

# Applicants to public bodies 'are mistreated'

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GOVERNMENT officials were today accused of mistreating people who have applied to serve on public bodies.

A watchdog claimed members of the public who put themselves forward for posts on boards that advise the Assembly's ministers found themselves treated in an "off-hand manner".

Commissioner for public appointments for Northern Ireland Felicity Huston also warned that more work had to be done to improve the interview process and to ensure conflicts of interest were avoided.

Launching her 14th annual report, she said: "Many people who put themselves forward for appointment to our public bodies have a really bad experience.

"They are treated in a cavalier manner, often given the runaround and generally made to feel unwanted.

"All I'm asking is for those organising these appointments to treat the public with the same respect and good manners they themselves would want.

"People don't spend hours filling in those forms because they're trying to pull a fast one, but because they have a genuine belief in public service."

The commissioner said that over the next six to 12

months she will be implementing her new code of practice.

"One of the new fundamental principles in this code is 'respect'," she said.

"Several of the new provisions in the code focus on changing the attitudes and practices of those managing public appointments for our ministers.

"Departments must remember that applicants putting themselves forward are offering their skills, time and experience to the public appointments arena. We should encourage them, not give them the brush-off."

The commissioner investigated complaints against the recruitment process and found that compliance by government departments to the code of practice for ministerial public appointments "remains, at best, patchy".

The commissioner had also previously complained that the decision to base her office in the government's Castle Buildings complex in Stormont worked against her efforts to demonstrate independence.

But today she welcomed the fact that new premises had now been found.

She said: "I am delighted to report that we have now moved to new offices Annex B - beside Dundonald House. We look forward to welcoming visitors and running our training sessions within our new location."