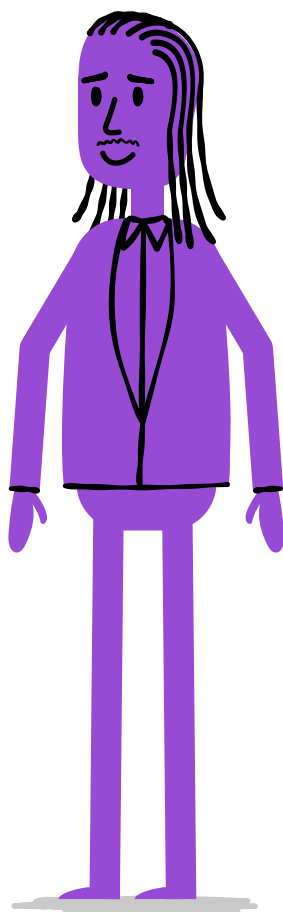
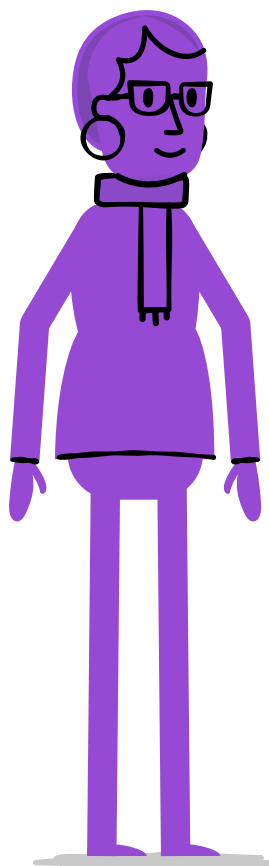


UK Central Government

Complaint Standards

Summary of expectations



**Complaint
Standards**
UK Central Government



Parliamentary
and Health Service
Ombudsman



**Let's make
complaints
count!**

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Definitions

We use the following definitions in the Complaint Standards:

Colleagues: everyone who is employed by a central government organisation. This includes colleagues who interact with and support service users to use their service. It also includes colleagues who make decisions about the services they provide.

Complaint: an expression of dissatisfaction - either spoken or written - that requires a response. This can be about an act, an omission, how a decision was made, or the standard of service provided. It does not include dissatisfaction with a decision that has a right of appeal, or referral to or review by a tribunal or court of law.

Complaints colleagues: colleagues who have a specific responsibility to look into and investigate complaints. This may be as part of their existing role, or dedicated colleagues whose main responsibility is to handle complaints within their organisation.

Everyday conversations: service requests, issues, questions and worries that are raised, dealt with quickly and resolved to the service user's satisfaction. This is done before they become dissatisfied or make a complaint.

Feedback: an opinion, whether invited or spontaneous, that can be positive, negative or neutral. It does not require a response.

Organisation: any organisation that provides central government services. These include parent departments, executive agencies, non-ministerial government departments, non-departmental public bodies and private service providers when they are delivering government services.

Parent department: any government department that provides central government services and has departmental responsibility for arms-length bodies and other executive agencies.

Representative: somebody who makes a complaint on behalf of a service user or supports them to make a complaint.

Senior leaders: people who are responsible for leading an organisation, including senior colleagues who have a specific responsibility for overseeing complaint handling.

Service user: a member of the public, or an entity such as a public or private company, a community interest company, an unincorporated association, or a charity who uses or is impacted by government services.



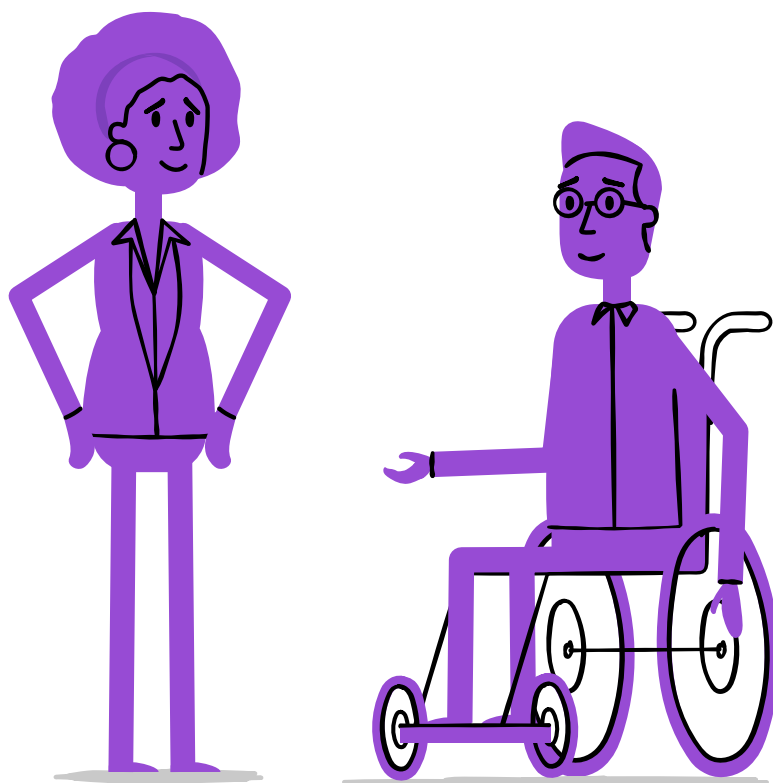
About the UK Central Government Complaint Standards

The UK Central Government (UKCG) Complaint Standards set out how all organisations providing central government services should approach complaint handling.

The Complaint Standards will support organisations to provide a quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaint handling service. They have a strong focus on:

- early resolution by empowered and well-trained people
- all colleagues, particularly senior leaders, regularly reviewing what learning can be taken from complaints
- how this learning should be used to improve services.

The Standards aim to deliver what service users say they want when they make a complaint.¹ They should be used alongside other central government complaint handling requirements listed on page 16.



¹ Citizens Advice research: [Understanding consumer experiences of complaint handling](#), Citizens Advice Bureau research, 2016 and [My Expectations: A user-led vision for raising concerns and complaints](#), LGSCO, Healthwatch and PHSO report, 2014.

Why we need the Complaint Standards

Good complaint handling provides a direct and positive connection between those who provide services and their service users. Complaints offer a valuable source of learning to help improve services for everyone.

We have heard from people who handle complaints, service users, and people who support them. They have told us there would be significant benefits from a consistent approach to the way complaints are handled across all public services we investigate.

A single vision for complaint handling clarifies what should happen when someone makes a complaint. This means everyone involved has a consistent and positive experience.

It also helps organisations show they take complaints seriously and take action to address them.

A single vision for complaint handling provides:

- reassurance for colleagues who are the subject of a complaint, making sure they feel supported and involved during the process
- the right environment for organisations and their staff to promote a positive learning culture, where complaints are welcomed and seen as a valuable source of feedback
- a solid foundation for training and skills development, and builds confidence in this crucial work.

The UKCG Complaint Standards are designed to support the work many government organisations have already put in place to strengthen their complaints processes.

The Complaint Standards will promote a fair and learning culture, with more accountability and openness. This will lead to better communication between central government organisations and service users.

The Standards will guide organisations of all sizes so they can put in place the right structures, reports and systems to capture and examine learning. This will help them gain true insight into their service users' experience.

By adopting the Standards, organisations will be able to resolve more complaints at the earliest opportunity and use learning to improve services for future users.

The Complaint Standards, along with other support such as professional skills training and further guidance, will lead to a better, more consistent approach to complaint handling for all organisations that deliver central government services.

Complaint Standards at a glance

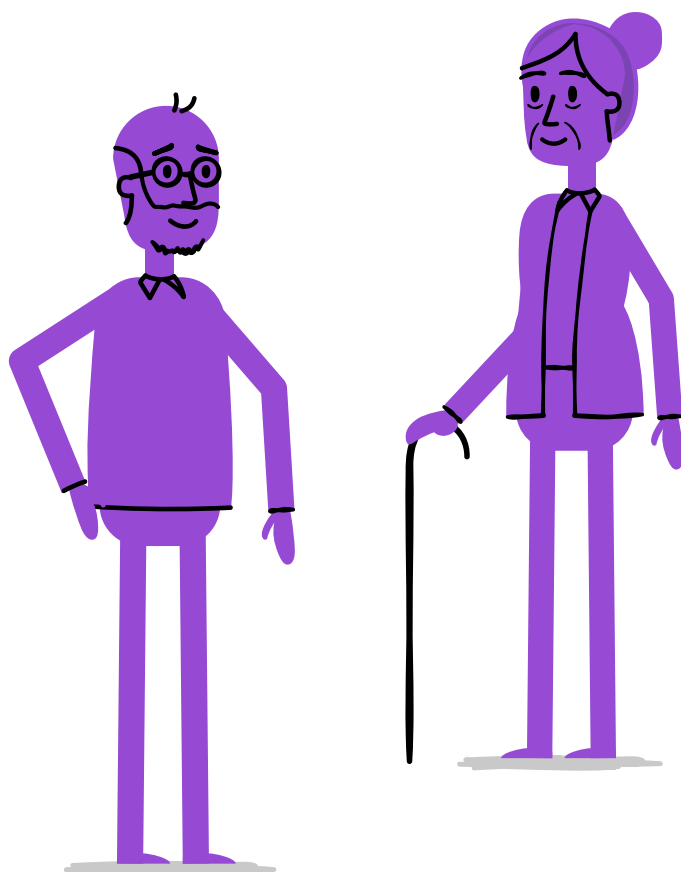
An effective complaint handling system...

Promotes a learning culture by supporting the entire organisation to see complaints as an opportunity to develop and improve its services and people. It sets clear expectations to embed an open, non-defensive approach to learning from complaints. The organisation regularly talks to its managers, leaders and service users about what it has learnt from complaints and how it has used learning to improve services for everyone. Colleagues receive regular support and appropriate training to deliver best practice in handling complaints.

Welcomes complaints in a positive way and recognises them as important insight into how to improve services. It creates a positive experience by making it easy for service users to make a complaint. Colleagues have the freedom to resolve issues quickly and to everyone's satisfaction.

Is thorough and fair when looking into complaints and gives an open and honest answer as quickly as possible in light of the complexity of the issues. It makes sure service users who make complaints, and colleagues directly involved in the issues, have their say and are kept updated when they carry out this work. It always makes sure service users can see what colleagues are doing to look into the issues in a fair and objective way, based on the facts.

Gives fair and accountable responses that set out what happened and whether mistakes were made. Each response fairly reflects the experiences of everyone involved and makes sure organisations take accountability when needed. It gives colleagues the confidence and freedom to offer fair remedies to put things right, and to take action to make sure any learning is identified and used to improve services.





Promoting a learning culture

Effective complaint handling promotes a culture that is open and accountable when things do not go as they should. Senior leaders create an environment where they and colleagues are supported and empowered to act on learning when things do not go as expected, rather than feeling blamed. Organisations use learning to improve their services and make sure every colleague knows their role in promoting a fair and learning culture. They put in place clear ways to demonstrate how they use learning to improve services.

- Senior leaders make sure every colleague knows how they can create and deliver a fair and learning culture around the handling of complaints. Colleagues and senior leaders can demonstrate how they contribute to this culture through practical examples.
- Senior leaders make sure appropriate structures are in place to deliver fair and robust investigations of complaints.
- Every organisation has appropriate governance structures in place to ensure that senior leaders regularly review information arising from complaints, and are held accountable for making sure that the learning is used to improve services.
- Organisations make sure colleagues are trained to identify and respond to complaints in a way that meets the expectations set out in the Complaint Standards.
- Senior leaders make sure colleagues are supported and appropriately trained in all aspects of dealing with complaints. This includes how to manage challenging conversations and behaviour.
- Organisations have clear processes in place to show how they capture learning from complaints and use it to improve services. They give details of how they have done this in their annual reports.
- Organisations put appropriate measures in place to capture feedback about their experiences from service users who make complaints and from colleagues directly involved. They use this to demonstrate how the organisation has performed towards meeting the Complaint Standards and what service users expect to see.
- Parent departments make sure they have meaningful strategic oversight of the performance of their related organisations. They know how these organisations handle complaints and how they meet the expectations set out in the Standards.



Welcoming complaints in a positive way

An effective complaint system goes out of its way to create a positive environment in which complaints are welcomed and resolved at the earliest opportunity. They know how to complain and can do this easily and without fear that it will affect the service they receive. Service users are confident their complaint will be taken seriously, looked at with empathy and answered as quickly as possible.

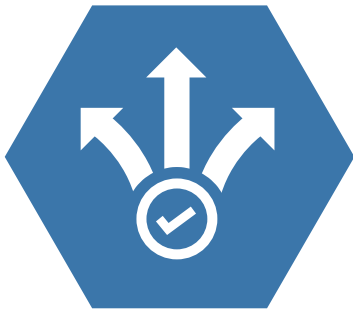
- All colleagues actively promote how service users can make a complaint. By openly welcoming complaints, they are able to identify and resolve issues quickly. Colleagues receive appropriate training in how to do this and make sure service users are being listened to and treated with empathy, courtesy and respect.
- Organisations actively reassure service users that the service they receive will not be compromised if they make a complaint, and explain what they can do if they feel the service has been compromised.
- Organisations clearly publicise how service users can raise complaints in a way that suits them and meets their specific needs. They offer a range of ways for people to complain and 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.
- Organisations make sure service users know how to access advice and support to make a complaint. This includes giving details of appropriate independent complaints advocacy and advice providers, and other support networks.
- Each stage in the complaints procedure is responsive to the needs of each individual. Every stage meets the needs of minority and vulnerable groups and makes reasonable adjustments where required.
- Organisations make sure colleagues who are specifically the subject of a complaint are made aware of the issues as soon as possible, and are given details of how to get advice and support throughout the process.
- Colleagues make sure they respond to complaints at the earliest opportunity. Colleagues consistently meet expected timescales for acknowledging a complaint. They give clear timeframes for how long it will take to look into the issues, taking into account the complexity of the matter.
- Organisations make sure colleagues can identify when issues raised in a complaint should be addressed (or are being addressed) via another route at the earliest opportunity, so a co-ordinated approach can be taken. Other possible routes include appeals, reference or statutory review by a tribunal or action in a court of law or disciplinary process. Colleagues know when and how to seek guidance and support from colleagues and are able to provide service users with information on where they can get support.
- Organisations regularly promote their wish to hear from their service users and show how they are using learning from all feedback (including complaints) to improve services.



Being thorough and fair

An effective complaints system makes sure colleagues take a thorough, proportionate and balanced look into the issues raised in a complaint. It gives service users fair and open answers to their questions based on the facts, and takes full accountability for mistakes identified.

- Organisations make sure all relevant colleagues have the appropriate level of training, skills, and authority to look into complaints thoroughly.
- Organisations make sure all colleagues who look at complaints have the appropriate resources, support and protected time to do so in order to meet these expectations consistently.
- Colleagues actively listen and demonstrate a clear understanding of what the key issues are for the service user making the complaint, and the outcomes they seek.
- Colleagues will discuss timescales with key parties involved and will agree how they will be kept informed and involved. Colleagues provide regular updates throughout.
- At all times, colleagues look for ways they can resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity.
- Colleagues make sure key parties involved (including colleagues specifically complained about) know how they will look into the issues. This includes what information complaints colleagues will need, who they will speak to, who will be responsible for providing the final response and how they will communicate their findings.
- Colleagues make sure key parties involved in a complaint have the opportunity to give their views and respond to emerging information where appropriate. Colleagues act openly and transparently and with empathy when discussing this information, making sure they take everyone's comments into account.
- When a complaint does not suit early resolution and needs detailed consideration or a formal investigation, this is done fairly. Where possible, organisations make sure they assign complaints to colleagues who have had no prior involvement or who have no actual or perceived conflict of interest. Where this is not possible, colleagues take clear steps to demonstrate how they have looked at the issues fairly.
- In complaints that involve multiple organisations, the organisations involved work together to deliver a co-ordinated and comprehensive response and ensure learning from complaints.
- Organisations publish a complaints procedure that meets the Complaint Standards and all relevant government guidance. Each procedure clearly sets out how colleagues will handle complaints and which quality standards and behaviours they are expected to follow when doing so.



Giving fair and accountable responses

An effective complaint handling system enables colleagues to give a fair and balanced account of what happened and what conclusions they have reached. Organisations openly identify instances where things have gone wrong, or where services have had an unfair impact, and take responsibility for these. They make sure colleagues can offer a range of ways to put things right for the service user. Colleagues also look at what action will be taken to learn from the experience to continuously improve services and help support colleagues.

- Colleagues give a clear, balanced account of what happened, based on established facts. Each account compares what happened with what should have happened. It gives clear references to any relevant legislation, standards, policies or guidance, based on objective criteria.
- In more complex cases, colleagues make sure they share their initial views on a complaint with key parties involved and give them the opportunity to respond. Colleagues make sure they take any comments into account in their final response to the complaint.
- Organisations make sure colleagues are supported and encouraged to be open and honest when things have gone wrong or where improvements can be made. Colleagues recognise the need to be accountable for their actions, and to identify what learning can be taken from a complaint and how this will be acted on to improve services and support colleagues.
- Wherever possible, colleagues explain why things went wrong and identify suitable ways to put things right for people. Colleagues make sure the apologies and explanations they give are meaningful and sincere, and openly reflect the impact on the individual or individuals concerned.
- Organisations empower colleagues to identify suitable and appropriate ways to put things right for service users who raise a complaint. Organisations provide guidance and resources to make sure any proposed action to put things right is consistent.
- Organisations make sure service users are kept involved and updated on how they are taking forward all learning or improvements relevant to their complaint.
- Colleagues make sure everyone is told about their right to escalate a complaint to the next stage of the procedure if they remain dissatisfied at the end of the organisation's complaint process. This includes escalating to any independent second tier complaint handler or to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman via their MP.

Other central government complaint handling requirements

The Complaint Standards work alongside several other important requirements and guidance for UKCG organisations.

A Modern Civil Service

The Complaint Standards will help deliver the Modern Civil Service vision of a skilled, innovative and ambitious Civil Service that is equipped for the future. The Standards embody the values of 'integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality' and will assist in the delivery of 'outstanding services to the public' as set out in the [Declaration on Government Reform](#).

The Standards will support the partnership working agenda and 'unity of purpose' ambition to work collaboratively and act 'as one government team, to deliver for citizens'. They will do this by driving a consistent approach to complaint handling across government, making sure lessons are learned and shared more widely.

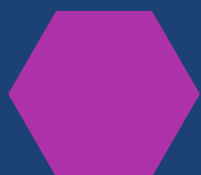
The Civil Service Code

The Complaint Standards will help bring greater consistency to deliver several important aspects of the [Civil Service Code](#), which supports good government and the highest possible standards in public service.

The Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles)

The Complaint Standards also support the ethical standards set out in the [Seven Principles of Public Life](#):

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership



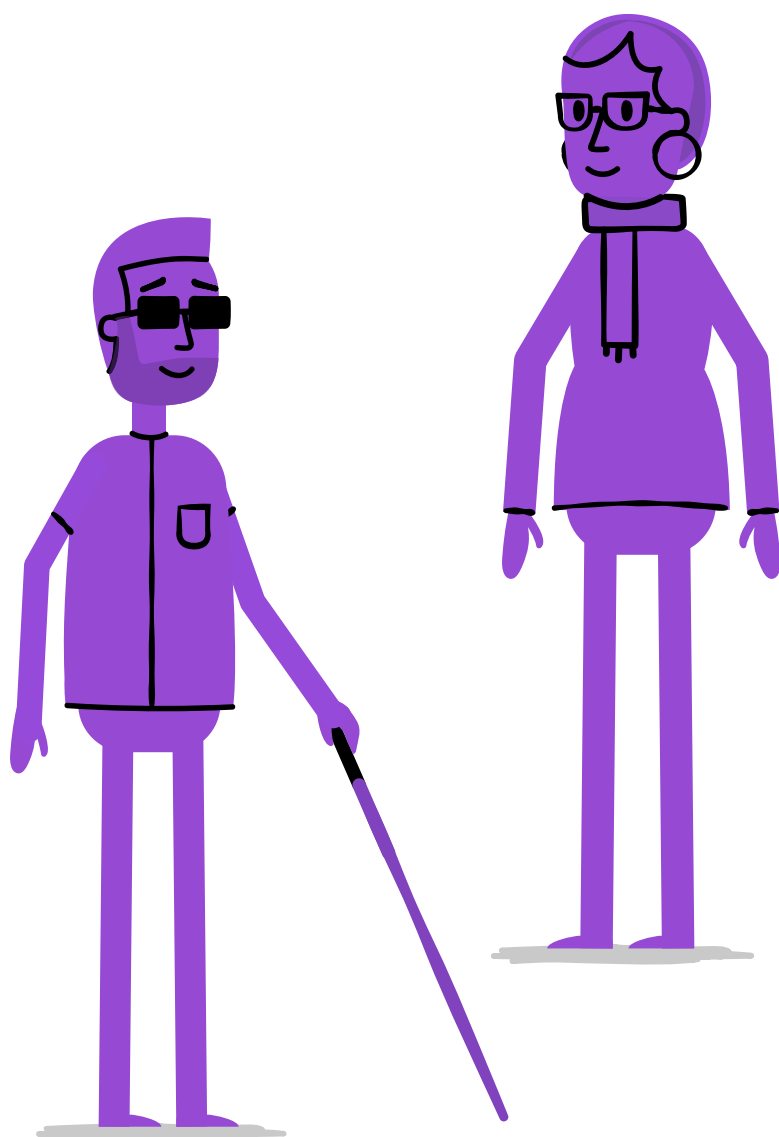
Other relevant guidance

The Complaint Standards support delivery of the requirements of other key UKCG guidance including:

- [Managing public money](#)
- [The Public Value Framework](#)
- [Delivering better outcomes for citizens](#)
- [Corporate governance code for central government departments.](#)

Values, charters and promises

The Complaint Standards will support delivery of each UK central government organisation's values, charters and promises.



Working in partnership to build the UKCG Complaint Standards

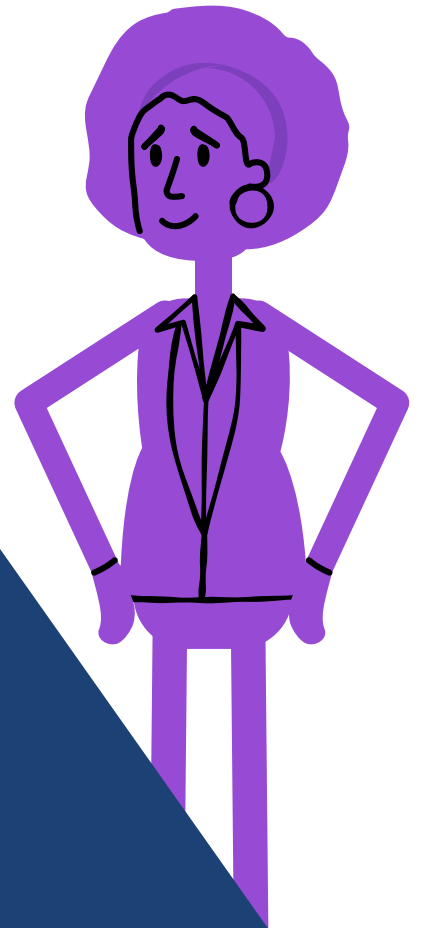
A group of organisations from across the UKCG sector and the advice and advocacy sector worked together to create the UKCG Complaint Standards.

UK Central government organisations

- Cabinet Office
- Department of Health and Social Care
- Department for Work and Pensions
- Department for Transport and associated agencies
- HMRC
- Ministry of Justice
- Home Office and associated agencies
- Adjudicators' Office
- Department for Education
- Defra
- UK Health Security Agency
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
- Food Standards Agency
- Government Internal Audit Agency
- Cross Government complaints forum
- Operational Delivery Profession

Advice and advocacy sector representatives

- Administrative Justice Council
- Citizens Advice
- POhWER



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complaints
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