



House of Commons
Public Administration Select
Committee

**When Citizens
Complain: Government
Response to the
Committee's Fifth
Report of Session
2007–08**

**Seventh Special Report of Session
2007–08**

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The Public Administration Select Committee

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, of the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith, and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

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Seventh Special Report

The Public Administration Select Committee reported to the House on *When Citizens Complain* in its Fifth Report of Session 2007–08, published 24 March 2008 as HC 409. The Government Response was received on 15 July 2008 and is published below as an Appendix to this Report.

Appendix

The Government welcomes the Committee's report.

The Government's vision is for all services to be world class: responsive to people's needs and aspirations and providing consistently high standards. Over the last ten years, most services have improved enormously, but there is still too much variation in services and insufficient tailoring of services to people's specific needs.

Encouraging and responding to complaints and other forms of feedback is central to achieving this vision. People have a right to expect a high standard of services and effective complaints procedures are essential in providing redress and raising standards if these standards are not being met. As importantly, achieving world class services requires leaders and planners of services and front-line professionals to be better informed about the experiences of those who use these services. In the best of the public sector and private sector, complaints are viewed as a vital source of insight. The Government wishes that to be the norm across public services.

Complaint procedures need to be tailored to the particular service and context in which they are operating—there is no one-size-fits-all complaints mechanism. However, there is a role for the Cabinet Office in supporting the promotion of best practice in complaint handling, including by encouraging the dissemination and establishment of best practice across public sector organisations. That is why the Cabinet Office worked closely with the Parliamentary Ombudsman on the development of her Principles of Good Administration and Principles of Remedy. The Ombudsman is currently consulting on the next stage of this work—Principles of Good Complaint Handling. The Government welcomes this development and the Cabinet Office will continue to keep under review how it can most effectively promote best practice in complaint handling.

In addition, as the full response below highlights, government organisations are rightly taking steps to improve their complaint handling processes. For example, the DWP's Pension, Disability and Carers Service has carried out a National Customer Survey which includes a section on complaints covering the whole customer journey from making the complaint to receiving a resolution. It also has a management assessment in

operation that selects a percentage of complaints and asks the customer about their experience of making a complaint.

The measures the Government and individual services are implementing to better encourage and respond to complaints forms just one way to improve redress and gain better insight. The Government is consulting on ways to increase the use of petitions by local authorities. Services are developing new ways to seek feedback, such as the ability of patients to comment on their experiences of hospitals on the new NHS Choices website. The Cabinet Office and others are pioneering new approaches to understanding the ways in which people use services and how their experience can be simplified and improved.

All these measures are underpinned by giving greater attention to the satisfaction of those who use services, in the Public Service Agreements that commenced this April and other performance measures. An example of this is the 'Better Care for All' target which will use the self-reported experience of patients and users to help drive success in health and adult social care services. Other performance management systems, such as the Police Performance Assessment Framework, also demonstrate the prominence being given to the satisfaction of customers in the delivery of public services.

Together, this suite of measures should form the basis for more responsive, higher quality services in the future.

The Government's response to the Committee's recommendations is set out below.

1. There are clear economic arguments for resolving complaints as quickly as possible. The earlier complaints are resolved, the cheaper it is for everyone. (Paragraph 10)

The Government agrees that it is important to try and resolve complaints at the earliest possible stage for the benefit of customers, as well as for economic reasons. The Government will continue to encourage organisations to constantly review their complaints procedures to look to make them as efficient as possible. For example, in 2007 the Department for Work and Pensions reviewed its complaints procedures and as a result it has provided greater focus on resolving complaints wherever possible on the front line. It has also sharpened up its arrangements for the escalation of complaints where appropriate, including making the services of the department's Independent Case Examiner available to all users of its customer facing businesses.

2. Complaints systems are always likely to be more accessible to the persistent and articulate. This makes it all the more important that complaints systems are clear and easy to navigate, so that they do not act as a barrier to the less articulate or less persistent (particularly disadvantaged groups). (Paragraph 14)

The Government agrees that it is important to have complaint systems that are user friendly and accessible to all. Government organisations have taken steps to improve

systems to guide customers through the complaints process. In 2007 both HMRC and DWP reviewed their complaints procedures for their internet sites and information leaflets to provide more comprehensive step by step guidance on how to complain and what customers can expect from public services when they complain.

3. We recommend that all government organisations use the widest possible definition of complaint—that of “any expression of dissatisfaction that needs a response, however communicated”— and treat all such expressions of dissatisfaction as complaints. (Paragraph 17)

The Government agrees that in most cases a widely drawn definition of complaint is desirable and most organisations do adhere to the Cabinet Office definition of complaint, produced in its 1998 guide ‘How to deal with Complaints’ (as quoted above). However given the huge variety of organisations across the public sector, we need to allow some flexibility.

4. Insisting on complaints in writing can potentially deter valid complaints and prevent problems from being identified. People should not be disadvantaged if they have difficulty in making a formal written complaint. We trust that the practice of not processing complaints made by telephone or e-mail has already been reviewed by the government organisations concerned in the light of the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. (Paragraph 18)

The Government agrees that all citizens should have full and easy access to complaint procedures. Since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act significant improvements have been made to departmental complaint procedures to make them compliant with the Act; for example by improving telephone access, including the availability of text-phones and minicom/typetalk facilities. The Government has also developed online facilities to handle customer feedback and process complaints.

5. The distinction between an appeal and a complaint is real, but apparently little understood by the public. The requirement must be for government organisations to define their processes clearly and to treat any expression of dissatisfaction in the appropriate way. In some cases, the best course of action may be to combine complaint handling with appeal handling; where that is not possible, the distinction must be made as clear as possible to the user, and those complaining or appealing should be guided through the system. (Paragraph 22)

In line with the requirement to clearly define their procedures, government organisations also aim to make the difference between a complaint and an appeal clear. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions has recently taken part in seminars aimed at customer representatives to clarify these differences. Government organisations also inform customers of their right to appeal wherever applicable.

6. As the internet becomes an increasingly important means for communicating with government departments and agencies, it is all the more important that

Directgov, the Government's online portal, should set out complaints processes in a clear, accessible and comprehensive manner. (Paragraph 32)

Directgov currently refers citizens to individual departments responsible for the published content or service and it works closely with those organisations to ensure easy access to their online services. However, the Government recognises that the increase in content and services that will arise from website convergence will require more robust systems to be in place. By the autumn, Directgov will assess its complaint processes as part of an overall review of its customer service strategy. This will consider best practice in complaints resolution.

7. We agree with Sir David Varney and the National Audit Office that the Government should explore the scope for a common access point nationwide for all non-emergency public services. This would provide a single point of contact for impartial information on where to make a complaint or seek redress. We restate our predecessor Committee's recommendation in favour of just such a service—'Public Services Direct'—which would offer an easy access, one-stop-shop approach to a complex web of public services. Public Services Direct should be both a gateway to government organisations and services, and a source of basic advice to public service users. It would act as the starting point for people unsure of how or where to lodge their initial complaint, and would provide them with appropriate information and guidance. (Paragraph 42)

The Government recognises the potential benefits of customers having a single point of contact for a range of services. It is currently piloting 'Tell Us Once', a scheme examining the feasibility of customers only having to inform the Government once about a change of circumstances, rather than having to contact individual organisations. Initially looking at registering a birth or reporting a death, it will expand to include change of address. Channels for accessing the service are likely to include telephone, face-to-face and online facilities. A complaints procedure will naturally form part of this service and is currently being tested, along with other aspects of a potential service, via a number of pilots with local authorities. Complaint resolution is currently handled directly by individual organisations but the Government is continually reviewing its procedures to see how it can make services more accessible to the user.

8. We do not wish to be prescriptive about the way government organisations handle complaints. Different organisations often establish different procedures for valid reasons. However, we are disturbed that a poor standard of complaint handling is raised by so many complaint reviewers. This suggests a systemic problem with first-tier complaint handling by government organisations. (Paragraph 48)

The Government recognises the need to continuously review and develop systems for handling complaints at the first tier. Wherever possible the Government continues to encourage organisations to resolve complaints as early as possible.

The Department for Work and Pensions for example is examining how well complaints are managed at service delivery levels in order to develop their systems for resolving complaints at the earliest possible stage rather than just looking at the mechanics of managing a complaint through the system. Both the Department of Health and Defra also offer National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in Customer Care to their Contact Centre staff at first-tier levels, in order to focus upon the importance of operational as well as policy skills needed to ensure successful complaint handling.

9. Government organisations must keep citizens informed on progress in dealing with their complaints, especially if delays are likely. (Paragraph 51)

10. Public service providers should be required to provide information on the next steps in the complaints process automatically whenever acknowledging a complaint, in line with the processes followed by financial service providers. (Paragraph 52)

The Government agrees that customers should be kept informed of the handling of their complaints and receive acknowledgement of their complaint at the earliest possible opportunity. Most government organisations have developed systems to ensure that customers receive an automatic receipt of complaint outlining the next steps of the process. All service delivery departments publish timescales for complaint handling and response targets. If a full response is not achievable within the timeframe, customers are issued with an interim response informing them of progress.

11. We recommend that, where practical, government organisations adopt a caseworker approach to complaint handling so that complainants have an identifiable person to deal with. (Paragraph 54)

The Government is pleased at the recognition given in the report to HMRC's caseworker approach, which has worked particularly well in the handling of Tax Credit cases. The Government agrees that this approach provides a quality standard of service in managing the end to end process and the approach has been implemented elsewhere. For example the Child Support Agency, as part of their Operational Improvement Plan, has recently implemented a caseworker approach to complaint handling. However, one size does not fit all and this approach is not always the solution for the handling of complaints. The Government believes that it is important to consider a variety of options in order to achieve the right balance between value for money and best customer service. For example, in the Department for Children, Schools and Families complaints about direct services will be handled by a senior manager who will have the best understanding of the work area. If a complaint is received about a third party (e.g. a school) a caseworker may be appointed to manage the complaint investigation. This is a good example of refined planning that can best be developed by front line services focused clearly on customer need.

12. Public services should seek to discover what complainants hope to achieve from making their views known. Some may look for financial compensation; others may

want no more than a sincere apology, and an explanation of the steps being taken to ensure that mistakes are not repeated. (Paragraph 57)

The Government agrees that it is vital to engage with citizens to better understand their expectations with regard to the complaint. Complaints are also more difficult to resolve when it is unclear what outcome the complainant is seeking. Work is underway across government organisations to better understand complainants and to identify what leads them to complain. For example, HMRC carries out a rolling survey of complainants which seeks to identify their experience and what they expect from the service they receive. In DWP, wherever possible, the Independent Case Examiner's Office contacts the complainant, usually by telephone, to establish the facts surrounding their complaint. There is also a discussion around how the customer would like to see the complaint progressed and what they expect from the business to put matters right which helps to identify areas for improvement.

13. For the public to have confidence in systems for complaint resolution, there must be robust and independent processes for dealing with complaints. We believe that for areas where large numbers of complaints are made and upheld, the existence of independent intermediate complaint handlers is crucial to ensuring the credibility of complaint resolution systems in government. (Paragraph 64)

The Government agrees that whilst all complaint systems should be credible and robust, they also need to be tailored to each organisation's business to be proportionate and cost effective. Second tier complaint handling systems would not be appropriate in all organisations, but as the Committee recognises they do have a key role to play in those departments that deal with large volumes of complaints. DWP has appointed an Independent Case Examiner who reviews cases where citizens do not feel their complaints have been properly dealt with by the department. Similarly, in HMRC cases can be reviewed by an independent Adjudicator. The Parliamentary Ombudsman has recognised the service provided by the Adjudicator in providing resolution for the department's customers and allowing her office to focus on more complex and contentious cases. Similar systems are also in place in the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

14. Although necessary in some circumstances, the existence of multi-tiered complaint processes does increase the complexity of the system—potentially adding to the confusion of prospective complainants. This reinforces our earlier point that clear information and guidance need to be made available from a central point to assist people through the complaints process. (Paragraph 68)

The Government agrees with the point made by the Parliamentary Ombudsman that “the last thing we need is to set up another huge organisation to deal with complaints” —it would be very difficult for one central point to manage all the multi-faceted aspects of complaint handling services that the Government delivers. The Government believes therefore that the most efficient process is for citizens to have direct and easy access to

service providers who are best equipped to deal with their specific circumstances and needs, and focusing on making existing systems work better.

15. Regulators can require private sector organisations to monitor complaints. Government organisations should also be obliged to ensure that they systematically monitor the complaints they receive in order to inform service delivery. (Paragraph 75)

16. Different organisations may wish to take different approaches to considering the views of service users in general, and complaints in particular. However, all government organisations should have an active strategy for monitoring and learning from complaints, and central departments should use such information to monitor the performance of their agencies. We recommend that the management boards of all departments and agencies with a customer-facing role should consider trends in complaints annually as an absolute minimum. (Paragraph 80)

The Government agrees that government organisations should have an active strategy for monitoring and learning from complaints using procedures that are robust and stand up to public scrutiny. Government organisations do monitor and assess complaints as part of their performance assessments in order to improve and develop services that better meet customer needs. For example, increasing numbers of public services are committed to Customer Service Excellence, the Government Standard for customer service. This requires organisations to demonstrate that they use vigorous systems for monitoring and learning from complaints.

The Government also agrees that management boards in departments and agencies should consider complaint trends as part of their performance indicators. Procedures for analysing complaints and identifying emerging trends are being developed at a central level in departments, including the use of customer insight to inform the overall design and delivery of services. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions is putting mechanisms in place to monitor trends centrally. Systematic recommendations from both the Independent Case Examiner and the Parliamentary Ombudsman will also be monitored centrally and shared across the department in a bid to inform business improvements.

17. We recommend that government organisations should use as a performance indicator the proportion of complaints upheld by independent bodies such as the Ombudsman's office. (Paragraph 85)

The Government recognises the important role that the Parliamentary Ombudsman and her office undertake. It also recognises that monitoring the proportion of complaints upheld by independent bodies is one key indicator of performance. Other indicators and evidence on organisations' ability to handle complaints effectively will also need to be taken into consideration when monitoring an organisation's performance in order to establish a broader perspective of how well an organisation is operating and what areas need to be focused upon. The Government also recognises the important role of

independent bodies in contacting government organisations if a particular issue or systematic problem has been identified, which they can seek to rectify.

18. Complaints are only one source of information on dissatisfaction among public service users. Organisation should seek to gather as comprehensive and accurate an overview as possible, and be innovative about how they do this in whatever ways are most relevant to the services they provide. (Paragraph 88)

The Government agrees that it is always important to value wide ranging information and feedback for improving services. Much good work is already being taken forward. For example the Pension, Disability and Carers Service is piloting end-to-end work tracking customer views throughout their customer journeys. Jobcentre Plus also uses a mystery shopper technique to monitor its customer services. The Department for Children, Schools and Families run an annual Customer Satisfaction Survey on its correspondence and national telephone line service. The feedback is acted upon and improved and best practice methods are introduced. The Department's agencies also carry out regular forums and consultations with its key customers.

19. There is clearly a need for a centrally co-ordinated official effort to champion good practice in complaints handling across government and the public services. We recommend that the Cabinet Office should take the lead within central government to produce effective guidance on how to deal with complaints. It should take account of key principles for handling complaints which reflect the recommendations in this report, as well as relevant existing guidance, and be drawn up in close consultation with the Parliamentary Ombudsman. (Paragraph 95)

In an effort to champion good practice across government organisations, the Cross-Government Complaints Handlers Network was set up in 2006. It is a self-organised network comprising complaint managers from organisations within the remit of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, including Health, DWP, Transport, Home Office, HMRC, the NHS and the Charity Commission. The network aims to promote the effective management of, and learning from, complaints and customer feedback by encouraging the exchange of good practice, ideas, experience and relevant training. The Cabinet Office will examine whether there may be scope therefore for the Government to build upon the existing network to establish more formalised cross-government collaboration to develop key principles for complaint handling and to better identify innovative good practice. The Cabinet Office acts as the key point of contact in Government for the Parliamentary Ombudsman. Within this capacity the department worked closely with the Ombudsman in the development of her Principles of Good Administration which were published in March 2007. She has also since published Principles of Remedy and her Principles of Good Complaint Handling are due to be published shortly.

20. We recommend that all government organisations be required to publish in their annual reports information on the number of complaints they receive, how many are reviewed by the Ombudsman, and the number that are upheld. (Paragraph 96)

The Government agrees that it is helpful for government organisations to publish information on their complaint handling. Most government organisations do publish information on complaints in their annual reports. However, in response to this recommendation, from next year, all government departments will include information on complaints and complaint handling in their departmental report, including information on the number of complaints reviewed by the Ombudsman and the number of those that are upheld.

21. Significant sums are spent on complaint handling. Handling individual complaints well is key to confidence in public services. But complaints, if systematically monitored, can also be a source of valuable information which can be used to improve these services. Ensuring consistency and best practice in these areas requires a lead from the centre which is currently lacking. We recommend that the Cabinet Office actively monitor how government organisations use information from complaints to improve administration and service delivery, and that it encourage the spread of good practice in this area. (Paragraph 98)

It is already clear that many organisations do work on establishing better practices based on feedback from complaint monitoring. As set out in the response to recommendation 19, significant steps are also being taken to disseminate good practice across organisations. The Government also recognises the need to continue to monitor processes in order to improve services and the Cabinet Office has a role to play in this process. It will continue to encourage organisations to review and improve their customer services by using performance indicators such as customer feedback, as well as learning from successful practices already underway in other government organisations.

22. When citizens complain, they want their concerns to be taken seriously and, where necessary, matters put right. We have looked in this Report at how the Government could improve how it deals with the complaints it receives about its operations. Complaints systems need to be accessible, understandable and easy for people to navigate. People should get the help they need to access complaints systems, and to take their complaints further if they are unhappy with how their case has been handled. Complainants also need to have confidence that their complaints will be dealt with in a fair and competent manner. (Paragraph 99)

23. The onus is therefore on the Government to ensure that it responds to complaints effectively and appropriately. A key part of this is making sure that complaints processes meet the requirement outlined above. Equally, however, it is about learning from complaints received in order to improve how government and public services operate. There needs to be a culture that invites and values complaints for the insights they can provide on how to make government work better. This is a culture that all government organisations should be doing their utmost to foster—so that they not only put things right for the citizen, but also get things right for the future. (Paragraph 100)

The Government agrees that building a culture that values complaints and acts on feedback is crucially important. It has described in this response some of the steps it is taking to set the strategy and build the capacity for delivering this.

The Government strongly believes in the benefits of listening to citizens and of adopting best practice, taking into account issues around efficiency, accessibility and accountability. It also believes that business managers are best placed to look at service delivery issues overall and to determine how services can be continually improved.

The Cabinet Office will consider (through the Customer Insight Forum) how it can best focus upon and encourage the identification and dissemination of best practice. It will also continue the work already underway to establish cultures that welcome customer feedback as a major contributor to excellence and fairness in public services.

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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Second Report	Propriety and Peerages	HC 153 (<i>Cm 7374</i>)
Third Report	Parliament and public appointments: Pre-appointment hearings by select committees	HC 152 (<i>HC 515</i>)
Fourth Report	Work of the Committee in 2007	HC 236 (<i>HC 458</i>)
Fifth Report	When Citizens Complain	HC 409 (<i>HC 997</i>)
Sixth Report	User Involvement in Public Services	HC 410 (<i>HC 998</i>)
Seventh Report	Investigating the Conduct of Ministers	HC 381
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Fourth Report	Ethics and Standards: The Regulation of Conduct in Public Life	HC 121 (<i>HC 88 Session 2007–08</i>)
Fifth Report	Pensions Bill: Government Undertakings relating to the Financial Assistance Scheme	HC 523 (<i>HC 922</i>)
Sixth Report	The Business Appointment Rules	HC 651 (<i>HC 1087</i>)
Seventh Report	Machinery of Government Changes	HC 672 (<i>HC 90 Session 2007–08</i>)
Eighth Report	The Pensions Bill and the FAS: An Update, Including the Government Response to the Fifth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 922 (<i>HC 1048</i>)
Ninth Report	Skills for Government	HC 93 (<i>HC 89</i>)
First Special Report	The Governance of Britain	HC 901

Session 2005–06

First Report	A Debt of Honour	HC 735 (<i>Cm 1020</i>)
Second Report	Tax Credits: putting things right	HC 577 (<i>HC 1076</i>)

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Third Report	Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill	HC 1033 (<i>HC 1205</i>)
Fourth Report	Propriety and Honours: Interim Findings	HC 1119 (<i>Cm 7374</i>)
Fifth Report	Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs	HC 689 (<i>HC 91, Session 2007–08</i>)