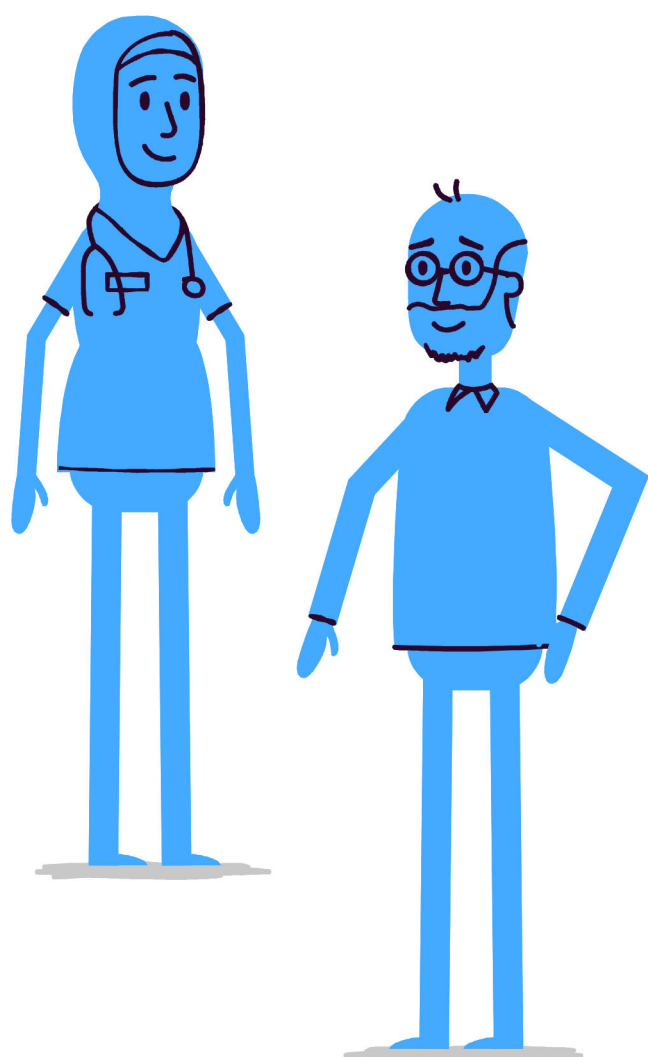


NHS Complaint Standards

Summary of expectations



December
2022



Foreword from Rob Behrens

It gives me great pleasure to introduce our updated Complaint Standards for NHS services in England. This version features additional and revised information based on feedback given to us by staff across the NHS since we first released the Standards in 2021.

These Standards will transform the way the NHS in England and independent healthcare providers who deliver NHS-funded care handle complaints and use learning to improve their service.

The Complaint Standards were developed by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) in collaboration with a working group of representatives from across the health and care sector including NHS service providers, health regulators and patient advocacy groups.

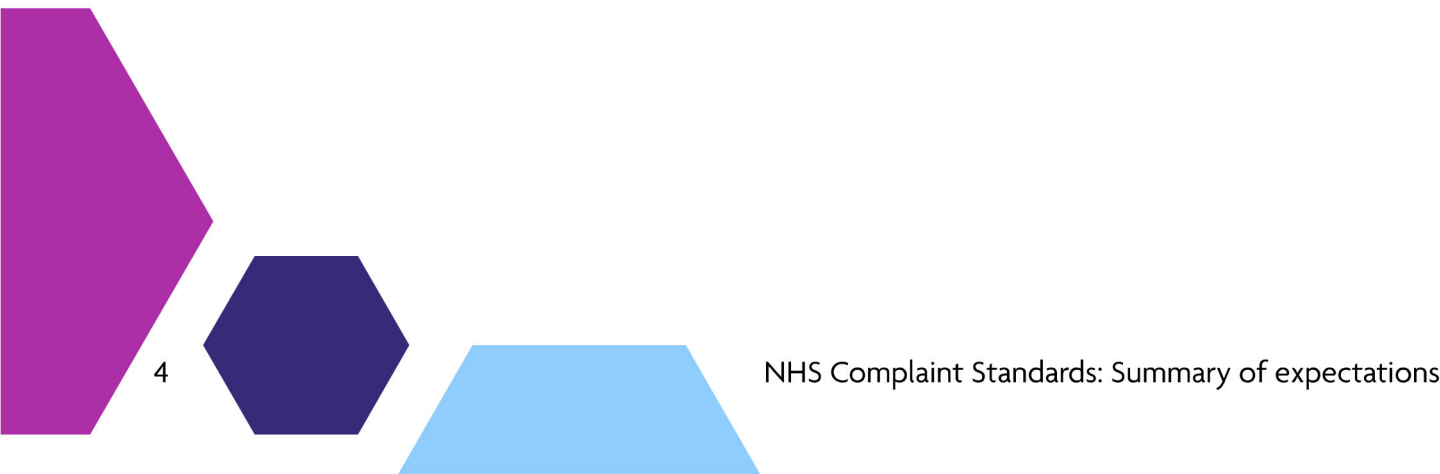
This version of the Standards is the culmination of several years of work and I am very grateful to everyone involved. The working group has been invaluable in shaping the Standards and making sure they are of practical relevance to complaint handling teams working across the NHS.

The Complaint Standards will help create an NHS complaint handling system that provides a consistent and positive experience for everyone involved. They are designed to guide organisations of all sizes so they can put the right structures and systems in place to capture and act on learning.

We believe at the heart of an effective complaint handling system are four core pillars, which these Standards are based on:

- welcoming complaints in a positive way and recognising them as valuable insight for organisations
- supporting a thorough and fair approach that accurately reflects the experiences of everyone involved
- encouraging fair and accountable responses that provide open and honest answers as soon as possible
- promoting a learning culture by supporting organisations to see complaints as opportunities to improve services.

In developing the Standards, the national Ombudsman held a wider consultation with the NHS and other public service organisations, members of the public and advocacy groups. The results showed widespread backing for the Standards, with 91% of respondents supporting their aims.



I am glad to see this support for the Complaint Standards. Although they are PHSO-led, for them to be successful it is vital that they are owned and championed by the NHS. I hope senior leaders across the NHS commit to embedding them in their service, creating a culture where complaints are embraced and welcomed as opportunities to learn.

The Standards themselves should be viewed as living principles that can be shaped as part of an ongoing process to make improvements in complaint handling and NHS service delivery. They are being published alongside supporting guidance to help staff deliver good complaint handling day in, day out.

We gained valuable feedback on the Complaint Standards and supporting guidance from piloting the Standards across a number of NHS organisations. These pilot organisations have reviewed and tested the model complaints handling procedure and guidance on complaints to ensure that they truly are supportive and work in practice.

Over the coming year we will continue to develop a range of resources to help NHS services embed the Standards in their day-to-day practice. This will include a training programme for complaint handlers and work towards our ambition of recognising complaint handling as a professional skill.

As we look beyond the launch of these Standards, the need for the national Ombudsman to be granted Complaint Standards Authority powers becomes even more important. Such powers would enable us to monitor consistency and help make sure staff and organisations receive tailored support to deliver the best possible service for users. This would also align our powers with the public service Ombuds in the UK's devolved nations, where these powers already exist.

We look forward to working with NHS partners to continue to improve complaint handling as we embed the Complaint Standards across the health service in England.

Rob Behrens

Rob Behrens CBE
Ombudsman and Chair
Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman





Promoting a learning culture

Effective complaint handling promotes a culture that is open and accountable when things go wrong. Senior leaders create an environment where everyone is supported and empowered to act on learning, rather than feeling blamed. Organisations use learning to improve their services and make sure every member of staff knows their role in promoting a learning culture. Organisations demonstrate how they use learning to improve services.

- Senior staff make sure every employee knows how they can create and deliver a just and learning culture for handling complaints. All staff can demonstrate how they contribute to this culture through practical examples.
- Senior staff make sure appropriate structures are in place to deliver fair and robust complaint investigations.
- Senior staff make sure staff are supported and trained in all aspects of dealing with complaints, from identifying a complaint to issuing a response, so that they meet the expectations set out in the Complaint Standards. This should include how to manage challenging conversations and behaviour.
- Appropriate governance structures are in place so that senior staff regularly review information that arises from complaints and are held accountable for using the learning to improve services. There are clear processes in place to show how organisations do this and this information is included in their annual report.
- Organisations take appropriate measures to capture feedback about the complaints process from those who make complaints and from the staff directly involved. They use this to demonstrate how the organisation has performed towards meeting the Complaint Standards and what users expect to see, as set out in My Expectations.
- Staff are trained to identify those complaints where mistakes have been made that may have resulted in significant impact. Staff ensure these mistakes are reviewed through the organisation's Duty of Candour processes.
- Organisations routinely share learning from complaints with other organisations (both locally and nationally) to build on insight and best practice.
- Organisations who outsource the provision of NHS services to a contractor or private provider have meaningful strategic oversight of how these services are performing. They know how these organisations handle complaints and how they meet the expectations set out in the Standards.



Welcoming complaints in a positive way

An effective complaints system goes out of its way to create a positive environment in which complaints are welcomed and resolved at the earliest opportunity. People know how to complain and can do this easily and without fear that it will affect their care. They are confident that their complaint will be taken seriously, looked at with empathy and answered as quickly as possible.

- All staff openly welcome complaints so they can identify and resolve issues quickly. Staff are trained to do this well and make sure people are being listened to and treated with empathy, courtesy and respect.
- Organisations clearly publicise how people can raise complaints in a range of ways that suits them and meets their specific needs. They 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 actively reassure people who use their services that their care will not be compromised if they make a complaint and what they can do if they feel it has been.
- The complaints procedure is responsive to the needs of each individual, and organisations make reasonable adjustments where required.
- Organisations make sure people know how to get advice and support when they make a complaint. This includes giving details of appropriate independent complaints advocacy and advice providers, any Patient Advice and Liaison service (PALs), and other support networks.
- Organisations make staff who are specifically the subject of a complaint aware of the issues as soon as possible, and tell them how to get ongoing advice and support.
- Staff respond to complaints at the earliest opportunity and consistently meet expected timescales for acknowledging a complaint. They give clear timeframes for how long it will take to look into the issues, taking into account the complexity of the matter.
- Organisations make sure staff 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 inquests, local disciplinary processes, legal claims or referrals to regulators. Staff know when and how to seek guidance and support from colleagues on such matters so they can give people information on the relevant process and explain where they can get support.
- Organisations regularly promote their wish to hear from service users and show how they use learning from all feedback (including complaints) to improve services.



Being thorough and fair

An effective complaint handling system makes sure staff take a thorough, proportionate and balanced look into the issues raised in a complaint. It gives people fair and open answers to their questions based on the facts, and takes full accountability for mistakes identified.

- Organisations make sure all staff have the appropriate level of training, skills and authority to look into complaints thoroughly.
- Organisations make sure all staff who look at complaints have the appropriate resources, support and protected time to consistently meet these expectations.
- Staff actively listen and demonstrate a clear understanding of what the main issues are for the person who has made the complaint, and the outcomes they seek.
- Staff discuss timescales with everyone involved in the complaint and agree how people will be kept informed and involved. They provide regular updates as agreed with the parties, throughout.
- Staff look for ways they can resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity.
- Staff make sure everyone involved in a complaint (including those specifically complained about) know how they will look into the issues. This includes what information complaints staff will need, who they will speak to, who will be responsible for providing the final response and how they will communicate their findings.
- Staff give everyone involved in a complaint the opportunity to give their views and respond to emerging information, where appropriate. They take everyone's comments into account and act openly and transparently and with empathy when discussing this information.
- When a complaint does not suit early resolution and needs more detailed consideration and investigation, this is done fairly. Where possible, staff who have not been involved in the issues complained about should look at the complaint. If this is not possible, the person looking into the complaint should openly demonstrate they are acting fairly when they consider all the issues.
- Organisations publish a local complaints procedure that meets the Complaint Standards and all relevant complaint handling regulations. Each procedure clearly sets out how staff will handle complaints and which quality standards and behaviours they are expected to follow when doing so.