



Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy

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Purpose

The policy provides a single, shared approach to customer compliments, comments and complaints for East Suffolk Council (“the Council”) based on best practice guidance from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the Housing Ombudsman.

The policy provides a clear approach for customers, staff, managers and councillors which:

- defines compliments, comments and complaints;
- ensures a fair and consistent approach to complaint handling;
- ensures that complaints are recognised and logged using the council’s complaints process;
- ensures a timely and thorough response to customer concerns;
- recognises excellent customer service reported as compliments;
- acknowledges customer insights reported as comments.

It is the basis for a complaints procedure used by all teams across the Councils which:

- defines roles and responsibilities;
- drives improvements to policies, procedures and staff training as a result of learning from complaints.

Definitions

Compliment

Positive recognition or praise for a service, team or individual.

Example: "Thank you for helping me to resolve my problem last week. Your Customer Service team was very supportive."

Compliments help the Council to understand where we are doing things right and what works well.

Excellent service is rewarded and recognised.

Comment

A comment is an opinion, feedback or remark from a customer. A comment can be positive, negative or neutral.

Ideas or opinions about the availability, delivery or nature of our services can help us to improve the way the Council functions.

Examples:

Positive: "Your website is clearly laid out."

Negative: "I found the information eventually but the form was complicated."

Neutral: "This process seems to work adequately."

Ideas or opinions about the availability, delivery or nature of our services are can help us to improve the way the Council functions.

Complaint

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction requiring a response.

Please see [Scope](#) below for the types of complaints we will consider.

Example: "I have reported this issue on 3 previous occasions. I have not received a reply and the problem is still happening."

Customers are not obliged to use the word "complain" or "complaint" when expressing dissatisfaction.

Complaints are valuable in identifying when we need to put things right with customers. They show where the Council is falling short of its standards, where processes, polices and procedures need changing and improving and where members of staff need training or guidance.

Ombudsman

An ombudsman is an independent official person or organisation which looks into complaints about organisations.

There are two Ombudsman organisations for East Suffolk Council:

- the [Housing Ombudsman Service](#) (HOS) which specifically looks into complaints about the Council as a landlord and
- the [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#) which looks into other complaints about the Council.

The Ombudsman will usually only consider a complaint once the customer has completed the Council's internal complaints process.

Scope

Complaints which will be investigated under the complaints procedure

The policy includes complaints about the Council's:

- quality of service or workmanship;
- staff attitude and behaviour;
- time taken to respond to or resolve an issue;
- lack of response;
- incorrect advice or guidance given;
- poor quality of a response;
- unfair or unclear decisions;
- breach of data protection.

It also covers complaints about our partner organisations (Norse group, Places for People and Sentinel Leisure Trust) and contractors for services they are providing on our behalf (for example waste and recycling, housing repairs).

The policy also includes our approach to compliments and comments.

Complaints which will not be investigated under the complaints procedure

- Complaints about services provided by other councils (for example, street lighting, pot holes, schools). These complaints should be directed to the organisation concerned, such as Suffolk County Council.
- Complaints related to the private business of partner organisations and contractors. The customer should complain directly to the organisation or contractor.
- Complaints about district, town or parish councillors. Complaints about councillors are investigated by the Monitoring Officer. These must be submitted via the online form or in writing. Further information is available on the [EastSuffolk website](#).
- Complaints related to issues where legal action is under way.
- Complaints where there is an existing right of appeal outside the complaint procedure (eg parking charge appeals).
- Complaints that have already completed the Council's internal complaints process.
- Complaints that have already been investigated by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman or the Housing Ombudsman.
- Complaints about cases dealt with under the Freedom of Information Act or Environmental Information Regulations. There is a separate process for this. Further information is available on the [EastSuffolk website](#).
- Complaints related to legislation or government regulation.

Policy statement

The Council is committed to providing excellent customer service first time, every time.

We welcome feedback, positive or negative. We recognise individuals and teams who have provided excellent service and we work hard to improve service where it is not as good as it should be.

We realise that sometimes we fall short and where customers are not satisfied then a clear and simple complaints process is in place to put this right.

Making a compliment, comment or complaint

Customers can register a compliment, comment or complaint via any communication channel: online form, email, social media message, telephone, letter or face to face.

The Council will not usually investigate complaints made more than 9 months after the first time the issue is reported.

Compliments

Customers can give compliments to any department and their compliment will be logged and forwarded to the manager of the team or member of staff concerned.

Customers will not usually receive a response when they give a compliment.

The Council rewards and recognises excellence through performance management meetings and staff awards ceremonies. As at August 2017, a Natural Work Team is being set up to review how the Councils recognise good performance and exceptional effort and will be making recommendations on how to improve this.

Comments

Customers can make comments to any department and their comment will be logged and forwarded to the Head of Service of the team or service area concerned.

Customers will not usually receive a response when they make a comment.

Comments are reviewed and where appropriate, action taken to improve policies, processes or services.

Complaints

Customers can make complaints to any department and their complaint will be logged and follow the corporate complaints process.

Customer complaints are acknowledged as soon as possible and responded to within the timeframes set out in the complaints procedure by a named individual. Where it becomes clear that a complaint is complex and will take longer to resolve, we will contact the customer to let them know.

Where customers remain dissatisfied with our response to a complaint, their next steps are clearly laid out in our response and on our website.

Customers may complain anonymously. Their complaint will be registered but they cannot receive a response and depending on the detail of the complaint it may not be possible to investigate.

Complaint stages in brief

The complaint stages are explained in more detail in the complaints procedure, as are details of the investigating officer at each stage.

Stage 1: investigation

The complaint is assigned to a council officer for the service area the complaint relates to (“investigating officer”). The investigating officer responds to the complaint within 15 working days. Where it is not possible to reply in time, then the investigating officer contacts the customer to notify them of an extension and updates the complaint record.

Note: initial complaints sent directly to the Chief Executive will still be logged as a Stage 1 complaint unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Stage 2: internal review

If the customer remains dissatisfied then they must contact the Council to appeal within 1 month (eg if the response is sent on 28 March then the customer must appeal by 28 April).

Appeals received outside this timescale will not usually be investigated.

Appeals which raise new points will be investigated as a new Stage 1 complaint.

The complaint is usually assigned to the Head of Service for the service area the complaint relates to. The Head of Service investigates and sends their response to the Chief Executive. The Chief Executive will approve and send the response within 20 working days. Where it is not possible to reply in time, then the Head of Service contacts the customer to notify them of an extension and updates the complaint record.

Stage 3: referral to ombudsman

If the customer remains dissatisfied then they must contact the relevant Ombudsman. Please note that public bodies cannot lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman.

Improving standards

We aim to improve standards, increase customer satisfaction and reduce complaints by:

- having an accessible, simple complaints process;
- recording customer complaints;
- handling complaints fairly and consistently;
- investigating each complaint thoroughly;
- apologising and putting things right as quickly as possible where we have fallen short of our standards;
- replying to customers, addressing all of their concerns;
- learning from complaints;
 - improving processes or procedures;

- identifying training needs and implementing training;
- effectively managing our relationship with our partners and contractors;
- reporting on complaint trends and learning from complaints;
- keeping to our legal responsibilities, our own policies and processes and published service levels;
- recognising excellent work and customer service, including where identified by compliments, making this an example to follow;
- where appropriate acting on customer feedback to improve policies, processes or services.

Supporting staff

Staff guidance on when to log and how to reply to a complaint is available both within the complaints recording system and on the Councils' intranet.

The Customer Experience Team will give advice and guidance.

All staff at team leader level and above receive training on how to investigate and reply to complaints.

Unreasonable and persistent complainants

The Councils have a separate policy regarding unreasonable and persistent complainants. If a complaint falls into this category then that policy takes precedence over the standard complaints policy.

Policy Review

The policy and procedure will be reviewed annually and additionally updated in line with any changes to advice from the Ombudsman.

Key Performance Indicators, performance indicators, metrics and performance targets will be reviewed annually in Quarter 1, following analysis of the previous year's statistics and outcomes and in line with benchmarking of other similar councils where data is available.

Additionally the policy and all metrics will be reviewed following the merger of Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Councils to reflect the new single council status.

Underpinning principles of the policy

Ombudsman guidance

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman key principles:

- accessibility - accessible to all (staff and public) and well publicised;
- communication - direct and continued contact with the complainant, effective contact with partners and across teams, effective feedback to learn and make improvements;
- timeliness - no longer than 12 weeks to resolution;
- fairness - clear roles and responsibilities, responses are proportionate, impartial approach;
- credibility - managed by someone who can implement changes; authoritative review stage, effective leadership giving complaints handling and learning from complaints a high profile;
- accountability - information is provided clearly and is properly managed, follow up on decisions to ensure implementation, regular monitoring of timescales and satisfaction, periodic review of process.

Housing Ombudsman Service Dispute Resolution Principles:

- be fair - be flexible, clear about responsibility, unbiased and impartial, have a clear and fair process;
- learn from outcomes - record and analyse complaints data, review outcomes, inform complainant of changes, be proactive;
- put it right - focus on resolution; manage expectations.

Culture

- Effective governance and leadership, accountability.
- Consider diversity when responding to complaints to make sure the response is fair.
- Reach resolution as soon as possible and learn from outcomes.

Please see [references](#) section for links to external Ombudsman documents.

Strategic Alignment

The Council's joint access and customer care strategy is to ensure that Council services are not only accessible but drive continuous improvement and this policy supports the strategy.

This policy meets three of the five aims outlined in the strategy:

- proactively managing customer demand;
- continuously improving our performance;
- effective stakeholder relations.

Written style

Written responses use the East Suffolk Style Guide for guidance, using Plain English to ensure responses are clear and easy to understand.

Quality

All written responses are returned to the Customer Experience team before being sent out as a final check to ensure that they answer the customer's complaint and are clear and easy to understand. Guidance will be given where needed to improve response quality.

Templates with essential information such as how to escalate a complaint are available and must be used for all written responses.

Other council policies

[Unreasonable complainants policy](#)

Compensation policy. A compensation policy is currently being drafted as a companion to the complaints policy and will be available early in 2018.

Until this time, compensation will be made only in line with the [Right to Repair Regulations 1994](#).

Stakeholder consultation

Consultation is essential to ensure that the complaints policy, system and procedure are suitable, accessible and easy to use.

Policy Development Task Group were consulted when developing the Key Performance Indicators for complaints.

Other stakeholders were consulted including:

- Team leaders and managers of service areas regarding complaints system features and usability, and the sort of training and guidance materials they would prefer.
- Customer Services regarding complaints logging and reporting.

Ongoing customer consultation will be carried out in the form of customer satisfaction surveys.

Administration

The Customer Experience Officer is the owner of the complaints process and procedure.

The Customer Experience Team within Customer Services administer the complaints process and procedure and allocate complaints to the relevant officers for response.

Contact customerservices@eastsoffolk.gov.uk with queries.

Reporting

Quarterly, half-yearly and annual reports will be sent to the Customer Experience Team and distributed to Senior Management and Cabinet.

Details of reports are held in the Performance Indicators and Reporting Specification documents.

Roles and responsibilities

All staff

- Familiar with how to recognise compliments, comments and complaints, and how to log them, or where to find guidance on the process.
- Supported in resolving issues at first point of contact where possible, and referring them to the complaints process where not possible.
- Able to explain the compliments, comments and complaints process to customers confidently.
- Staff outside Customer Services forward compliments, comments and complaints to Customer Services to be logged.
- Staff within Customer Services log compliments, comments and complaints when received.

Team leaders and managers

- Encourage and promote resolution of issues at first point of contact where possible and encourage staff to use the complaints process where not possible.
- Investigate complaints, reply and implement learning. Escalate required improvements where outside own remit.
- Reward and recognise staff and team when compliments are received.

Heads of Service

- Encourage and support the culture of logging, resolving and learning from complaints.
- Provide a supportive environment for managers in complaint resolution and implementation of learning from complaints.
- Investigate Stage 2 complaints and refer to Chief Executive for approval.
- Investigate trends of complaints within own service area.
- Implement identified improvements.
- Reward and recognise staff and team when compliments are received.
- Review comments to service area, respond where necessary and implement improvements where needed.
- Lead on information gathering and responses for cases investigated by the Ombudsman.

Chief Executive

- Encourage and promote the culture of logging, resolving and learning from complaints.
- Provide a supportive environment for Heads of Service in complaint resolution.
- Review, approve and send out Stage 2 complaint responses.
- Support and promote council-wide improvements where identified.
- Reward and recognise staff and team when compliments are received.

Leader of the Council

- Encourage and promote the culture of logging, resolving and learning from complaints.
- Encourage councillors to follow the complaints procedure.

Councillors

- Familiar with how to recognise compliments, comments and complaints, and how to log them.
- Resolve issues at first point of contact where possible, and refer them to the complaints process where not possible.
- Able to explain the compliments, comments and complaints process to customers confidently.
- Forward compliments, comments and complaints to Customer Services to be logged.
- Where a councillor has referred a complaint to the Council then both they and the customer will receive a copy of the response.

Partner Organisations

- Forward complaints to Customer Services to log where the complaint falls within the Councils' responsibility.

Customer Experience team

- Roll out of training and information on the policy and procedure to all staff and councillors.
- Administering the complaints procedure.
- Ensuring website and customer information on how to make a compliment, comment or complaint are kept up to date.
- Advice & guidance to all staff at all levels.
- Quality control and advice on complaint responses.
- Following up and reporting on implementation of learning.
- Carrying out and reporting on customer satisfaction surveys.
- Reporting on Key Performance Indicators, performance indicators and metrics.
- Ombudsman case administration.
- Ombudsman case reviews where decision shows Council service failure or maladministration.

Head of Customer Services

- Ombudsman case reviews where decision shows Council service failure or maladministration.
- Advice and guidance to managers on complex complaint cases.

References

[Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman guidance on running a complaints system](#)

[HOS Dispute Resolution Principles](#)

Related documents

Complaints process and procedure.

The following documents are held on the Council intranet:

- Key Performance Indicators and Performance Indicators (complaints KPI and PI).
- Complaints reporting categories.
- Complaints reporting specification.