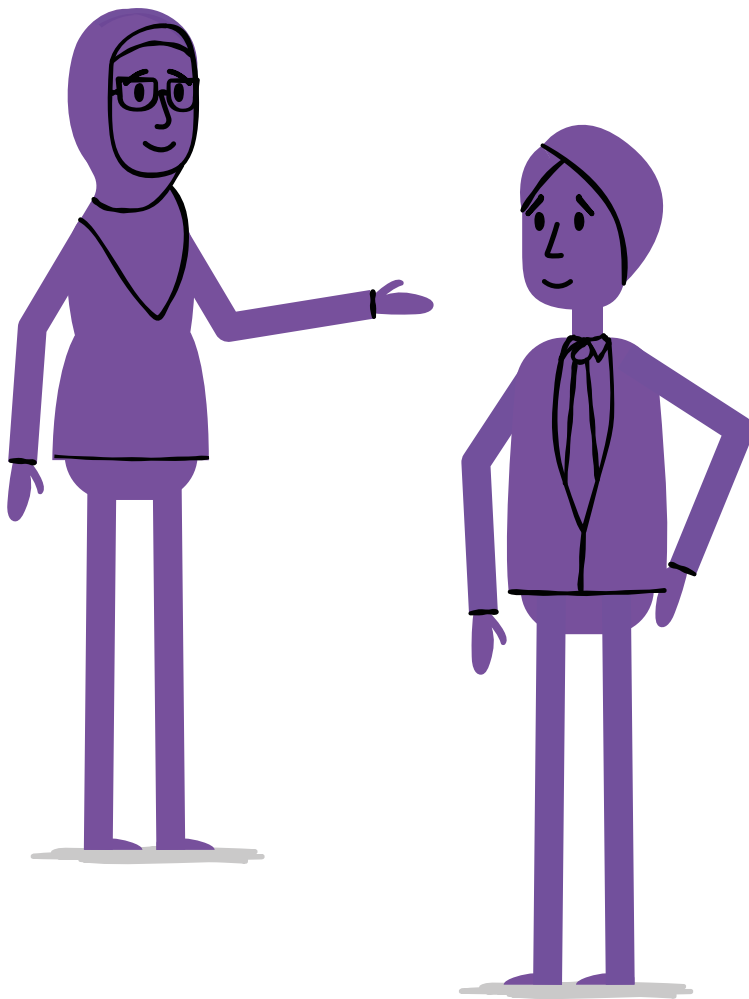
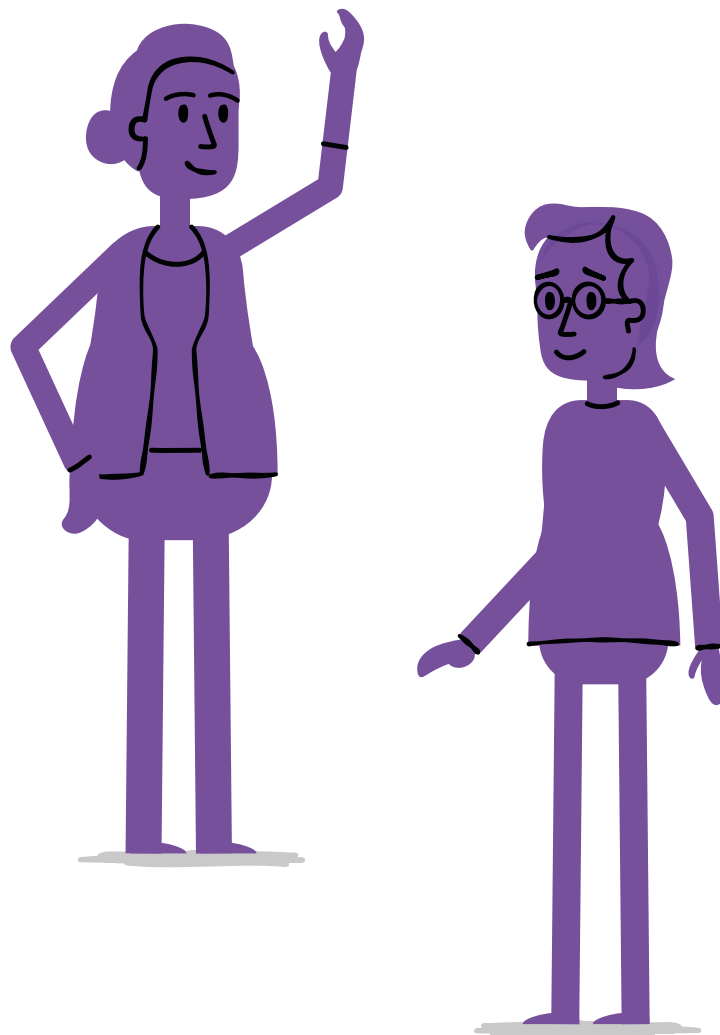


# Writing and communicating your final response



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# Welcome to this guide

This is one of the Good Complaint Handling series. Guides in this series are designed to help you implement and deliver the expectations in the [UK Central Government Complaint Standards](#).

The guide explains how to write a good final response to a complaint. It explains how to make clear in your letter:

- that you have understood the complaint and what the person wanted to achieve by complaining
- what you have investigated
- how you have investigated it
- how you have decided whether something has gone wrong or not
- that you have understood the impact of any failing
- what will happen as a result of the complaint
- if the person is not happy and wants to take the matter further, what they can do next.

Read this module alongside the [Model Complaint Handling Procedure](#). You can find guides to related topics on our [website](#).

# What standards and guidance cover Government complaints?

- The [Complaint Standards](#) set out expectations to help you deliver good complaint handling in your organisation.
- Relevant statutory and national guidance sets out other important requirements and information. You can consult your organisation's complaints policy to check what standards and processes you should follow.

## What the Complaint Standards say

### Giving fair and accountable responses

- 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 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.

# What you need to do

Your final written response is important because it sets out your organisation's position on the complaint. It should help the person who made the complaint understand what has happened before reassuring them either:

- that having looked into the matter carefully, you have found that nothing went wrong, or
- that you found something went wrong and you acknowledge and accept this.

It is also your chance to:

- show that you understand the impact any failings have had
- explain how you will put things right for them and potentially for other users of the service.

This will help the person see that making the complaint has been worthwhile and that your organisation listens and learns from what service users have to say.

## Use plain English

It is important that you use plain English, especially when you write to the public. This will ensure that the person you are writing to can understand the letter you send. Use shorter words, short sentences and short paragraphs, where possible.






### Find out more

The Plain English Campaign [letter](#) and [report](#) writing guidance is a useful guide to clear writing.





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## Adapt your tone of voice to the reader

Your letter should meet the communication needs of the person who has complained:

-  If the person needs the letter translated into another language, or in an alternative format, such as Braille, easy-read or an audio recording, provide this.
-  Where you can, use the language and words they have used in their original complaint and in conversations with you.
-  Make sure your language shows empathy. As you write, keep in mind the person you are writing to. Ask yourself 'Would I be happy if a member of my family received a letter like this?'

In your final response, describe how you investigated the complaint and set out what, if anything, will happen next.

-  Make it clear that your investigation is complete.
-  Tell the person about any further options, such as a review stage, an independent complaint assessor or the Ombudsman via their MP, if they are still unhappy.
-  Tell them about any support you are aware of that could help them progress their complaint further.
-  If appropriate and you have consent, send a copy of your final response to anyone who is supporting or helping the service user who has brought the complaint.

## What a good final response letter includes

1

### Step 1

**Set out the issues complained about and what the person wanted.** This shows that you have listened to them and have understood their complaint. It also reminds them what they said they wanted to happen, and what they agreed would be a good outcome. Ideally, use the language that they used, because this shows you have listened carefully.

2

### Step 2

**Explain how you looked into the complaint.** Set out how you investigated it, who you spoke to, and what steps you took to make sure you (and anyone else involved) were impartial. As you explain your actions, refer to the complaint, so the person knows you looked at all aspects of the matter. For example, say 'You said your passport with your visa was delayed so we checked our records to find out when your application arrived and when we processed it'.

3

### Step 3

**Present the evidence you considered.** This should always include the account and evidence given by the person who has made the complaint. It may also include things like extracts from records, details of interviews with colleagues and witness accounts. Explain why you looked into this evidence and be clear about everything you found, regardless of whether it supports their complaint.

4

### Step 4

**Explain the outcome and whether something went wrong.**

To do this:

- explain what happened, based on the evidence you have seen and the accounts you have heard
- set out what should have happened, explaining the relevant law, policy, procedure, standards or guidance that should have been followed in the circumstances
- compare the two.

If the service provided was in line with what should have happened, reassure the person who has complained. If this could have, or should have, been explained to them earlier, then apologise. If the service provided was not in line with what should have happened, say so and explain why, if you can. Your aim is to set out clearly whether something went wrong or not.

5

## Step 5

**If something went wrong, set out the details of that failing and any impact it had.**

This should take into account the impacts that the person making the complaint told you about, along with any other impacts the person may be unaware of.

Reflect the language and information that the person used to describe the impact. If they told you they had felt 'hurt and upset', say that you understand this. If you present this with empathy, the person is more likely to accept that you understand how they feel.



### Find out more

For help with explaining impact, see the [guidance on providing a remedy](#).

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6

## Step 6

**If something went wrong, give a meaningful apology.** An apology does not mean your organisation is admitting legal liability, but it acknowledges that something could have gone better. For your organisation, it may also be the first step towards learning from what happened, stopping it happening again, or restoring trust.

Your apology needs to:

- express regret
- accept responsibility for the failings
- explain why the apology is needed.



## 7

### Step 7

**Explain how your organisation will put things right.** First, describe any action your organisation has already taken to remedy the failing. Then set out any further remedy or action needed. This may include:

- reviewing or remaking a decision
- reviewing the service provided to identify what more should be done
- revising published material
- revising policies and procedures to stop the same thing happening again
- training or supervising colleagues
- a combination of these things.

It may also include a financial remedy for:

- direct or indirect financial loss
- loss of opportunity
- inconvenience
- distress
- any combination of these.

## 8

### Step 8

**If the failing has had, or could have, an impact on other service users, acknowledge that and explain what you will do to put that right.** Most people who complain want to know that what has happened to them will not happen to anyone else.

Explain how their complaint has helped you learn and what you will do to help improve services for others (such as training colleagues, changing policies or procedures, or introducing new ones). This is an important part of resolving a complaint and restoring trust, even in the most serious of cases.

## Step 9

### **Explain how your organisation will show that it has learnt from the complaint.**

Offer to keep involving and updating the person who raised the complaint until all the actions to improve services are complete or tell them how they will know that they have been completed (for example, you will highlight changes on your website or in your annual report). Ideally, offer to involve them in any action you take to improve services as a result of their complaint. This could involve:

- sharing drafts of any changes to policies and procedures
- sharing the outline and objectives of any training sessions
- inviting them to see any physical changes
- asking them to share their story with colleagues to embed learning.

## Step 10

**Set out their right to refer their complaint for a review or to any independent tier, or to the Ombudsman.** Make it clear that you have finished investigating the complaint and if the service user is still unhappy, they can:

- request a review of your decision or
- escalate their concerns to an independent complaints tier or
- approach their MP and ask them to refer the matter to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

You should include instructions on how to do this, with any relevant information on where they can get information or advice if they need it. Make sure any instructions and contact details for escalating their remaining concerns are correct. When signposting to the Ombudsman, you could use the suggested signposting paragraph in the practical tools section of this module.

# Practical tools

## Sample paragraph: Signposting to the Ombudsman

If you are not happy with how we have dealt with your complaint and would like to take the matter further, you can approach your MP and ask them to refer the matter to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman makes final decisions on complaints that have not been resolved by the NHS in England, government departments and some other public organisations. The service is free for everyone.

There is a time limit for making your complaint to the Ombudsman, so make sure you approach your MP as soon as possible.

To take a complaint to the Ombudsman, or to find out more about the service, go to [www.ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk) or call 0345 015 4033.

## Top ten tips for writing a good complaint response

Keep this desk guide to remind you what goes into a good complaint response

Writing a good complaint response: the top ten	
1. Set out the issues and what the service user wanted to achieve	6. If there are failings, give a meaningful apology
2. Set out how you have investigated	7. Explain how you will put things right for the service user
3. Explain if something has gone wrong or not by comparing what happened to 'what should have happened'	8. If relevant, explain how you will put things right for other service users
4. Set out your conclusion about the service provided	9. Explain how you will keep the person involved and updated
5. Explain any failings and the impact they have had	10. Make it clear it is your final response and signpost to review, independent tier or the Ombudsman

## The Plain English Campaign

The Plain English Campaign is a company that offers editing and proofreading services. Its website has free [letter writing guidance](#) and [report writing guidance](#).

### Guidance on making a good apology

[Apology leaflet from Scottish Public Services Ombudsman](#)

### The dos and don'ts of making a meaningful apology

Don't say
'I'm sorry you feel like that.'
'We're sorry if you're offended.'
'I'm sorry you took it that way.'
'We're sorry, but...'

Do say
'I'm sorry X happened.'
'We're truly sorry for the distress caused.'
'We apologise for the distress this has caused.'



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

**Let's make  
complaints  
count!**

