



Public Awareness Survey for Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman (NIPSO)



Report of Findings

**Opinion Research Services
August 2021**

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1. Introduction

Background

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) commissioned Opinion Research Services (ORS) to carry out a Public Awareness Survey. The purpose of the survey was to better understand attitudes to complaining about public bodies in Northern Ireland, awareness of NIPSO, and views about NIPSO's work. The findings of this survey are detailed in this report.
- 1.2 This survey was carried out using a telephone methodology, with the aim of achieving a broadly representative sample of interviews with residents of Northern Ireland aged 18 and over. The survey was conducted using a quota sampling approach with targets set on the numbers of interviews required by age, gender, working status and district (more details on these targets is provided below).
- 1.3 A Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) methodology was employed, with interviews undertaken by ORS's social research call centre interviewers. The survey used random-digit dialling (RDD), as well as purchased mobile sample. In total, ORS undertook 600 interviews between 15th March and 30th April 2021.

Respondent profile

- 1.4 The extent to which results can be generalised from a sample depends on how well the sample represents the population from which it is drawn, as different types of people may be more or less likely to take part. Such 'response bias' is corrected by statistical weighting based on a comparison of the demographic characteristics of the respondents with data for the whole population.
- 1.5 The quota targets for age, gender and working status were designed to be representative of the overall population of Northern Ireland, based on the most recent available secondary data. A proportional number of interviews was also targeted in each of the eleven local authority districts.
- 1.6 The achieved sample was compared against comparative data for district, age, gender and working status and then subsequently weighted by working status, age, and gender. As a result of this process, the survey results should be broadly representative of the views of the overall population of Northern Ireland to within around +/- 4 percentage points.
- 1.7 The table on the following page shows both the unweighted and weighted profile of respondents to the survey, compared with the resident population aged 18+ (based on Mid-Year Population Estimates - with the exception of working status where the Annual Population Survey has been used).

Table 1: Response profile to the residents' survey, compared with the resident population

Characteristic	Unweighted Count	Unweighted Valid %	Weighted Valid %	Resident Population 18+ %
BY AGE				
18 to 24	66	11%	11%	11%
25 to 34	88	15%	17%	17%
35 to 44	117	20%	17%	17%
45 to 54	97	16%	18%	18%
55 to 64	97	16%	16%	16%
65 to 74	77	13%	12%	12%
75 or over	58	10%	10%	10%
Total valid responses	600	100%	100%	100%
BY GENDER				
Male	243	41%	48%	49%
Female	356	59%	52%	51%
Other ¹	1	*	*	-
Total valid responses	600	100%	100%	100%
BY WORKING STATUS				
Working	357	60%	57%	58%
Retired	148	25%	23%	21%
Otherwise not working	95	16%	20%	21%
Total valid responses	600	100%	100%	100%
BY DISTRICT				
Antrim and Newtownabbey	47	8%	8%	8%
Ards and North Down	48	8%	8%	9%
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	62	10%	10%	11%
Belfast	107	18%	18%	18%
Causeway Coast and Glens	54	9%	9%	8%
Derry City and Strabane	39	7%	7%	8%
Fermanagh and Omagh	33	6%	6%	6%
Lisburn and Castlereagh	47	8%	8%	8%
Mid Ulster	53	9%	9%	8%
Mid and East Antrim	48	8%	8%	8%
Newry, Mourne and Down	62	10%	10%	9%
Total valid responses	600	100%	100%	100%

¹ Excluded from figures for resident population 18+ due to lack of secondary population data currently available

Interpretation of the Data

- 1.8 The results of the residents' survey are presented in a largely graphical format. The pie and bar charts (and other graphics) show the proportions (percentages) of residents making responses.
- 1.9 Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of 'don't know' categories, or multiple answers. Throughout the chapter an asterisk (*) denotes any value less than half of one per cent.
- 1.10 The number of valid responses recorded for each question (base size), are reported throughout. As not all respondents answered every question, these base sizes vary between questions.

Acknowledgements

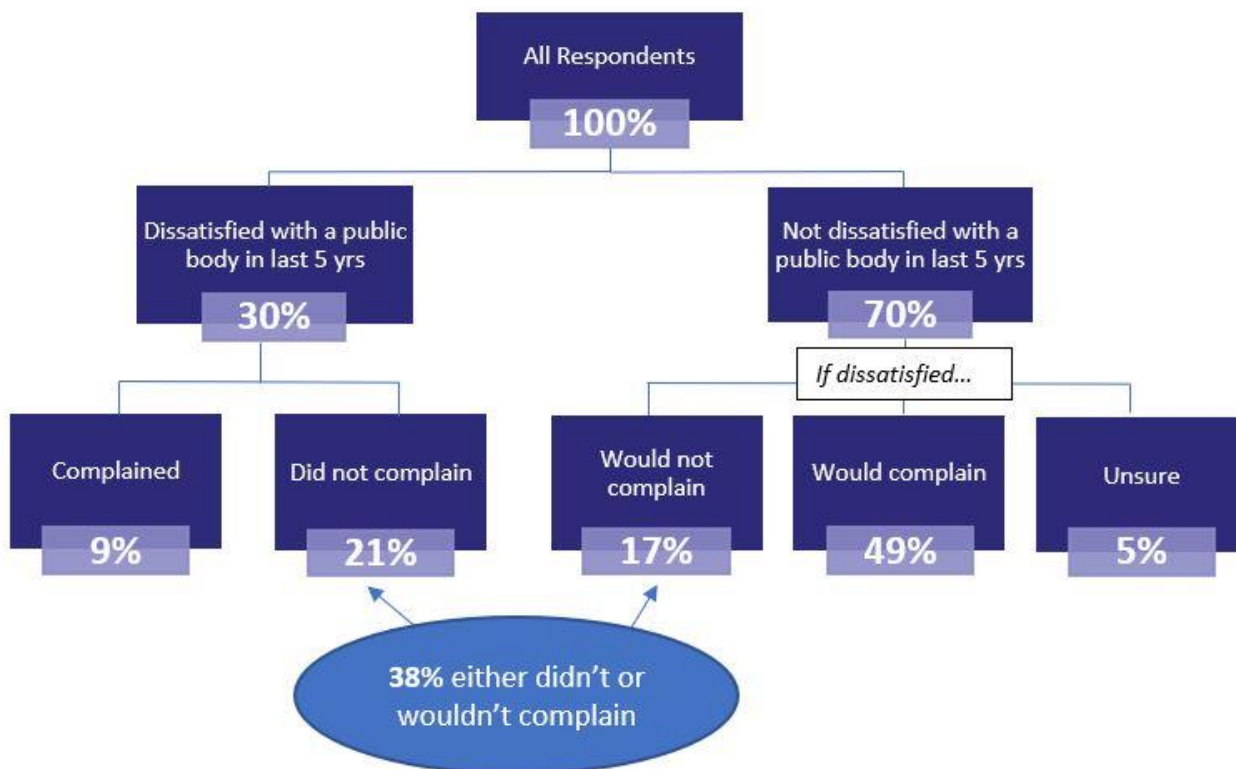
- 1.1 ORS would like to thank Andrew Ruston and Gabrielle Cairns at NIPSO for their help and assistance in developing the project. We would also like to thank the 600 respondents who took part in the survey, without whose valuable input the research would not have been possible.

2. Executive summary

Levels of dissatisfaction and attitudes towards complaining

- 2.1 Three in ten residents (30%) could recall an occasion when they were dissatisfied with the level of service that they received from a public body in Northern Ireland (in the last five years). Seven in ten (70%) could not recall any occasion when they were dissatisfied.
- 2.2 Of those *who had been dissatisfied with a public body*, three in ten (30%) had gone on to make a complaint, while the remainder (70%) had not complained. Of those that did complain, a majority (63%) said their complaints had not been fully resolved.
- 2.3 Of those *who had not been dissatisfied*, just over two thirds (69%) indicated that they *would* complain (if they were dissatisfied), while around a quarter (24%) *would not*, and the remainder did not know (5%).
- 2.4 Figure 1 below provides a summary of these findings, with the percentages **recalculated as a proportion of all survey responses**, to better understand the overall prevalence of each group.
- 2.5 In total, 9% of all respondents had made a complaint and a further 49% indicated that they would complain if they had reason to. However, **nearly two fifths (38%) either** had not complained (despite being dissatisfied) **or** indicated that they would be unlikely to complain even if they had a reason to do so.

Figure 1: Summary of the overall proportions of residents who were/were not dissatisfied, did/did not complain, and would/would not complain. Base: All residents (600)

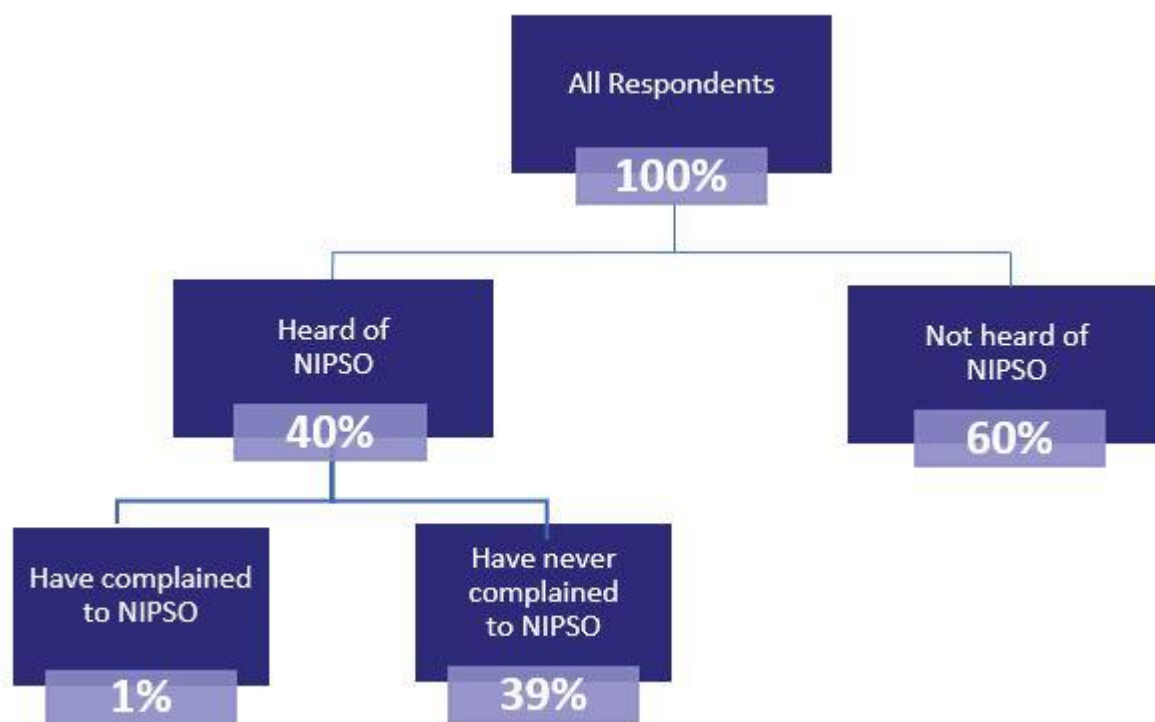


- 2.6 Among those who either *did not or would not complain*, the most common reasons given for not wanting to were: feeling that it would be pointless/make no difference (38%) and feeling that their complaint would be too trivial/not worth the effort (31%).

Awareness of NIPSO and its role

- 2.7 Two in five residents (40%) had heard of NIPSO prior to taking part in the interview; the remaining three fifths (60%) had not.
- 2.8 Of those who *had* previously heard of NIPSO, 3% had previously submitted a complaint to NIPSO – this equated to 1% of residents overall, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Summary of awareness of NIPSO and complaints submitted. Base: All residents (600)



- 2.9 Those who *had* previously heard of NIPSO were asked where they had heard about it: nearly half had done so via the news/media (50%), with most of the remainder having heard about NIPSO by either word of mouth (18%) or through employment/working in the public sector (16%).
- 2.10 Of those *who had previously heard of NIPSO*, most were aware that it investigates complaints received about public services (66%) and that it makes recommendations following investigations to help improve the delivery of public services (66%). Around half (52%) were aware that it supports public bodies in good complaint handling, while somewhat fewer (37%) were aware that NIPSO can investigate maladministration by a public body even if a complaint has not been made.
- 2.11 Over nine in ten of those residents *who had previously heard of NIPSO* felt that they could approach NIPSO if they needed to (96%) and that NIPSO investigates complaints impartially (92%), whilst only slightly less (88%)

have confidence in the work of NIPSO. However, over three fifths (63%) agreed that they don't know much about what NIPSO does.

- ^{2.12} It is worth noting that a couple of these questions (those about NIPSO being impartial and having confidence in its work) attracted higher levels of 'don't know' responses compared to other questions in the survey (34 and 42 respectively); these have been excluded when calculating percentages.
- ^{2.13} Respondents were asked what NIPSO might be able to do to increase awareness of its role. Over two fifths of residents said NIPSO could raise awareness via TV/Radio advertising (47%) or by being more active on social media (42%), while around a quarter (26%) suggested that NIPSO should conduct a marketing campaign.

3. Results

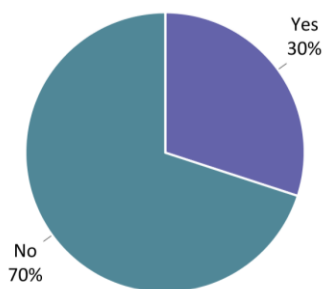
Dissatisfaction at the level of service from a public body

Thinking about the last 5 years, can you recall any occasion(s) when you were dissatisfied with the level of service you received from a public body in Northern Ireland?

- 3.1 Three in ten residents (30%) said that they could recall an occasion when they were dissatisfied with the level of service that they received from a public body in Northern Ireland in the last five years. Seven in ten (70%) could not recall any occasion when they were dissatisfied.

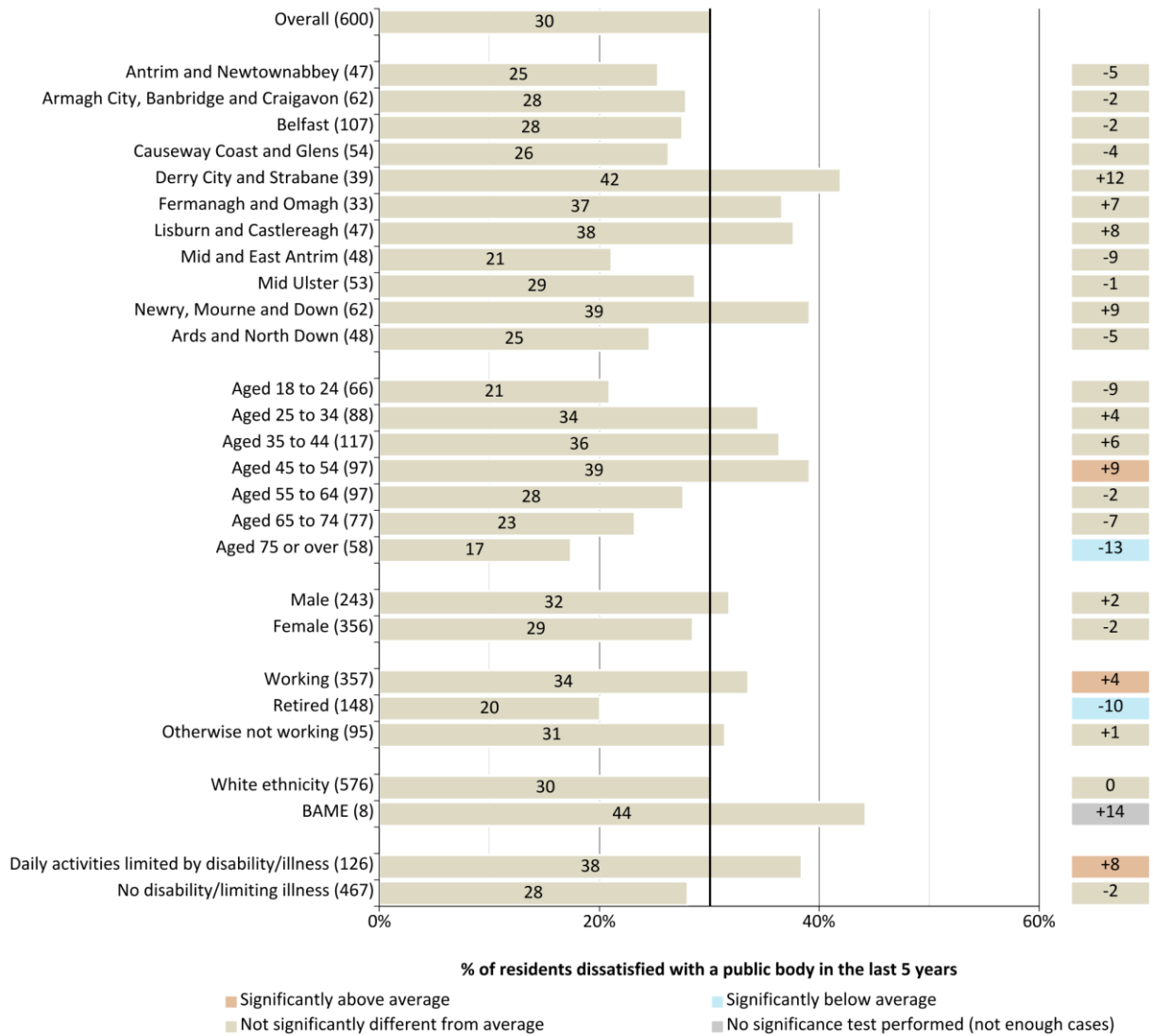
Figure 3: Thinking about the last 5 years, can you recall any occasion(s) when you were dissatisfied with the level of service you received from a public body in Northern Ireland?

Base: All residents (600)



- 3.2 The chart overleaf shows how the responses for this question vary across different sub-groups of the population who stated that they could recall an occasion(s) when they were dissatisfied with the level of service that they received from a public body in Northern Ireland in the last five years. Results for sub-groups which are significantly more likely than the overall score are highlighted in orange, whilst results which are significantly less likely are highlighted in blue.
- 3.3 It can be seen that residents who aged between 45 and 54 and residents who are working were significantly more likely to have been dissatisfied with the level of service provided by a public body in Northern Ireland in the last five years. In contrast, residents aged over 75 and residents who are retired were significantly less likely to say this.

Figure 4: Thinking about the last 5 years, can you recall any occasion(s) when you were dissatisfied with the level of service you received from a public body in Northern Ireland? (by sub-groups)



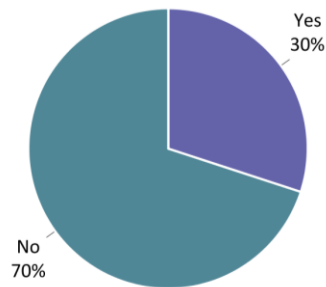
Base: All residents (number of residents shown in brackets)

And in this time, have you made a complaint to any public body in Northern Ireland as a result of being dissatisfied with the service you received?

- 3.4 Those residents who were dissatisfied with the level of service were then asked if they had made a complaint as a result: three in ten of those residents (30%) said that they had made a complaint whereas seven in ten (70%) had not made a complaint.

Figure 5: And in this time, have you made a complaint to any public body in Northern Ireland as a result of being dissatisfied with the service you received?

Base: All residents who were dissatisfied with the level of service (178)

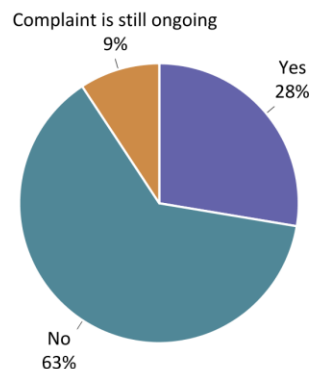


Did your complaint get resolved?

- 3.5 Those residents who were dissatisfied with the level of service they received and had made a complaint as a result were then asked if their complaint had been resolved.
- 3.6 Over six in ten of these residents (63%) said that their complaint had *not* been resolved, whereas almost three in ten (28%) said it *had* been resolved. The remaining tenth or so (9%) said that their complaint is still ongoing.

Figure 6: Did your complaint get resolved?

Base: All residents who were dissatisfied with the level of service and had subsequently made a complaint (54)

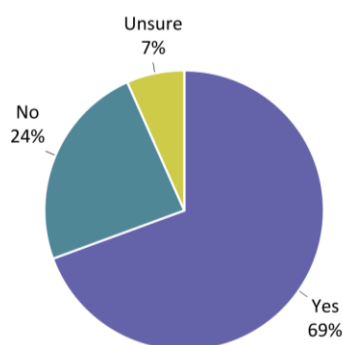


Willingness to make a complaint

If you did feel dissatisfied with the service you received from a public body, would you complain to them?

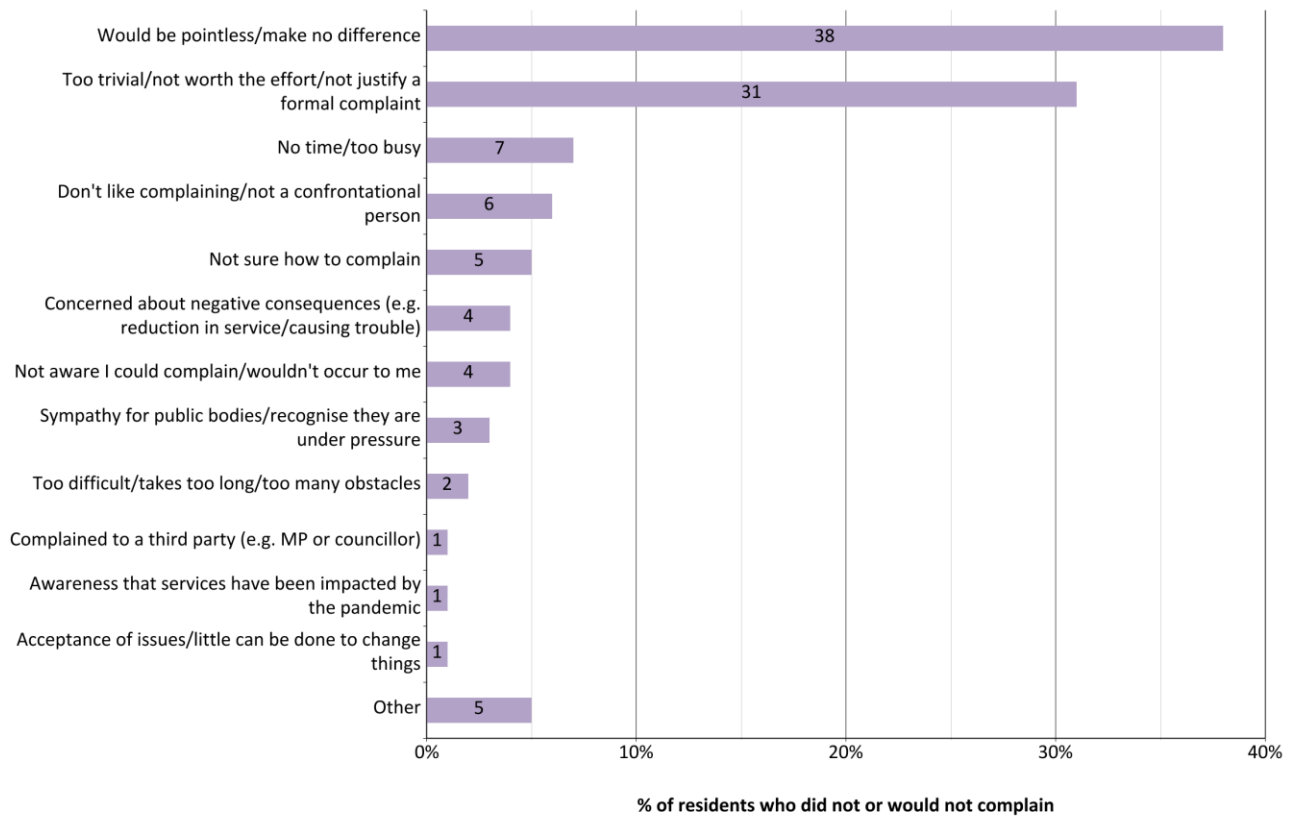
- 3.7 Those residents who did not recall being dissatisfied with the level of service that they received from a public body in Northern Ireland in the last five years, were then asked whether they *would* complain if they were dissatisfied in the future.
- 3.8 Over two thirds (69%) of residents who did not feel dissatisfied with the service they received in the last five years said that they *would* complain; around a quarter (24%) said that they would not, with the remainder (7%) being unsure.

Figure 7: If you did feel dissatisfied with the service you received from a public body, would you complain to them?
Base: All residents who were not dissatisfied with the level of service from a public body in the last five years (422)



Why did/would you choose not to complain?

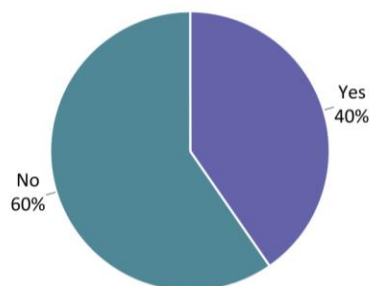
- 3.9 Those residents who did not recall being dissatisfied with the level of service that they received from a public body in Northern Ireland in the last five years and said that they would not complain if they were dissatisfied with the service that they received from a public body in the future **and** those residents who were dissatisfied with the level of service that they received but decided not to complain were then asked *why* they did not or would not choose not to complain.
- 3.10 Nearly two fifths of these residents (38%) felt or would feel that complaining would 'be pointless or make no difference', while around three in ten residents (31%) felt or would feel that their complaint was 'too trivial, not worth the effort of complaining, or would not justify a formal complaint'. Other reasons included: a lack of time or being too busy (7%), not liking to complain and/or wishing to avoid confrontation (6%), not being sure how to complain (5%), being concerned about some kind of negative consequence (e.g. receiving a poorer service or getting a staff member in trouble as a result of a complaint) (4%), and not being aware that one could complain, or being unlikely to think to do so (4%). Other reasons given by fewer respondents are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Why did/would you choose not to complain?**Base: All residents who chose not to complain or would not complain in the future (221)**

General awareness of NIPSO

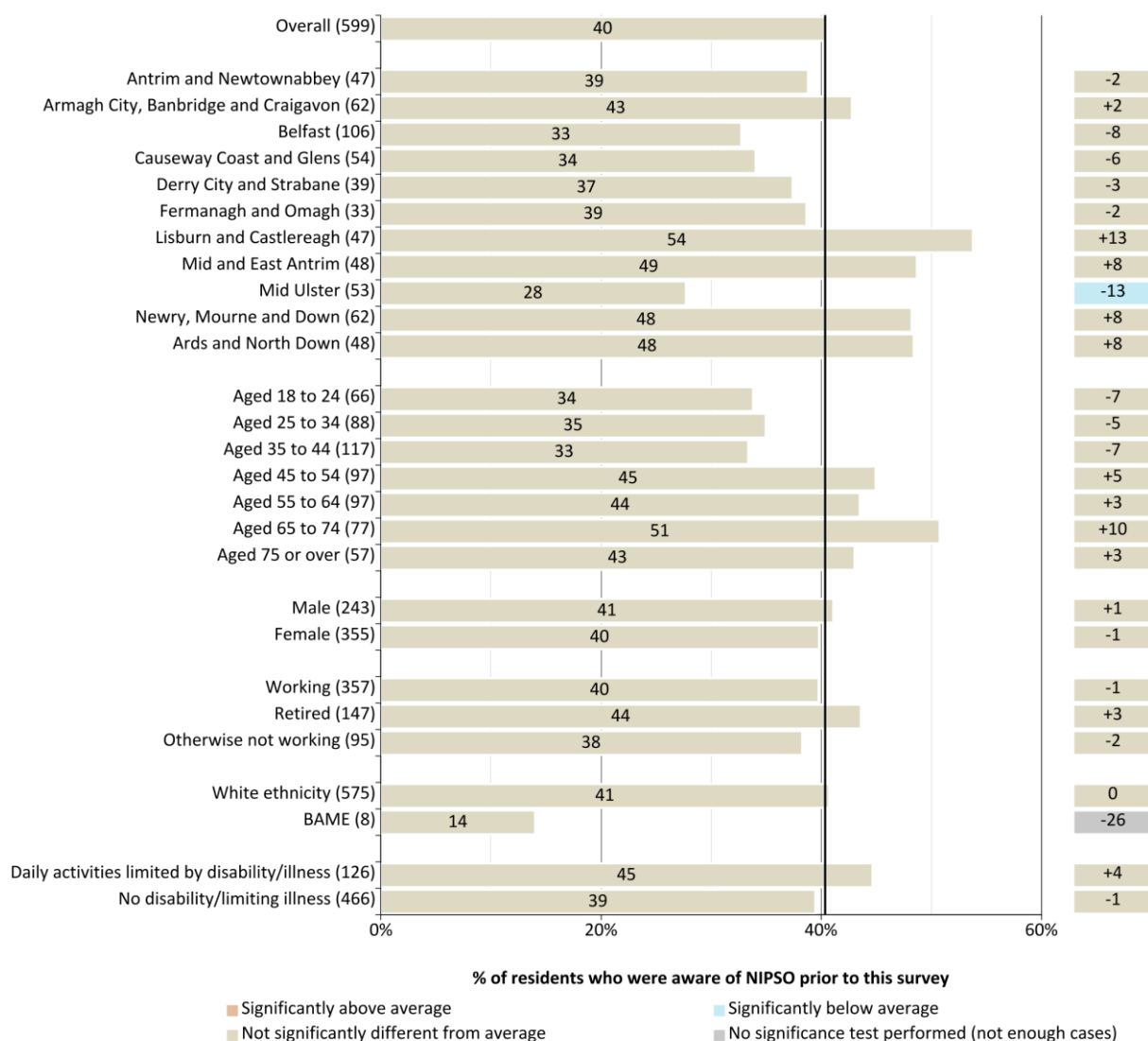
Prior to our call today, had you ever heard of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO)?

- ^{3.11} Respondents were asked if they had heard of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) prior to the interview. Two fifths (40%) of residents had heard of NIPSO; three fifths (60%) had not.

Figure 9: Prior to our call today, had you ever heard of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO)?**Base: All residents (599). (Excludes Refused (1 response)).**

- 3.12 The chart overleaf shows how the responses for this question vary across different sub-groups of the population who stated that they had heard of NIPSO prior to the interview. Only one result was significantly different to the overall result (i.e. the result in Mid Ulster), which is highlighted in blue.
- 3.13 Although the results for separate, individual age bands were within error margins (when compared to the overall result), the chart suggests that awareness of NIPSO is higher among those aged 45 and above, relative to age groups below 45.

Figure 10: Prior to our call today, had you ever heard of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO)? (by sub-groups)

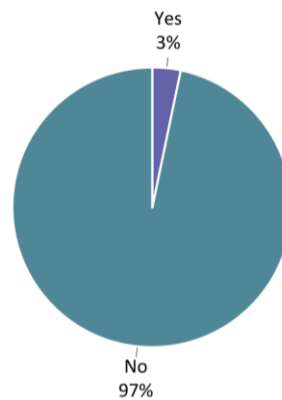


Base: All residents (number of residents shown in brackets)

And have you ever approached the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) with a complaint?

- 3.14 Residents who had heard of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) were then asked if they ever approached them with a complaint. Only a small proportion of these residents (3%) had done this.

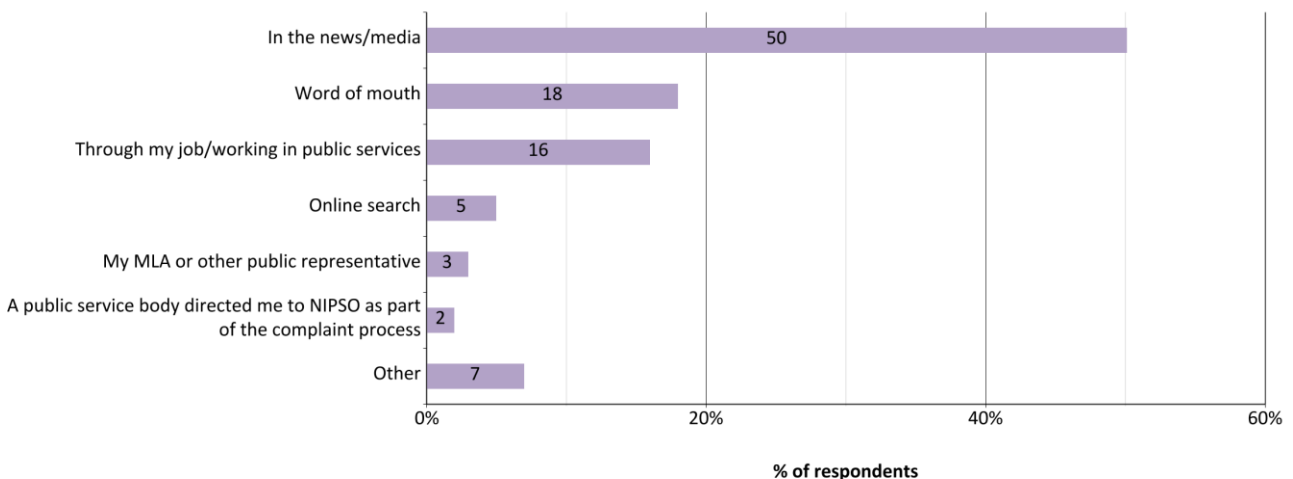
Figure 11: And have you ever approached the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) with a complaint?
Base: Residents who had heard of NIPSO prior to the interview (241)



Where did you hear about NIPSO?

- 3.15 Residents who had heard of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) were then asked where they had heard of NIPSO.
- 3.16 Half of these residents (50%) said they had heard of NIPSO through the news/media, while close to a fifth had heard of NIPSO through word of mouth (18%) or through a job/working in public services (16%).

Figure 12: Where did you hear about NIPSO?
Base: All residents who had heard of NIPSO prior to the interview (220). (Excludes Don't know (21 responses))



Detailed awareness of NIPSO

Prior to today, were you aware or unaware that NIPSO...?

a) Investigates complaints received about public services

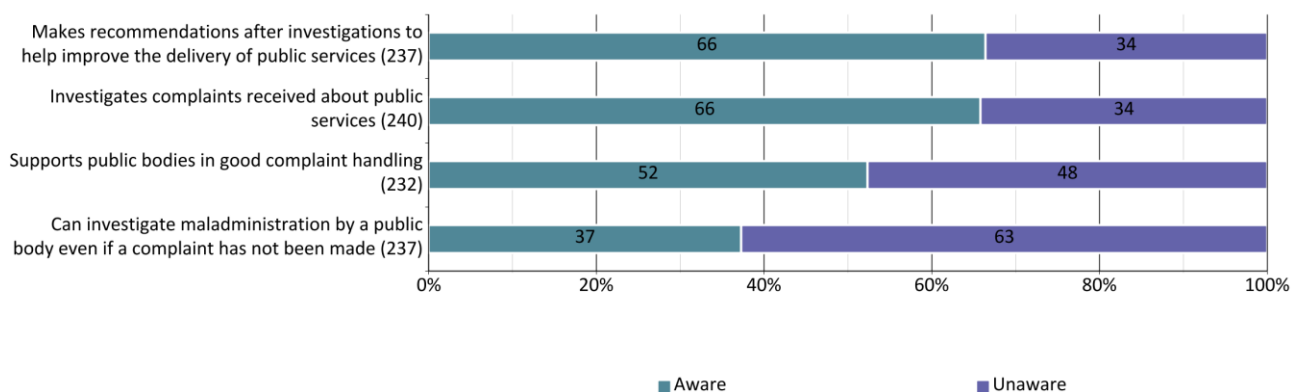
b) Can investigate maladministration by a public body even if a complaint has not been made

c) Supports public bodies in good complaint handling (e.g., supports organisations to improve the way they handle complaints)

d) Makes recommendations following investigations to help improve the delivery of public services

- 3.17 Residents who had heard of NIPSO were then asked a further four questions to ascertain their awareness of the work carried out by NIPSO.
- 3.18 Two thirds of residents (66%) who had heard of NIPSO were aware that NIPSO investigates complaints received about public services and that NIPSO makes recommendations following investigations to help improve the delivery of public services, whilst over half (52%) were aware that NIPSO supports public bodies in good complaint handling.
- 3.19 However, less than two fifths of residents (37%) who had heard of NIPSO were aware that NIPSO can investigate maladministration by a public body even if a complaint has not been made.

Figure 13: Prior to today, were you aware or unaware that NIPSO...?
 Base: Residents who had heard of NIPSO prior to the interview (Base numbers included for each question). (Excludes Don't know and Refused; further details in footnote²).



² Makes recommendations after investigations: (2 Don't know, 2 Refused); Investigates complaints received (1 Don't know); Supports public bodies (8 Don't know, 1 Refused); Can investigate maladministration even if a complaint has not been made (4 Don't know).

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about NIPSO?

a) I have confidence in the work of NIPSO

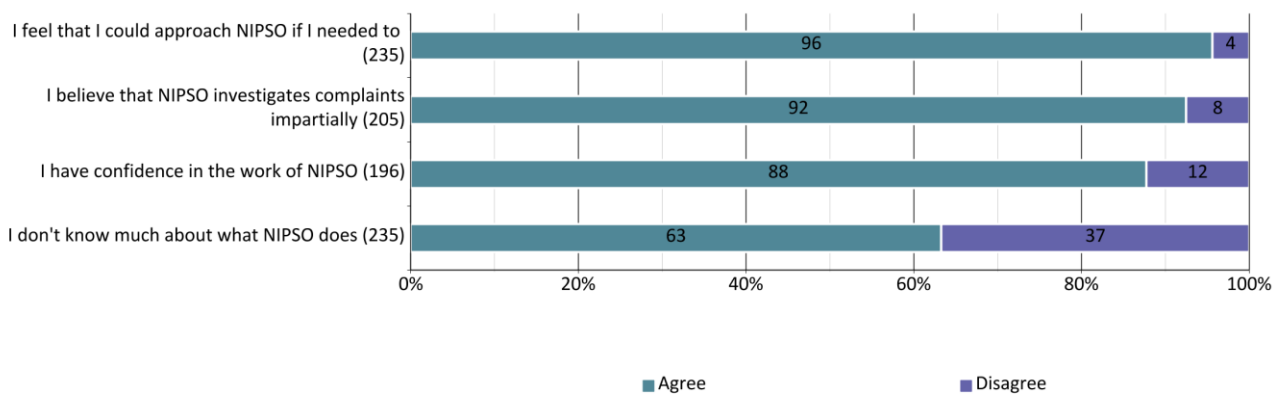
b) I believe that NIPSO investigates complaints impartially

c) I feel that I could approach NIPSO if I needed to

d) I don't know much about what NIPSO does

- 3.20 Residents who had heard of NIPSO were asked if they agreed or disagreed with four statements about NIPSO.
- 3.21 Over nine in ten residents who had heard of NIPSO felt that they could approach NIPSO if they needed to (96%) and that NIPSO investigates complaints impartially (92%), whilst only slightly less than nine in ten residents (88%) have confidence in the work of NIPSO.
- 3.22 However, over three fifths (63%) of residents agreed that they don't know much about what NIPSO does.
- 3.23 It is worth noting the higher levels of 'don't know' responses on a couple of these questions, relative to others in the survey; a summary of the number of respondents answering 'don't know' (or declining to answer at all) is provided in the footnote below.

Figure 14: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about NIPSO?
 Base: Residents who had heard of NIPSO prior to the interview (Base numbers included for each question). (Excludes Don't know and Refused; further details in footnote³)



³ I feel I could approach NIPSO if I needed to (5 Don't know, 1 Refused); I believe NIPSO investigates complaints impartially (34 Don't know, 2 Refused); I have confidence in the work of NIPSO (42 Don't know, 3 Refused); I don't know much about what NIPSO does (5 Don't know, 1 Refused)

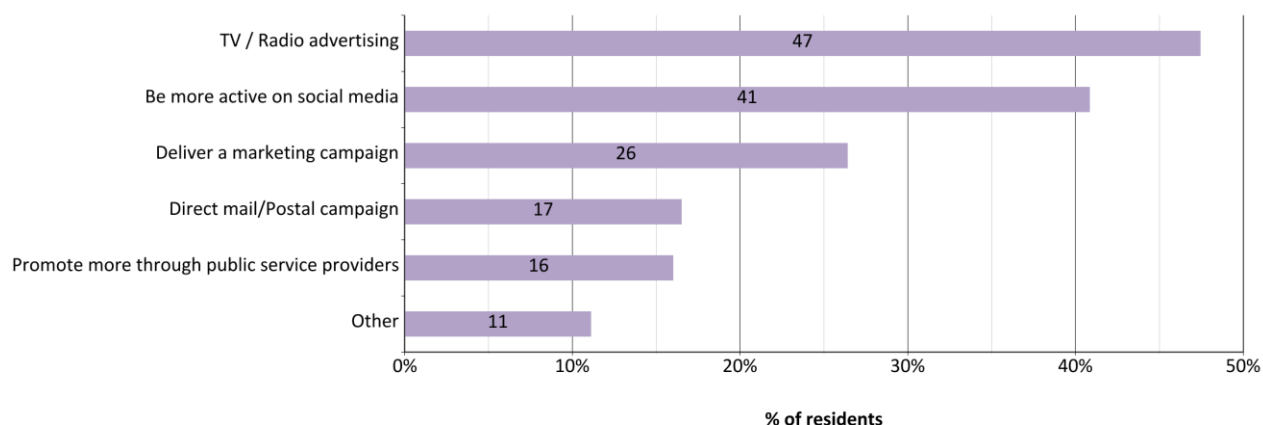
Promoting awareness of NIPSO in the future

What could NIPSO do to increase awareness of its role among the general public?

- 3.24 Respondents were asked what NIPSO might be able to do to increase awareness of its role; respondents could give more than one answer.
- 3.25 Over two fifths of residents said NIPSO could raise awareness via TV/Radio advertising (47%) and/or by being more active on social media (42%), whilst around a quarter (26%) suggested that NIPSO should conduct a marketing campaign.
- 3.26 Smaller proportions suggested a postal campaign (17%) and promoting NIPSO more through public service providers (16%), while around a tenth of respondents (11%) suggested an 'Other' way of increasing awareness. Suggestions included: publishing in newspapers, putting posters on buses and trains, holding consultations in each council area and leaflets in health centres/hospitals.

Figure 15: What could NIPSO do to increase awareness of its role among the general public?

Base: All residents (520). (Excludes Don't know (77 responses) and Refused (3 responses)).



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