



INTERNATIONAL
OMBUDSMAN
INSTITUTE

GUIDE TO THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF OMBUDSPERSONS
AND THEIR STAFF MEMBERS - 2026

PREAMBLE

The International Ombudsman Institute (IOI) has developed these guidelines to the Ethical Principles of Ombudspersons and their staff members as a reference point for its members. They provide an overview of the core principles that underpin the work of Ombudsman institutions worldwide.

This Guide reflects a common understanding of the ethical principles shared by Ombudsman institutions. It seeks to articulate principles that are common to all Ombudsman institutions, while recognising the diversity of legal systems, mandates, and institutional frameworks in which they operate. Accordingly, the principles may require adaptation to national, local, or institutional contexts.

The principles set out in this Guide are not intended to be exhaustive. They complement existing institutional codes and guidelines developed by individual Ombudsman institutions.

The Guide applies to Ombudspersons (office holders) and their staff members.

Principle 1 – INDEPENDENCE

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act independently and safeguard the independence of the Ombudsman institution.

Principle 2 – IMPARTIALITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act impartially and without bias or prejudice in the performance of their functions.

Principle 3 – INTEGRITY AND DIGNITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act with integrity and uphold the dignity of the office, thereby maintaining public trust and confidence in the institution.

Principle 4 – NEUTRALITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act with neutrality and maintain an appropriate distance from political party politics.

Principle 5 – TRANSPARENCY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall ensure transparency in their work while respecting confidentiality, privacy, and data protection obligations.

Principle 6 – RESPECT, LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall engage with all individuals respectfully, ensure that they are heard, and provide services that are accessible and responsive to diverse needs.

Principle 7 – EXPERTISE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall perform their duties with expertise, professionalism, and a strong sense of responsibility.

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Preamble

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The Guide applies to Ombudspersons (office holders) and their staff members.

PRINCIPLE 1 – INDEPENDENCE

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act independently and safeguard the independence of the Ombudsman institution.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall perform their functions free from external influence, whether political, administrative, or otherwise, and shall neither seek nor accept instructions from any authority.

Independence shall be ensured through appropriate legal, institutional, and practical arrangements. This includes financial independence, such as adequate resources and autonomous control over budgetary expenditure, as well as the ability to obtain, retain, and manage the human, technical, and financial resources necessary for the effective fulfilment of the mandate.

Ombudspersons shall actively promote and safeguard the independence of the institution. They shall refrain from any conduct that could reasonably raise doubts as to their independence and shall avoid situations in which personal or institutional conflicts of interest may arise.

Ombudspersons shall be free to determine their priorities, to initiate investigations on their own initiative, to report findings and to make public recommendations without fear of reprisals or undue interference.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall not engage in political, administrative, or professional activities that could compromise their independence or impartiality.

Staff members shall uphold and support the independence of the Ombudsperson and the institution in the performance of their duties.

PRINCIPLE 2 – IMPARTIALITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act impartially and without bias or prejudice in the performance of their functions.

Ombudspersons shall investigate complaints free from bias or prejudice, and without fear or favour. They shall give a fair hearing to all persons whose evidence is relevant to the consideration of a complaint.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act fairly and equitably and shall not discriminate on any ground.

Ombudspersons shall avoid conflicts of interest or any situation that might place their impartiality in doubt.

Where an Ombudsperson considers it necessary not to conduct an investigation in circumstances in which a person exercising judicial functions would consider it appropriate to abstain, they shall not carry out that investigation.

When Ombudspersons perform duly authorised activities outside their legal mandate, they shall ensure that such activities do not compromise their impartiality or independence.

PRINCIPLE 3 – INTEGRITY AND DIGNITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act with integrity and uphold the dignity of the office, thereby maintaining public trust and confidence in the institution.

Integrity requires honesty, probity, and consistency in conduct. Ombudspersons and their staff members shall exemplify the highest standards of ethical behaviour and avoid any conduct that is, or may reasonably be perceived as, improper. They shall exercise their authority solely for the purposes for which it has been conferred.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall conduct themselves with professionalism, restraint, and respect in all interactions. Their behaviour, language, and appearance shall reflect the seriousness, dignity, and credibility of the institution.

They shall treat all persons with courtesy, fairness, and respect, with due regard for human rights, equality, and cultural diversity.

In recognition of the heightened public scrutiny inherent in their role, Ombudspersons shall accept the necessary personal constraints and conduct themselves at all times in a manner that preserves the standing, credibility, and authority of the office.

Ombudspersons shall refrain from publicly advocating personal views or engaging in activities that could compromise, or reasonably be perceived as compromising, their impartiality, independence, or institutional role.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall ensure that public resources are used lawfully, economically, efficiently, and exclusively for official purposes. They shall be accountable for their actions and decisions and be prepared to explain them in a transparent manner.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall neither solicit nor accept any gift, benefit, or advantage that could influence, or reasonably be perceived to influence, their independence, objectivity, or integrity.

When using social media, Ombudspersons and their staff members shall exercise restraint and moderation in their manner of expression, recognising the public nature of their communications, which may affect the reputation and credibility of the institution.

PRINCIPLE 4 – NEUTRALITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act with neutrality and maintain an appropriate distance from political party politics.

Ombudspersons shall keep away from political party politics in the execution of their mandate.

Ombudspersons shall exercise caution and restraint in their public statements in order to safeguard their independence and neutrality.

PRINCIPLE 5 – TRANSPARENCY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall ensure transparency in their work while respecting confidentiality, privacy, and data protection obligations.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall respect confidentiality and privacy obligations, while, where possible, working in an open and transparent manner.

They shall apply all applicable confidentiality and data protection rules in the exercise of their functions.

Information and documents obtained in the exercise of their functions shall be used and disclosed only for the purposes of, and to the extent necessary for, the fulfilment of their mandate.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall communicate proactively with the public, explaining their role, processes, decisions, and limitations in clear and accessible language.

They shall ensure the security and integrity of information.

When using digital tools, including artificial intelligence, Ombudspersons and their staff members shall ensure that information obtained through complaints or investigations is not disclosed, except where properly authorised, and that confidentiality and data protection obligations are fully respected.

PRINCIPLE 6 – RESPECT, LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall engage with all individuals respectfully, ensure that they are heard, and provide services that are accessible and responsive to diverse needs.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall treat all individuals, including members of the public and public officials, with courtesy, respect, and understanding.

They shall communicate in a clear and comprehensible manner, taking into account the needs of different individuals, with particular attention to those of vulnerable and underrepresented groups, and ensuring that their actions support participation in Ombudsman activities and public affairs.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall perform their mandate in an accessible manner, including by adapting their services to meet the needs of persons with disabilities.

They shall ensure that individuals feel heard and valued and that their views are given due consideration.

Ombudspersons shall promote participation and accessibility in all aspects of their work.

Ombudspersons shall foster a culture of respect, listening, and understanding within their institutions, including through appropriate training in communication, listening, and dialogue.

PRINCIPLE 7 – EXPERTISE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall perform their duties with expertise, professionalism, and a strong sense of responsibility.

Ombudspersons and their staff members shall carry out their work with competence, rigour, and sound judgment. They shall adopt a professional and diligent approach in all aspects of their work, taking into account the merits and particularities of each case and acting without undue delay. Their conduct and decisions shall be reasonable, fair, and prudent.

In performing their functions, Ombudspersons and their staff members shall act with integrity and a strong sense of responsibility. They shall uphold the principles of the rule of law and democratic values, and take into account the broader impact of their work, including its social and environmental implications, with a view to achieving fair and sustainable outcomes.

Ombudspersons shall promote continuous learning within their institutions. They and their staff members shall maintain and further develop their knowledge and skills through appropriate training and remain informed of relevant developments in administrative justice, jurisprudence, and applicable national and international legal frameworks, including human rights standards.

Ombudspersons shall encourage the exchange of knowledge and best practices, including through cooperation with other Ombudsman institutions at national and international levels.

They shall promote responsible innovation, seek to improve services and ensure that digital tools and systems, including artificial intelligence, are used in a secure, transparent and accountable manner in full compliance with individuals' rights. Digital tools, including artificial intelligence, shall support, and not replace, human judgment. Staff members shall receive appropriate training to use such tools effectively and responsibly.