

Q2d: Please consider each element of the draft MCHP outlined below and comment on any changes or additions.

Based on experiences in other places, a ‘frontline response’ should be responded to within a maximum of 5 working days, with the possibility of an extension in exceptional circumstances of up to 5 additional working days.

HEALTH SECTOR

Organisation name	Response
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service	NIAS is fully supportive for timescales to be included in a complaints handling process, but considers the maximum 5 day response time unachievable for reasons previously advised.
Southern Health & Social Care Trust – email submission	SHSCT is regulated by the Department of Health (DoH) and its Regional Complaints Policy. Therefore, the Trust considers that DoH must review and respond to aspects of NIPSO’s proposal. SHSCT has shared this with DoH and awaits its input. SHSCT will share with NIPSO any input received from DoH.
Southern Health & Social Care Trust – online submission	No response to this question.
Health & Social Care Board	The HSC Complaints Procedure currently has a response time of 10 working days for complaints concerning Family Practitioners. The reason for this is that, in the majority of cases, complaints raised at primary care level would not be as complex as those raised at HSC Trust level. A timescale of 20 working days is in place when the HSCB acts in its ‘honest broker’ or intermediary role in Family Practitioner complaints. This enables further time for any liaison that may occur or be required to assist in resolving the complaint at local level. It is the HSCB’s opinion that the FPS 10 working day response time should not be removed from the process, as it currently works for Practices and complainants alike, and places emphasis on the FPS to attempt to resolve complaints as expeditiously as possible.
NHS	No
Woodbrooke Medical Practice	No response to this question.

HSC Trust Complaints Forum	Agree that the aim should be to deal within 5 working days but not hard targets. There will be times this is not possible and it is better to wait to get response rather than automatically stepping into a formal process. This should also reflect the complainants view/wish as they may prefer to wait for a call back to deal with informally or they may not want to actually use Stage 1 at all. This stage, when instigated, will need to be fluid dependant on the individual case.
Patient Client Council	This approach is welcomed.
General Medical Council	No response to this question.
Medical Protection Society	MPS disagrees with this proposal. We consider that it is unnecessary to set timescales in relation to 'frontline responses' because the vast majority will be resolved 'on the spot' or soon thereafter. The 'frontline response' should be as flexible as possible. The introduction of deadlines suggests a degree of formality that may cause confusion with the 'stage 2' approach.
CHASNI	Acknowledgement within 5 days is acceptable. What is exceptional circumstance?
Northern Health & Social Care Trust	No response to this question.

EDUCATION SECTOR

Organisation name	Response
Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)	CCEA would be keen to keep the five working days timescale for acknowledgments at all stages as we feel it is consistent for our service users and our staff and from benchmarking seems to be consistent with other public sector organisations.
Spires Integrated Primary School	No response to this question.
Belfast Metropolitan College	We believe all complaints, whether frontline or formal investigation, should have a 20 working day response timeframe. Early resolution is always preferable and we always aim to respond to complaints as quickly as possible. however, 5 working days in a busy College environment with staff working different working patterns could be very challenging. We are unaware of any other places that operate on 5 day response.
South West Regional College	SWC believes all complaints; whether front line or formal investigation; should have a 20 working day response timeframe. Early resolution is always preferable and we always aim to respond to complaints as quickly as possible, however 5 working days in a busy College environment with staff working different working patterns could be very challenging. We are unaware of any other places that operate on 5 day response.
Northern Regional College	We believe all complaints; whether front line or formal investigation; should have a 20 working day response timeframe. Early resolution is always preferable and we always aim to respond to complaints as quickly as possible, however 5 working days in a busy College environment with staff working different working patterns could be very challenging. We are unaware of any other places that operate on 5 day response.
Education Authority - School Development Service	
Education Authority - Corporate Complaints Service	<p>a) It is agreed that a frontline response should be responded to within 5 working days , the response should be provided as quickly as possible and as close to the point of service delivery as possible. These types of complaints are usually straight forward and require little or no investigation.</p> <p>b) Extensions are quite often required in Stage 1 complaints and usually a 5 day extension is suffice to enable an adequate response to be issued. However, there can be certain circumstances/situations which are not envisaged and unfortunately even with a five day extension, the response is still unable to be issued. This may be due e.g. a staff member is on Annual Leave/ Bereavement or perhaps the service involved is under significant pressures at that particular time that it is simply not possible to have the response issued within 10 working days. However, an additional 5 day extension may allow for the response to issue. It is suggested that the MCHP should</p>

	allow the Complaints Manager to consider and grant an additional 5 day extension (i.e. a second extension) based on extenuating circumstances, with each request being assessed on their own merits. The benefits of this would be that it may avoid an unnecessary escalation to a Stage 2 Complaint which would involve a senior member of staff being appointed to carry out an investigation (in what may be a relatively straight forward complaint) and the response would issue to the customer within 15 working days.
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	In some school contexts this may be difficult to achieve. Some schools have 3/4 members of staff so they may struggle to meet this timeframe given the full-time contact with pupils on a daily basis. In larger schools, the majority of staff have a full-time teaching commitment and this short timeframe may be unrealistic. 10 days or asap might be more realistic, currently EA has asap in our model schools' procedure – this allows for flexibility whilst giving the clear message that the expectation is that the response is made efficiently.
Northern Ireland National Association for Head Teachers	No response to this question.
Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education	Given that we understand that day 1 is the day of receipt we think that 5 days is inadequate. We also understand that school holidays will still be regarded as working days this is impractical if someone makes a complaint on the last day before a holiday. Staff may be unavailable to deal with the problem.
NI Teachers Collaborate	<p>We believe all complaints; whether frontline or formal investigation; should have a 20 working day response timeframe.</p> <p>Early resolution is always preferable and we always aim to respond to complaints as quickly as possible, however 5 working days in a busy College environment with staff working different working patterns could be very challenging. We are unaware of any other places that operate on 5 day response.</p>
South Eastern Regional College	<p>We believe all complaints; whether frontline or formal investigation; should have a 20 working day response timeframe. Early resolution is always preferable and we always aim to respond to complaints as quickly as possible, however 5 working days in a busy College environment with staff working different working patterns could be very challenging. We are unaware of any other places that operate on 5 day response.</p>

HOUSING SECTOR

Organisation name	Response
Co-Ownership Housing Association	We agree that the timeframes themselves would appear to be appropriate in the circumstances, subject to our comments immediately above.
Clanmil Housing Association	We would have concerns that the proposed 5 days to resolve Stage 1 complaints is too tight and may not allow for sufficient time to contact third parties, establish facts, and provide a remedy. We would therefore strongly suggest 10 working days for this stage while encouraging IOs to resolve complaints as soon as possible within this timescale.
Choice Housing Association	For the majority of formal complaints 5 days at stage 1 does not give the opportunity to undertake a meaningful assessment of the complaint and engagement with the complainant. Choice does recognise that some complaints can be resolved quickly; these tend to be informal complaints which are handled at front line level and do not require escalation through a formal complaints process. Under the proposed model these enquiries will be addressed in stage 1. Choice welcomes acknowledgement within the consultation that even where early resolution is feasible resolution response times may be impacted by * Availability of relevant staff due to leave, absence, training. * complaint received late in working day which effectively reduces frontline resolution time frame to 4 days In addition to examples provided within the consultation the following circumstances impact resolution times * availability of relevant external stakeholder eg repair contractor * availability of complainant. We would welcome further guidance as to what constitutes exceptional circumstances for 5 day extension and would hope it would include common circumstances such as aforementioned examples
Ark Housing Association	It may prove difficult for smaller organisations (such as ourselves), who have limited resources to undertake a full investigation and issue a detailed response within 5 working days. We currently work within a 10 working day response and feel that this timescale is much more manageable and realistic. In addition, we believe that further clarity is required on what a 'frontline response' is and suggest that this is detailed within guidance and the complaints handling procedure. We would ask that you clarify what constitutes as 'exceptional circumstances' e.g. would annual leave/holiday periods be considered as part of this?
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Neither the specified complaints handling model nor the attached research seem to detail what the 'experiences in other places' statement is based on. Further evidence on this would be of benefit. The Housing Executive would have

	<p>significant concerns around the practicality of adequately responding to a significant number of complaints within the specified 5 day period. This is especially the case as any extension can only be given in 'exceptional' or unforeseen circumstances. In particular, this may lead to cases being unnecessarily passed between stages or escalated to 2nd Stage. Again, the Housing Executive would draw attention to the model adopted by the English Housing Ombudsman which allows a 10 day turnaround time for Stage 1 with the possibility of a further 10 days 'for good reason', rather than unforeseen circumstances. This would allow for the most appropriate level of fact finding and potential for resolution to take place at first stage as staff would not feel as much time pressure to rush a response which may well be based on inadequate consideration. It would, of course, not preclude any appropriate response being issued within 5 days in cases where this could be achieved. As noted above, the Housing Executive would be of the view that formal complaints handling should be removed from the initial individual decision maker or service provider and have witnessed that customers welcome this 'independence' in any complaints procedure. The presence of a 5 day target would make this process much more difficult and may increase customer frustration and the likelihood they will not be willing to engage with the Stage 1 process. As a housing provider also responsible for a range of statutory functions including assessment of housing need, we would deal with complaints which often involve contact with a third party including our own contractors, police, other statutory agencies etc. Again the presence of a 5 day target would make resolution of these cases extremely challenging and could lead to high 'target time' failure rates. Conversely, achieving target times could lead to unsatisfactory investigations increasing the number of stage two complaints. The Housing Executive is of the view that the proposed Stage 1 timescale needs to be lengthened to allow for the more meaningful customer interaction and response to occur where necessary.</p>
Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations	<p>It may prove difficult for smaller organisations, with limited resources to undertake a full investigation and issue a full response within 5 working days.</p> <p>For the majority of formal complaints 5 days at stage 1 does not give the opportunity to undertake a meaningful assessment of the complaint and engagement with the complainant. A 10-working day response timescale is more manageable and realistic.</p> <p>Clarity is required on what a 'frontline response' is and suggest that this detailed within guidance and policy handling procedure.</p> <p>While it is recognised that some complaints can be resolved quickly; these tend to be informal complaints which are handled at front line level and do not require escalation through a formal complaints process. Under the proposed</p>

	<p>model these enquiries will be addressed in stage 1.</p> <p>Can you clarify what constitutes as exceptional circumstances e.g., would annual leave/holiday periods be considered as part of this?</p> <p>We welcome acknowledgement within the consultation that even where early resolution is feasible resolution response times may be impacted by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of relevant staff due to leave, absence, training. • complaint received late in working day which effectively reduces frontline resolution timeframe to 4 days. <p>We suggest that 5 days is calculated from a day after the complaint has been received. For example, if a complaint is received on Monday, the due date for response would be on the following Monday. In this way, if a complaint is received at 3.30pm on Monday, we still have full 5 working days to respond to it.</p> <p>In addition to examples provided within the consultation the following circumstances impact resolution times</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • availability of relevant external stakeholder e.g., repair contractor • availability of complainant
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LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Organisation name	Response
Ards and North Down Borough Council	As detailed already the word 'complaint' needs clearly defined. A lot of complaints may not be complaints but service requests which can be dealt with very quickly and assigned to the relevant department to action. It is important to distinguish the difference between a complaint and a service request and record appropriately. If it is deemed a complaint, frontline staff should respond to the complaint within 5 working days to initially acknowledge the customer's correspondence and in this response the complaints process should be explained to the customer with expectations of timescales? As Frontline staff are the 1st stage and they should be trained to try and resolve. Complaint expectations for this should be up to 20 working days as if it is a complex complaint it may need more time to resolve and it is better to set these guidelines upfront.
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	Agree but with the caveat that further explanation on what constitutes 'exceptional circumstances' would be needed.
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	Agree with this point.
Newry, Mourne & Down District Council	A front line response time of 5 working days is appropriate for routine complaints. The facility for a 5-day extension provides scope for the collection of information to support a response to a more complex complaint.
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	It is imperative that the inclusion of "exceptional circumstances" is retained, as circumstances beyond reasonable control can occur e.g. the sickness of a key member of staff.
Mid & East Antrim Borough Council	Council supports this approach and is in line with existing Council policy. A clear interpretation of "Exceptional Circumstances" is essential to allow for the unavoidable situations that can occur in organisations such as holidays, unexpected absences, etc.
Belfast City Council	This is a practical solution to give every opportunity for a front line response to be provided in as many cases as possible.
Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council	In the Council our proposed draft approach is 3 working days to acknowledge a "front line response" and 10 working days to investigate and respond. We feel that 5 working days is too short of a timescale to fully investigate, and then draft a response, and would recommend 10 working days.
Mid Ulster Council	No response to this question.

Northern Ireland Local Government Officer's Superannuation Committee	Currently NILGOSC aims to respond to informal complaints within 10 working days. If it is not possible to resolve the matter within this time period, an acknowledgement letter will be sent before the 10 days have passed, explaining that more time is required and providing a revised timescale for a final response. The proposed 5 working days would be challenging. These timescales would not be achievable for formal complaints relating to ill-health decisions.
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CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Organisation name	Response
Department of Education	No response to this question.
Department for Communities	The draft consultation proposes 5 working days for Stage 1. This would be exceptionally challenging to deliver operationally for the majority of complaints relating to benefits and therefore most would be handled as Stage 2, going by the suggested process. Experience in DfC has shown that while sometimes challenging, the 10 working day clearance target at the first stage provides an opportunity for the Department to investigate and resolve the complaint without the requirement for further escalation to the second stage in DfC's process.
Department for Justice	<p>Our current policy allows for a 15 day time limit at Stage 1 of our process. While we understand the intention of NIPSO to address a high number of complaints as quickly as possible, we believe that it is important to properly investigate any complaint raised to provide an assurance to ourselves that the complaint is handled appropriately, and to ensure that the complainant receives a professional service.</p> <p>We would not be in favour of a complaint should automatically proceed to Stage 2 if it cannot be dealt with within 5 days, or if the complainant refuses to engage with the Department. This would remove the complainant's right of appeal internally, which in our view would be a regressive step. It is also likely to increase the number of 'unresolved' complaints being submitted to NIPSO.</p>
Department for Health	No response to this question.
Department for Economy	Agreed. This reflects current DfE procedures. However, in terms of good records management and the potential for future follow up, we recommend not only that all relevant records are kept but that a written response is always issued where possible, in order to address any difference of understanding during verbal communications - even if only to note that the complaint has been resolved.
National Museums NI	We have a defined two stage process and our time frames are exactly as you have proposed for both first stage and second stage (First response & Investigation).
Land & Property Services	The complexities of some of our correspondence means that we have a ten day response period in place
Northern Ireland Audit Office	NIAO is not a public sector facing organisation providing a direct service to the taxpayer. Each audit we conduct and, indeed, each complaint we receive, is very different. The nature of complaints raised with our Office tend to be complicated, in most cases unique and, in many cases, requires significant input from audit staff. In our current arrangements we are allowing 20 days for stage 1, but strive to address the matter within a shorter time frame. As a rule, we do not believe that 5 days is achievable unless meeting the conditions, as set out above.

Probation Board for Northern Ireland	PBNI asks managers to complete the informal stage (front line stage) of the process within 15 working days of receipt of the complaint. PBNI staff have been able to resolve 80% of our complaints at the frontline stage in 2020/21 and the time frame of 15 days gives staff time to properly speak to complainants and identify the issues being complained about in detail. Many of our complainants are prisoners and it can be difficult to make arrangements to meet with them to discuss their complaint. Therefore, we need to have 15 working days to make the necessary arrangements with complainants in prison and seek to resolve the complaint. We believe 5 days is a very short time frame to properly consider the kind of complaints we receive at first front line stage.
The Consumer Council Northern Ireland	We currently work to a time frame of acknowledging a complaint within 3 working days and providing a full response within 10 working days. However, in all cases the complaint will actually be acknowledged on the day it is received but we kept the 3 day time frame to be consistent with our organisations Service Standards, as we acknowledge all written contact within 3 working days. As this is a 'front-line response' we would see no reason why the case couldn't be acknowledged on the day it is received and actioned within 5 working days.
Charity Commission for Northern Ireland	While this would be an ideal scenario and would support ensuring the complainant receives a response very promptly, this is not always possible and would create unfair pressure on a small organisation without a dedicated complaints staff - which could ultimately damage the complaints process. For example, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland has a small staff team covering a broad regulatory remit. During times of high staff leave or work pressures, it would be very difficult to ensure a frontline response is issued within five working days. This is particularly the case where the issues may need to be extracted from lengthy correspondence, investigated and discussed with a member of senior management to ensure accuracy and that a full response can be issued. If a rushed response were issued in order to meet a five working day timescale, this could ultimately mean a full response is not provided, causing further upset to the complainant.

OTHER

Organisation name	Response
Information Commissioner's Office	No response to this question.
Scottish Public Services Ombudsman	We find that public organisations in Scotland with experience of the model usually report high compliance with this standard. Before its introduction most complaints were likely already being handled quickly, often within the time-frame of a single phone call. The significant change in the procedure that we have seen following the introduction of the model is that these interactions are now logged and tracked more effectively. This enables organisations to identify and monitor trends within this category of quick-resolution complaints and has helped organisations to identify where they were repeatedly fixing problems individually rather than putting in place a single, systemic fix leading to improved service and a reduction in resources used.
Alliance Party	Reasoning for an extension to 5 working days should be communicated to complainant as soon as possible.