**Customer Complaint Policy**



**POLICE OMBUDSMAN FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Customer Complaint Policy**

POLICY OWNER: Chief Executive

POLICY APPROVED BY: Senior Management Team

IMPLEMENTATION DATE: 1 April 2021

NEXT REVIEW: 1 April 2024

**CUSTOMER COMPLAINT POLICY**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The statutory objective of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (the Office) is to secure the efficiency, effectiveness and independence of the police complaints system and the confidence of the public and the police in that system.

The Office is committed to providing the highest possible standard of customer service to its service users and stakeholders and strives to continually improve service performance.

The Office Service Charter and Values are based on the principles of independence, impartiality, accountability and treating people in a respectful and professional manner.

The Police Ombudsman’s Code of Ethics also outlines the requirements for staff in terms of their general conduct and behaviour. Everything that the Office does should be ethical and embrace high standards in relation to privacy, confidentiality, equality, integrity and accountability. Failure to comply with the Code of Ethics may constitute a breach of the Disciplinary Policy and procedures of the Office.

The aim of this policy is to outline a consistent process for dealing with complaints received by the Office.

1. **POLICY STATEMENTS**

Service users and stakeholders have the right to complain about how they have been dealt with by the Office and its staff. Service users and stakeholders are in a good position to assess how the Office is performing and to assist the Office in understanding when things might have gone wrong. The Office takes all complaints seriously and will deal with them in a professional manner and in accordance with this policy.

* 1. The Office will attempt to address and resolve customer complaints in line with the Office’s statutory objectives, Service Charter and Values;
  2. The complaints service should be accessible, straight-forward and involve minimum bureaucracy;
  3. All complaints made to the Office will be acknowledged, investigated appropriately and responded to promptly;
  4. One of the main objectives of managing complaints is to gather essential feedback in order that the Office can improve the service it provides and ultimately enhance confidence in both the Office and the Police Complaints system;
  5. The Office will ensure that information about the complaints procedure is easily accessible and available in different formats on request. The Office will invite people to provide details of any specific communication needs they might have;
  6. The Office, so far as is practicable and in accordance with the law, will respect confidentiality;
  7. Complainants and staff (against whom the complaint has been made) will be updated regularly with regard to the progress of their complaint;

h) All members of staff have a responsibility to adhere to the principles and procedures within this policy;

i) The Office will identify and record complaints; identify any trends relating to complaints and ensure that related risks to the operations and reputation of the Office are managed;

j) The Office is committed to the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations and has subjected this policy to equality screening.

1. **WHAT IS A COMPLAINT AGAINST THE OFFICE?**

The Office defines a complaint as:

“An expression of dissatisfaction about the behaviour of our staff, service provided or administration of your complaint but excluding the outcome of an investigation or resolution process.”

Examples of complaints would be:

* An unnecessary and/or unexplained delay in a case;
* Poor administrative process or error;
* Lost documents;
* Rudeness by a member of staff
* Poor customer care; not responding to phone calls, letters, emails; or
* Allegations of discrimination/harassment.

You are entitled to make a complaint about staff who work in any area of the Office, whether staff conducting investigations or staff in support functions. An expression of dissatisfaction with the outcome of an investigation or resolution process does not constitute a customer complaint within the definition of this policy. There is no statutory review or appeal mechanism within the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 for decisions taken by the Police Ombudsman to be reviewed.

A complaint outcome once an investigation has been closed will therefore not be reviewed. The exception to this is that a matter may be re-opened where there is new information which was not reasonably available to the investigator which may have a material effect on the outcome of an investigation. If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of an investigation you are entitled to seek judicial review proceedings.

1. **WHO CAN MAKE A COMPLAINT AGAINST THE OFFICE**

Any person who has had a direct interaction with a member of staff in the Office in an official capacity is entitled to make a complaint about the service they received. A complaint can be made directly by an individual or through a nominated representative, for example a family member, solicitor or public representative.

1. **TIME LIMITS FOR RAISING COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE OFFICE**

Unless there are exceptional circumstances a complaint will only be dealt with if it is made within 6 months of the date of the issue giving rise to your complaint.

1. **Making a complaint AGAINST THE OFFICE**

Service users or stakeholders are encouraged to detail their complaint in writing whether by letter or by email. If a customer complaint is made by telephone, the issues subject of the complaint will be confirmed with the complainant in the call and then set out in writing in the acknowledgement that is issued to the complainant.

Complaints should be sent to [info@policeombudsman.org](mailto:info@policeombudsman.org) or to

Customer Complaints

New Cathedral Buildings,

11 Church Street

Belfast

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1. **WHAT INFORMATION WILL I NEED TO PROVIDE**

To assist us in dealing with your complaint the following information will generally be required.

Your name, address and contact details including the name of any representative whom you may wish to have with you or you may wish to speak for you

Full details of your complaint, providing as much information as possible, including dates, the events that gave rise to your concern and the names of persons involved if known and any reference number we may have provided in previous correspondence with you.

Please note that we may be required to share your information with other parties, both in the investigation of your complaint and in order to comply with our statutory obligations.  [Our Privacy Notice contains further detail about how we process your information and you can find it on our Website](https://www.policeombudsman.org/getmedia/b62733b3-b750-4f28-9340-0cb5cce13905/Privacy-Notice-(Aug-2021)-v3-FINAL.DOCX) or, alternatively, you may request a copy.

1. **CAN THE MATTER BE DEALT WITH INFORMALLY WITHOUT MAKING A COMPLAINT AGAINST THE OFFICE?**

Certain matters can be dealt with through an immediate telephone response by front line staff/investigator response. Dealing with queries or issues of minor dissatisfaction in this way will allow the opportunity for timely and proportionate resolution to such matters, whilst also promoting complainant satisfaction

Where it is not possible to resolve the issue informally to the complainant’s satisfaction then the complainant will be invited to make a formal complaint

Complaints of a serious nature will always be dealt with by way of the Customer Complaints Policy.

1. **Dealing with FORMAL complaints AGAINST THE OFFICE**

We will acknowledge receipt of your complaint via your preferred method of contact within 5 working days and will normally seek to provide a full response within 20 working days.

1. **OUTCOMES**

These may take the form of:

* An apology;
* An explanation of what happened and/or what went wrong;
* Remedial action – this may include for example a revision of practice, revising published material, providing training or enhanced supervision of staff, disciplinary proceedings or any combination of these;
* No further action – where having conducted an investigation into the customer complaint or having reviewed the investigation giving rise to the complaint it is considered that the member of staff acted appropriately.

1. **What can i do if i am dissatisfied with the way my complaint has been dealt with**

We expect that those who make a complaint about our service will be satisfied at the initial investigation stage outlined at section 8-10 above. However, if you are not satisfied, you must advise us within one month of receiving our explanation. Complaints outside this timescale will not be considered unless in exceptional circumstances.

Normally your complaint will be referred to a manager from a different team to the member of staff about whom you are complaining.

You should contact [info@policeombudsman.org](mailto:info@policeombudsman.org) or

Customer Complaints

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11 Church Street

Belfast

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1. **is there any appeal against the way the ORGANISATION has decided to deal with my complaint AGAINST THE OFFICE**

The Office has appointed an external independent assessor who will carry out a review of a complaint where a complainant is not satisfied with the way in which the Office has dealt with the matter. The independent assessor operates independently from the Police Ombudsman or her staff. The independent assessor operates a confidential service and will, upon receipt of your complaint engage with you directly.

The independent assessor can investigate your complaint only after the matter has been investigated first by Police Ombudsman staff and the matter concluded.

The independent assessor’s role is limited to matters of complaint about the manner in which the Office has dealt with your service complaint. They have no role regarding dissatisfaction with the outcome of a complaint against the police.

The Office will make available all relevant files and information relating to your complaint in order to assist in the investigation of your complaint. The independent assessor can be contacted at [independent.assessor@policeombudsman.org](mailto:name@policeombudman.org) or

Sarah Havlin

Independent Assessor of Complaints

Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

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11 Church Street

BELFAST

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1. **MONITORING OF THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE**

The Office is committed to ensuring that these complaint handling arrangements are effective. The Investigations Support Team within the Ofifce will record all customer complaints and oversee the implementation of any recommendations made. They will also provide a report to SMT on a quarterly basis of the number of complaints received and on the outcomes of complaints..

The Annual Report of the Office will include information regarding customer complaints.

1. **UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR BY COMPLAINANTS**

We recognise that individuals may act out of character in times of difficulty or distress. However, the Office does not expect staff to tolerate behaviour by individuals which is unacceptable (for example, abusive, offensive or threatening). Nor do we expect staff to deal with habitual/persistent people who are unreasonably persistent in contacting the Office regarding the same set of circumstances/complaint and thereby hindering investigation of the complaint.

The Office will take steps to protect staff from such behaviour or unreasonable persistence. Where a complainant’s behaviour is deemed unreasonable and/or unreasonably persistent they will be advised of this in writing and, if necessary, steps will be taken to restrict contact with the Office. Examples may include:

* Limiting phone calls taken;
* Restriction to one channel of communication e.g. letters;
* Formally stating that the Office will no longer respond to the person.

Whatever action is taken will be reviewed periodically.