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[www.fira.co.uk/tfo](http://www.fira.co.uk/tfo)  
[www.thefurnitureombudsman.org](http://www.thefurnitureombudsman.org)



## New Members 2010

We are delighted to welcome the following new members:

### FULL

Collective Imports  
Leather Studio  
Tamerisk Design Limited

### ASSOCIATE

Antiques 2 Modern  
Beds Direct.Com/Timberband  
Bedsonline.biz  
C Harris & Sons (Fleet) Limited  
Clover Star Limited  
Custom Carpentry  
Exclusive Interiors  
Hampshire Barn Interiors  
Heico Fasteners UK Limited  
Homewood Interiors Limited  
Hypnia Limited  
JJO plc  
JTS Interiors  
Keechdesign UK Limited  
La Source  
New-life Interiors Limited  
North Wales Beds  
Sofa & Home  
TC Group  
The Bed & Suite Centre  
The Homezone/Bedzone

# Dear Member

With our services receiving positive exposure in the pages of the national consumer press, across the airwaves and on television, it has been an extremely busy year for all of us at The Furniture Ombudsman. Our partnership with Consumer Direct continues to provide many exciting opportunities for us to explore and is providing a vehicle for us to raise our profile nationally. We have also continued to invest in new systems which will help us to deliver an efficient and robust service to all of our stakeholders.

**Over recent months we have seen an increase in the number of consumers who have contacted us on the telephone and browsed our website for advice prior to making a purchase.** This has prompted the introduction of a store locator on our website which directs consumers to shop with our members.

With the economy showing positive signs of recovery and the uncertainty following the general election behind us, I am sure that the high street will begin to see an increase in consumer spending. Today consumers are presented with more choice over products and services than ever before. Aside from seeking out the best deal for them financially, many consumers are seeking out those retailers who can offer them additional assurances over quality, service and after-care.

Each of us is a consumer in our own right so it's poignant to ask oneself – why wouldn't I choose to shop with a retailer who is overseen by some credible third party? **Those of us who travel wouldn't dream of booking a holiday from an agent who isn't ABTA approved and I see a similar trend developing over the coming months and years with consumers of the furniture and home improvement industries.**

I hope that over the coming months more and more of you will tap into the marketing benefits that your association with The Furniture Ombudsman provides, which in turn, will highlight the assurances of shopping with you.

*Kind regards*

**Kevin Grix**

**Head of The Furniture Ombudsman**

# TFO website launch

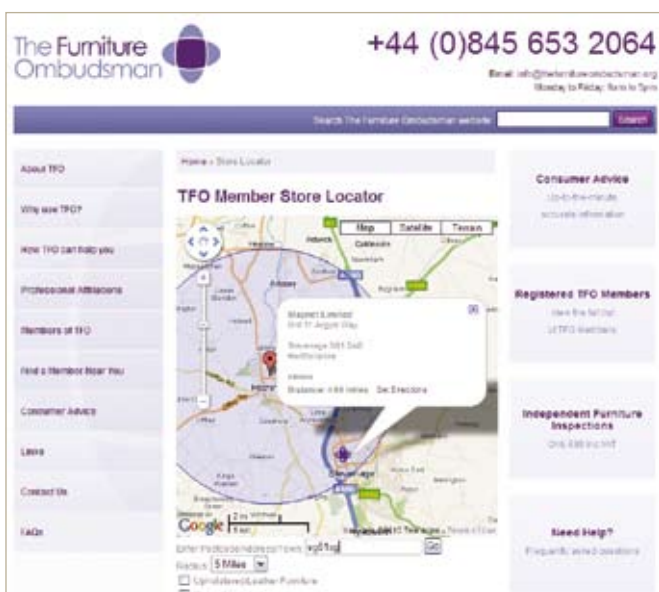


At the start of 2010 The Furniture Ombudsman launched two brand new websites designed to provide both consumers and businesses with clear, easy-to-use functionality and a comprehensive guide to all the services on offer.

Previously, TFO shared space on the FIRA website and was limited to just a handful of pages of information. Now with a dedicated section on the FIRA site and a standalone consumer site, we've seen a significant increase in overall visits and currently receive approximately 1,000 hits per week to each of the sites. TFO's area on the FIRA site is consistently the most visited part of the website and analysis shows that the majority of those visitors are looking up information on members of TFO.

With this in mind, we have just launched a new branch locator for our members, giving visitors the ability to look up TFO members store details in their area. Consumers can either enter their postcode or town name, then select from a list of categories such as kitchens, bathrooms, upholstery etc. A map will then show them contact information and addresses of branches that are closest to them within a selected radius. From there they can then click for instant A-B directions or visit the members' website for more information.

Since the launch we have been working hard to improve the features available on the websites and, along with the store locator, have implemented a new Consumer Advice section that offers live, up-to-the-minute information on a wide range of topics. Future plans include the introduction of a new online shop which will allow visitors to purchase training events and membership packages via the website. Development is almost complete and we will be testing and launching the new shop this summer.



# TFO - working in partnership with our members

**“We firmly believe that having TFO membership assists in our customers’ decision-making process.”**

Gary Hedley,

Customer Care Manager, Magnet.

The role of The Furniture Ombudsman is to raise standards in the furniture and home improvement industries, and membership of the organisation at Full or Associate level provides a unique badge of honour which gives businesses an important differentiation in the market.

TFO was founded at the behest of The Office of Fair Trading, who approached the industry as an alternative to passing legislation. It provides an opportunity to raise the profile of the industry in the eyes of consumers and consumer organisations and a means of resolving disputes without the need for costly litigation.

Importantly, membership of TFO inspires consumer confidence in furniture retailers and manufacturers, as well as providing brand protection for its members.

*‘...membership of TFO inspires consumer confidence in further retailers and manufacturers...’*

TFO provides ad hoc advice on a dispute, giving an opinion on the validity of a complaint or general guidance on how to resolve matters. A significant proportion of cases which come to TFO are resolved at conciliation stage, meaning a substantial saving in time and costs spent inhouse dealing with disputes. The organisation is a source of specialist expert advice, specialist training on consumer

legislation, customer service issues and complaint management. It also provides:

- A dedicated telephone advice line
- Dispute Resolution Services
- Payment Protection Scheme
- Specialist training and information services
- Independent inspection and testing
- Access to unlimited telephone guidance
- Advice on issues relating to furniture problems, customer complaints and consumer law in general

Full TFO member Magnet, is one of the UK’s leading manufacturers, suppliers and retailers of joinery and kitchen products to the trade and consumer markets.

Part of the Nobia Group, Magnet employs over 2,000 people in the UK through its large branch network, support centre and supply operation in Darlington.

*‘TFO’s advice line is invaluable. We use this service when internal processes fail...’*

Joanne White, Service Excellence Manager at Magnet, says: “TFO’s advice line is invaluable. We use this service when internal processes fail and we feel the need to seek impartial guidance and advice. We want to ensure our decision is fair before telling the customer, and TFO helps us to balance our decisions.”

Magnet’s customer issues have reduced by 85% over the last 10 years as a result of driving pro-active Customer Service, she says. “Issues continue to be at a low level because of our aim to be fair and reasonable, and TFO’s advice line assists in keeping us on the straight and narrow.” Magnet is also enthusiastic about TFO’s Dispute Resolution Service. “This is a fantastic alternative to a last resort (the last resort being litigation),” says Gary Hedley, Customer Care Manager at Magnet. “We’ve seen a reduction in legal issues as customers choose to pursue their issue via TFO rather than legal issues as customers choose to pursue their issue via TFO rather than issuing a

County Court Summons. We have complete trust in the integrity and independence of TFO staff because of the transparency of their processes, and we're assured by the fact they are professionally qualified by the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators."

*'Our TFO membership and relationship helps us to drive improvements...'*

"We aspire to be the best in terms of Service Excellence," says Joanne White. "Our TFO membership and relationship helps us to drive improvements, which in turn help us achieve our aspiration of being Best in Class. We absolutely want to continue to work together with TFO, developing our relationship to raise the standard for the scheme, and we want to help TFO to unite the industry to raise its profile."

## Case study - from the files of TFO

A consumer purchased a fully fitted kitchen in March 2009. The kitchen was delivered in May, and installation commenced the following day.

The consumer's initial complaint in July was that the granite work surface fitted didn't resemble the display which was viewed in the showroom. They also complained that the breakfast bar was significantly different in colour from the other work surfaces in the kitchen.

The consumer requested that the granite work surfaces were replaced with a fair representation of the display viewed, and also requested compensation for delay, disruption and inconvenience.

The retailer believed that the customer received the correct granite work surfaces as per the original order form and the original display viewed at the showroom. As a goodwill gesture the retailer agreed to replace the breakfast bar section of granite free of charge.

The consumer was not satisfied with the retailer's response and referred the matter to The Furniture Ombudsman. All parties were asked to submit information and documents about the dispute so that a full understanding of the issue could be obtained. The dispute was referred to the Dispute Resolution Service of The Furniture Ombudsman for adjudication under the Code of Practice. All TFO members agree to accept the outcome of the adjudication as a condition of membership. This doesn't affect the rights of the consumer to pursue the matter further.

In this case, the Furniture Ombudsman organised for an inspection of the installation in order to understand the dispute.

### The consultant was instructed to –

- Assess the granite work surfaces installed in the consumer's property

- Assess the granite work surfaces on display in the showroom
- Take into consideration the wording on the consumer's contract
- Establish whether the granite installed is a fair representation of the display viewed in the showroom
- With regard to the granite work surfaces, the inspection revealed that they were installed in a kitchen which was well maintained and pleasantly presented

In carrying out a close and detailed examination using the different forms of natural and artificial lighting available in the kitchen, the consultant was of the opinion that the granite work surfaces which had been supplied were a fair and reasonable representation of the display in the showroom, and the consumer's claim was therefore not upheld.



# Make your membership count.....

## Don't forget to make the most of your Associate and Full TFO membership by:

- Using TFO logos on all your marketing materials and website to show your on-going commitment to great customer service
- Displaying your certificate and window sticker
- Ensuring your contact details are up-to-date for the new members branch locator
- Taking advantage of discounted training courses
- Sharing your news on our website
- Keeping yourself up-to-date through our newsletters

## For Full Members additional benefits include:

- Alternative Dispute Resolution service
- Access to our online case management system – where you can track your cases online
- Telephone advice on consumer complaints
- Business and legal up-dates

## New Standards Board for The Furniture Ombudsman

"Independence and integrity form part of the foundations of The Furniture Ombudsman" says Kevin Grix, Head of TFO. "It is important for everyone associated with the Ombudsman that not only is it fair, it is seen to be fair." Inspired by these principles, a new Standards Board was established at the beginning of 2010 to oversee the work of The Furniture Ombudsman. The new board amalgamates two previous bodies, The Furniture Ombudsman Council and Advisory Panel, which previously helped to regulate the organisation.

Chair of the new Board is Guy Pratt, Head of Hertfordshire Trading Standards. Mr Pratt is assisted by Vice Chair Simon Burge from retailer House of Fraser. Jim Potts, Head of Lancashire Trading Standards also sits on the Board alongside Isabel Barrell (Wesley Barrell Limited), Paul Hughes (Homeform Group Limited) and solicitor Charlotte Ali. Membership of the Board shall remain balanced so as to represent the interests of the consumer and the furniture and home improvement industries.

In order to maintain the integrity of TFO's Alternative Dispute Resolution Service, the Standards Board reviews a cross-section of adjudications each month to ensure that decisions are both fair and reasonable. "Given the quality of my staff and their qualifications, I am naturally confident in our decision making processes – however external accountability is very important from a professional point of view," said Kevin. The Board also helps to ensure that various aspects of the Ombudsman's policy and procedures are fair.

"Meeting quarterly, the Standards Board provides valuable and effective support to the organisation, as well as impartial scrutiny. It is important that consumers and our members have confidence in our independence and the Standards Board helps to preserve this." Added Kevin.

# TFO – behind the scenes

one of our adjudicators explains her work



**Dominique  
Le-Grand**  
**LL.B, ACIArb**  
Adjudicator

Prior to her appointment in 2007, Dominique read law at university in St Albans for 3 years. To date she has conciliated approximately 1500 cases and continues to offer telephone legal support to members of the Ombudsman scheme. She has also written and presented a cross-section of training packages on behalf of the Ombudsman. In 2009 she was professionally qualified as an Associate of The Chartered Institute of Arbitrators.

## *Summarise a typical day in the office*

A typical day usually begins with the checking of post and emails as well as a review of my cases. I'll also look at any new cases that have come through our pre-case checks and try and establish if indeed there is a case and whether it can be resolved. Additionally I'll check and see if any reasonable offers have been made and, if necessary, ask for any additional evidence. At the beginning of each week I'll meet with the Head of the Ombudsman and the other adjudicators to discuss any difficult cases and relevant points of law issues. Another typical part of my day is preparing for training courses which could involve looking up recent,

relevant court cases to ensure I'm up to speed with current legislation. I also work on my adjudications on a daily basis. This requires the compilation of reports, based upon evidence presented by independent consultants, along with all of the information provided by both parties, in order to make a decision regarding their claim.

## *What do you think the skills of a good mediator are?*

I would say a good mediator needs the ability to look at both sides of a case in an impartial manner. Good communication skills are a must and the capacity to extract the relevant facts from large amounts of information is essential. Good mediators also need to be able to digest information and assess what the salient points are in each case and, more importantly, what the parties believe are the most salient points.

## *What is the most satisfying part of your job?*

I get a lot of satisfaction from cases where a successful conclusion for both parties has been reached. In terms of what I enjoy most about my job, I would say applying the principles of consumer law in my day-to-day job and sharing my knowledge of law with delegates on training courses. I also get satisfaction from helping to raise their standards and understanding of consumer law within their own companies.

## *What are your interests out of work?*

I enjoy playing netball and swimming to keep active and like to relax by reading, watching films, socialising and playing the piano. I consider myself to be a 'people person' and like to use my communication and mediation skills, as well as my knowledge of the law in day-to-day life. I also quite often find myself being a source of legal advice for my family and friends.

# Training and events

July  
16

## *Consumer Law - Unfair Commercial Practices and Distance Selling*

This course will provide a step-by-step guide as to how the Regulations will affect your business and what actions you will need to take to implement them into your normal working practices. Time: 10.15am - 3pm (lunch provided).

August  
04

## *Customer Service and Understanding Upholstery Complaints*

This course is designed to equip delegates with all the information necessary to ensure that they are confident in delivering excellent customer service, and to aid them in their understanding of the issues surrounding upholstery complaints. Time: 9.45am - 3pm (lunch provided).

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## *The Principles of Consumer Law & Customer Service*

This course is designed to equip delegates with all of the information necessary to ensure that they are confident in delivering excellent customer service at all times, whilst also giving customer-facing staff an insight into the essential legal issues surrounding typical furniture transactions, from upholstery to fitted kitchens. Time: 9.45am - 3pm (lunch provided).

September  
08

## *Consumer Law in Practice*

This workshop will give customer-facing staff an insight into the essential legal issues surrounding typical furniture transactions, from upholstery to fitted kitchens, along with a study of the assessment of compensation with specific references to the principles and theories used. Time: 9.45am - 3pm (lunch provided).

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## *Customer Service and Understanding Home Improvement Complaints*

This course is designed to equip delegates with all the information necessary to ensure that they are confident in delivering excellent customer service, and to aid them in their understanding of the issues surrounding home improvement complaints. Time: 9.45am - 3pm (lunch provided).

October  
06

## *The Principles of Consumer Law & Customer Service*

This course is designed to equip delegates with all of the information necessary to ensure that they are confident in delivering excellent customer service at all times, whilst also giving customer-facing staff an insight into the essential legal issues surrounding typical furniture transactions, from upholstery to fitted kitchens. Time: 9.45am - 3pm (lunch provided).

November  
13

## *Customer Service and Understanding Upholstery Complaints*

This course is designed to equip delegates with all the information necessary to ensure that they are confident in delivering excellent customer service, and to aid them in their understanding of the issues surrounding upholstery complaints. Time: 9.45am - 3pm (lunch provided).

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## *Consumer Law in Practice*

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*Cost for all courses listed:*

**£250 + VAT Members & £400 + VAT Non-Members**

The Furniture  
Ombudsman 

**FIRA**

Expertise • Independence • Integrity

The Furniture Ombudsman is  
a division of FIRA International

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