



Customer Feedback Policy

(Compliments, comments and
complaints)

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1 Introduction

East Suffolk Council (“the Council”) is committed to providing excellent customer service first time, every time.

We know that by listening to our customers, we can learn what we are doing well, and where we need to improve. Our customers are at the heart of what we do, and it should be simple and straightforward for them to access the services and information they need.

We welcome positive and negative feedback from our customers. Understanding the experiences of our customers is an important way for us to continuously review and improve the services we provide to the people who live in, work in and visit East Suffolk.

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

Where something has gone wrong for the first time, we will always try to put it right as soon as possible – we call this “early resolution”. In most cases, a discussion between the customer and a Council officer will be able to resolve the problem and identify any underlying issues to prevent a recurrence. Where this is not possible, we will register a complaint to be investigated and resolved.

We also learn from compliments to understand what makes excellent customer service and promote those lessons across the Council.

We use the information from compliments, comments and complaints to learn and make improvements, and respond positively to our customers’ needs and expectations.

2 Aims of the policy

The policy sets out our approach to customer compliments, comments and complaints.

2.1 What is in the policy

It sets out:

- what we consider to be a compliment, comment and complaint;
- a fair, consistent and timely approach to complaint resolution;
- why customer feedback is important;
- how we will learn from compliments, comments and complaints; and
- how we will monitor the effectiveness of the policy and process in improving standards.

It should be quick and simple for customers to give us feedback, no matter what the issue and what contact channel they choose: electronic, phone, letter or face to face.

2.2 Learning from feedback

We learn from all feedback, positive, neutral and negative.

Compliments, comments and complaints from our customers:

- Help the Council to understand where we are doing things right and what works well.
- Show us where we can improve the availability, delivery or nature of our services to best serve our residents, businesses and visitors.
- Tell us where we need to put things right with individual customers; where processes, policies and procedures can be improved and where staff need additional training or guidance.
- Identify improvements to make the Council more efficient and effective, which can directly affect the cost of service provision.
- Give recognition to individual officers and teams who are providing excellent service and allow us to share examples of best practice across the Council.

The policy puts customer feedback at the heart of our approach to improvement and change. We will:

- respond to feedback;
- seek actively to understand underlying factors that can be improved to prevent repeat occurrences of issues;
- share learning across different teams where there are wider implications; and
- acknowledge that our customers are individuals and respond accordingly.

2.3 Improving customer service and customer satisfaction

We strive to achieve and maintain customer focussed and enhanced quality delivery of services by:

- having an accessible, simple complaints process;

- recording customer compliments, comments and 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;
- recording outcomes and learning from compliments, comments and complaints to:
 - improve processes or procedures;
 - identify training needs and implementing training;
 - effectively manage our relationship with our partners and contractors;
 - report on complaint trends, changes and improvements;
 - share learning across departments;
- 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; and
- acting on customer feedback to improve policies, processes or services.

3 How we define a compliment, comment and complaint

3.1 Compliment

A compliment is 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."

3.2 Comment

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

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."*

3.3 Complaint

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction requiring a response.

Example: "I have reported this issue on 3 previous occasions. Although you said you had put it right, the problem is still happening."

Customers are not obliged to use the word "complain" or "complaint" when expressing dissatisfaction. We will log complaints where they fit the criteria in section 4, below.

4 Complaints we will and will not investigate under this policy

4.1 Complaints covered by the policy

Complaints about the Council's:

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

4.2 Complaints not covered by the complaints policy

- Complaints about services provided by other councils (for example, street lighting, pot holes, schools).
- Complaints where there is an existing right of appeal outside the complaint procedure (eg parking charge appeals, planning appeals).
- Complaints about cases dealt with under the Freedom of Information Act or Environmental Information Regulations. Further information is available on the [EastSuffolk website](#).
- Complaints about district, town or parish councillors. Complaints about councillors are investigated by the Monitoring Officer. Further information is available on the [EastSuffolk website](#).
- Complaints related to legislation or government regulation where the Council has a duty to provide or regulate a service in line with that regulation.
- Complaints where police investigations, legal proceedings, court or tribunal action are being taken.
- Complaints about matters which are subject to an insurance claim.
- 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 related to the private business of partner organisations and contractors. The customer should complain directly to the organisation or contractor.
- Complaints which are vexatious in nature, whose aim is to pursue a grudge against the Council or particular officers or teams; or to disrupt the legitimate business of the Council (see "[delayed, unreasonable and persistent complaints](#)" below).
- Data protection breaches. Customers should report a suspected breach to dataprotection@eastsoffolk.gov.uk.

4.3 Complaints about our partners and contractors

The Council investigates complaints about our partner organisations and other contractors where the complaint covers services they are providing on our behalf (for example waste and recycling or housing repairs).

Complaints about service or standards at leisure centres should be directed initially to the centre management. The Council will investigate these complaints only where the customer remains dissatisfied following completion of the centre's complaints process.

4.4 Delayed, unreasonable and persistent complaints

The Council will not usually consider complaints about issues which took place more than 12 months before the date of the complaint; or 6 months for complaints which relate to the Council as a landlord. Where there is a long delay, it is unlikely that any investigation would be effective.

We will also not consider complaints which are substantially about issues which have already completed our complaints process. The Council has a separate policy and procedure for managing customers who may be persistent, habitual and vexatious complainants: the [Unreasonable Behaviour policy](#).

5 Making a compliment, comment or complaint

Customers can register a compliment, comment or complaint via an online form, email, social media message, phone, letter or face to face.

Customers can direct their feedback to any officer or department.

5.1 Support and advocacy

Some people may not be sure about how to send us feedback, or how to explain their case. Where possible, we will offer help and support to ensure that we have all the right information.

Customers may ask somebody they trust to help them make a complaint or to act on their behalf (an “advocate”). This could be a friend or relative, a voluntary organisation or a local councillor. If customers want us to send the reply to their advocate, we will ask for written consent to discuss personal information with the advocate and for them to act on the customer’s behalf, otherwise we will reply to the customer.

5.2 Anonymous feedback

Some people may worry that if they make a complaint it will result in a poorer service for them or their household. This is not the case; we support and resolve complaints fairly.

If customers send feedback anonymously, we will be unable to respond to them. Where possible we will still record, investigate and learn from the complaint.

5.3 Compliments and comments

We share the learning from compliments received across departments to encourage best practice throughout the Council. We review comments and take action to improve policies, processes or services as appropriate.

5.4 Complaints

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

Where an issue can be resolved quickly and informally, we encourage early resolution between the relevant department and the customer – please see [Section 6](#) for an explanation of the difference between early resolution and a stage 1 complaint.

Customer complaints are acknowledged as soon as possible and responded to within the timeframes set out below.

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

Please note: complaint correspondence sent directly to the Chief Executive or councillors will be directed through our standard complaints procedure unless there are exceptional circumstances.

6 Investigating and recording complaints

We follow best practice guidance from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS). In most cases, they will not investigate a complaint that has not followed our internal complaints process.

We also have an internal procedure which contains detailed guidance for Council officers and councillors on how to identify, investigate, respond to and learn from compliments, comments and complaints.

[Appendix A](#) lists who investigates each type of complaint.

6.1 Service request

Where we have a standard process for resolving a problem, we call this a “service request”.

Examples include a missed bin collection, or a council tenant requesting a repair to their property.

6.2 Early Resolution

Where the customer’s issue is not a service request but we can resolve it fairly simply and quickly, we call this “early resolution”.

In most cases we can put something right easily and straightforwardly. If we can do this then we will aim to resolve the issue quickly, and in a timescale which suits the customer. If the customer or the officer resolving the issue feels that early resolution is taking too long or is ineffective, they may decide to log a formal complaint.

We record early resolution so that we can identify and improve on these issues as well as those which go through the formal complaint process.

We aim to put things right via early resolution as far as possible, but we recognise that it is not suitable for serious complaints that require a detailed or complex investigation.

6.3 Complaint stage 1: investigation

We will acknowledge receipt as soon as possible, usually in writing, and we aim to do this within 3 working days.

The complaint is assigned to an officer for the service area the complaint relates to (the “investigating officer”) who will consider the background, evidence and circumstances of the complaint. They will make a decision on whether any apology or action needs taking to resolve the issue, and whether the Council acted fairly and reasonably. As part of the investigation they may contact the customer to ask for more detail and discuss the issue.

The investigating officer will phone or write to the customer with their response.

We aim to respond to a stage 1 complaint within 15 working days. Where it is not possible to reply within the usual timescales, then the Council will contact the customer to notify them of an extension.

6.4 Complaint stage 2: internal review/ appeal

We will acknowledge receipt as soon as possible, usually in writing, and we aim to do this within 3 working days.

If the customer remains dissatisfied following our investigation at stage 1, they can ask for the complaint to be looked at again by a more senior Council officer. They must appeal within 1 month (for instance 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.

The customer's appeal must provide clear details, in writing whenever possible, explaining why they are still dissatisfied, what resolution they would like and providing any additional information to clarify the case.

We will make the decision to not proceed with a stage 2 internal review if we believe there is sufficient justification; for example, that there can be no other position for the Council to take, or the complaint is an unfair criticism of an officer. In this case, we will usually refer the customer directly to the relevant Ombudsman.

Where the appeal raises entirely new issues, the Council will take the decision on a case by case basis as to whether these should be addressed as part of the stage 2 review, logged as a new stage 1 complaint or resolved via early resolution. If the appeal raises only a minor issue with the original response, then the original investigating officer may be able to respond fully to resolve any outstanding points.

A stage 2 complaint is usually assigned to the Principal Service Manager (PSM) or Head of Service for the service area the complaint relates to ("reviewing officer") who will review the original complaint and response in light of the customer's reasons for appeal. They may decide that the original response was fair, or may make different recommendations. The reviewing officer's response is sent to the Chief Executive for final approval.

The response to a stage 2 complaint marks the end of the Council's internal complaints process.

We aim to respond to a stage 2 complaint within 20 working days. Where it is not possible to reply within the usual timescales, then the Council will contact the customer to notify them of an extension.

7 Independent external review

The Council will not consider the complaint further following completion of its internal complaints process.

If the customer remains dissatisfied they may contact the relevant Ombudsman.

Please note that public bodies cannot lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman so for them, the conclusion of the internal complaints process is the final stage of appeal.

7.1 Ombudsman

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

For East Suffolk Council:

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

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

We will always provide contact details for the relevant Ombudsman organisation in our final response to the customer.

7.1.1 Complaints about the Council as a landlord

Complaints from Council tenants related to tenancy issues are regulated by the Housing Ombudsman (HOS). The HOS is unable to consider cases until 8 weeks following the completion of the Council's internal complaints process, but the customer can contact a Designated Person (DP) to help resolve the complaint straight away. The [HOS website](#) has guidance for customers and DPs.

8 Policy Review

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

In addition to ongoing learning from customer feedback, we will carry out an annual review of the statistics, trends and key learning points from the previous year's feedback, to ensure we are continuing to learn and improve, and highlight any successes and significant areas where we need to concentrate on improving.

We will review key statistics and benchmark against other similar councils where data is available.

Appendix A: 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	Principle Service Manager (PSM)/ Head of Service. Complaint is signed off by Chief Executive
Partner organisations working on our behalf	Partnership manager	Head of Service. Complaint is signed off by Chief Executive
Manager/ departmental policy	Principal Service Manager (PSM)/ Head of Service	Head of Service/ Chief Executive. Complaint is signed off by Chief Executive
Head of Service	Strategic Director	Chief Executive
Chief Executive	Independent Person	No stage 2 complaint - refer to Ombudsman

Appendix B: Underpinning principles of the policy

We follow the guidance of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) on complaint handling, and relevant legislation such as:

[Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman guidance on effective complaint handling](#)

[LGSCO guidance on remedies](#)

[HOS Dispute Resolution Principles](#)

For Council tenants - [Right to Repair Regulations 1994](#).