

RQIA Complaints Policy and Handling Procedure

February 2026

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Background and Introduction

This policy has been updated to reflect the The [Health and Social Care Model Complaints Handling Procedure \(MCHP\)](#) published on 1 July 2025 by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

This updated policy also reflects learning from previous complaints.

RQIA recognises the importance of having an accessible and impartial process for dealing efficiently and effectively with complaints about our performance.

RQIA is committed to listening to people and learning from their experiences of interacting with us. The purpose of this policy is to set out how we will address complaints in a timely and effective way. We will also ensure that relevant staff receive appropriate training in complaints management.

RQIA's Complaints Policy has been developed around the following 6 key principles in line with the NIPSO Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP):



These principles aim to help drive a focus on the early resolution of complaints and promote the use of complaints information for learning and improvement.

What is a Complaint?

In line with the NIPSO, MCHP a complaint is defined as:

“An expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about an organisation’s action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of an organisation.”

Who can complain about RQIA?

Anyone directly affected by the way in which RQIA has carried out its functions, or anyone acting directly on their behalf, may make a complaint under this policy. This includes individuals or a person acting on behalf of an organisation.

Complaints by a third party should be made with the written consent of the individual concerned. However, where a person is unable to act for themselves their consent is not required.

RQIA staff can, use this policy to raise a Section 75 complaint, details can be found in Appendix A.

What can people complain about?

People can complain to RQIA about a range of topics for example:

- Failure or refusal by RQIA to provide a service;
- Poor conduct, behaviour or attitude of a member of RQIA staff;
- Disagreement with a decision made by RQIA (except where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision, or an established appeals process); or
- Failure by RQIA to follow appropriate administrative process.

What are the timescales for making a complaint?

A complaint should be made as soon as possible after the action giving rise to it and normally within six months of the event. However, in exceptional circumstances, if a complainant can demonstrate that they became aware of the circumstances after six months, or where issues such as bereavement, poor health, communication difficulties or limited support delayed the complaint after the six months, then RQIA's Chief Executive or his/her nominated deputy can use discretion to extend this time limit to a period **not** exceeding 12 months from the date of the action giving rise to the complaint.

How can I make a complaint?

Complaints may be made verbally, in writing or electronically. Should a verbal complaint be made, the complainant may be asked to formalise their complaint in writing – either by email or on paper. This will help ensure that both the complainant and RQIA are clear about the issues and will help avoid confusion or dissatisfaction and subsequent complaints.

If the complainant is unable to put their complaint in writing, then RQIA's Complaints Manager or the Patient and Client Council (PCC) can provide help.

Complaints can be made to any RQIA staff member, who will then pass this to RQIA's Complaints Manager for recording and next steps. RQIA staff receive training in relation to the process for handling complaints. Depending on the nature of the complaint, we may be able to resolve it immediately.

Some complainants may prefer to make their initial complaint to someone within RQIA who has not been involved in the issue/area of work. In these circumstances, you should make your complaint directly to RQIA's Complaints Manager:

RQIA Complaints Manager
1st Floor
James House
2-4 Cromac Avenue
Gasworks
Belfast
BT7 2JA

Email: info@rqia.org.uk **Telephone:** 028 9536 1111

What support is available to help make a complaint?

Advice and assistance is available at any stage in the complaints process from the Complaints Manager by contacting RQIA on 028 9536 1111.

Independent advice and support for complainants is also available from the PCC. Further information can be obtained from: [Patient Client Council Northern Ireland \(PCC\)](#) and completing the [Online Contact Form](#) or using the Freephone number: 0800 917 0222

How will RQIA manage my complaint?

Firstly, we will acknowledge complaints in writing within two working days of receiving them.

In our acknowledgement, we will:

- Seek to confirm the issues raised in the complaint;
- Offer opportunities to discuss issues with relevant staff;
- Provide information on the availability of independent support and advice;
- Aim to establish at the outset what a complainant wants to achieve; and
- Attempt to address / manage complaints in two stages in line with NIPSO MCHP.

We will normally try to resolve complaints at Stage 1 (Early Resolution). However, Stage 1 may be disregarded where RQIA believes that the complaint will require more thorough investigation. On these occasions, the complaints process will begin at Stage 2. See Appendix B for Procedure Map.

Where complaints are made anonymously, all issues raised will be reviewed and an investigation carried out, as appropriate. However, RQIA cannot respond to an anonymous complaint, as we cannot contact the complainant.

Stage 1

This stage will normally be carried out by a senior RQIA staff member in the team / area of work relating to the complaint. Stage 1 may involve a telephone call or face-to-face meeting or written exchange between RQIA and a complainant in order to understand the issues and provide satisfactory resolution to the complaint.

If the complainant is satisfied with our response to their complaint, the senior staff member will write to the complainant to advise of any learning and to close the complaint. This correspondence will be recorded by the Complaints Manager and shared with RQIA's Chief Executive or his/her nominated deputy.

If the complainant is dissatisfied with RQIA's Stage 1 response, they can request a more detailed investigation be carried out under Stage 2 within 30 days of receipt of response.

Stage 2

This stage will be carried out by a senior RQIA staff member not involved in the team / area in work related to the complaint. They will be the 'Investigating Officer' and will familiarise themselves with the documentation relating to the complaint. The investigation process is best described as "listening, learning and improving".

The Investigating Officer will meet the complainant to give them an opportunity to clarify their matters of dissatisfaction, together with their preferred outcomes. These areas of complaint and preferred outcomes should be agreed between the Investigating Officer and the complainant and formally recorded.

To help gain a full understanding of events surrounding the complaint, the Investigating Officer will also contact any other relevant persons to arrange a date to interview them. A note of each meeting or discussion will be made and sent to interviewees for them to check the accuracy. This should be returned to the Investigating Officer within an agreed timeframe.

Investigations will be conducted in a manner that is supportive to all those involved; without bias; and in an impartial and objective manner. The Investigating Officer will uphold the principles of fairness and consistency and will ensure that complainants are kept informed of progress throughout.

Where an employee of RQIA is subject to a complaint and the investigation remains ongoing, should they leave RQIA's employment, they will be informed of the outcome at the conclusion of the investigation. If a former employee is subject to a complaint, we will consider contacting them as part of any investigation or review.

Reporting on the Outcome of the investigation

The Investigating Officer will produce a clear report which will clearly set out the evidence that underpins their conclusions. It will actively differentiate between fact and opinion. Any conclusions and recommendations will be substantiated and clearly linked to findings.

The investigating officer will draft a response to the complainant for the Chief Executive's or his/her nominated deputy's consideration. The response will detail any findings, conclusions and any recommendations for RQIA. The investigating officer will also outline to the Chief Executive or his/her nominated deputy, any learning for RQIA.

The Chief Executive or his/her nominated deputy will send the final response to the complainant and any person subject to the complaint. This response will be clear, accurate and balanced and will contain an apology where things have gone wrong.

What if the complainant remains dissatisfied?

In the final response we will advise the complainant that if they are not satisfied, they can contact us again within one month and we will discuss the options available which may help in resolving any outstanding issues.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaints process they can then refer their complaint to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The complainant must do so by writing to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman within six months from the date of the final response from RQIA, at:

**Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman
Progressive House
33 Wellington Place
Belfast
BT1 6HN**

Freepost: Freepost NIPSO
Telephone: 0800 34 34 24 (free-phone number)
OR 028 9023 3821 (switchboard)
Email: nipso@nipso.org.uk
Website: www.nipso.org.uk

How long will the Complaints Process take?

The length of the complaints process will be determined by the type of complaint made and the need for further investigation, if required. However, we will take every opportunity to resolve complaints as quickly as possible through discussion with the complainant.

We will acknowledge receipt of complaints within 2 working days and will attempt to complete early resolution within a total of 5 working days of receipt of

a complaint if we can. This can be extended to another 5 days, if required. However, Stage 1 may be disregarded where RQIA believes that the complaint will require more thorough investigation at Stage 2. We will aim to complete resolution within 20 working days.

Any difficulties or delays identified in being able to resolve a complaint within 20 working days will be communicated to the complainant as quickly as possible and an update provided at least every 20 working days thereafter.

We understand that involving a complainant throughout the consideration of their complaint will provide for a more flexible approach to resolution. Our Complaints Manager will be available at an early stage to discuss the individual case and timescales for any investigation.

How will RQIA Learn from Complaints?

We recognise the importance of identifying learning from complaints and disseminating this learning to all relevant staff groups in order to improve performance and reduce the likelihood of any recurrence of the actions/omissions giving rise to the complaint.

All recommendations arising from investigations of complaints will be outlined in an action plan by the Complaints Manager. The Head of Corporate Affairs and Business Services and the Complaints Manager will bring the action plan to a senior management team meeting and discuss this with relevant senior staff.

Once agreed, a senior manager within each relevant team will ensure that an action plan is implemented within their respective area of responsibility within an agreed timeframe. RQIA's Executive Management Team will also receive periodic updates on the timeliness and effectiveness of complaints management in RQIA.

In line with the NIPSO MCHP we will publish an annual report on complaints handling.

We also maintain a database of all complaints. The Complaints Manager also collates information on complaints for reporting to our Authority and through our Annual Report and Accounts. These reports will specify the number of complaints received about RQIA, themes, the timeliness of their management and how they have been addressed. The reports will also identify how any lessons learned have been disseminated.

Who will Manage the Complaints Process?

Chief Executive - has overall responsibility and accountability for the handling and consideration of complaints about RQIA.

Complaints Manager - has day-to-day responsibility for managing the complaints process and is available to complainants to answer any questions or queries they may have. The Complaints Manager is also responsible for the effective reporting and management of the systems and processes for handling complaints.

RQIA Authority - will receive regular updates on complaints about RQIA to provide appropriate governance and oversight of the process.

Are there types of complaints that RQIA will not Investigate?

We will work with complainants to find the best solution to any concerns raised about RQIA's work. However, there are some matters which fall outside the scope of this complaints policy and which may be referred to another process to deal with these concerns. These include:

- Any matter relating to requests for information under Freedom of Information (FOI) or access to records under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- Any matter which is being, or has been, investigated by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).
- Any matter which is the subject of an independent inquiry, legal proceedings or criminal investigation.

However, it may be possible to investigate any aspects of the complaint which do not fall within the scope of the legal action. RQIA will engage with the complainant to clarify the scope of any investigation prior to commencing the complaints process.

- Any matter relating to enforcement action. This is governed by our Enforcement Policy.
- Any matter where a group of service providers, or their representatives, has an issue of general concern. This should be raised directly with the relevant Director for consideration and resolution.
- Any matter relating to the factual accuracy of inspection reports. This is managed through our Inspection Policy.
- RQIA will not investigate complaints that are considered unreasonable or abusive. Any such decision will be authorised by the Chief Executive or his/her nominated deputy and this will be recorded by the Complaints Manager. Unreasonable or abusive complainants, along with threats or abuse of staff, will not be tolerated and, where appropriate, will be referred to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Unreasonable complainants may also be managed under the RQIA Policy for the Management of Unreasonable, Persistent or Vexatious Contacts.
- A concern raised internally by a member of staff which was not about a service delivered by RQIA and which they have received, such as a whistleblowing concern, will be dealt with under the RQIA Whistleblowing Policy). However, staff can use this Complaints Policy to raise a Section 75 complaint. See Appendix A.

Post-Closure Contact

Where you contact us for clarification following receipt of a final complaint response, it is permissible to have further discussion with you to clarify a response and answer your questions. This can be used as a further opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to improvement and learning. However, the complaint will not be re-opened or investigated again.

If you are dissatisfied with our response, or you do not accept the investigation findings, we will explain that we have already given our final response on the matter and signpost you to NIPSO.

Equality, Human Rights & DDA

This policy has been screened for equality implications as required by Section 75 and Schedule 9 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* and is assessed as having no serious impact on the Section 75 groups, therefore it is not considered to require a full impact assessment. Equality Commission guidance states that the purpose of screening is to identify those policies which are likely to have a significant impact on equality of opportunity so that greatest resources can be devoted to these.

RQIA is committed to upholding equality, diversity, and human rights in all aspects of its work. This policy has been developed in line with the principles of fairness, respect, and non-discrimination, and takes account of the Human Rights Act 1998 and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In implementing this policy, RQIA will ensure that no individual or group is disadvantaged on the basis of age, disability, gender, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, or any other protected characteristic.

The policy has been **screened out** without mitigation or an alternative policy proposed to be adopted.

Alternative Formats

This document can be made available on request on disc, larger font, Braille, audiocassette and in other minority languages to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English.

Appendix A: Section 75 Complaints

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) is responsive to the views of members of the public. We will endeavour to resolve all complaints made to us.

Schedule 9 paragraph 10 of the [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#) refers to complaints. A person can make a complaint to a public authority if the complainant believes he or she may have been directly affected by an alleged failure of the authority to comply with its approved equality scheme.

If the complaint has not been resolved within a reasonable timescale, the complaint can be brought to the Equality Commission.

A person wishing to make a complaint that RQIA has failed to comply with its approved equality scheme should contact:

RQIA Complaints Manager
1st Floor
James House
2-4 Cromac Avenue
Gasworks
Belfast
BT7 2JA

Email: info@rqia.org.uk **Telephone:** 028 9536 1111

We will in the first instance acknowledge receipt of each complaint within 2 working days.

RQIA will carry out an internal investigation of the complaint and will respond substantively to the complainant within one (1) month of the date of receiving the letter of complaint. Under certain circumstances, if the complexity of the matter requires a longer period, the period for response to the complainant may be extended to two (2) months. In those circumstances, the complainant will be advised of the extended period within one month of making the complaint.

During this process the complainant will be kept fully informed of the progress of the investigation into the complaint and of any outcomes.

In any subsequent investigation by the Equality Commission, RQIA will co-operate fully, providing access in a timely manner to any relevant documentation that the Equality Commission may require.

Similarly, RQIA will co-operate fully with any investigation by the Equality Commission under sub-paragraph 11 (1) (b) of Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

RQIA will make all efforts to implement promptly and in full any recommendations arising out of any Commission investigation.

Appendix B: Handling Procedure Map

