



# Compliments, Comments and Complaints Process and Procedure

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1.1	Sara Barratt	01 April 2019	Updated to reflect change from Suffolk Coastal & Waveney to East Suffolk
1.0	Sara Barratt	14 November 2017	Minor clarification to complaints exceptions.  Update Document Control following approval.
0.4	Sara Barratt	10 October 2017	Minor changes recommended by Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman including updating their name.
0.3	Sara Barratt	12 September 2017	Various minor changes: Cabinet member comments
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## **Making a compliment, comment or complaint**

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

Compliments, comments and complaints are logged onto the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) by Customer Services. Officers in other service areas and district councillors should forward the details to [customerservices@eastsoffolk.gov.uk](mailto:customerservices@eastsoffolk.gov.uk) as soon as received.

Please see the compliments, comments and complaints policy on the EastSuffolk website for definitions.

Where the complaint has been made to a district councillor or the local MP, then both they and the customer will receive a copy of the response.

### **Compliments**

Compliments are logged on the Council's CRM system and Customer Experience team forward them to the manager of the individual, team or service area concerned.

Customers will not usually receive a response to their compliment.

Managers will pass on the compliment straight away and also record for performance management.

Exceptional performance or service will be publicised on the Council's intranet and managers will investigate and implement service-wide improvements based on compliments.

### **Comments**

Comments are logged on the Council's CRM system and Customer Experience team forward them 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 regularly to identify issues and trends and where appropriate, action is taken to improve policies, processes or services.

### **Complaints**

At any stage in the complaints process, customers can complain to ANY OFFICER in the council via any communication channel.

All complaints must be logged on the corporate complaints system and follow the complaints process.

If the customer supplies an email address, we will reply by email unless they specify another format (for example a telephone response).

Where we have replied by telephone we will send out a confirmation email or letter closing the complaint and explaining how to escalate the complaint if dissatisfied with the response.

If the customer wishes to remain anonymous, they will not be able to receive any updates about the progress of their complaint.

Customers should be given information about the complaints process - including a link to the compliments, comments and complaints webpage of the EastSuffolk website if they have internet access.

### **Information required from the customer to resolve the complaint**

- Contact details: customer name, email address, postal address and telephone number.
- Which service does the complaint relate to?
- What is the problem? Take reference numbers (eg planning application, council tax account) where known. Does the customer have officer names/ dates/ photos/ documents to support the complaint? Scan any photos or documents and forward, or ask the customer to email them to [customerservices@east Suffolk.gov.uk](mailto:customerservices@east Suffolk.gov.uk).
- What should we do to put things right? Ask the customer how we can resolve this for them.

### **Exceptions to making complaints**

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

We will not usually investigate a complaint at stage 2 if the customer waits more than 1 month to appeal against the stage 1 response.

We will not continue to investigate complaints where we have already completed our own complaints process. Customers should refer these to either the Housing Ombudsman Service or the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman as appropriate.

We will not investigate complaints which have already been investigated by the Ombudsman.

Please see the compliments, comments and complaints policy on the EastSuffolk website for details of what will and will not be investigated.

## Complaint stages

### Resolution at point of contact

Where an issue arises for the first time and can be resolved without lodging a complaint then the officer receiving the contact is encouraged to resolve the issue and log details on the relevant service area's systems (eg Uniform/ CRM/ Capita).

If the customer still wishes to make a complaint then this should be progressed to stage 1.

### Stage 1 - investigation - 15 working days

Stage 1 is the first stage of the complaints process.

A complaint at stage 1 should be replied to within 15 working days of receipt unless it is particularly complex.

A complaint will be logged at stage 1 if any of the following apply:

- it is the first complaint from this customer about an issue;
- the customer has complained about this issue before but it is more than 1 month since the previous complaint was closed;
- the customer wishes to log a stage 2 complaint but has also raised new issues not mentioned in their earlier complaint.

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

### Procedure

- The complaint is logged on CRM, either by the customer via the online form or by Customer Services.
- The complaint is assigned to the relevant officers for the service area the complaint relates to (see [Who investigates a complaint?](#)).
- An acknowledgement is sent to the customer by email or letter.
- One of the team leaders/ managers takes responsibility for investigating the complaint and updates the complaint record on CRM.
- The investigating officer contacts the customer early in the complaints process to identify themselves and discuss the complaint, ensuring they have a good understanding, updating the complaint record on CRM.
- The investigating officer investigates all aspects of the complaint including root cause.
- The investigating officer resolves the issue where possible and identifies any learning and improvements to be made as a result of the complaint, updating the complaint record on CRM.
- The investigating officer enters the response into the CRM, answering the customer's issues point by point and explaining any learning and improvements that will be made.
- The investigating officer indicates on CRM whether the complaint is justified, partially justified or unjustified.
- 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 on CRM.

- When the response is complete it is returned via CRM for the Customer Experience team to quality check.
- The Customer Experience team will check the response to ensure it answers all the issues raised, is simple and well written, explains whether the complaint is justified and what changes, if any, will be made as a result of the complaint investigation.
- If the response does not meet quality standards it will be returned to the investigating officer with advice and guidance, so that they can improve it.
- If the response does meet quality standards it will be sent and the complaint closed.
- A customer satisfaction survey will also be sent where we hold the customer's email address.

## **Stage 2 - internal review - 20 working days**

Stage 2 is the second stage of the complaints process.

A complaint at stage 2 should be replied to within 20 working days of receipt unless it is particularly complex.

If the customer remains dissatisfied following a stage 1 response then they must contact the Council to appeal within 1 month (for example, 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.

A complaint will be logged at stage 2 if the following applies:

- The customer is dissatisfied with the response to their stage 1 complaint and has contacted the Council within 1 month of the stage 1 response being issued.

## **Procedure**

- The complaint is logged on CRM, either by the customer via the online form or by Customer Services.
- Customer Experience team attach the complaint history and assign to the relevant Head of Service.
- An acknowledgement is sent to the customer by email or letter.
- The complaint is usually assigned to the Head of Service for the service area the complaint relates to. In exceptional circumstances, another Head of Service may investigate (for example, if there is a conflict of interest).
- The Head of Service contacts the customer early in the complaints process to identify themselves and discuss the complaint, ensuring they have a good understanding of why the customer is dissatisfied, updating the complaint record on CRM.
- The Head of Service investigates all aspects of the complaint including root cause.
- The Head of Service resolves the outstanding issues where possible and identifies any learning and improvements to be made as a result of the complaint, noting the complaint record on CRM.
- The Head of Service creates the response and sends it to the Chief Executive to approve.

- If the Chief Executive approves the response the Chief Executive signs the response letter and attaches it to the complaint record on CRM.
- If the Chief Executive does not approve the response it will be returned to the Head of Service with advice and guidance, so that they can improve it.
- When the response is complete it is returned via CRM for the Customer Experience team to quality check.
- The Customer Experience team will check the response to ensure it answers all the issues raised, is simple and well written, explains whether the complaint is justified and what changes, if any, will be made as a result of the complaint investigation.
- If the response does not meet quality standards it will be returned to the Head of Service with advice and guidance, so that they can improve it before sending on to the Chief Executive again.
- If the response does meet quality standards it will be sent and the complaint closed.
- A customer satisfaction survey will also be sent where we hold the customer's email address.
- 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 on CRM.

### **Stage 3 - Referral to Ombudsman**

If the customer remains dissatisfied following a Stage 2 response then they must contact the relevant Ombudsman. Please note that public bodies cannot lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman.

Council Housing Tenants who are complaining about the Council as a Landlord can either contact a Designated Person immediately, or wait 8 weeks from closure of their stage 2 complaint and contact the Housing Ombudsman Service directly. See [Appendix 2: referral of tenant complaints](#).

Complaints about all other issues should be referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

### **Complaints which cover more than one service area**

One officer must oversee the complaint and liaise with the other departments to put together a single comprehensive response.

## Roles and responsibilities

### Who investigates a complaint?

An officer will never investigate a complaint about themselves or about an issue which they have been directly involved in.

If a complaint is made about a specific member of staff they should be made aware of the complaint and given the opportunity to give their account of the issues as part of the investigation, but they will not be involved in carrying out the investigation or responding to the customer.

Subject of complaint	Stage 1	Stage 2
Service/ member of staff/ service area	Team leader/ manager	Head of Service. Complaint is signed off by Chief Executive
Partner organisations working on our behalf	Partnerships manager	Head of Service. Complaint is signed off by Chief Executive
Manager/ departmental policy	Head of Service	Chief Executive
Head of Service	Strategic Director	Chief Executive
Chief Executive	Independent Person (TBC)	No stage 2 complaint - refer to Ombudsman

### 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.
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### **Head of Customer Services**

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

## Responding to a complaint

### Complaint procedure...DO

- Welcome complaints and try to resolve them at first point of contact.
- If a complaint is resolved at first point of contact record the issues and actions taken to resolve.
- Ensure your departmental policies and processes are clear and that if there is an external or separate or independent right of appeal then this is clearly laid out in your publicity, letters, decision notices and other documentation.
- Apologise. An apology is not an admission of liability but a recognition that a customer has had a negative experience.
- Contact the customer during the investigation. The customer should know who is investigating their complaint and talking to them will give a better understanding of how to resolve the complaint. Offer to visit the customer if they feel this would be helpful.
- Keep a record of all contact with the customer.
- Listen to the customer and reply in the format they have requested.
- Keep the customer updated, especially if it will take longer than specified in the procedure to complete your complaint investigation.
- Follow Council procedures.
- Use the East Suffolk Style Guide principles and write in plain, simple English.
- Use the CRM system to record and send your response. It has templates which include advice to customers on how to appeal if they remain dissatisfied and includes the complaint reference numbers.
- Be aware of the complaints policy, procedure and guidance on the Council intranet.
- Take the [Housing Ombudsman e-learning](#) which contains excellent guidance on complaint handling.

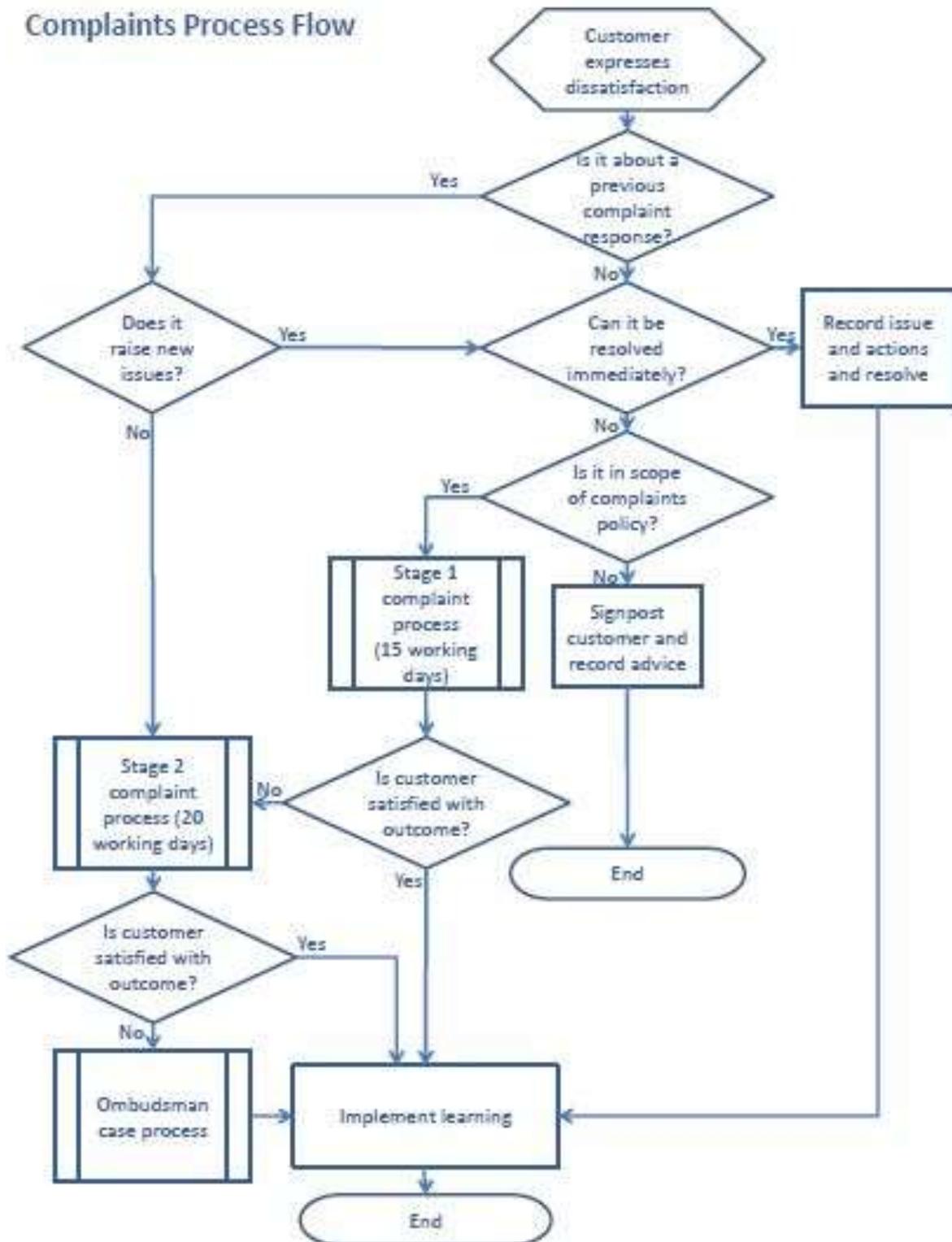
### Complaint procedure...DON'T

- Make assumptions based on the identity of the complainant, the subject of the complaint or any thing else.
- Avoid or sidestep the complaints procedure.
- Use jargon. If technical terms must be used, explain them.
- Take a one-size-fits-all approach to handling complaints.
- Send your final response outside the CRM system.

# Appendices

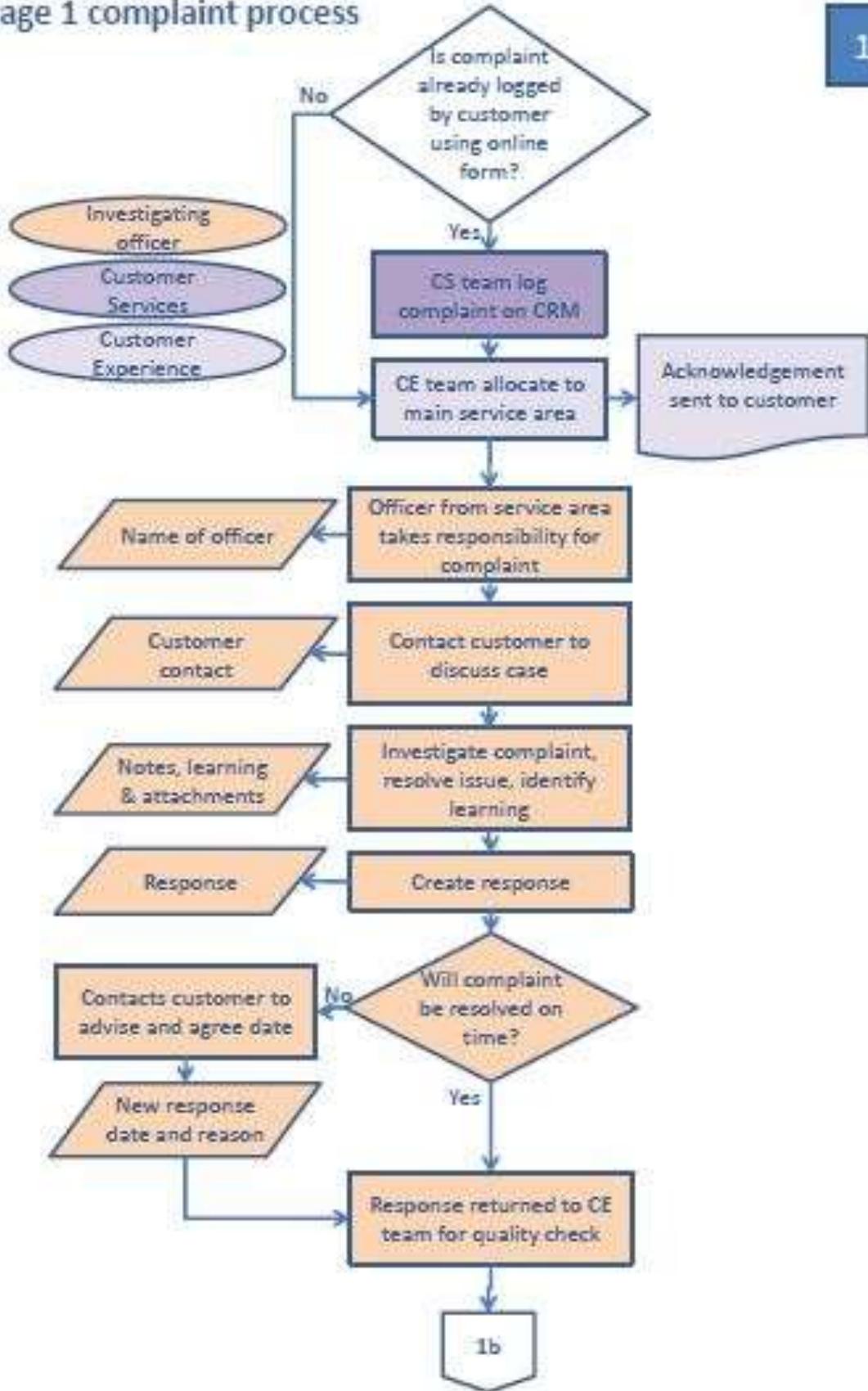
## Appendix 1: process flow

### Complaints Process Flow



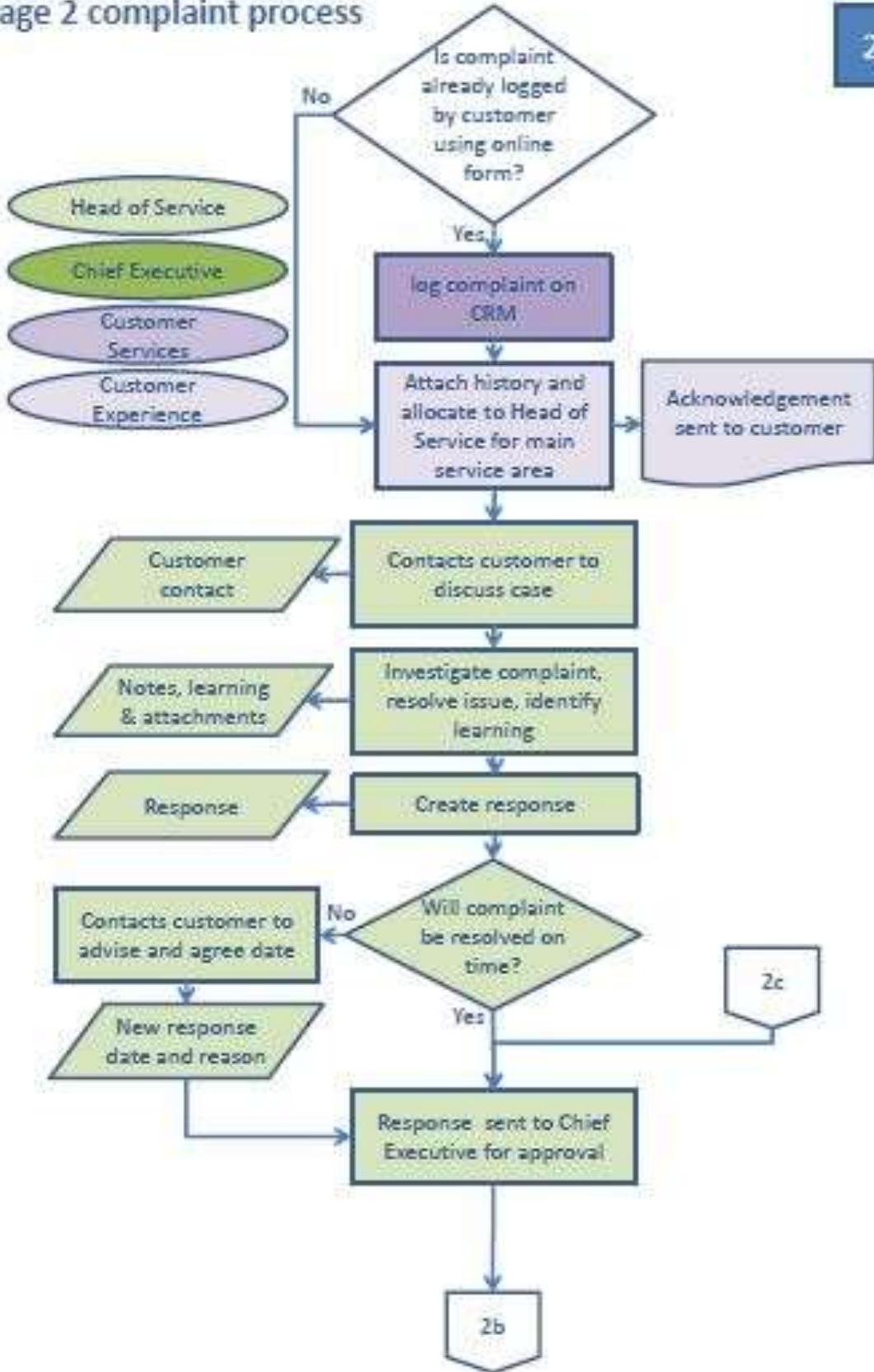
# Stage 1 complaint process

1a



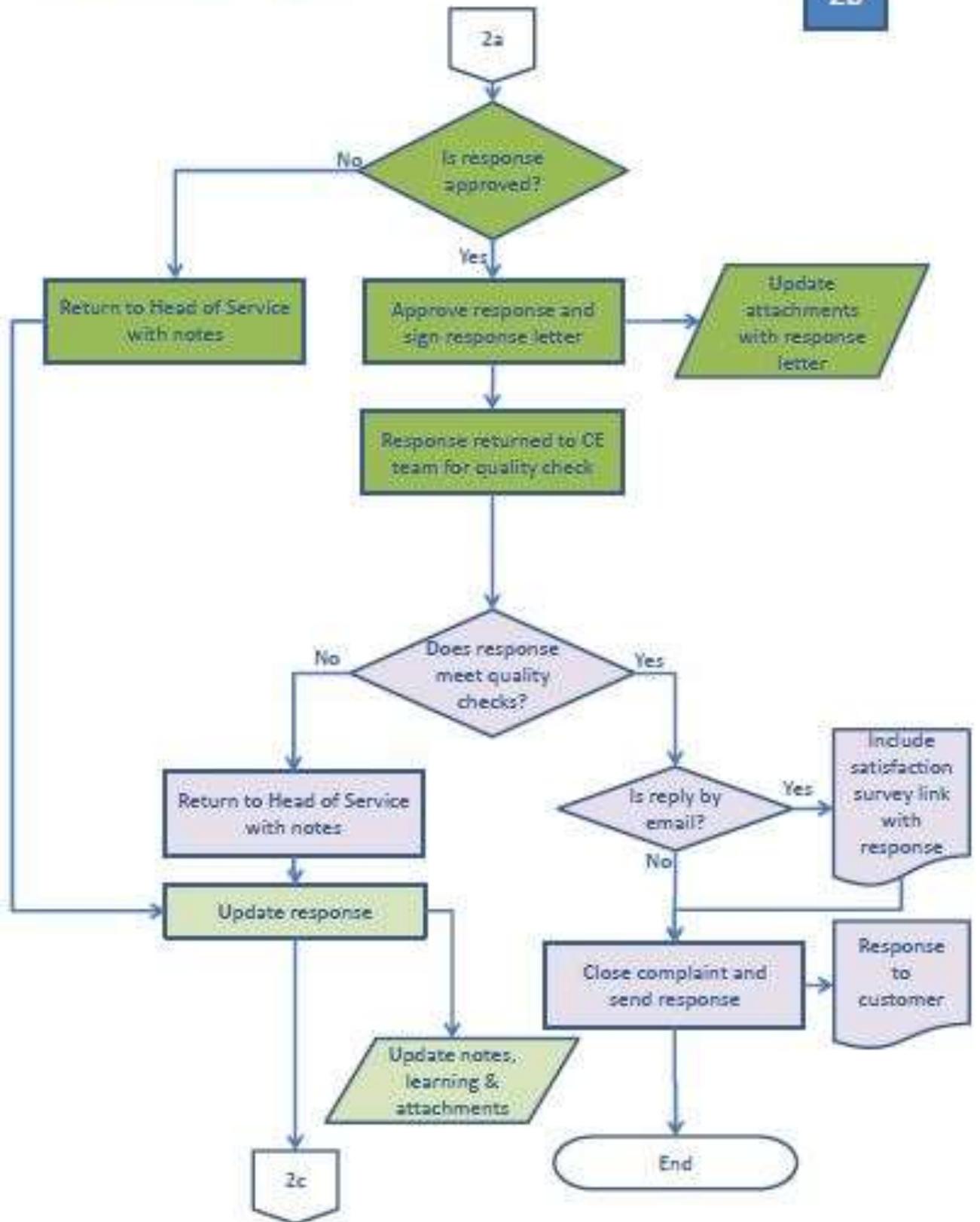
## Stage 2 complaint process

2a



# Stage 2 complaint process

2b



## Appendix 2 referral of tenant complaints

### Designated person/ housing ombudsman referral

