



# A guide to making a formal complaint

## 1. Introduction

If you think a public body has made a mistake or you are unhappy with the service you have received you can make a formal complaint through the public body's internal complaints procedure. (See the PLP leaflet no. 7 in this series for details of the complaints procedures for particular public bodies.)

You should start by asking the public body for a copy of the relevant complaints procedure. This may be available on their website, or you can ring them and ask them to send you a copy.

## 2. Getting started – key issues

Once you have got a copy of the complaints procedure, you should check some basic points before you start to write out your complaint.

- Does the public body have a special form you should use?
- Who should you address your complaint to?
- Do you have to make it in writing, or can you make it over the phone, or by email (via their website)?
- Is there a deadline for making a complaint?
- How long will they take to deal with your complaint?
- Are there different stages to the complaints procedure?
- Does the complaints procedure cover what you want to complain about?
- Do you need any help to make your complaint? If so, see below: "Getting help to make your complaint".

## 3. How to put your complaint together

You want to make sure that your complaint is as clear as possible, that you have included everything you want to say and all the information the public body will need to investigate your complaint properly.

If you have any documents (letters, notes or other records) that relate to your complaint, get these together and put them in date order, so that the oldest document is on the top. This will help you to tell the story of your complaint.

Once you have got all your papers in order, write out a chronology or timeline about what has happened. Put the date on the left hand side, and what happened on that date on the right hand side; even if you can only remember rough dates this is still helpful in putting your complaint together. For example:

May 2006	told my caretaker about the repairs that needed doing
June 2006	rang estate manager and told her about the repairs
July 2006	called into the housing office to report the repairs
August 2006	went to housing office again to complain

When you have worked out all the key dates, write out your complaint in full explaining what happened being as specific as possible about what you think the public body has got wrong and how it has affected you. It's good to start with a short paragraph as a summary about what you are complaining about, for example:

"I am writing to complain about the delay in the Council not repairing the stairs in our block on Whitestone Estate. The stairs have needed repairing for six months, but nothing has been done." Then go on to tell the full story.

If you are complaining about more than one thing (for example delay in dealing with an issue, a staff member being rude, and a failure to be kept informed), then it may make your complaint clearer to separate the points out and number them. Put the most important first. If the public body has information you want from them, set out your queries clearly and ask for them to provide copies of their documents about your complaint.

If you have any documents that confirm what you are saying then refer to them in your complaint, for example: "I enclose a copy of the repairs report form which I completed at the estate office in on 26 July 2006". If you can be specific about dates, then include them as well.

#### **4. Finalising your complaint**

If you can, get someone else to read your complaint for you before you send it off. They can make sure that the story makes sense and that you have explained your problem properly. Try to make sure that you leave out irrelevant details, and focus on the main things that you are concerned about, and explain how it has affected you.

If possible, tell the public body what you want them to do to put matters right. For example, do you want an apology; do you think they should change how they do things? Do you want compensation, or for them to do the specific thing that they have failed to do?

When you are ready to send off your complaint, make sure that you keep a copy of it for your own records. Make sure you date your complaint, and if you are sending it in by post, you may want to send it recorded or special delivery so that you are sure it will get there. Ask the public body to

acknowledge receipt of your complaint, and if you have not heard from them within a week, contact them again to check they have received it.

## **5. Where to get help with your complaint**

Some public bodies offer help to make a complaint, so when you get a copy of their complaints procedure, ask them whether they can help you, or whether there are any local organisations that offer help to people making complaints.

You can also go to your local Citizens Advice Bureau for help to make a complaint. To find your local CAB, look them up in your phone book, ask at your local library or go online to [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk).

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