



Northern Ireland
Public Services
Ombudsman

Invitation to Tender for

Independent Reviewer of Standards of Service Complaints (IR)

January 2026

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1 Overview of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

- 1.1 At NIPSO we investigate unresolved complaints about public bodies in Northern Ireland. In our investigations we check to see if a public body acted properly or whether someone was treated unfairly. When things go wrong, we suggest what can be done to put things right.
- 1.2 We can also investigate where we think there might be systemic service failures, even if we haven't received a complaint. We call these our 'Own initiative' investigations. To carry out one of these investigations we have to think that it would be in the public interest; would help improve public services and is the best and most proportionate use of investigative resources.
- 1.3 Our work to create common complaints handling standards by public bodies is also aimed at improving public services. We help public bodies in Northern Ireland deal with complaints quickly and more effectively.
- 1.4 We also carry out two other important functions:
 1. As the Local Government Commissioner for Standards, we look at allegations that councillors may have breached the Local Government Code of Conduct.
 2. As the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman, we investigate complaints from applicants for judicial appointments of alleged maladministration by the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (the Commission) or by Committees of the Commission.
- 1.5 The first Ombudsman's office in Northern Ireland was created in 1969. The legislation which created the current office and informs our role is the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.
- 1.6 NIPSO employs approximately 60 staff based in Belfast City centre. Most staff work on a hybrid basis between the office and home.
- 1.7 The Ombudsman prepares an Annual Report and Accounts which is laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly. This is available on the NIPSO website www.nipso.org.uk

2 Background and Scope

- 2.1 The Ombudsman is inviting tenders for the provision of an Independent Reviewer of Standards of Service Complaints. The provider will review complaints about the standard of service provided by NIPSO against NIPSO's published service standards and undertake reviews in line with NIPSO standards of service complaints policy. Having been requested by NIPSO to undertake a review the provider will report their findings to NIPSO and the complainant..
- 2.2 NIPSO takes any complaints about the service it provides very seriously and aims to address any areas where the standard of service is lower than it should be. This includes the **handling** of complaints made about NIPSO's services.
- 2.3 Where NIPSO receives complaints about the services provided by staff, we will firstly seek to resolve matters informally (Stage 1). If this is not possible a formal process will be followed, which involves investigation by a manager, (Stage 2). If a complainant remains unhappy with the response to their Standards of Service complaint at Stage 2, they can request that their complaint is considered by the IR. The NIPSO service standards complaints process has been established voluntarily by NIPSO to ensure that there are robust arrangements to consider and learn from complainants about the standard of service we provide.
- 2.4 The IR will be responsible for investigating and responding to complaints **about the service provided by NIPSO** in the carrying out of its statutory functions. The IR role is limited to complaints about NIPSO's failure to meet its service standards. Matters related to a NIPSO casework decisions, or the basis for that decision (including evidence gathered to make that decision), are not issues within the IR remit. Any disagreement with the basis of a decision on a complaint about a public body or councillor is for NIPSO to consider through a separate request for review process, subject to the criteria applicable to these requests.
- 2.5 The IR will investigate complaints only after NIPSO has attempted resolution and responded to the complainant via its Standards of Service policy.
- 2.6 In addition to considering complaints about the service provided, the IR will also consider the manner in which the service standards complaint has been handled, including whether NIPSO has handled the complaint in line with its case handling process or where deviations have occurred the reason is recorded. Information on NIPSO's complaints handling process can be found on NIPSO website [here](#).

- 2.7 The IR will be accountable to the Ombudsman, for the carrying out their role to an acceptable standard and will also provide an annual report to NIPSO on the delivery of service standards review function..

3 Key Responsibilities

- 3.1 The IR will be responsible for investigating and responding to complaints **about NIPSO's failure to meet its service standards.**
- 3.2 The IR will aim to contact complainants within 5 working days of contact and reply in full within 2 months of receipt of the complaint. Where this is not possible the IR will explain this to the complainant and set a clear timescale for further progress with the case.
- 3.3 For the purpose of the IR's work, they will have access to all relevant files. The review of complaints may involve analysing internal and external correspondence and interviewing complainants and relevant staff where this is appropriate.
- 3.4 The IR will be required to issue a decision to the complainant and NIPSO when they have completed their review. The decision should include the IR's conclusion on whether NIPSO has met its service standards. Where NIPSO has failed to meet its service standards the IR may make with recommendations to address any failures identified
- 3.5 Each financial year the IR will be required to produce a formal report about their work on complaints in the previous year. The first report will be required by 1 May 2026, reporting on the period from the point of award of contract to the end of March 2026. This should include any trends or patterns, recurrent failures or weaknesses identified in NIPSO's complaints procedure.
- 3.6 The IR may be asked by NIPSO to undertake further work with the aim of ensuring improvement in the standards of service provided by NIPSO.. The scope of this would be determined by NIPSO.

4 Contract Terms

4.1 Length of contract

The contract will be for a two-year term, commencing **February 2026** with the option to extend to a total of four years by mutual agreement.

4.2 Location

It is expected that investigation work will generally be undertaken remotely using electronic records and telephone / video interviews. Electronic copies of relevant records, recordings etc will be made available to the IR. Office space can however be made available within NIPSO's office if and when required for the review of complaints referred to the IR.

4.3 Confidentiality

All records, working papers, reports and other information held by the IR in fulfilling this contract will remain the property of NIPSO. At the end of the contract all applicable paperwork must be returned to NIPSO or disposed of in a manner agreed by NIPSO.

4.4 Any records (paper and electronic) must be securely stored with appropriate security measures in place. Disposal of any hard copy documents must be in a manner agreed by NIPSO.

The IR is responsible for ensuring any records are thoroughly removed from any computers, servers, hard disks before any of these are disposed of. The IR will be required to comply with all applicable Data Protection legislation and NIPSO's Information and Asset Security Policy and associated processes, copies of which will be made available. Further details of obligations imposed under Data Protection legislation will be contained within the Service Level Agreement.

4.5 The IR must undertake not to publish or communicate the results or content of any of their work to anyone other than NIPSO and the complainant. This undertaking continues beyond the life of the contract.

4.6 Any breach of confidentiality of contract or of restricted information will constitute a material breach of contract and enable NIPSO to terminate the contract.

5 Pricing

- 5.1 All pricing should be submitted in GBP. Rates will be fixed for the duration of the contract.
- 5.2 An hourly rate should be provided. VAT, if applicable, should be identified separately.
- 5.3 It is anticipated that the work will be conducted at the IR's own premises or, where necessary, at our offices in Belfast. The hourly rate is to include any overheads and office expenses. No additional office expenses will be paid for this work.
- 5.4 Where NIPSO agrees in advance that in a particular case attendance at NIPSO offices, or a visit to a complainant, is required reasonable travel expenses may be agreed.
- 5.5 There is no guaranteed level of work under this arrangement, which is by definition responsive to demand. However, to give an indication of likely workload, around 5 cases are referred to the IR annually.

6 Invitation to Tender Response

6.1 Your proposal should include:

1. A sample report reviewing the service delivery aspects of a mock case, based on those which you have produced for previous clients or employers (de-personalised). This is so that we can get an insight into the likely format of the reports that you will produce for us.
2. Details of what quality assurance procedures you have or would put in place to ensure that you deliver a consistent, high-quality service.
3. Details of relevant experience including evidence of a history of effective complaint resolution.
4. CVs of those who would provide the service, highlighting relevant skills, experience and training in relation to handling complaints, and in relation to continuous improvement in complain service delivery.
5. Details of 2 referees who can give references on similar and relevant work you have done elsewhere.
6. Our expectation is that we will be dealing with a small number of IR members of staff (no more than 3), for continuity and consistency, throughout the duration of the contract. Resource should not be substituted without prior written consent from NIPSO. Please confirm that you are able to satisfy this requirement.
7. Also please advise if you are aware of any conflict of interest in providing services to NIPSO.
8. Please provide details of your commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (with reference to any internal equality policy or process is applicable).
9. Please also advise what level of Professional Indemnity Insurance and Public Liability Insurance cover you / your company has in place.

7 Tender Submission

7.1 Questions

Any questions should be submitted to Kirsty McCool in the first instance:

Email: kirsty.mccool@nipso.org.uk

7.2 Proposal Submission

Your response should include:

1. Table of Contents (with corresponding page numbers relating to the proposal).
2. Executive Summary - a brief summary demonstrating your understanding of NIPSO's requirements and the day rate and half day rates in GBP for the duration of the contract term.
3. Main Response - to aid the evaluation process you should ensure that your response is in the format outlined below:

Schedule 1:

- Approach (as per section 6) Sample Report (de-personalised)
- Details of Quality assurance procedures Relevant Experience
- CV's highlighting relevant skills, experience and training.
- Details of two referees who can give references on similar work Confirmation of dedicated resource.
- Statement re: conflict of Interest and commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Confirmation of status – self-employed or employee of a company Details of Professional Indemnity and Public Liability Insurance cover

Schedule 2:

Pricing (as per section 5)

7.3 Please clearly state any assumptions you have made in formulating your proposal.

7.4 The tender submission document should be submitted by email to kirsty.mccool@nipso.org.uk by **12 noon on Monday 9 February 2026**.

8 Evaluation process and criteria

8.1 The key dates are as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Issue Tender | 9 January 2026 |
| Closing Date for Tenders | 12pm 2 February 2026 |
| Assessment | w/c 2 February 2026 |
| Commencement of provision | February 2026 |

8.2 Upon receipt NIPSO will review and evaluate the proposal. NIPSO may request clarification if there are questions concerning the proposal.

8.3 Proposals will be evaluated on:

| Qualitative Criteria | Score |
|--|-------|
| AC1 - understanding of NIPSO's requirements | 15% |
| AC2 - quality of draft sample report | 15% |
| AC3 - evidence of quality management procedures | 10% |
| AC4 - skills and relevant experience in relation to complaint resolution, complaint handling and continuous improvement in complainant service standards | 15% |
| AC5 - references | 10% |
| AC6 - equality policies | 10% |

| Value for Money Criteria | Score |
|--------------------------|-------|
| AC7 - value for money. | 25% |

8.4 To ensure consistency and equity in approach the evaluation panel will assign scores to qualitative assessment criteria using the scoring key below:

| Score | Indicator |
|-------|---|
| 0 | Failed to address the criterion. |
| 1 | Poor proposal to address the criterion. |
| 2 | Limited proposal to address the criterion. |
| 3 | Acceptable proposal to address the criterion. |
| 4 | Good proposal to address the criterion. |
| 5 | Excellent proposal to address the criterion. |

8.5 If tenderers score **2, 1 or 0** in any of the qualitative criteria then it shall be deemed that they have failed to meet the specification, and their tender will be eliminated from the competition.

8.6 For those tenders passing the qualitative assessment, the lowest price tendered will be awarded the maximum score available 25.

8.7 To calculate the score for the remaining price, the following formula will be applied. The lowest tendered price divided by the tenderers price multiplied by 25.

8.8 Tenderers should note that NIPSO is not obliged to accept the lowest, or any, tender.

9 Tender application terms and conditions

9.1 Confidentiality

The tenderer will not issue any public statements or otherwise disclose any information concerning this tender document, the process and its participation in the process without the prior written approval of NIPSO.

9.2 Legal Disclaimer

This tender document is an invitation to propose and does not in any manner create an offer or other obligation on the part of NIPSO to enter into any contract. All expenses and costs incurred by the tenderer in completing, submitting and delivering the bids, together with any costs incurred during the post tender stage, will be to the tenderer's account. NIPSO are not bound to accept the lowest or any bid.

9.3 Use of Information

This tender document and any other information furnished hereunder shall be used solely for the purpose of responding to this invite. Reproduction of any part of this document is authorised only to the extent necessary for the preparation of your response. Tenderers shall ensure that all such copies are destroyed when no longer required in connection with this application. The above shall supersede any confidentiality agreements between NIPSO and the tenderer.

10 Conditions of Contract for services

10.1 The Conditions of Contract as set out in this specification will apply. Prospective providers should include any additional proposed Conditions of Contract with their submission.