

**Making sure service users know how to complain and where to get support**

1. **Introduction**

1.1 This is part of a series of guidance modules that will help you implement and deliver the expectations in the [UK Central Government (UKCG) Complaint Standards](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/gcs).

1.2 This module explains how you can make sure service users, and those who represent them, know your organisation welcomes feedback (including complaints) and will use it to improve services for everyone. It explains how you can make sure service users:

* know how to make a complaint
* know about the different ways they can do this
* know where they can get help, advice and support with raising their complaint.

1.3 **You should read** this guidealongside the following modules [insert link to guidance page]:

* Promoting a learning culture
* Who can make a complaint, consent and confidentiality
* Identifying a complaint
* Early resolution.

These are available on the [Ombudsman’s website](https://www.ombudsman.org.uk/organisations-we-investigate/uk-central-government-complaint-standards/uk-central-government-complaint-standards-guidance).

**2. The Complaint Standards and national guidance**

2.1 The relevant Complaint Standards are:

**Welcoming complaints in a positive way**

* All colleagues actively promote how service users can make a complaint. By openly welcoming complaints, they are able to identify and resolve issues quickly. Colleagues receive appropriate training in how to do this and make sure service users are listened to and treated with empathy, courtesy and respect.
* Organisations clearly publicise how service users can raise complaints in a way that suits them and meets their specific needs. They offer a range of ways for people to complain and make it easy for everybody to understand how the process works. This includes being clear about who can make a complaint and what will happen next.
* Organisations make sure service users know how to access advice and support to make a complaint. This includes giving details of appropriate independent complaints advocacy and advice providers, and other support networks.
* Organisations make sure colleagues can identify when issues raised in a complaint should be addressed (or are being addressed) via another route at the earliest opportunity, so a co-ordinated approach can be taken. Other possible routes include appeals, reference to or statutory review by a tribunal or action in a court of law or disciplinary process. Colleagues know when and how to seek guidance and support from colleagues and are able to provide service users with information on where they can get support.
* Organisations regularly promote their wish to hear from their service users and show how they are using learning from all feedback (including complaints) to improve services.

**Being thorough and fair**

* Organisations publish a complaints procedure that meets the Complaint Standards and all relevant Government guidance. Each procedure clearly sets out how colleagues will handle complaints and which quality standards and behaviours they are expected to follow when doing so.

2.2 The Complaint Standards work alongside several other important requirements and guidance including:

* A Modern Civil Service
* The Civil Service code
* The Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles)
* Managing Public Money
* the Public Value Framework
* Delivering better outcomes for citizens
* the Corporate governance code for central government departments.

2.3 Relevant statutory and national guidance

* **Public Bodies: A Guide for Departments,** Chapter 8**:** Policy - Openness and Accountability

‘4.2.1 Complaints provide a valuable source of feedback on how an organisation is performing, and in identifying potential weaknesses and problems. Departments and [non-departmental public bodies] should have established and published procedures for dealing with complaints from members of the public.’

‘4.2.2 It is important for public sector organisations that deal with members of the public to handle complaints effectively. Key principles include: keeping procedures simple and avoiding long forms; giving personal and specific replies; being clear about what remedies can be offered, including in terms of disciplinary action for staff; and letting customers know about improvements as a result of their complaint.’

* **Managing Public Money**

‘A4.14.1 Public sector organisations should operate clear accessible complaints procedures. They are a valuable source of feedback which can help shed light on the quality of service provided, and in particular how well it matches up to policy intentions. So all complaints should be investigated.’

See the [guidance module on ‘Providing a remedy’](https://www.ombudsman.org.uk/organisations-we-investigate/uk-central-government-complaint-standards/uk-central-government-complaint-standards-guidance) for more information .

**3. What you should do**

3.1 One of the best ways to learn and improve is to listen and act on what people tell us about how we are doing. But research shows that people are often reluctant to speak up when things go wrong because they:

* have previously had a bad experience when they made a complaint
* think it will have a negative impact on the service they receive
* think that nothing will change because Government organisations are too busy to listen and act on what they say.

It is essential that you change that mindset and make the process of speaking up and raising complaints as easy as possible.

3.2 First, make sure that service users, and those who support them, know you welcome complaints as a way to help improve your service. They should know they can raise their concerns with any colleague and be confident that the matter will be taken seriously.

3.3 **All colleagues**, particularly thosewho have an outward-facing role, must be aware that listening to service users and dealing with complaints is an important part of their work. This should be one of their performance objectives. They should be:

* trained and supported in how to deal with complaints as they come up
* confident in explaining how to make a complaint and how it will be dealt with
* able to signpost people to any internal or external sources of help, advice and support they can access when making a complaint.

**Encouraging service users to speak up**

3.4 One of the main reasons people give for not raising their concerns is they think Government organisations are too busy to listen and they do not think it will make a difference. Showing service users that you care, have the time to listen and act on what they say, and that it will make a difference will encourage them to speak up.

3.5 One of the best ways to do this is **publicly sharing the actions you have taken and the changes you have made** as a result of someone speaking up or making a complaint. Be creative in how you do this but make sure your service user knows that speaking up has led to positive change for them, your organisation and for other service users.

**Telling service users how they can raise a complaint**

3.6 There are lots of ways to tell service users:

* that you value their complaints
* how they can raise a complaint
* where they can get help, advice and support.

First, **think about** **how people get information about your service** or interact with the service itself. For example, through your website, day-to-day communications, newsletters, information sheets, national and local charities and advice and support organisations, or visiting your organisation. Once you have identified them, these will be your target opportunities for sharing information.

**Providing different ways to raise a complaint**

3.7 Having identified how and where people get information about your service, you need to **develop information about your complaints process.** You should do this in different formats and make sure it is visible and easy to access.

3.8 You should personalise the information to make it clear how service users can raise their concern with your organisation. Include contact details for any help that is available, including relevant advice and support organisations (see below).

3.9 You should also publicise what service users can expect when they raise a complaint with you.

3.10 Ideally, any helpline for service users should be accessible seven days a week and have evening cover. Where this is not possible, an answer message should explain when the call will be picked up and actioned. You should refer service users to the appropriate websites to find the most up-to-date opening times for helplines.

**Telling service users where they can get help, advice and support**

3.11 A barrier to making a complaint can be the lack of help, advice and support available to service users who need it. It is important for your organisation to identify and signpost to all the relevant and available sources of help for your service users who want to make a complaint.

3.12 You may have help, advice and support services for service users within your organisation. These should be impartial and independent of service provision. Colleagues who provide help, advice and support should be trained appropriately to support and advise service users through your complaints process.

3.13 Ideally, support should be available from organisations that are independent of your own. Your organisation should identify and know about all available sources of external and independent help, advice and support relevant to your service. This will usually include:

* national organisations like Citizen’s Advice
* national and local organisations and charities that specialise in supporting service users who want to make a complaint.

It may also be helpful to consider appointing an independent advice and support provider, such as a professional advocacy service, to help your service users. Once you have identified all relevant sources, tell service users about them and give details so they can access this support if they need to. See the guidance module on ‘Independent help, support and advice’ for more information.

**Involving service users**

3.14 When developing materials and information, involve your service users and the people that support and represent them. This will help you make sure the materials you produce and the different options for making a complaint meet your service users’ needs.

**Measuring success**

3.15 To make sure you are providing the correct information in the right way, you should regularly ask service users, and those that represent them, if they know how to raise a complaint. This will help you measure the success of your complaint service and make any necessary improvements.

**4. Examples and case studies**

4.1 Examples of how to let service users know you welcome their complaints:

* **Example**: Cabinet Office

‘The Cabinet Office is committed to providing a high-quality service to everyone we deal with. In order to do this, we need you to give us any comments about our service, and to tell us when we get things wrong. We want to help you resolve your complaint as quickly as possible. We treat as a complaint any expression of dissatisfaction with our service which calls for a response. We listen to your complaints, treat them seriously, and learn from them so that we can continuously improve our service.’ [Insert link or contact details]

* **Example:** Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)

‘Customers are at the heart of our business and we are committed to providing a high quality of service to everyone. We value your feedback and are committed to act on any concerns or complaints about the service we provide.

We aim to:

* + objectively investigate all complaints and put things right for you when it is possible
	+ learn from where we went wrong
	+ make sure we do not make the same mistake again.’

[Insert link or contact details]

* **Example:** High Speed 2 (HS2)**:** ‘We know that building HS2 will affect the lives of thousands of people. We need many other companies to do work on our behalf and we will all always try to do the right thing and reduce disruption as much as we can. But if you’re unhappy about anything we do, or about anything another company does on our behalf, please tell us. We will treat this as a complaint. We have a process to make sure your complaint is dealt with by the right person, as quickly as possible. Please follow this process to help us get the best result for you [Insert link or contact details].’

4.2 Examples of how to encourage service users to speak up

* **‘You said, we did’ example:** HS2

[**You said, we did on construction, landscape design, recreational opportunities, viaduct design and noise requirements**](https://www.hs2.org.uk/about-us/our-documents/you-said-we-did-on-construction-landscape-design-recreational-opportunities-viaduct-design-and-noise-requirements/)

* **Example of how to encourage children and young adults to speak up**: Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass)

‘We want your Feedback! Tell us how we did. We want to hear from you if you thought we helped and supported you or if you want to complain.

* + Did you understand what was happening during your court proceedings?
	+ Did you feel that you were listened to?
	+ Did we share our thinking and recommendations with you?
	+ What could we have done differently or better?

We need this information for us to learn and so we can improve the service we provide to other children and young people who may be going through a similar experience to you.’

4.3 Developing information about your complaints process:

* Cafcass:

[Concerns and complaints factsheet](https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/download/4382/)

[Children’s complaints factsheet](https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/download/17307)

**5. Practical tools**

5.1 Encouraging people to speak up – ‘You said, we did’ template (see below)

5.2 Example complaint form (see below)

5.3 Example poster explaining what happens when a service user makes a complaint (see below)

**6. Version control**

6.1 Final – November 2022

**Working together to improve what we do**

**You said We did**

[Insert what person said]

[Insert explanation of what you did]

[Insert what person said]

[Insert what person said]

[Insert explanation of what you did]

[Insert explanation of what you did]

**Example complaint form**

**For use online or to be completed by hand**

|  |
| --- |
| **Section 1: About you** |
| **Please fill in your details, even if you are complaining on behalf of someone else**Title**:** First name: Surname: House number or name: Street name: Town or city: Country: Postcode: Daytime telephone number: Alternative contact number (optional): Email: How would you like us to contact you? (optional)[ ]  Phone[ ]  Mobile[ ]  Email[ ]  Post[ ]  Video callIs there anything we can do to make it easier for you to access our complaint service? (For example, you may want to receive information from us in large print.) If you need help to make your complaint, please contact [provide the contact details below of any internal or external sources of help, advice and support]:Advice service’s name:Telephone number: Alternative contact number (optional): Email: Note: we will need your consent to discuss your case with anyone supporting you. Please see section 5. |
| **Section 2: Are you complaining on behalf of someone else?**  |
| If yes, please fill in this section and section 3. If no, please go straight to section 4.**What is your relationship to them?** [ ]  I am their spouse or partner[ ]  I am their parent or guardian[ ]  I am their child[ ]  I am their carer[ ]  Other(please give details below)**Why can't they make the complaint themselves?****[ ]** The person is a child[ ]  They are not well enough to do it[ ]  They have not got the ability to do it themselves[ ]  My partner would prefer me to do it[ ]  The person has died[ ]  Other (please give details below)Note: if you are complaining for someone else, we will need their consent for this. Please see section 5. |
| **Section 3: About the person you are making the complaint for** |
| Title: First name: Surname: House number or name: Street name: Town or city: Country: Postcode: Daytime telephone number: Alternative contact number (optional): Email:  |
| **Section 4: The complaint**  |
| When did the problem you want to complaint about happen? You should complain within a year of becoming aware of the problem. Sometimeswe will extend this time limit if there is a good reason for the delay and the information we need to look into the matter is still available. If you haven’t been able to complain to us within a year of becoming aware of the problem, please tell us why you did not complain sooner. |
| **Briefly tell us what your complaint is about. Tell us what happened, when and who was involved.** |
| Complaint details: |
| **Please tell us how you, or the person you represent, have been affected by what has happened.** |
|  |
| **What would you like to happen? What outcome would you like?**  |
|  |
| **Section 5: Authorisation and consent**  |
| **Please look at my complaint.** I agree that you can access all relevant information, including any personal records that you hold, so that you can look into my complaint and provide me with a response. Your signature: Date:  |
| **If you are supporting someone with their complaint or complaining for someone else, they must sign below if they can.**I agree that ……………………………………………………. can complain for me/is supporting me with my complaint and that you can access the information you need, including any personal records that you hold, to investigate my complaint. I understand this may mean that my representative will be able to see any personal information you access for the investigation. I also understand that you may contact me to confirm the above. Signature:Date:       |

**Please email this completed form to:**

**Or post to:**

**Quick guide example to the complaint process for service users**

**We value your feedback and complaints because they help us improve our service.**

**By speaking up you can help make a difference.**

You can make your complaint to us in person, by phone, by email or in writing. If you need help and support to do that, we will help you find it.

We will always try to deal with your complaint quickly if we can. But if it is clear that the matter will need a detailed investigation, we will tell you and explain what that means.



**The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman**

If you are still unhappy with how we have dealt with your complaint after receiving our final written response, you can ask the Ombudsman to consider it. We will tell you how to do this when we send you our final response.

**A closer look**

If the matters you raise cannot be resolved quickly, are serious, complex or need detailed investigation, we will take a closer look at your complaint.

We will talk to you about your complaint, explain how we will investigate and keep you involved and updated at all stages of the process.

**Early resolution**

We will always try to resolve your complaint quicklyif we can.