

Helping you to help your constituents

Have you been asked to help a member of the public with a complaint about a public service provider in Northern Ireland? If so, this leaflet will assist you in understanding the role you can play.

Our ASSIST team is here to help. If you need advice about referring a complaint to the Ombudsman, please call us on Freephone 0800 34 34 24

About Our Service

The Ombudsman provides a free, independent, and impartial service for handling complaints about public services in Northern Ireland. These include government departments and agencies, Councils, public housing providers and Health and Social Care Trusts. You can find a list of the organisations within our remit on our website.

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 a citizen has experienced injustice because a public service provider in Northern Ireland 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.

How the Ombudsman can help you deal with complaints

The offices of Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints will cease to exist from 1 April 2016 and will be replaced, from that date, by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

There will no longer be a requirement for complainants to obtain MLA sponsorship in order to bring a complaint about a government department or its agencies. However, an MLA can act on behalf of a complainant, if authorised to act by the person. An MLA can also act on behalf of a person who has died or who is unable for any reason to act for themselves.

Prior to you referring a complaint to the Ombudsman on behalf of a constituent or member of the public, the complainant should always try to complete the complaints process of the organisation. Complaints must be referred to the Ombudsman within **six months** of completion of the organisation's internal complaints process; however the Ombudsman may consider a late complaint if there are special circumstances that would make it proper to do so.

The Ombudsman will correspond directly with you about the complaint. As the representative of the complainant, it may be necessary to contact you for further information. We will keep you updated during the investigation. Where the Ombudsman has decided to undertake an investigation of the complaint, you will receive a copy of the investigation report. For more details on how the Ombudsman deals with complaints, please visit our website.

Referring individual complaints

A complainant may ask any Member of the Assembly to refer their complaint to the Ombudsman.

All complaints referred to the Ombudsman must include sufficient information about the complaint, namely:

- Details of the organisation's response to the complaint and the reasons why this response has failed to satisfy the complainant
- When the matter that gave rise to the complaint occurred
- An explanation as to why there has been a delay in asking the Ombudsman to investigate the case, where such a delay has occurred
- How the complainant has been affected
- The remedy being sought by the complainant

If you have attempted to resolve the complaint with the organisation on behalf of the complainant, you may also wish to include details of any such attempt and the outcome to this.

We would encourage you to use our Complaints Form when referring a complaint. This will ensure that we have all the necessary information. Importantly, it will also ensure that we have a record of the complainant's consent to you acting on their behalf. The form is available from the Office or can be downloaded from our website. You can also submit the complaint on line.

For further information on how to make a complaint to the Ombudsman, please visit our website.

Publishing Reports

The individual problems that citizens of NI may experience with public service providers are often not unique. Others in similar circumstances may be affected in the same way. A core objective of the Ombudsman's Office is to improve public administration.

The Ombudsman's annual report and periodic digest of cases provide a wealth of information on the common and significant issues uncovered as a result of our investigations into complaints. Although the Ombudsman's investigation will continue to be conducted in private, she has additional powers to publish investigation reports in the public interest. She may also lay a range of reports to the Assembly. It is hoped that MLAs can draw from the evidence and experiences detailed in these reports and make use of these, in their oversight role of the executive branch of the Assembly, and when examining proposed legislation.

How to contact the Ombudsman's Office

Our website has further information which you and your constituents may find useful. Alternatively, if you would like to discuss the content of this leaflet in more detail, or would like more information on the work of the Ombudsman, please do not hesitate to contact us at:

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

Website: www.nipso.org.uk

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