



Northern Ireland
Public Services
Ombudsman

About Our Service

We provide a free, independent, and impartial service for handling complaints about public services in Northern Ireland.

Our role is to make a decision on each case by taking into account all the available facts and evidence. We do this by carefully considering the views and opinions of both the person making the complaint and whoever is being complained about.

Our aim is to help public services improve through our investigations and reports. We also help to put things right if you have experienced injustice because a public service provider has delivered a service badly or has failed to provide a service. We are not an advocacy agency (an agency that acts in favour of a particular cause, idea or policy), but we do make sure that the rights of people who complain are respected.

The types of complaints we receive are many and varied. We focus our resources where we judge these to be most effective. In doing so we consider the complaint being raised, its impact on the individual and the delivery of the public service complained of.

In asking us to consider your complaint, you accept the way in which we work and our authority to come to a final decision in the matter being complained of. We will work with you and those you have complained about to make sure the facts of your complaint are accurate. However, it is for us to interpret the facts and the available evidence and come to a judgement about your complaint.

How your complaint will be dealt with by this Office:

Please note that we are not able and are not required to accept every complaint we receive for investigation. If we decide not to accept your complaint for investigation we will let you know why we have made that decision.

There are 3 main stages to our case handling process. These are:

Initial Assessment



Assessment



Investigation

Initial Assessment:

This stage involves deciding whether or not we have the legal authority to investigate your case. It is also sometimes described as 'deciding whether the case is within jurisdiction'. We use the legislation to help us make this decision. We will rely on and refer to the relevant provisions in the legislation to explain our decision where we have decided that we do not have the legal authority to investigate your complaint.

Assessment:

Assessment is the process by which we determine whether we should investigate your complaint. It involves considering your complaint and the supporting evidence you have presented. In a large number of instances it will be necessary to make contact with the organisation complained of to obtain further information about the complaint so that a proper assessment of whether your complaint warrants investigation can be undertaken. We may also ask the organisation, at the assessment stage, about any proposals it may have for settling the case rather than the Ombudsman carrying out an investigation. The Ombudsman may also identify her own proposals for settlement which are put to the organisation complained of. In both circumstances it is for the Ombudsman to decide whether the case should be settled or whether an investigation is warranted.

Once sufficient information to undertake the assessment has been obtained, the allegations you have made alongside the supporting evidence you have supplied, are considered to establish whether:

- (1) An investigation is appropriate and necessary in the circumstances (proportionality)
- (2) An investigation by the Ombudsman would directly bring about a solution or adequate remedy (practical outcome)
- (3) Investigating the issues of complaint could be of potential benefit to the general public (public interest).

The work undertaken at the assessment stage is not only necessary to enable us to decide if your case should be accepted for investigation, but also represents important ground work in the event we do decide to investigate your complaint.

In keeping with proportionality we only take up issues where we believe that there is substance to them. Therefore, if there is no evidence to support the complaint or allegation we may decide an investigation is not appropriate.

Our assessment of your case will focus on the principal and contentious issues of complaint rather than minor breaches of policy and procedure which have little or no impact on the allegations made or where the injustice caused is minimal.

Investigation:

Investigation is the final stage of our case handling process. It can be conducted entirely by way of correspondence, where this is proportionate and appropriate. Alternatively, it can involve interviewing those involved in the complaint. The Ombudsman has discretion to decide how an investigation is conducted in every individual case. The purpose of an investigation is to establish if the allegations made in the complaint can be substantiated and, if so, whether they disclose any maladministration by the organisation complained of. The outcomes to our investigations are produced in a report or a report letter which you will be sent a copy of.

Our service standards:

When assessing your complaint we aim to:

- Acknowledge your correspondence within 3 working days of the date of its receipt
- Let you know within 2 weeks of your complaint being received whether the initial assessment of your case has been completed
- Interview you by phone or arrange a face to face meeting where we believe this would be beneficial in considering your complaint
- Let you know within 10 weeks of your complaint being received whether it has been accepted for investigation
- Let you know if we are unable to meet a target timescale and the reasons for this. We will also provide you with a revised timescale for response
- Provide you with information on what to do in the event you disagree with the decision that has been made in respect of your case.

Where we accept your complaint for investigation, we aim to:

- Update you either by phone, email or letter approximately every 8 weeks on the progress of the investigation of your case
- Produce a draft report, for issue to the organisation, detailing the Ombudsman's proposed findings and conclusions, within 50 weeks of informing you that your complaint was accepted for investigation
- Provide you with information on what to do in the event you disagree with the decision that has been made in respect of your case.

At all times we aim to treat you with respect and courtesy.

Your responsibilities

- Use the complaint form provided where possible
- In compiling your complaint, focus on your outstanding issues stating specifically why you don't accept what the organisation complained of has said in its response to your complaint
- Provide accurate and timely information in support of your complaint
- Inform us of the remedy being sought in relation to your complaint
- Inform us of your intention to take legal action, or if you initiate legal action, in respect of your complaint
- Adopt a reasonable and open minded attitude to the perceived problem
- Listen to reasonable explanations
- Treat our staff with respect and courtesy

Data Protection & Confidentiality

We will collect your personal information in order to process your complaint. We are committed to protecting all of the information we hold and conduct our investigations in private. Further details relating to our information handling can be found in our Privacy Notice and Information Promise on our website by accessing www.nipso.org.uk. Alternatively please contact our Office for further information.

Complaints about our service

In the event that you feel that the service you have received from us has fallen short of the standards mentioned above, please contact us or refer to the our website www.nipso.org.uk for information on our internal 'Service standards complaints procedure'.

Please note that complaints about our service are dealt with separately and under a different procedure to those which are challenges to our decisions. If you wish to challenge our decision, please refer to our leaflet 'Your Complaint - Our Decision' which sets out the relevant procedure and timeframe for requesting a review.

Please retain this leaflet until your complaint with us is closed as it contains information that you may wish to refer to during the course of the consideration of your complaint.

Contact Details

You can contact us in the following ways:

Freepost: Freepost NIPSO

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

Telephone: 028 9023 3821 **or Freephone:** 0800 34 34 24

Text Phone: 028 9089 7789

Email: nipso@nipso.org.uk

or
By calling, 9.00am & 5.00pm, Monday to Friday,
at the above address.