

MIDDLETOWN CENTRE FOR AUTISM (MCA)

Complaints Policy

How to tell us when something has gone wrong, and what you can expect from us

MAKE A COMPLAINT

Telephone: +44 (0)28 3751 5750

Email: admin@middletownautism.com

Post: Complaints Coordinator, Middletown Centre for Autism, 35 Church Street, Middletown, County Armagh, BT60 4HZ

Website:

www.middletownautism.com/contacts

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Stage 1 We will normally speak with you and give a decision or agreed resolution within 5 working days.

Stage 2 If you remain dissatisfied, we will acknowledge your request within 3 working days and normally issue our final response within 20 working days.

After MCA You may ask the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman to consider the complaint.

You can complain verbally or in writing. You do not need to use a form, and making a complaint is free.

Please **do not** include sensitive personal information in an initial email or website message. Send your name and safe contact details and ask us to contact you securely.

Our promise

You will not be treated less favourably because you make a complaint. We will listen, be open and respectful, try to put matters right as early as possible, and learn from what happened.

1. Purpose of this policy

Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) welcomes feedback and complaints. They help us resolve individual concerns, understand people's experience of our services and improve how we work.

This policy explains who can complain, what can be complained about, how we will respond, the support available and what to do if you remain dissatisfied.

2. Our approach

We will handle complaints in a way that is:

- easy to access and free of charge;
- focused on the issues and outcome that matter to the person complaining;
- open, honest, fair and proportionate;
- supportive of early resolution and apology where appropriate;
- respectful of confidentiality and data protection;
- accessible to people who need support or reasonable adjustments; and
- used to improve services and reduce the risk of the same problem happening again.

3. Who and what this policy covers

Anyone who receives, requests, is directly affected by, or comes into contact with a service delivered by or on behalf of MCA may complain. This includes autistic children and young people, parents, carers, family members, education professionals, schools, training participants, students, research participants, partner organisations and members of the public.

The policy applies to MCA services delivered in Northern Ireland and Ireland, including services delivered online, in schools, homes, community settings, training venues or through a contractor or partner acting on MCA's behalf.

What is a complaint?

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction about something MCA has done or failed to do, or about the standard of a service delivered by or for MCA. You do not have to use the word "complaint".

A complaint may be about:

- failure or refusal to provide a service;
- the quality or standard of a service;
- an unreasonable or avoidable delay;
- failure to follow a policy, procedure, standard, law or guidance;
- incomplete, unclear or incorrect information;
- how a decision was administered or communicated;
- the conduct, attitude, communication or behaviour of a member of staff;
- difficulty contacting the right person or service; or
- a service delivered by a contractor or partner on MCA's behalf.

Matters handled through another process

Some matters have a more appropriate route. We will explain that route and help you reach the right person or organisation. These may include:

- a first request for a service, information, action or correction where MCA has not yet had an opportunity to respond;
- a formal appeal or review where a separate process exists;
- Freedom of Information, Environmental Information or data protection requests and reviews;
- staff grievances, employment matters, recruitment complaints or disciplinary matters;
- safeguarding concerns, allegations of abuse, or an immediate risk to a child, young person or adult;
- suspected wrongdoing, fraud, illegality or malpractice;
- a legal claim or a matter being determined by a court or tribunal; or
- disagreement with a policy position alone, unless the concern is about how the policy was applied or administered.

Delay, poor communication, failure to act or failure to follow the correct process may still be considered under this policy, even where the underlying matter is being handled elsewhere.

4. Who can complain and getting help

You may complain for yourself or, with appropriate authority, on behalf of someone else. A representative may be a family member, carer, advocate, adviser, solicitor, elected representative or another person chosen by the service user.

We will normally ask for the service user's consent before sharing personal information with a representative. We will take a proportionate approach where the person is a child or young person, has communication or capacity needs, or where another lawful authority applies. Consent requirements will not be used unnecessarily to delay or prevent a complaint being considered.

Accessibility and reasonable adjustments

Please tell us what would help you use the complaints process. Support may include:

- help to explain or record the complaint;
- a telephone, video or face-to-face conversation instead of written correspondence;
- Easy Read, large print, audio or another accessible format;
- translation or interpretation, including British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language where required;
- more time to respond or breaks during meetings;
- communication through a representative, advocate or trusted person; or
- a neutral contact if you feel unable to complain directly to the staff delivering the service.

Reasonable adjustments and interpretation or translation support required to use the complaints process will be provided free of charge.

5. How to make a complaint

You can complain verbally or in writing. You do not need to complete a form. You can:

- speak to any MCA member of staff, including during training or when staff are supporting a school, family, child or young person;
- telephone MCA on +44 (0)28 3751 5750;
- email admin@middletownautism.com with your name, contact details and a request to discuss a complaint securely;
- write to the Complaints Coordinator at 35 Church Street, Middletown, County Armagh, BT60 4HZ; or
- use the contact facility on the MCA website and ask for the Complaints Coordinator to contact you.

Complaints received through social media will be redirected to a private and secure complaints channel. We will not discuss an individual complaint publicly on social media.

Information that helps us respond

Please tell us, as far as you can:

- your name and preferred contact details;
- what happened, where and when;
- which service or people were involved;
- how this affected you or the person you represent;
- what you have already done to try to resolve the issue; and
- what outcome you are seeking.

We will still help you make a complaint if you cannot provide all of this information.

Time limit for making a complaint

Please complain as soon as possible. We will normally accept a complaint made within six months of the event, or within six months of the date you became aware that you had reason to complain.

We may accept a later complaint where there is a reasonable explanation for the delay, the person faced barriers to complaining, the matter is serious, or it remains possible to investigate fairly and effectively.

6. How we will handle your complaint

Every complaint is recorded

We will log every complaint, including a verbal complaint that is resolved quickly at Stage 1. Recording it does not make the process more formal for you; it helps MCA track actions and learn from what happened.

Stage 1: frontline response

Stage 1 is intended to resolve complaints quickly and as close as possible to where the service was delivered. It will normally involve a direct and supportive conversation rather than a paper-based investigation.

The relevant line manager or service manager will normally speak with you to:

- listen to and clarify the issues you are raising;
- confirm what outcome or action you are seeking;
- provide support and reassurance;
- give an explanation or take immediate practical action where possible;
- offer an apology where something has gone wrong; and
- agree what will happen next.

Timescale. We will provide a Stage 1 decision or agreed resolution within 5 working days of receiving the complaint, and sooner where possible.

Exceptional extension. Stage 1 may be extended by up to a further 5 working days only in exceptional and unforeseen circumstances. We will explain why and give you the revised response date. Stage 1 will not exceed 10 working days in total.

Response and record. If the matter is resolved through conversation, a written response is not required unless you ask for one or we consider it helpful. We will record the complaint, the conversation, the outcome, any apology or action agreed and any learning identified. If the complaint is not resolved, we will provide a written response explaining the decision and how to request Stage 2.

Stage 2: investigation

You may request Stage 2 if you remain dissatisfied after Stage 1, if Stage 1 has been unreasonably delayed, or, exceptionally, where you and MCA agree that the issues are too complex for Stage 1.

Requesting Stage 2. Please ask within 30 working days of the Stage 1 response. We will consider a later request fairly where there is a reasonable explanation or another good reason.

Acknowledgement. We will acknowledge the Stage 2 complaint within 3 working days, tell you who is handling it and confirm your preferred method of communication.

A fresh and impartial review. Stage 2 will normally be considered by a manager or investigator who was not directly involved at Stage 1 or in the matters complained about. We will confirm the issues to be investigated and the outcome you are seeking.

Timescale. We will provide our final Stage 2 response as soon as possible and normally within 20 working days. If more time is genuinely needed for a fair and thorough investigation, an authorised senior manager will explain why, give a revised response date and keep you updated.

Final response. Our response will address each issue, explain the evidence and reasons for our findings, state whether the complaint was resolved, upheld, partially upheld or not upheld, set out any apology or remedy, identify service improvements where appropriate and explain your right to contact NIPSO.

7. Outcomes and remedies

Depending on the circumstances, an appropriate outcome may include:

- an explanation or clarification;
- an apology;
- immediate action to correct a problem;
- reconsideration of how a service is delivered;
- correction of inaccurate information;
- staff support, supervision or training;

- a change to a process, procedure or communication;
- action to prevent recurrence; or
- an explanation of why the outcome requested cannot be provided.

An apology acknowledges a poor experience or something that should have been done differently. It does not prevent MCA from taking any other appropriate action.

8. If you remain dissatisfied

After you receive MCA's final Stage 2 response, you may ask the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) to consider your complaint. NIPSO is independent and its service is free. NIPSO will normally expect you to have completed MCA's two-stage process first.

NIPSO generally expects a complaint within six months of the correspondence confirming that MCA's complaints process is complete and explaining the right to refer the matter.

NORTHERN IRELAND PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN

Address: 33 Wellington Place, Belfast, BT1 6HN
Freepost: FREEPOST NIPSO

Freephone: 0800 34 34 24

Email: nipso@nipso.org.uk

Website: www.nipso.org.uk

Because MCA delivers services across the island of Ireland, we will also explain any other external review or oversight route that appears relevant to the location and subject of the complaint. This does not remove your right to approach NIPSO and ask whether the complaint falls within its jurisdiction.

9. Particular circumstances

Complaints involving more than one service or organisation

Where a complaint involves more than one MCA service, we will coordinate a single response where possible. Where another organisation is involved, we will agree with you how the complaint should be handled, seek consent before sharing personal information and explain which organisation is responsible for each issue. We will avoid asking you to repeat your complaint unnecessarily.

Services delivered on MCA's behalf

A complaint about a contractor, consultant, venue, partner or commissioned provider delivering an MCA service may be investigated by that provider or by MCA, depending on the arrangements in place. MCA remains responsible for ensuring the complaint is handled properly, recorded, reported and used for learning.

Complaints about senior staff or Board members

Complaints about the Chief Executive will be referred to the Chair of the Board, or to the Vice-Chair where the Chair has a conflict of interest. Complaints about the Chair will be referred to the Vice-Chair. Complaints about another Board member will be referred to the Chair. The person appointed to investigate must be independent of the matter and may be another Board member or an external investigator. The same two stages and timescales will apply as far as reasonably possible.

Anonymous complaints

We will consider an anonymous complaint where there is enough information to identify the issue and it is reasonable and proportionate to do so. Anonymity may limit our ability to investigate, clarify the complaint or provide an outcome. Anonymous complaints will still be recorded and considered for risk and learning.

Safeguarding, criminal, disciplinary or legal matters

Where a complaint raises a safeguarding concern, suspected criminal conduct, disciplinary issue, legal proceedings or another formal process, we may need to refer, pause or coordinate part of the complaint. We will explain what can and cannot proceed and keep you informed. Where possible, any separate complaint issues will continue without unnecessary delay.

10. Confidentiality, privacy and respectful communication

We will handle complaint information sensitively and share it only with people who need it to consider the complaint, provide advice, take action, meet legal duties or support organisational learning. A member of staff who is complained about will normally be told the substance of the complaint and given a fair opportunity to respond.

Records will be kept securely in line with MCA's privacy notice, records management arrangements and applicable data protection law.

We recognise that people may be upset, anxious or angry when making a complaint. We will remain patient, respectful and focused on the issues. We ask complainants and representatives to treat staff and others with respect in return.

Very occasionally, behaviour may become abusive, threatening, discriminatory, persistently repetitive or so demanding that it prevents the complaint or other services from being handled fairly. MCA may then set reasonable and proportionate communication arrangements. Any restriction will be explained, recorded and reviewed. It will not be used simply because a person is persistent or because their complaint is difficult.

11. Learning and accountability

MCA will use complaints as an early warning and improvement tool. We will record outcomes, remedies, underlying causes and service improvement actions. Actions will have a named owner and target date and will be followed up by an appropriate senior manager.

The Senior Management Team, Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and Board will receive appropriate information on complaints performance, themes, risks, learning and improvement actions. Serious, systemic or high-risk matters will be escalated promptly.

At least annually, MCA will publish anonymised and accessible complaints information, including complaint volumes, performance against response times, outcomes, trends, actions taken and lessons learned. Where low numbers could identify an individual, information will be grouped or presented differently to protect confidentiality.

12. Policy information

Policy owner	Chief Executive Officer
Approved by	Middletown Centre for Autism Board
Effective date	1 January 2027
Review	After 12 months, then at least every three years or sooner if guidance, legislation or MCA arrangements change
Supporting arrangements	Internal staff guidance, complaints register, standard response templates, training and escalation arrangements
Reference	Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, Government Departments and Arm's Length Bodies Model Complaints Handling Procedure, published 1 July 2026

Need help to make a complaint?

Call +44 (0)28 3751 5750 or email admin@middletownautism.com with your name and safe contact details. Tell us about any communication support or reasonable adjustment you need.