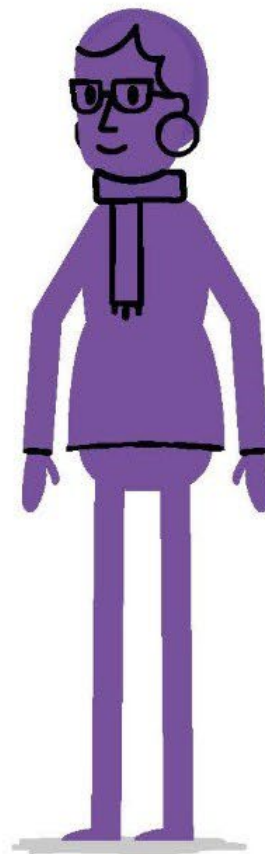


# The role of parent departments: overseeing complaint handling



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## About this guide

This is one of a series of guides that will help you deliver the expectations in the [UK Central Government Complaint Standards](#).

This guide is for parent departments (a department that has ministerial or departmental responsibility for other UK Central Government organisations and service providers). It explains:

- what your role is as a parent department under the Complaint Standards and how you can support the organisations you work with
- how to maintain meaningful strategic oversight to make sure your related organisations meet the Complaint Standards
- how to discuss this with your related organisations
- the information to look for.

This guide is also for organisations that have a parent department so they can understand and agree:

- what is expected from them
- what they can expect from their parent department under the Complaint Standards.

This guide may also be helpful to organisations that have different relationships. For example:

- organisations that have devolved their services
- organisations that work closely together (but are not responsible for each other) and want to share learning and support each other in embedding and meeting the Complaint Standards.

This guide is one of the ‘Good complaint handling’ series, designed to help you meet the [UK Central Government Complaint Standards](#). Read it alongside the [model complaint handling procedure](#) and other ‘[Good complaint handling](#)’ [guides](#).

# The Complaint Standards and national guidance

The [UK Central Government Complaint Standards](#) provide expectations to help you deliver good complaint handling in your organisation.

## The Complaint Standards say:

### Promoting a learning culture

- Parent departments have meaningful strategic oversight of how their related organisations are performing. They know how the organisations handle complaints and how they meet the expectations set out in the Standards.

Managing Public Money and the Corporate Governance Code explain what is expected of colleagues.

## Managing Public Money says:

- ‘The framework ... agreed between an [arm’s length body - ALB] and its sponsor always provides for the sponsor [parent] department to exercise meaningful oversight of the ALBs strategy and performance’ (chapter 3, section 10, paragraph 2).
- ‘Best practice for boards in central government departments ... [the board] keeps an overview of its ALBs’ activities’ (chapter 4, box 4.1).
- ‘Key decisions for boards [include] ... control and management of associated ALBs and other partnerships’ (chapter 4, box 4.2).

## The Corporate Governance Code says:

- ‘[The parent department] ... has general oversight of other bodies on whose behalf they may answer in parliament, including the department’s arm’s length bodies ... the board’s regular agenda should include scrutiny of the performance of the department’s sponsored bodies ... ALBs are accountable to their sponsor department for performance’.

This guidance aligns with the National Audit Office’s guide ‘Improving operational delivery in government: a good practice guide for senior leaders’.

## The Cabinet Office guide on Handling of Parliamentary Ombudsman Cases says:

- ‘Sponsor teams in ministerial departments have an assurance role with regard to complaints standards in the Arm’s Length Bodies (ALBs) they sponsor. The PHSO’s UK Government Complaint Standards recommend that departments have strategic oversight of complaints standards in their ALBs.’

# What to do as a parent department

This section explains what you should do to make sure your organisation and the organisations you are responsible for understand your role and theirs in complaint handling.

Government guidance says parent departments must have strategic oversight of the strategy and performance of your related organisations. Make sure you have conversations at the highest level so that everyone understands:

- what strategic oversight means
- the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of each organisation.

## Strategic oversight under the UK Central Government Complaint Standards

The UK Central Government Complaint Standards provide simple, consistent good practice in complaint handling across the government sector. To deliver this, all government organisations should work together (regardless of relationship) to capture and share learning from complaints so services improve for everyone.

Your conversations and agreements with your related organisations should make it clear that your strategic oversight under the Complaint Standards is about:

- making sure correct and consistent complaint handling processes are in place
- making sure colleagues who deal with complaints are sufficiently resourced, supported and trained
- making sure insight from complaints is captured and learned from so that mistakes are not repeated and services improve for everyone
- saving time and resources by making sure complaints are dealt with well, as early as possible, delivering what service users want.

You should clearly explain what is expected from them as a related organisation and what help and support they can expect from you.




## Putting the right systems and processes in place

As part of your strategic oversight, you should make sure there are systems and processes in place that show you what is happening across all of the organisations you are responsible for.



First, check that each organisation knows about the [UK Central Government Complaint Standards](#). Signpost them to the website if they are unaware of the Standards so they can find the information they need.

There is a four-step guide for organisations to follow when they deliver the Standards. This can be a useful starting point for discussions when you are starting to oversee complaint handling in each organisation. (See the practical tools section for a template you can use to guide these conversations.)


### 1. Has the organisation assessed its current complaint handling against the expectations set out in the Complaint Standards?

-  It should use the [organisational assessment tool](#) to identify what it already delivers and uncover any areas it would like to develop.
-  It should share the assessment and any development plans with you so you can discuss, constructively challenge, advise and support.
-  You can then agree any review stages you would like to set and how often it will repeat the assessment.

### 2. Does the organisation have a complaints procedure in place and has it compared this to the [model complaint handling procedure](#)?

-  You need to make sure any complaint procedure works with the Complaint Standards and your department's expectations for dealing with complaints.
-  The organisation should share its procedure with you, along with any changes it wants to make.

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 **Tip:** you can use this conversation to reassure yourself that the organisation:

- ✓ has a robust complaints procedure in place, with appropriate resources
  - ✓ will make sure learning from complaints is captured and acted on to continuously improve services
  - ✓ will be able to provide examples of this learning going forward.
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### 3. Has the organisation reviewed and understood the Complaint Standards supporting guides?

- This is an opportunity for it to ask you any questions so it understands what you expect and to make sure its colleagues have the support and guidance they need.
- You can raise any questions or concerns with the Ombudsman's Stakeholder Engagement Team ([liaisonmanagers@ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:liaisonmanagers@ombudsman.org.uk)) including any ideas for other guidance and support materials that would be helpful.

### 4. After completing the steps above, has the organisation thought about any changes it needs to make to its training so everyone can successfully deliver the expectations in the Complaint Standards?

- You can help and support here by making sure all your related organisations have suitable complaint handling training in place, either as individual organisations or through cross-departmental training. This should be available to everyone who needs it, from frontline staff who may receive complaints (and could resolve them quickly if trained and supported) to those who regularly investigate and respond to complaints.
- You can also talk to the Ombudsman's Stakeholder Engagement Team about any training needs or book onto their free training courses.

## Providing ongoing oversight and support

Once you are satisfied that your related organisations are on the right track to delivering the Complaint Standards, you can focus on what you need to continue your strategic oversight and support.

Each organisation should follow the good complaint handling guide on [capturing and reporting on learning from complaints](#). It should share this information with you at least annually but preferably quarterly. This will help you identify any themes or patterns across your organisations.

As a minimum, you should focus on making sure each organisation captures and reports on:

- ✓ the number of complaints received - this can be broken down into areas or different services
- ✓ the subject matter of those complaints to help identify themes or trends

- ✓ the number of complaints where it was found that something went wrong
- ✓ the action taken to put things right
- ✓ the learning that has been identified and how it has been used to improve services
- ✓ details of how that service improvement will be measured or evidenced
- ✓ how details of that service improvement have or will be shared with service users to show the organisation has listened and learnt
- ✓ a summary of feedback captured on the organisation's complaint handling service from:
  - service users who have complained
  - any colleagues who have been specifically complained about
  - colleagues who have worked on the investigations.

This information will allow you to reassure yourself that each of your related organisations:

- ✓ has appropriate complaint handling procedures in place
- ✓ supports and trains colleagues to deal with complaints
- ✓ captures and acts on the insight they get from the complaints to improve services for everyone.

You will also have a unique opportunity to share any learning with all your related organisations and potentially the wider government sector.



## Supporting learning and continuous improvement

Help and support for the organisations you are responsible for should not only happen at set review points. It should be ongoing throughout the year.

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Set up, support and lead a forum for the complaint managers from each of your related organisations. The forum should focus on:

- sharing good practice and learning
  - open and honest discussion about the challenges colleagues are facing and the problems they need to solve.
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The forum can then help resolve those issues and identify any learning that applies across all organisations. Your senior leaders should listen to this forum and pay careful attention to any suggestions and feedback. The forum's outputs should be part of the evidence your board considers when carrying out its role.

## Working with independent tiers

Some departments or organisations have an independent tier as part of their complaint procedure. These are a valuable source of insight into how you and your organisations are dealing with and learning from complaints. If you have an independent tier in your procedure, an appointed non-executive board representative responsible for overseeing complaint handling should meet with it regularly to:

- hear its views
- examine its evidence on how each organisation is performing in terms of complaint handling and learning from complaints.

## Example: Cross Government Complaints Forum

The Cross Government Complaints Forum is a good practice example of a complaint handling improvement forum. It was set up to raise standards in complaint handling across the Government. It aims to:

- collectively advance customer service standards
- improve the quality of complaint handling across the Government
- encourage departments to value and maximise the use of insight and learning from complaints.

The forum is sponsored by the Government's complaint champion and works at three levels: **operational (working) level, director level and senior strategic level.**

It has an online knowledge management and collaboration platform called [Knowledgehub \(Khub\)](#) that is free to join. It allows members to connect digitally with each other to:

- share knowledge, insight and best practice
- learn from experiences
- inspire innovation and new ways of working.

## Practical tools

[Checklist: conversations about strategic oversight](#)

[Template: complaints, feedback and learning report](#)