, one targeting the general public and another involving past users of the Ombudsman's services, have shaped the institution's outreach strategy. While overall awareness has increased to nearly 91% in 2024 (up from 70% in 2015), the 25-34 age group remains a significant focus, with 21% still unaware of the Ombudsman's role. Misunderstandings about the institution's jurisdiction persist, with nearly half of the respondents incorrectly believing it includes private entities. Furthermore, a decline in the willingness to lodge complaints, now rated at 60% compared to 84% in 2015, highlights the need for clearer communication about the complaint process. The users' survey demonstrated strong support for the role of the Ombudsman of Malta, with 99.6% affirming its importance. However, concerns were raised by 55.3% of the respondents about the enforcement of recommendations by public authorities. In response, the outreach program of the Ombudsman of Malta focuses on engaging younger adults, addressing misconceptions about jurisdiction, and simplifying the complaint process. By shifting attention to the implementation success rate by the public administration of the recommendations made by the Ombudsman, the office aims to restore public trust, improve understanding, and ensure greater engagement with its work.

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman explains it as follows:

"We monitor and analyse our (and where we can public sector) complaints data. If we identify areas we believe complaints are underrepresented, we engage with those groups/sectors to try to understand better the barriers for complaint handling, what we can do to raise awareness and support people, and what resources and further engagement we should focus on."

Using external data
Some participants combine the analysis of their own data with external data to gain more information about the people they managed to reach out to.

Data of the Central Bureau of Statistics
The office of the Ombudsman of Israel combines its own data with that of the Central Bureau of Statistics. The data from both sources are analysed and processed into usable knowledge, indicating to the office the success of its outreach program and where it should focus its future outreach activities.

Combining internal and external data
The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) collects additional internal data by a team dedicated to outreach and engagement to develop their understanding of which groups bring complaints to NIPSO and which may be experiencing barriers. This additional internal data includes:

- Postcode analysis of complaints to identify complaints from areas of high deprivation.
- An Equality, Diversity & Inclusion survey to new complainants, which helps to monitor and understand better the people who bring complaints to the office. For example – gender, age profile, sexual orientation, do they have a disability or caring responsibilities. They can cross reference this information with the complaints data to see whether specific groups of people are complaining about different services and, just as importantly are there groups who are not complaining? This information helps inform the external engagement work and the internal efforts to be an accessible organisation.
- A feedback survey to closed cases.
- An accessibility survey to all staff to inform an Accessibility Strategy.

This information, along with feedback from engagement meetings and a second Public Awareness Survey (March 2024) will be regularly reviewed. This will inform both future engagements with under-represented groups and highlight next steps for NIPSO in how it supports complainants and communicates with the public to deliver a fully accessible service for people in Northern Ireland.

Hire a research agency to help
The National Ombudsman of the Netherlands hired a research agency to investigate which specific groups they did not reach yet even though they could benefit from its services.
The research agency identified five specific groups: young adults, migrants and refugees, self-employed individuals, single parents with young children, and older caregivers as well as elderly individuals living alone. For the determination of these specific groups, the research agency took into account the reasons for their vulnerability, the obstacles for them to ask for help and the difficulties they experience in contact with governmental organisations and public agencies.

Testing assumptions
Aside from identifying who the priority groups are, data analysis also helps in testing the assumptions held within the Ombudsman institutions. An example was provided by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman who mapped the general deprivation indices for postcodes with their own data. The outcome was that they received a high number of complaints from people in the lower four deprivation indices. Traditionally, it was thought complaints came from older, middle- class citizens, so this insight was very valuable.

Careful dealing with data
When using data, it is important to handle it with care. Some participants noted that national privacy legislation is always taken into account. Additionally, the information is anonymised and cannot be traced back to an individual, ensuring a certain level of security. When data is used to identify a group for specific outreach activities, it is crucial to carefully consider any potential risks.

Summary and afterword

This Best Practice Paper results from the collaboration and valuable contributions of all participating IOI members. The best practices from these organisations take center stage in this document and can serve as sources of inspiration for all IOI members. Although mandates, local contexts, and geographical locations may differ, these practices can evoke a sense of recognition and urgency for changing one's own practices.

Three main goals of outreach

To gain a deeper understanding of these practices, it is essential to consider the goals that participants aim to achieve with their outreach activities. It became clear that there is a wide range of goals for outreach. The three main goals that emerged in the participants' responses are:

1. Raising awareness about the Ombudsman's existence and activities,
2. Empowering the public, and
3. Gaining a deeper understanding of societal issues.

The overarching aim of these goals is to ultimately enhance the functioning of government. A single outreach activity does not contribute to just one goal. The opposite is true; an activity can usually contribute to multiple goals.

Best practices of outreach

Different factors are considered in the methods used for outreach, such as geographical location (e.g., less accessible rural areas, mountainous regions, closed communities, indigenous populations), whether individuals live in isolated or restricted settings (e.g., hospitals, detention centres, psychiatric clinics), age, literacy (including digital literacy), language barriers, cultural barriers, financial constraints (socio-economic status) and psychological barriers (e.g., shame, suspicion, mistrust).

The most frequently mentioned outreach approach by participants involves physically stepping out of the premises to connect directly with people and being literally close to them. For instance, by setting up regional offices, installing complaint drop boxes in remote areas, organising provincial tours or roadshows, or visiting specific priority groups (in closed settings) on a regular basis.

Many also noted activities conducted within the organisation's premises, which make the Ombudsman's services more visible and accessible. These activities include adapting communication styles to the needs of different audiences, such as using plain language and providing services and information in multiple languages. Additionally, feedback from 'experts by experience' helps improve the services offered.

Many respondents also leverage traditional media, such as set time slots on the radio or regular television broadcasts, to increase awareness about the Ombudsman. Digital tools are also employed, such as an interactive platform for children to learn about their rights and an online counselling desk for intermediaries. Both traditional and digital tools require an outward focus, proactive engagement, and creativity.

One thing is clear: connecting with relevant intermediaries (key figures who are in direct contact with different priority groups on a daily basis), experts by experience and third-sector organisations is crucial — not only for identifying priority groups but also for reaching them effectively. Perspectives on how to establish and maintain connections with these intermediaries and organisations vary. In some cases, intermediaries are financially compensated for their efforts.

Targeted audience

The nature of outreach activities is also related to the targeted audience. Therefore, it is important to consider whom you want to reach as an Ombudsman. Most Ombudsman offices aim to engage with the broader public, initially welcoming everyone without directly focusing on specific groups. However, many also prioritise certain groups within outreach practices because they require enhanced protection.

For identifying priority groups, different types of research (including surveys) and different types of data (analyses) are used. Internal data, such as complaint analysis, seem to be very useful for identifying priority groups. The same applies for using a combination of internal and external data.

Nearly all participants reported that they face challenges in connecting with priority groups in their societies. The reasons why it is challenging for Ombudsman institutions to connect with priority groups vary. It can be a lack of trust in public authorities, insufficient visibility of the Ombudsman or other barriers such as the socio-economic status, geographical location or psychological or physical barriers, which make it harder to connect with certain communities.

Some Ombudsman offices aim to reach priority groups and communities through third-sector organisations. This approach also offers insights into which groups to target and the challenges they encounter. These third-sector organisations of intermediaries play a key role in addressing structural issues as well, which is why most participants view them as an important instrument in their outreach strategies. Furthermore, some Ombudsman institutions also include (elected) government officials and public authorities within their scope of key stakeholders.

Afterword

Most Ombudsman institutions do not have a formal or explicit definition of outreach. In this paper, we do not hold a single definition of outreach. We think this is not really necessary. Since, broadly speaking, we have a shared understanding of outreach within the IOI community. Even though some felt that the term ‘outreach’ did not fully capture the scope, leading them to prefer the term ‘engagement’. The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman explains that outreach is thought to fall short of capturing the idea of a two-way exchange between the Ombudsman and their stakeholders while engagement better encompasses this exchange. Outreach can be interpreted as reaching out to citizens at a single point of time rather than as the start of an ongoing conversation. Even though not all Ombudsman institutions refer to engagement, their descriptions of outreach clearly reflect a two-way exchange between the Ombudsman and their stakeholders, highlighting a shared understanding.

It can be valuable however to explicitly and consciously determine which principles should truly underpin your organisation’s outreach activities. The Ombudsperson of British Colombia (Canada) has done this by adopting six core principles as the foundation for effective outreach activities. The first core principle is **building relationships**, which involves a commitment to building and sustaining respectful relationships based on reciprocity. The second principle, **open communication**, emphasises an open, two-way dialogue, with a focus on listening and sharing information. The third core principle, **honouring lived experiences**, canters on connecting with diverse communities by listening with empathy, respecting personal stories, and applying trauma-informed practices. **Accessibility** is the fourth principle, with a commitment to working with communities to eliminate systemic barriers that might affect their access to communication and services. Lastly, **creating safe spaces and empowerment** underscores the importance of empowering community members through education to manage complaint processes. It can be useful for any Ombudsman institution to explicitly and consciously determine, which principles should truly underpin your organisation’s outreach activities.

In addition to carefully considering the principles that should underpin outreach activities, we also observed that some organisations have dedicated departments or employees focused on engagement and outreach. For example, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman with a special Improvement, Engagement & Impact Team which has two Engagement & Policy Officers. It is, however, important to notice, that although engagement is an important part of the team's role, it is not their sole focus.

We also asked the participating members about the challenges they face. The most frequently mentioned issues were a lack of financial resources and personnel. There are many tasks that an Ombudsman must carry out, and there is not always enough capacity to cover everything. Given the scarcity of both funds and people, it becomes even more crucial to carefully consider how an organisation allocates its resources. What goals do you aim to achieve? Which audience do you want to reach? And which outreach activities align best with these priorities? This Best Practice Paper aims to provide useful guidance in addressing these questions and consciously engage in outreach as an organisation.

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May 2025