



Northern Ireland

**Public Services**

Ombudsman

## **Standards of Service Complaints Policy**

***Reviewed and Issued:***      *June 2024*

***Next Review Date:***      *June 2027*

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) is committed to providing a high standard of service to all users. We value complaints about our service and use information from them to identify learning and implement service improvements.

## **2. Policy Aims**

- 2.1 This policy aims to explain:
- What a standards of service complaint is, and what service users can and cannot complain about using this policy.
  - Who can raise a complaint.
  - Within what timeframe service users can submit a complaint.
  - How service users can complain.
  - The process of how we manage standards of service complaints.
  - How we report on these complaints, outcomes, and learning/service improvements.

## **3. Policy Scope**

- 3.1 This policy is available to service users who may wish to raise concerns under NIPSO's standards of service complaints process.

## **4. Roles and Responsibilities**

- 4.1 NIPSO's Standards of Service Complaints Administrator (the Administrator) will administrate standards of service complaints we receive.
- 4.2 Managers (Deputy Principal Grade and above) will investigate and respond to complaints at Stage 1.
- 4.3 An Independent Reviewer<sup>1</sup> (IR) will investigate and respond to complaints at Stage 2.
- 4.4 Directors will identify and implement learning, service improvements, and/or training when necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> The Independent Reviewer is a person not employed by NIPSO and has no previous knowledge of or involvement in the process.

## **5. What is a standards of service complaint?**

5.1 A standards of service complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction from our service users about the standard of service we provide.

5.2 This may include:

- Our failure to provide a service, or the provision of an inadequate standard of service;
- Unreasonable delays in the provision of our service;
- How we treated, communicated or interacted with a service user;
- Our failure to correctly follow our internal processes; or
- Our failure to follow the appropriate legal or administrative process.

5.3 There are some concerns we will not consider under our standards of service complaints procedure. These include:

- Disagreement with the scope of an investigation, or how we worded the scope of an investigation.
- Concerns regarding the evidence we took into account, or the weight we gave to evidence considered during an investigation.
- A belief that we were biased in our consideration of the evidence.
- Disagreement with our decision on a complaint, including our decision to either accept or not accept a complaint for investigation.
- Issues previously considered and responded to under the Standards of Service Complaints Procedure
- A request to reopen a previously concluded service complaint, or to get a service complaint reconsidered.
- Disagreement with decisions we made regarding misconduct in accordance with the Code of Conduct.
- A request for information, or a belief that we did not provide all information requested as part of a Freedom of Information or Subject Access Request. Those are matters for the Information Commissioner.
- A data breach which has not been appropriately dealt with in line with NIPSO's data breach management policy.

- Issues that are in court or have already been heard by a court or a tribunal.
- Issues we consider have not had any adverse impact on the service user and/or where we consider the matter will not lead to a service improvement.

5.4 For those complaints that relate to the Local Government and Ethical Standards (LGES) Code of Conduct, we will consider these under the procedure in the usual way. However, there may be occasions where we are unable to progress the matter. This is because it may be more appropriate to raise it with the Commissioner for Standards if referred for an adjudication. If we decide this is the case, we will write to you and explain our reasons for this decision.

#### *Repeated use of the policy*

5.5 Overuse of the service standards process may result in access to the service standards procedure being withdrawn for a period of time. We may not consider complaints we define as unreasonably persistent. This usually relates to those complaints from service users who, because of the nature or frequency of their contacts with us, hinders our ability to fulfill the requirements of the office. If this occurs, we will notify the service user of our decision not to consider their complaint and explain the reasons why. We may also consider whether the unreasonable persistence is a matter which falls under our 'Unacceptable Actions' policy.

5.6 Where the decision is taken to deny access to the service standards process the complainant may ask for this decision to be reviewed by a more senior manager.

## **6. Who can raise a standards of service complaint?**

- 6.1 Anyone who has used our service can submit a standards of service complaint. This may include:
- Complainants;

- Their representatives (MLAs, their family/friends etc);
- Members of staff from a public body;
- Visitors to the office (for example, contractors); or
- Professionals who interact with NIPSO as part of their role.

## **7. How long does a service user have to make a standards of service complaint?**

- 7.1 Service users are asked to submit their concerns to us as quickly as possible, and **no later than one month** of the event they wish to complain about (or of finding out they have a reason to complain).
- 7.2 We may consider complaints received outside this timeframe. In this case, we will ask the service user to explain why they did not complain earlier and consider this when deciding whether or not to accept their complaint.

## **8. How can service users submit a standards of service complaint?**

- 8.1 Service users can submit their complaint by telephone, in writing (letter or email), in person, or by using the online standards of service complaint form available on our website (Appendix 1).
- 8.2 If raising their complaint by email, service users should use the following email address: [servicestandardscomplaints@nipso.org.uk](mailto:servicestandardscomplaints@nipso.org.uk)
- 8.3 We encourage service users to raise standards of service concerns separately (using those methods outlined in 8.1) and not within ongoing correspondence with our office. This will assist NIPSO to identify and manage a service user's concerns as a standards of service complaint.
- 8.4 We are committed to making our service accessible for everyone. Our staff will consider reasonable adjustments (where necessary) to ensure full accessibility for those service users who require assistance.

## **9. How do we manage standards of service complaints?**

### **9.1 Stage 1**

- 9.1.1 NIPSO's Administrator will record all standards of service complaints we receive, assign a reference number, and acknowledge receipt of the complaint within 3 working days.
- 9.1.2 The complaint will then be assigned to an Investigating Manager (IM).

- 9.1.3 The IM may contact the service user to explore an early resolution and/or to obtain further information as part of the investigation process.
- 9.1.4 Once the Stage 1 investigation is complete, the IM will respond to the complaint in writing. This completes Stage 1 of the standards of service complaints process.
- 9.1.5 The IM will issue the Stage 1 response within **20 working days**. Where the IM considers it unlikely they will meet this timescale, they will inform the service user of the delay, the reasons for it, and the expected timeframe in which they hope to respond to the complaint.

## **9.2 Stage 2**

- 9.2.1 If the service user remains dissatisfied, they can submit a Stage 2 complaint to the Independent Reviewer (IR). A request for investigation at stage two should be made **no later than one month** from the date of the Stage 1 response. The IM will signpost the service user on how to access Stage 2 of the process within their Stage 1 written response. The service user should quote the relevant reference number in all correspondence. The service user should also clearly set out any disagreement with the Stage 1 assessment of the issues they raised.
- 9.2.2 The Administrator will acknowledge receipt of the Stage 2 complaint in writing within 3 working days.
- 9.2.3 The IR will contact the service user and advise of their timeframes for the investigation. They will conduct their investigation independently.
- 9.2.4 The IR will provide a draft copy of the written response to NIPSO, before it is issued, for fact checking and to obtain NIPSO's comments to any recommendations the IR might make. Those comments will be considered by the IR before the decision is issued to the service user. NIPSO will consider any learning / service improvements identified by the IR and decide how it will be implemented.
- 9.2.5 The IR will provide a written response directly to the service user with a copy provided to NIPSO.
- 9.2.6 The IR's decision on the complaint is final. The service user does not have any further recourse after the completion of Stage 2.

## **10. How do we report outcomes and learning/service improvements?**

- 10.1 The relevant Director(s) will report Standards of Service information to the Senior Management Team (SMT) on a quarterly basis. This will include information on how any learning / service improvements have been implemented.
- 10.2 The Ombudsman reports to the Audit and Risk Committee<sup>1</sup> the total number of Standards of Service complaints received each year. They are also reported on within NIPSO's Annual Report and Accounts.

## **11. Policy Review**

- 11.1 We will review this policy every three years.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ombudsman's Audit and Risk Committee supports the Ombudsman as Accounting Officer in her responsibility for issues of risk, control and governance.

## Appendix 1

### Standards of Service Complaint Form

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) is committed to providing a high standard of service to all users. We value complaints about our service and use information from them to identify learning and implement service improvements.

A standards of service complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction from our service users about the standard of service we provide.

Please use this form if you wish to complain about the standard of service you received from NIPSO.

**Before you complete this form, please read our Standards of Service Complaints leaflet.** This leaflet outlines our process and timeframes. It also outlines the concerns we can and cannot consider under our Standards of Service Complaints policy.

#### SECTION 1 – About You

Surname:		Title:
Forenames:		
Address:		
		Postcode:
Email:		
Telephone:	Home:	Mobile:
Case Reference Number (if relevant):		



## SECTION 2 – About Your Complaint

**1. Which aspect of the service provided by the Ombudsman’s Office does your complaint relate to?**

- Maladministration Investigations
- Local Government Investigations
- Corporate Services/Finance
- Improvement, Engagement and Impact
- Communications
- Legal
- Complaints Standards
- Other
- Unsure

**2. When did the issue that you wish to complain about occur?**

If this was more than 6 months ago, please explain why you waited until now to complain.

**3. Please outline the issue(s) of complaint.**

Please outline how you believe our level of service fell below your expectations, providing as much information as possible.

**4. Please outline how we can remedy your complaint.**

If you do not wish to suggest a remedy at this stage, please leave this box blank.

**Please submit your form to:**

By email: [servicestandardscomplaints@nipso.org.uk](mailto:servicestandardscomplaints@nipso.org.uk)

By post: FREEPOST NIPSO

OR

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman  
Progressive House  
33 Wellington Place  
BELFAST  
BT1 6HN

You can submit your form in person at the above address. Please check our website for up to date information on our office opening hours.

You can also raise your concerns by telephone on **0800 34 34 24**. Please also use this number if you have any enquiries regarding our Standards of Service Complaints procedure.