

From the Ombudsman **Robert Behrens CBE**

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee



Sent by email

22 March 2022

Dear Chair,

I am writing to share details of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's consultation on the [UK Central Government \(UKCG\) Complaint Standards](#). I would very much welcome the Committee's views on this area of our work.

Complaints continue to be an important source of learning for improving public services. As you are aware, we published the [NHS Complaint Standards](#) last year to provide a more consistent and streamlined approach to complaint handling within the NHS in England. We are now broadening this approach to include UK Central Government departments and arms-length bodies through the publication of the UKCG Complaint Standards.

Our aim is to provide a single, unified view of best practice in complaint handling across public services within our remit. We have welcomed the contributions of UK Central Government departments and wider public bodies in developing common principles and objectives for the Standards, which includes promoting a learning culture.

We know from our own research that members of the public are more confident about knowing how to complain about health-related organisations, such as GPs or hospitals, than Government bodies. In response to our recent [stakeholder survey](#), only 30% of the public felt confident making a complaint about a UK Central Government department. Through the UKCG Complaint Standards, we will be supporting Government departments to raise awareness of how members of the public can make complaints, to make complaint handling processes more straightforward, and to use the learning to make improvements in public services.

We have also identified the need to make complaint handling processes more straightforward and easier to access and navigate. The UKCG Complaints Standards can help promote best practice by removing unnecessary hurdles to promote efficiency and resolve cases earlier, and ensure that complaint handling processes are accessible to all service users.

The UKCG Complaint Standards will also enable complaint handling staff to provide the best possible experience for service users. Once published, these Standards will be supported by guidance and other supporting materials that describe how they can be embedded in practice. We will also be developing training to increase the practical support for staff when handling complaints. We would welcome your feedback on how best we can achieve this.



Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

Telephone: 0300 061 4308

Email: Rob.Behrens@ombudsman.org.uk

www.ombudsman.org.uk

PHSO has a unique and strategic role to play in strengthening complaint handling by promoting consistency and best practice. As the support we can offer to embed both versions of the Complaint Standards widens, the need for PHSO to be granted Complaint Standards Authority powers becomes even more important. Such powers would enable us to monitor compliance and consistency in relation to the NHS and UKCG Complaint Standards, and help ensure staff and organisations receive tailored support to deliver the best possible service for users. This would also align PHSO's powers with the public service Ombuds in the UK's devolved nations, where such powers already exist.

In any event, it is vitally important public services place emphasis on their complaints handling operations to ensure concerns are listened to and resolved at the earliest opportunity. Too often, poor complaints handling results in frustrated members of the public escalating their complaint to Members of Parliament to ask my Office to intervene. This prolongs the process, and only seeks to compound the frustration and distress.

The UKCG Complaint Standards prioritise the need for better frontline complaints handling. We need your support to help us champion these standards to promote better experiences for all. Alongside this, we continue to seek legislative reform to enable members of the public, as well as Members of Parliament, to bring complaints about Government departments to PHSO directly in future, which will help people access our service quicker when that is needed.

We will be embedding the UKCG Complaint Standards into PHSO's own complaint handling to ensure that we continuously improve our service. We are committed to widening access to our service through the delivery of our new corporate strategy, which we will be publishing next month.

My Office looks forward to working with you over the coming months to improve complaint handling in public services through the UKCG Complaint Standards. The [consultation](#) will be open until **31 May 2022**.

Should you welcome a meeting to discuss this further, please contact my Assistant Private Secretary, Faye Glover faye.glover@ombudsman.org.uk

Your sincerely,

Rob Behrens

Rob Behrens CBE
Ombudsman and Chair
Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman



Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

Telephone: 0300 061 4308
Email: Rob.Behrens@ombudsman.org.uk

www.ombudsman.org.uk