



Office of the Ombudsman
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Public Bodies and the Citizen

The Ombudsman's Guide to Standards
of Best Practice for Public Servants

Public bodies should strive for the highest standards of administration in their dealings with people. And public servants should ensure that people are dealt with properly, fairly, openly and impartially. The following checklist, although not exhaustive, is a guide to standards of best practice for public servants. I hope that public bodies will find it useful in their efforts to provide a better service to their clients.

Dealing "properly" with people means dealing with them -

- promptly, without undue delay and in accordance with published time limits;
- correctly, in accordance with the law or other rules governing their entitlements and published quality standards;
- sensitively and by giving reasonable assistance, having regard to their age, to their capacity to understand often complex rules, to any disability they may have and to their feelings, privacy and convenience;
- helpfully, by simplifying procedures, forms and information on entitlements and services, maintaining proper records, and providing clear and precise details on time limits or conditions which might result in disqualification;
- carefully, where more than one public body is concerned, by ensuring proper communications between the bodies to prevent a person's needs being overlooked;

- courteously, including communicating in Irish (both written and oral) where it is clear a person wishes to do so;
- responsibly, by not adopting an adversarial approach as a matter of course where there may be a fear of litigation and by being prepared to explain why an adverse decision has been given.

Dealing "fairly" with people means -

- treating people in similar circumstances in like manner;
- accepting that rules and regulations, while important in ensuring fairness, should not be applied so rigidly or inflexibly as to create inequity;
- avoiding penalties which are out of proportion to what is necessary to ensure compliance with the rules;
- being prepared to review rules and procedures and change them if necessary;
- giving adequate notice before changing rules in a way which adversely affects a person's entitlements;
- having an internal review system so that adverse decisions can be looked at again and reviewed by someone not involved in the first decision;
- informing people of how they can appeal, co-operating fully in any such appeal and being open to proposals for redress including apologies, explanations and payment of appropriate compensation;

- making appropriate redress which puts the person back into the position he/she would have been in if the public body had acted properly in the first place;
- adopting a policy for dealing with the small number of people who act in a vexatious manner or in bad faith, which strikes a balance between the interests of the public body, its staff and the person concerned.

Dealing "openly" with people means -

- putting people in contact with the officials of the public body with responsibility for dealing with them and, if appropriate, referring them to alternative sources of assistance;
- making available and keeping up to date, comprehensive information on the rules and practices which govern public schemes and programmes;
- giving people full information on the reasons for a decision which adversely affects them including details of any findings of fact made in the course of the decision;
- ensuring people know what information is available, where to get it and know of their right to access it in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act, 1997 and otherwise;
- assisting people, where necessary, to prepare their requests for access to information;

- providing accessible public offices and using information and communications technologies to ensure maximum access and choice in service delivery.

Finally, dealing "impartially" with people means -

- making decisions based on what is relevant in the rules and law and ignoring what is irrelevant;
- avoiding bias because of a person's gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race, membership of the Travelling Community, language, attitude or reputation or because of who they are or who they know;
- ensuring, where a service is based on a scheme of priorities, that the scheme is open and transparent;
- being careful that one's prejudices are not factors in a decision;
- declining any involvement with a decision where one has a conflict of interests, a potential conflict of interests, or where there may be a perceived conflict of interests.

(Revised March 2003)

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