

Civilians on public bodies 'are mistreated'

By Steven McCaffery PA

GOVERNMENT officials were yesterday 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'.

"Many people who put themselves forward for appointment to our public bodies have a really bad experience"

Felicity Huston

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 in public appointments 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 an off-hand cavalier manner, often given the run around 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 would 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 need these individuals to help make our public bodies reflective of the society we live in. 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 previously complained that the decision to base her office in the government's Castle Buildings in Stormont worked against her efforts to demonstrate independence.

She welcomed the fact that new premises had now been found.

"On many occasions I have referred to the location of my office deep in Castle Buildings in the Stormont estate and how this was not conducive to independent operations," she said.

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

Ms Huston was appointed Commissioner for Public Appointments in August 2005.

She said recent surveys found that 83 per cent of people questioned said they supported the regulation of public appointments.