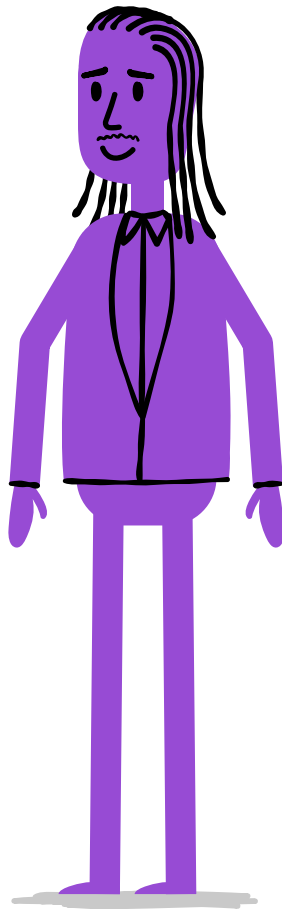
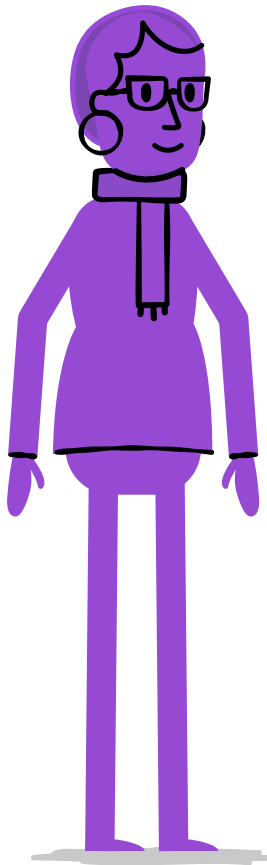


UK Central Government

Complaint Standards

Summary of expectations



Complaint Standards
UK Central Government



Parliamentary
and Health Service
Ombudsman



**Let's make
complaints
count!**



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Foreword from Rob Behrens

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's UK Central Government (UKCG) Complaint Standards. I firmly believe that these new Standards will transform the way UK Government departments handle complaints and use learning to improve public services.

The Complaint Standards have been developed by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO), in collaboration with representatives from central Government departments, other public bodies, and advice and advocacy groups.

They are the culmination of many months of work and I am very grateful to everyone involved. The working group has been invaluable in shaping the Standards and making sure they are of practical relevance to complaint handling teams from across Government.

As a first step towards building a complaint handling system that provides a consistent and positive experience for everyone involved, they are designed to provide a guide that can be adapted to suit the unique environments which exist across central Government and public bodies.

We believe at the heart of an effective complaint handling system are four core pillars, which these Standards are based on:

- **welcoming complaints in a positive way** and recognising them as valuable insight for organisations
- **supporting a thorough and fair approach** that accurately reflects the experiences of everyone involved
- **encouraging fair and accountable responses** that provide open and honest answers as soon as possible
- **promoting a learning culture** by supporting organisations to see complaints as opportunities to improve services.

In developing the Standards, PHSO held a wider consultation with Government complaint handlers, the public, and third sector and advocacy organisations. The results showed widespread backing for the Standards, with 82% of respondents saying it was clear what they were trying to achieve and 91% supporting their aims. I'm very glad to see this support for the Standards.

Although the Complaint Standards are PHSO-led, for them to be successful it is vital that they are owned and championed by the sector. I hope that senior leaders across central Government commit to embedding them in their service, creating a culture where complaints are embraced and welcomed as opportunities to learn.



The Standards themselves should be viewed as living principles that can be shaped as part of an ongoing process to make improvements in complaint handling and public service delivery. Over the coming months we will continue to develop and share a suite of resources to support departments and other public bodies to embed the Standards into practice. This will include a full set of guidance modules and accompanying training.

As we look beyond the launch of these Standards, the need for PHSO to be granted Complaint Standards Authority powers becomes even more important. Such powers would enable us to monitor consistency and help make sure staff and organisations receive tailored support to deliver the best possible service for users. This would also align PHSO's powers with the public service Ombuds in the UK's devolved nations, where these powers already exist.

We look forward to working with Government organisations over the coming months to continue to improve complaint handling in public services through the UKCG Complaint Standards.

Rob Behrens

Rob Behrens CBE
Ombudsman and Chair
Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman





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 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 the service user becomes dissatisfied or makes 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 delivering Government services.

Key parties: the service user(s) making the complaint, anyone who represents them and any colleagues who have been specifically complained about.

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 helps them 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 that uses or is impacted by Government services.



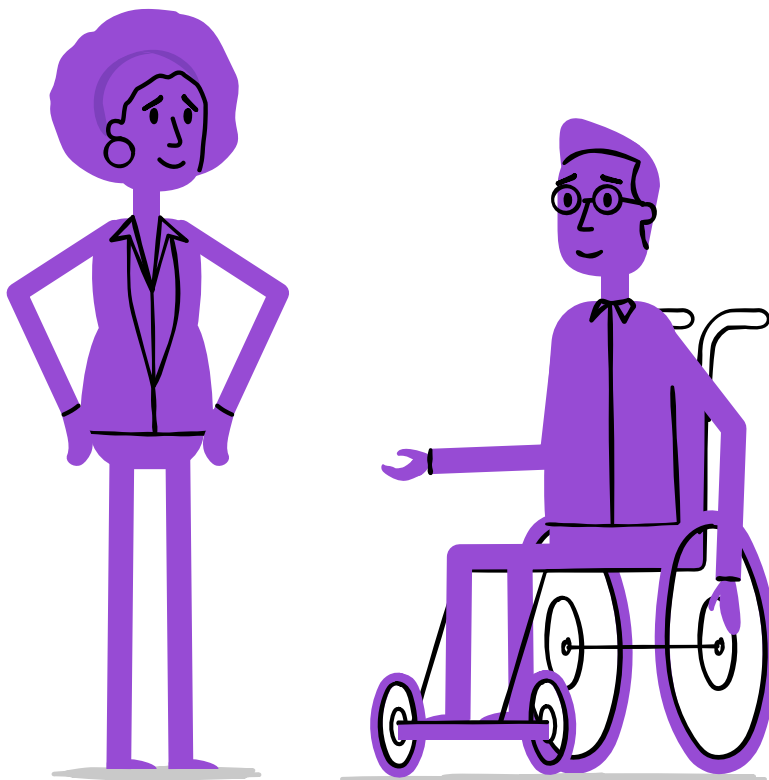
About the UK Central Government Complaint Standards

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

The Complaint Standards will help organisations 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 the learning from complaints
- how all colleagues, particularly senior leaders, should use this learning 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 14.



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

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

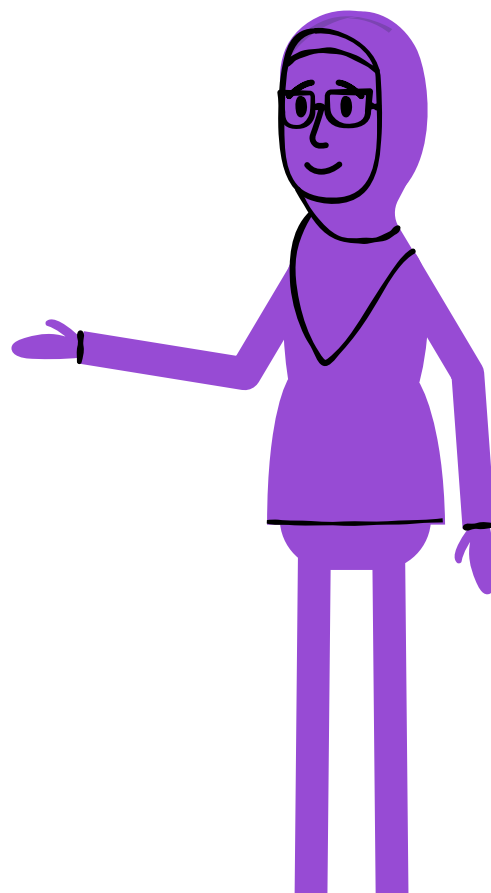
We have heard from people who handle complaints and service users and people who support them. They want to see a single vision that guides the way complaints, about public services are handled.

It can often be difficult for colleagues to deliver good complaint handling because:

- some organisations do not actively promote a learning culture where complaints are welcomed and used as a valuable source of learning
- there is no single set of guidelines for managing complaints
- colleagues handling complaints do not always get the right training and support
- managers and leaders approach learning from complaints in different ways
- service users who make complaints find the process complex and confusing – they do not get a consistent, positive experience.

“From consultation with our community, it is clear that they face a complicated and confusing complaints landscape.”

Third sector organisation employee





This can lead to a culture in which complaints are feared or ignored, rather than embraced. As a result, colleagues who handle complaints can feel unsupported in this important and complex area of work.

The UK Central Government Complaint Standards are the first step towards addressing these issues.

The Complaint Standards set out a single vision for complaint handling that will make complaining a consistent and positive experience for everyone involved.

They will provide:

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

The Standards also help organisations show they take complaints seriously and take action to address them.

The Complaint Standards are designed to support the work many Government organisations have already done to strengthen their complaints processes. They will promote a learning culture, with more accountability and openness.

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 and will lead to better communication between central Government organisations and service users.

The Complaint Standards are supported by a model complaint handling procedure and detailed guidance on how each expectation can be applied in practice. The procedure can be tailored by each Government department so that it best fits their service, size and structure.

Organisations can use the model procedure as a benchmark to ensure consistency in practice. This will help organisations deliver what service users say they want when they make a complaint.

By adopting the Standards, organisations will be able to provide a quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaint handling service and use learning to improve services for future users.



Complaint Standards at a glance

An effective complaint handling system...

Promotes a learning culture by supporting the whole organisation to:

- see complaints as an opportunity to develop and improve its services and people
- set clear expectations to embed an open, non-defensive approach to learning from complaints
- regularly talk 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
- give colleagues the support and training they need to deliver best practice in handling complaints.

Welcomes complaints in a positive way and:

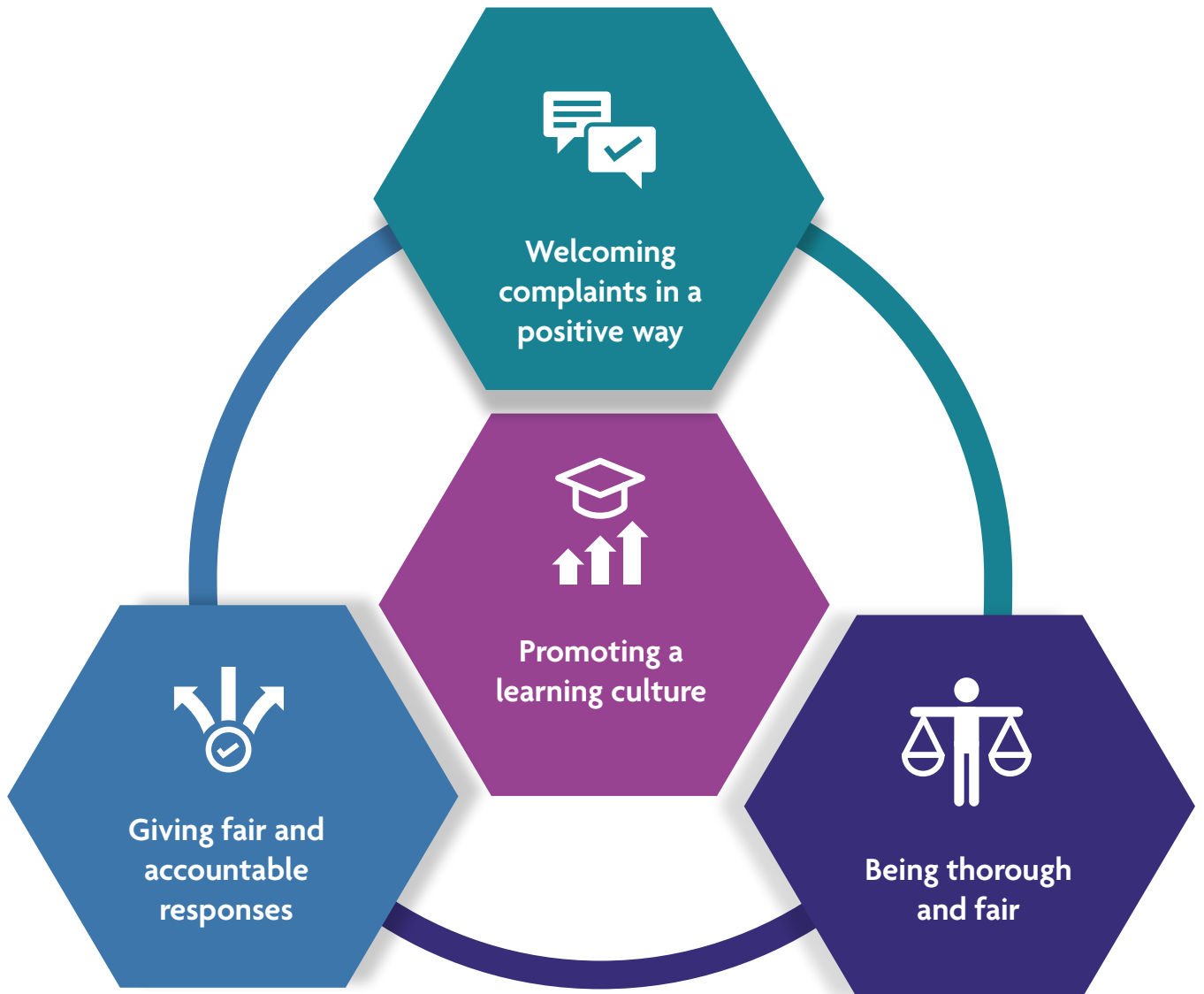
- recognises them as important insight into how to improve services
- creates a positive experience by making it easy for service users to make a complaint
- gives colleagues the freedom to resolve issues quickly and to everyone's satisfaction.

Is thorough and fair when looking into complaints and:

- gives an open and honest answer as quickly as possible, considering the complexity of the issues
- 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
- 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
- fairly reflect the experiences of everyone involved
- clearly set out how the organisation is accountable
- give colleagues the confidence and freedom to offer fair remedies to put things right
- 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 go wrong. Senior leaders create an environment where everyone is supported and empowered to act on learning, 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. Organisations 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 for handling complaints. Colleagues and senior leaders demonstrate how they contribute to this culture through practical examples.
- Senior leaders make sure appropriate structures are in place to deliver fair and robust complaint investigations.
- 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.
- Appropriate governance structures are in place so that senior leaders regularly review information that arises from complaints and are held accountable for using the learning to improve services. There are clear processes in place to show how organisations do this, and this information is included in their annual reports.
- Organisations put appropriate measures in place to capture feedback about the complaints process 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.
- Parent departments have meaningful strategic oversight of how their related organisations are performing. 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. Service users know how to complain and can do this easily and without fear that it will affect the service they receive. They are confident their complaint will be taken seriously, looked at with empathy and answered as quickly as possible.

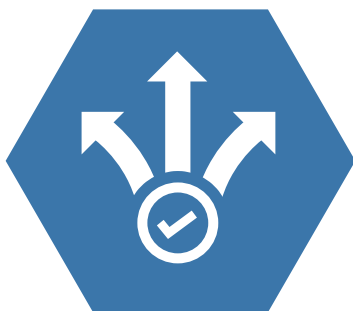
- Colleagues openly welcome complaints so they can identify and resolve issues quickly. Colleagues receive training in how to do this and make sure service users are being listened to and treated with empathy, courtesy and respect.
- Organisations clearly publicise and promote how service users can raise 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.
- 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 it has been.
- Each stage in the complaints procedure is responsive to the needs of each individual and organisations make reasonable adjustments where required.
- Organisations make sure service users know how to get advice and support when they make a complaint. This includes giving details of appropriate independent complaints support and advice providers, and other support networks.
- 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 ongoing advice and support.
- Colleagues make sure they respond to complaints at the earliest opportunity. They consistently meet expected timescales for acknowledging a complaint. They also 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 (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 on such matters so they can give service users information on the relevant process and explain where they can get advice and support.
- Organisations regularly promote their wish to hear from 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 time so they consistently meet these expectations.
- 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 discuss timescales with key parties involved in the complaint and agree how they will be kept informed and involved. They provide regular updates, as agreed with the parties, throughout.
- Colleagues look for ways they can resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity.
- Colleagues make sure key parties (including those being 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 give key parties the opportunity to share their views and respond to emerging information where appropriate. They take everyone's comments into account and act openly, transparently and with empathy when discussing this information.
- When a complaint does not suit early resolution and needs more detailed consideration and investigation, this is done fairly. Where possible, a colleague who has not been involved in the issues complained about should look at the complaint. If this is not possible, the person looking into the complaint should openly demonstrate they are acting fairly when they consider all the issues.
- For complaints that involve multiple service areas or organisations, the colleagues and organisations involved should 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 the 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 for everyone.

- Colleagues give a clear and 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, procedures or guidance, based on objective criteria.
- In more complex cases, colleagues make sure they share their initial views on a complaint with the key parties involved and give them the opportunity to respond. Colleagues take any comments into account in their final response to the complaint.
- Organisations support and encourage colleagues 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. They are clear about how this will be used to improve services and support colleagues.
- Wherever possible, colleagues explain why things went wrong and identify suitable ways to put things right for service users. Colleagues give meaningful and sincere apologies and explanations that openly reflect the impact on the service users concerned.
- Organisations empower colleagues to identify suitable and appropriate ways to put things right for service users who raise a complaint. They 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 the organisation is taking forward all learning or improvements relevant to the complaint.
- Colleagues make sure they tell people about their right to escalate a complaint to the next stage if they are not satisfied with the response 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*” as outlined in [A Modern Civil Service](#) 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





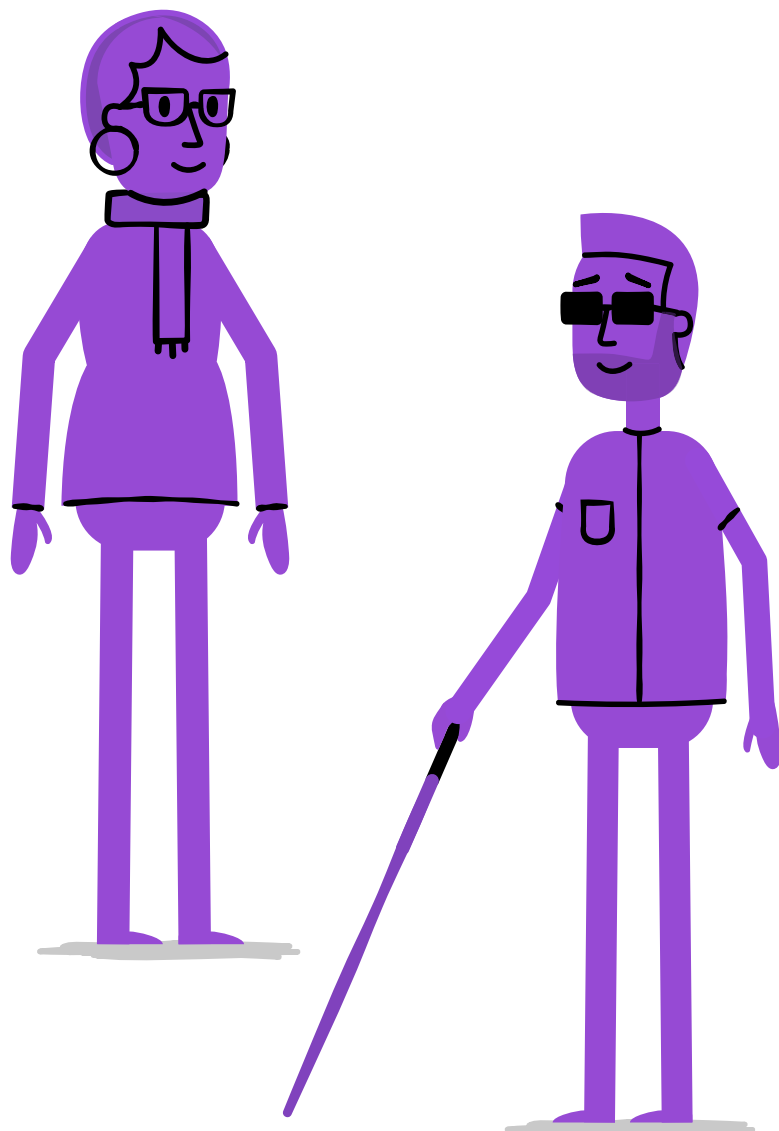
Other relevant guidance

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

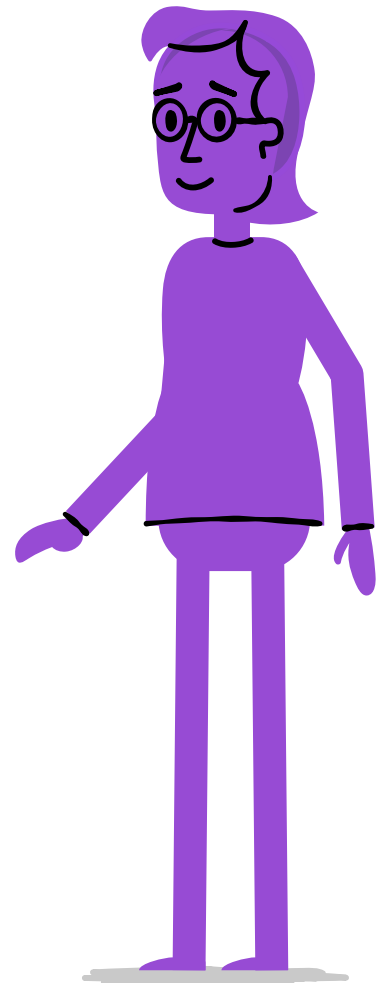
A group of organisations from across the UKCG sector and the advice and advocacy sector worked together to create the UKCG Complaint Standards.

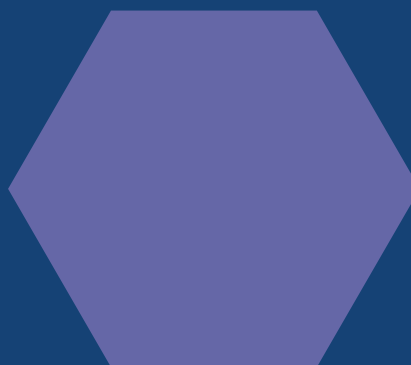
UK central Government organisations

- 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
- Adjudicator's 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





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

**Let's make
complaints
count!**

