

#MakeComplaintsCount

# About the Complaint Standards Framework

What it is, why we need it and  
what benefits it will bring



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# About the Complaint Standards Framework

The Complaint Standards Framework sets out a single vision for handling complaints about NHS services.

The Framework sets out a single set of standards for staff to follow when they handle complaints. It also sets out how organisations can best capture and act on the learning from complaints.

This version of the Framework is for:

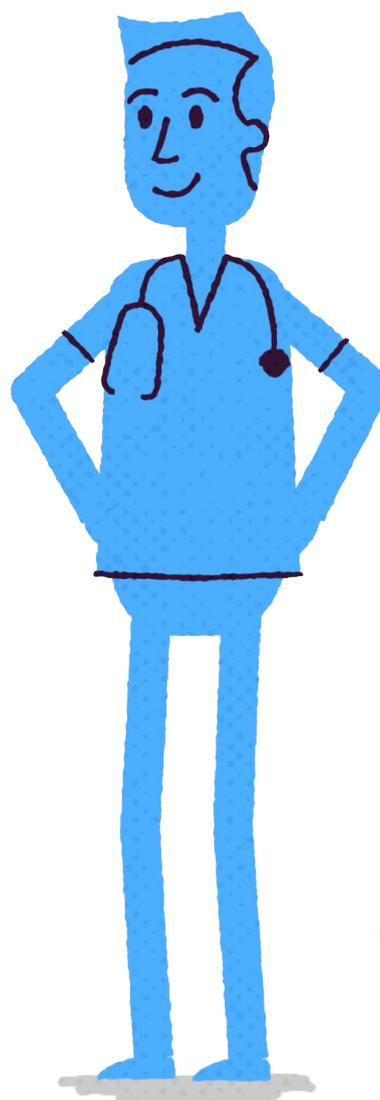
- **All staff delivering NHS services, including all clinical and non-clinical staff and senior leaders, to:**
  - provide a clear vision of how to approach feedback and complaints effectively
  - set out how they should approach learning from complaints to improve services.
- **Everyone who provides feedback or makes a complaint about the service they have received, and the people who support, advise or advocate for them.** It sets out what they can expect to see and experience when doing so.
- **staff who are being complained about.** It will make sure they are supported and that the complaint is seen as a learning opportunity rather than a finger-pointing exercise.

The Framework does not cover or replace how health and social care regulators carry out their work (for example, a fitness to practice investigation or regulatory inspection). Nor does it cover how serious patient safety issues or legal claims should be taken forward. The Framework helps staff identify when issues

should be directed to a regulator, or where another route is more appropriate.

Overall, the Framework sets out how organisations that provide NHS services can promote fairness, justice and learning when handling feedback and complaints, and take responsibility to be accountable when things go wrong.

The Framework focuses on supporting and developing staff to get the most out of learning from feedback and complaints through practical support and skills training. It also recognises the huge complexity and emotional impact that can come with making a complaint, as well as having a complaint being made about you.



# Why we need a Framework

A clear and consistent approach to learning from complaints is essential for every organisation. Good complaint handling provides a direct and positive connection between those who provide services and the people who use them. It offers a rich source of learning to help improve services for everyone

This is particularly the case for the NHS, services that we rely on every day and at critical times of need. So, it is important that:

- staff have the skills and experience they need to be confident in handling complaints well
- people using NHS services know how to give feedback or make a complaint, can get support when they need it, and are confident their concerns are taken seriously and addressed
- staff being complained about are supported and involved throughout the process.

Currently, it can be difficult for staff to achieve these aims because:

- there is no single set of guidelines for managing complaints about NHS services
- staff cannot always get the right training and support to handle and resolve concerns
- managers and leaders approach learning from complaints in different ways.

This can lead to a culture where complaints are feared or ignored, rather than embraced as a valuable source of learning. As a result, staff can feel unsupported in what is a critical and complex area of work.

The Complaint Standards Framework is the first step to addressing these issues.

Staff have told us that they would be best supported by a clear and consistent set of expectations to follow, rather than references to 'good practice'. This also gives people making a complaint some certainty and provides clarity for those being complained about because it clearly sets out what they can expect to see throughout.



## How we developed the Framework

We have developed the Complaint Standards Framework in partnership with a wide number of organisations and people who share a common aim to support complaint handling for organisations who deliver NHS services.

The Framework covers both ‘feedback’ and ‘complaints’. Feedback refers to when somebody raises a general issue about a service or incident. It can be positive, negative or neutral. Sometimes people just want to make staff aware of something before it becomes a serious issue later. We have included feedback in the Framework because it is important that the valuable learning it brings is routinely recorded or acted on, as it can also lead to improvements in service.

The Framework draws upon the wealth of good practice and guidance for complaint handling that already exists and puts it into a single place to describe the key principles and expectations. It is based on [My Expectations](#), which sets out what the public have said they would expect to see from health and social care providers when they provide feedback or make a complaint.

Staff have told us that any set of standards needs to be flexible enough to recognise individual circumstances to accommodate the wide range of NHS services across England. The Framework will help them have the confidence to use their discretion when handling feedback and complaints, but only if there is a reasonable need to take a different approach.

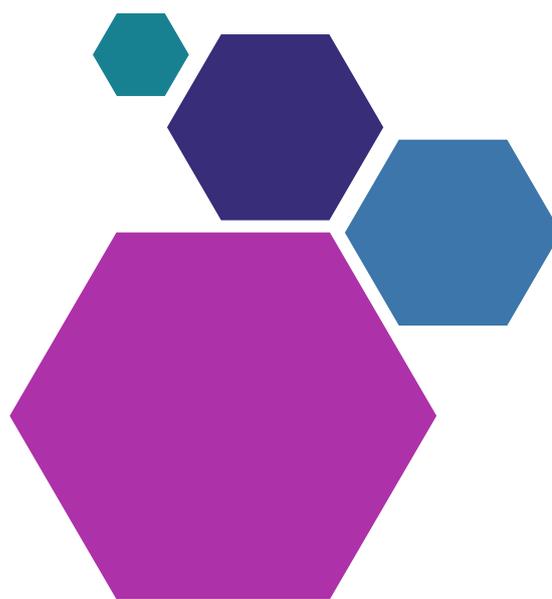
## Putting the Framework into practice

The Framework will be supported by detailed guidance on how each expectation can be applied in practice.

The Framework and the guidance will be used to develop a professional skills training and support programme for all staff delivering NHS services.

This single set of expectations will form the basis for one central training platform so that staff can develop their skills through accredited courses. This will give them the confidence to deliver consistent, positive local complaint processes and outcomes when they receive feedback and complaints.

Organisations will also have access to a ‘Model Complaint Handling Procedure’ based on the Framework which they can use in their own service. Each organisation will be supported to tailor this model procedure to make sure it reflects its size and the services it provides.



## What benefits will the Framework bring?

The Framework will deliver many positive outcomes through setting out a clear and consistent set of expectations for complaint handling. It will give staff and patients a single vision of what is expected when a complaint is raised. This will ensure everyone experiences a culture that seeks out learning from feedback and complaints, and meets the desired outcomes set out in [My Expectations](#).

The Framework is the first step towards recognising complaint handling as a professional skill. It will set a clear path for all services to harness the rich learning that comes from feedback and complaints to help improve services for the benefit of all.

It will help to address and resolve more complaints at the earliest opportunity, which is to the benefit of everyone. People will get answers to their concerns quickly. They will see staff taking learning forward to improve services for future users.

Earlier resolution of complaints will also reduce the need for complaints to become legal claims or be referred to the Ombudsman. This can save both financial and emotional costs for everyone.

The Framework will promote:

- better accountability and openness through a just and learning culture
- better communication between providers and the public, leading to improvements in services.

It will guide organisations of all sizes to put the right structures and systems in place so they can capture and examine learning to gain true insight into how people experience their services.

The Framework combined with the training and further guidance will see more organisations following similar processes across the country. This will lead to a better, more consistent approach to complaint handling across organisations delivering NHS services, and more effective reporting and learning from complaints.

**The Framework is the first step towards recognising complaint handling as a professional skill.**



# Working in partnership to build the Framework

A group of organisations across the health sector in England worked together to help create the Framework's design and content:

- Action against Medical Accidents (AvMA)
- Carers Federation
- Care Quality Commission
- Dental Complaints Service
- Department for Health and Social Care
- General Dental Council
- General Medical Council
- General Optical Council
- General Pharmaceutical Council
- Health and Care Professions Council
- Healthwatch England
- Independent Sector Complaints Adjudication Service
- NHS England
- NHS Improvement
- NHS Resolution
- Nursing and Midwifery Council
- Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman
- Patients Association
- POhWER
- The Advocacy People (formerly seAp Advocacy)
- VoiceAbility

We are extremely grateful for the input and advice given by advocates, complaints and claims managers, patients and many others, all of whom gave up their valuable time to help us.



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[www.ombudsman.org.uk/csf](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/csf)

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