

Consultation on creating complaints handling standards for the Northern Ireland public sector

This questionnaire provides an opportunity for organisations and other interested parties to provide feedback on the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's (NIPSO's) proposals for a set of principles and procedures aimed at standardising complaints handling by public bodies. If you haven't already done so, you may wish to read the consultation document before providing your feedback by [clicking here](#).

The Statement of Principles

The draft Statement of Principles (SOP) consists of six basic principles that NIPSO believe all public bodies should follow when handling a complaint. The full SOP is available by clicking [here](#).

The six key principles are:

- 1. Start off right**
- 2. Fix it early**
- 3. Focus on what matters**
- 4. Be fair**
- 5. Be honest**
- 6. Learn and improve.**

For each of the six principles above, NIPSO has set out what it expects public bodies to do when they receive a complaint. These include: acknowledging mistakes at the earliest opportunity, providing clear reasons for decisions, investigating complaints fairly, and using complaints as an opportunity for improvement.

Is there anything you would like to see added or changed in terms of the content of the principles? If yes, please indicate which principles and provide details.

Please enter your response below

The principles as stated are sufficiently comprehensive, easily understood and will, in the council's opinion, meet the needs of both the council and its customers.

Model Complaints Handling Procedure

The draft Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) is designed to: make sure complaints to public bodies are dealt with in a straight-forward and simple way; provide a general complaints handling procedure that all public bodies will broadly follow where complaints are resolved early, and where this is not possible, complaints are thoroughly investigated. The draft MCHP also makes it easier for public bodies to analyse and learn from the complaints they receive. The full draft MCHP is available [here](#).

Please consider each element of the draft MCHP outlined below and comment on any changes or additions.

A Complaint Handling Procedure should contain an agreed definition of what is and what is not a complaint.

Please enter your response below

A suitable and agreed definition is important to ensure that complaints are identified as such, as quickly as possible, and provide guidance to both complainants and council, to promote the early resolution of all complaints.

A register of all complaints received should be kept by public bodies.

Please enter your response below

Agree. This is the groundwork of ensuring that council successfully manages all complaints received, and learns from complaints through purposeful analytics. In particular providing information on feedback trends that can be used in conjunction with other approaches to customer insight to achieve a customer focused approach to service improvement.

Complaints should be dealt with in no more than two stages; an initial 'frontline response' based on early resolution and a stage 2 'investigation' where early resolution is not possible and a complaint needs to be thoroughly investigated.

Please enter your response below

Council considers this to be a modern and sensible approach that both simplifies the complaints process for customers and council. And importantly, will serve to help reduce the frustration sometimes felt by customers who perhaps feel they are engaging in a long drawn out procedure.

Based on experiences in other places, a 'frontline response' should be responded to within a maximum of 5 working days, with the possibility of an extension in exceptional circumstances of up to 5 additional working days.

Please enter your response below

This is a practical solution to give every opportunity for a frontline response to be provided in as many cases as possible.

All complaints escalated to stage 2 'investigation' should be acknowledged within 3 working days.

Please enter your response below

Agree. This is achievable and is good practice.

A full response to stage 2 complaints should be provided as soon as possible but no later than 20 working days from the time the complaint was received for investigation

Please enter your response below

Based on council's experience twenty working days is sufficient to bring to conclusion the vast majority of complaint cases.

In more complex cases, if it is not possible to meet the 20-day timeframe, a revised timescale should be provided, and an update at least once every 20 working days on the progress of the investigation.

Please enter your response below

This is a very practical and efficient approach which will allow more time when needed for complex complaints, such as those involving planning service, to be addressed within an extended time frame. And will also keep the complainant aware of progress at pre-agreed milestones in the investigation process.

Information about complaints received should be reported and publicised.

Please enter your response below

Agree. Council already reports on all aspects of complaints management. And equally an easily understood quarterly and annual report, posted on the council's website, would meet this requirement.

Public bodies should demonstrate active learning from complaints.

Please enter your response below

Agree. This is fundamental to the council's culture of customer focussed learning and gathering insight into customer journeys and experiences in a structured and transparent way, including from complaints.

Suggested approach to implementation

NIPSO feels standardisation is necessary across all public bodies, however it also recognises that circumstances may sometimes differ between sectors. It is therefore expected that detailed discussions will be needed with public bodies **within** each sector, to decide precisely what their complaints handling procedures should look like.

Five distinct sectors have been identified: **health and social care, councils, government departments, housing, and education.**

NIPSO is proposing to introduce MCHPs for public bodies on a sector by sector basis. Do you consider this is the most effective approach? If not, what would you propose?

Please enter your response below

The council views a sector by sector approach as a sensible and effective way to introduce and implement the MCHP. It will enable a programme of work which can address and learn from issues as it rolls out across different sectors.

NIPSO has yet to decide the first sector(s) it will work with to introduce the MCHPs. Some of the factors being considered in this decision are: the number of complaints received by the sector, size/complexity of the sector, risk attached to public service provision. Do you have any views on this issue?

Please enter your response below

Given that the majority of local authority complaints are relatively straightforward and that referrals to the NIPSO are quite low, council would encourage the NIPSO to consider local authorities to be in the first tranche of sectors to adopt the revised approach. The Belfast City Council has been considering a change to a two stage procedure for quite some time and is well placed to implement 5/20 format following co-design.

Are there any issues or concerns specific to any particular sector or area of work, that you feel NIPSO should take into account when refining MCHPs?

Please enter your response below

If you have any further comments on these proposals, or any other

Yes, it will be important that all services within local authorities are considered in the co-design phase, encompassing and taking account of both the more operationally focused 'frontline services' as well as the more complex service providers such as, planning, building control and environmental health.

suggestions or comments about NIPSO's Statement of Principles, MCHP and/or approach for implementing complaints standards and ensuring compliance with them, please provide details below.

Please enter your response below

Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation and looks forward to working with NIPSO and other councils in the co-design and implementation of the complaints handling standards for the Northern Ireland public sector.