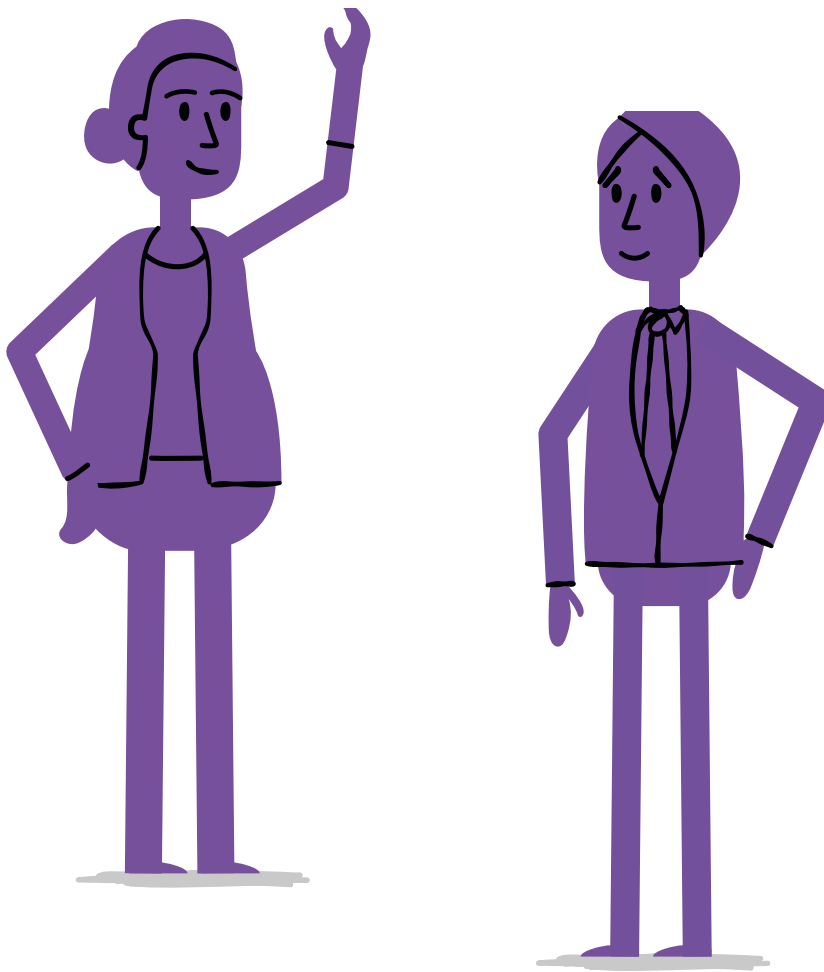


Early Resolution



Contents

Welcome to this guide	3
What standards and regulations are relevant to this guide?	4
What the Complaint Standards say	4
What Managing Public Money says	5
What the Civil Service Code says	5
What you need to do	6
Deciding whether the complaint can be resolved quickly	7
How to resolve a complaint through early resolution	9
Practical tools	14

Welcome to this guide

This guide is one of the Good Complaint Handling series. These are designed to help you implement and deliver the expectations in the [UK Central Government Complaint Standards](#).

The guide explains:

- how to decide whether a complaint is one that could be resolved quickly (early resolution)
- how to resolve a complaint early
- how to capture any learning, to help improve services for everyone
- what to do if the person who complained is still unhappy.

Read this module alongside the [Model complaint handling procedure](#). You can find guides to related topics on our [website](#).

What standards and regulations are relevant to this guide?

- **The Complaint Standards** set out expectations to help you deliver good complaint handling in your organisation.
- **Relevant statutory and national guidance** set out what you must do to handle complaints promptly and efficiently.

What the Complaint Standards say

Promoting a just and learning culture

- Senior leaders make sure colleagues are supported and trained in all aspects of dealing with complaints, from identifying a complaint to issuing a response, so that they meet the expectations set out in the Complaint Standards. This should include how to manage challenging conversations and behaviour.

Welcoming complaints in a positive way

- Colleagues openly welcome complaints so they can identify and resolve issues quickly. Colleagues receive training in how to do this and make sure service users are being listened to and treated with empathy, courtesy and respect.
- Organisations clearly publicise and promote how service users can raise complaints in a range of ways that suits them and meets their specific needs. They make it easy for everybody to understand how the process works. This includes being clear about who can make a complaint and what will happen next.

Being thorough and fair

- Colleagues actively listen and demonstrate a clear understanding of what the main issues are for the service user who has made the complaint, and the outcomes they seek.
- Colleagues look for ways they can resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity.

What Managing Public Money says

- ‘Annex 4.14 ... Prompt and efficient complaint handling is an important way of ensuring customers receive the service to which they are entitled and may save public sector organisations time and money by preventing a complaint escalating unnecessarily. If their services have been found deficient, public sector organisations should consider whether to provide remedies to people or firms who complain. ... Remedies may take several different forms and should be proportionate and appropriate. ... Dealing with complaints ... Public sector organisations should operate clear accessible complaints procedures. They are a valuable source of feedback which can help shed light on the quality of service provided, and in particular how well it matches up to policy intentions. So all complaints should be investigated. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) has published Principles of good complaint handling [and the UKCG Complaint Standards] to help public bodies when dealing with complaints. Systems for dealing with complaints should operate promptly and consistently. Those making complaints should be told how quickly their complaints can be processed. ... Public sector organisations should seek to learn from their complaints.’

What the Civil Service Code says

- ‘**Integrity:** You must ... deal with the public and their affairs fairly, efficiently, promptly, effectively and sensitively, to the best of your ability ... **Honesty:** You must ... correct any errors as soon as possible ...’

What you need to do

This section explains what you should do when you receive a complaint that you think you may be able to resolve quickly ('early resolution') or decide that whether it requires a more detailed investigation (a 'closer look').

Everyday conversations with service users

Every day, colleagues interact with people who use (or are affected by) your service. The people they encounter often raise issues that they can help with and resolve there and then (or shortly after), without the need for a complaint. These are called 'everyday conversations' and can include:

- a request for advice or an action
- a need for an explanation to resolve confusion or frustration
- concern about an error that may have been made.

Addressing matters through everyday conversations is the best, most cost-effective and time-efficient way to deal with an issue, before the person becomes dissatisfied and raises a complaint.

However, if a colleague does not deal with the matter within the timescale promised, the issue can quite quickly become a complaint. For this reason, colleagues should always do what they say they will.

Use the decision tool to decide if something is a complaint.

Decision tool: Is something a complaint or not?

Everyday conversation

The person is asking for something.

The person needs an explanation.

Complaint

The person is clearly dissatisfied with something that has, or has not, happened.

The matter needs looking into.

The person wants a response.

The rest of this guide refers to complaints that should go through your organisation's complaints procedure. It explains what the Complaint Standards say and how to resolve complaints quickly when you can.

Deciding whether the complaint can be resolved quickly

When you first receive a complaint, ask yourself:

- ✓ Can I resolve it quickly?
- ✓ Do I need to give it closer, more detailed consideration and investigation?

You may be able to resolve it quickly if there is something you or your organisation can do in a short space of time that will resolve the issues fully - for example, where:

- a service has not been provided that should have been
- a service has not been provided to an appropriate standard
- a request for a service has not been answered or actioned
- a service being provided is having an immediate negative impact
- an error has been made that can be corrected quickly
- a colleague was seen as rude or unhelpful
- a colleague or contractor did not attend a scheduled appointment.

What does 'quickly' mean?

The Complaint Standards and Model Complaint Handling Procedure do not give specific timeframes for how long the 'early resolution' of complaints should take.

As a rule of thumb, if you can resolve the complaint within days, it is probably suitable for early resolution.

The decision tool below is designed to help decide if a complaint might be suitable for early resolution or not. You can amend the details to reflect the types of complaint your organisation might receive.

Examples of complaints that are suitable for early resolution:

Decision tool

Some complaints are:

- complex
- complicated or serious
- need significant work and time to investigate.
- These cases are not suitable for early resolution and will require a detailed 'closer look'.

Even if the issues look straightforward, a complaint still may require a closer look - particularly where the issues:

- flag concerns that may be affecting other service users
- involve safeguarding issues or a vulnerable person
- involve major delays or repeated failures
- may attract media interest
- may present a risk to your organisation.

Tip:

If in doubt, ask your colleagues their opinion of which approach to take.

Find out more

If you decide against early resolution and need to take a closer look, with a more detailed investigation, see the relevant guidance modules.

How to resolve a complaint through early resolution

When you receive a complaint, the Model Complaint Handling Procedure says you should do the following:

- ✓ Record the complaint in writing (if it is made verbally).
- ✓ Share the details with the person who made the complaint.
- ✓ Do this by email, letter or using a simple form. Choose whichever option is easiest and meets the needs of the person making the complaint as well as your organisation.
- ✓ Acknowledge complaints within three working days. (You can do this in writing, as part of your contact above, or verbally.)
- ✓ Offer to discuss the complaint with the person at a convenient time - to explain how you plan to deal with the complaint and how long you think it will take to respond (in keeping with Managing Public Money guidance).

Reminder: Important steps to consider when resolving a complaint early

How to resolve a complaint early

If you are trying to resolve a complaint early:

- listen to make sure you understand the problem or issues
- ask about the impact this is having and how it feels
- ask what they would like to happen to put things right
- acknowledge the complaint and discuss how you will look into the matter and how long you think this will take.

Once you have looked into the matter:

- explain what happened and why, if you can
- if nothing has gone wrong, provide reassurance and an explanation
- if something has gone wrong, give a meaningful apology
- carry out actions to put things right if you can (or with the support of others)

- if you cannot put things right, explain why and what you can do instead
- if something has gone wrong, capture any learning to share with colleagues and improve services for others.

Managing early discussions

- ➔ When somebody makes a complaint, the most important thing to do is to talk to them - either face to face, or by phone or video call.
- ➔ If you think their complaint could be resolved quickly, use this initial discussion to acknowledge the complaint, discuss the issues, explore how you can resolve them and set out how long this may take.

Follow these steps to gather information and build trust and confidence:

Step-by-step guide: holding an initial discussion

Step 1: Take time to understand Listen carefully, to make sure you understand what the problem is. If it is not clear, ask questions.

Step 2: Clarify the impact Ask what impact the issue is having on the person (or whoever they are representing) and acknowledge this. People react differently to situations, so ask rather than assume.

Reflect the language they use, focusing on any emotive words. For example, if they describe their experience as ‘a nightmare’, reflect this back, saying ‘You said this has been a nightmare for you - could you tell me more about how that made you feel?’

Acknowledging impact and how someone is feeling does not mean you accept that you, or your organisation, have failed or made a mistake. It shows that you are listening, and you understand how the situation has made them feel - regardless of whether anyone is at fault.

Step 3: Gather evidence Ask the person for any evidence that supports the alleged impact so that if mistakes have been made, you can put them right as soon as possible.

Step 4: Acknowledge the complaint Thank the person for telling you about their dissatisfaction.

Step 5: Ask what would put things right When things do go wrong - particularly at the very early stages - people often want a simple acknowledgement, explanation, action and apology.

Ask the person how they would feel if you provided what they are asking for. For example, someone who says initially that all they are looking for is an apology

may say that what they really want is your organisation to learn from what has happened.

Step 6: Explain what you will do Tell the person what action you will take to look into the matter, and how long you think it will take.

Tip

Many complaints that go on to become long and complicated could have been resolved much earlier with

- acknowledgement
- explanation
- action
- apology
- effective communication.

After the conversation

If you find nothing has gone wrong

Once you have looked into the matter, if you find that nothing has gone wrong, explain and reassure the person and if things were not explained to them clearly earlier, apologise.

If you find something has gone wrong

If you find something has gone wrong, try and put things right straight away.

- Always be open and honest about what has gone wrong. Explain what has happened and why, if you can, and give a meaningful apology.
- Take action to put things right if you can (or with the help of others). Ideally deliver what the person raising the complaint has asked for,
- If you cannot provide what the person is asking for, explain what you can do instead so they can make an informed choice.
- If you need help, talk to your colleagues, agree what action is needed and then make sure it is carried out.
- Capture any learning to share with colleagues and improve services for others.

Tip

A simple, clear acknowledgment of what went wrong and a meaningful apology is often all that people want. This goes a long way towards restoring faith and trust in your organisation.

What to do if you can resolve the complaint

- If you can answer or address the issues raised, talk to the person who has made the complaint and make sure they are satisfied that this resolves the matter.
- The Complaint Standards say you should send the person a written response (by email, a simple form or a letter - whichever they prefer) that sets out:
 - how their complaint has been considered
 - the conclusions reached
 - the outcome and proposed actions.

Recording the complaint and capturing the learning

Organisations see far too many complaints about things that happen time and time again. This is often because they pay too little attention to what their staff and service users are telling them. That is why it is important to make sure all complaints are recorded and used for learning.

➔ Make a simple record of the complaint, the outcome, and any action taken to resolve the issue and improve services.

Combined with other sources of feedback, this will help your organisation:

- identify emerging themes or issues
- build a better picture of the impact of your services on service users
- improve those services for everyone.

If you do not already have a system for recording this information, you could create a simple form like the example in the practical tools section.

What to do if the service user is still dissatisfied

If the person making the complaint is unhappy with your resolution, consider whether your organisation can, and should, do more to try and resolve the matter. This might include taking a closer look into the complaint.

- Discuss what has happened with your manager or complaints lead to help you decide if you should do further work.

- If you are satisfied you have done all you can to resolve the matter, you should explain to the service user how they can progress their concerns by:
 - asking for a review of the decision (if this service is available)
 - escalating their concerns about the decision to an independent complaints tier (if this service is available)
 - approaching their MP and asking them to refer the matter to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

If the matter is complicated, serious, complex, or cannot be dealt with quickly

If you decide that you cannot deal with the complaint quickly, you (or another colleague) will need to take a closer look and carry out a more detailed investigation.

- Discuss with your manager and a relevant colleague responsible for complaints whether taking a closer look is the right thing to do.
- If you decide the complaint needs a closer look, explain this to the person who has raised the complaint.
- Tell them what will happen next.
- Finally, explain how they can access help and support with their complaint if they need it.

You will find more help and support on how to carry out a closer look investigation in the closer look [guidance modules](#).

Practical tools

Below is a simple desk aid to help identify if something is a complaint or not.

Everyday conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The person is asking for something or just needs an explanation.
Complaint	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The person is clearly unhappy with something that has, or has not, actually happened to them• You need to look into the matter• The person needs a response.

See the annex for an example flowchart of the UKCG Model Complaint Handling Procedure that can be tailored and amended to reflect your organisation's process.

Desk reminder for important steps to consider when resolving a complaint early.

How to resolve a complaint early

When trying to resolve a complaint early you should:

- listen to make sure you understand the problem or issues
- ask about the impact this is having and how this feels
- ask what they would like to happen to put things right
- acknowledge the complaint and discuss how you will look into the matter and how long you think it will take.

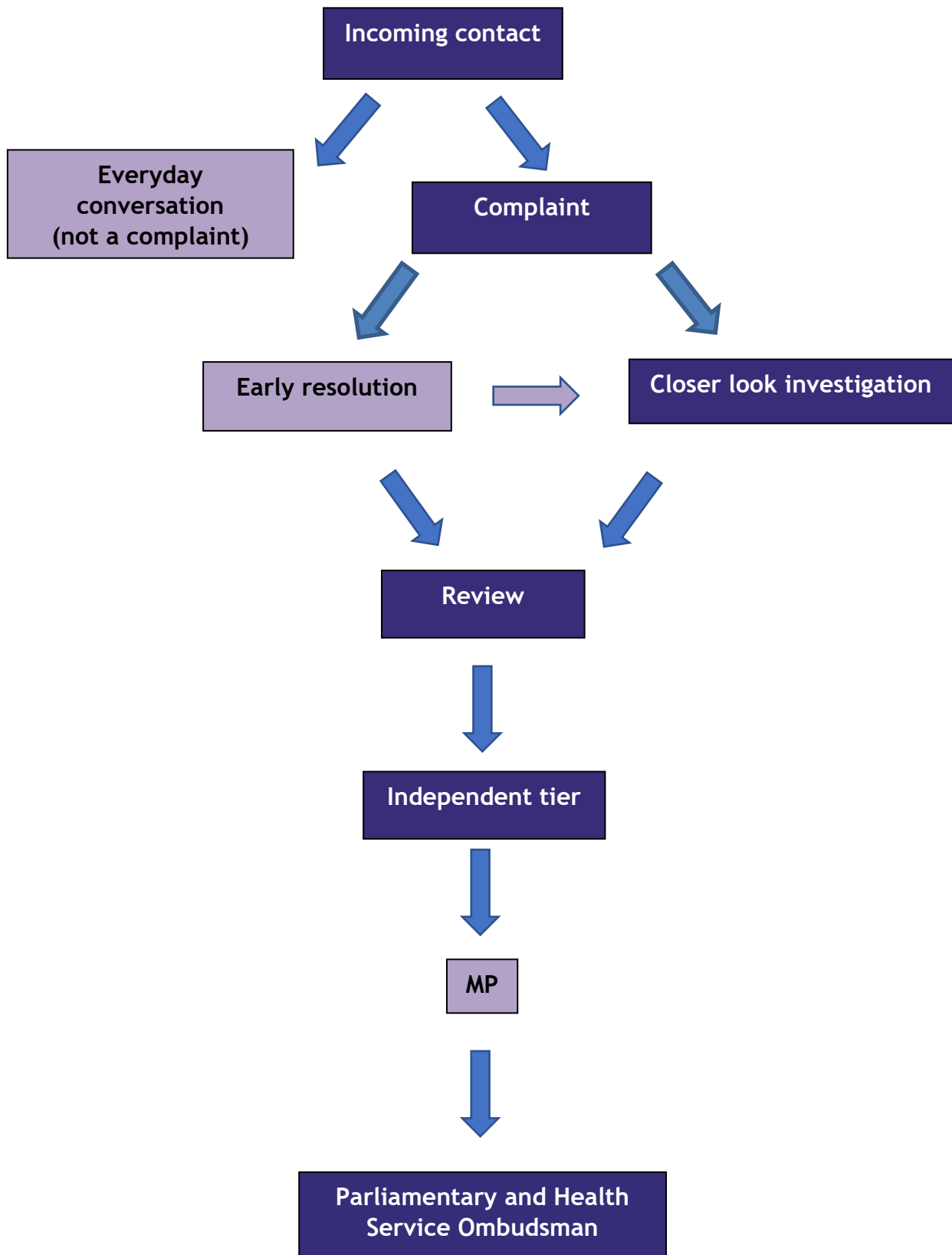
Once you have looked into the matter:

- explain what happened and why, if you can
- if nothing has gone wrong, provide reassurance and an explanation
- if something has gone wrong, give a meaningful apology
- carry out actions to put things right if you can (or with the support of others)
- if you can't put things right, explain why and what you can do instead.
- if something has gone wrong, capture any learning to share with colleagues and improve services for others.

See the annex for a simple form you can adapt if there is no other available system for capturing complaints that are resolved early and the learning from them.

[Guide: 'How to make a good apology' - Scottish Public Services Ombudsman](#)

UKCG Model Complaint Handling Process



Insert organisation logo here

Example form for capturing complaints at early resolution

Service user raising the complaint:
Person dealing with the complaint:

Contact details:
Contact details:

Reference:

Issue and action requested	How resolved	Improving services
Set out the main complaint issues, how they have affected the service user and what the service user is looking for as a good outcome or resolution	Set out what you have done to look into the matter, what you found and what action you took to resolve the complaint	Set out any learning you have identified and how you have shared it with colleagues, other teams, your complaints team, etc., to make sure this does not happen again

I have shared/offered to share this form with [name of the service user]. They have confirmed that they are happy with [insert details of how matter has been resolved eg explanation, apology, action etc].

Signed:

Date:

I confirm that I have entered relevant data on [Insert organisational data capture/learning platform]

I confirm that I have passed this form to [insert key contact or team for data capture/learning] to enter on our learning platform.

If you would like this document in a different format, such as Daisy or large print, please contact us.

**Let's make
complaints
count!**

