



# Customer Feedback Policy

(Compliments, comments, and complaints)

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## 1. Introduction

East Suffolk Council (“the Council”) is committed to providing excellent 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 everything 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 we have a clear and simple process 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 service and promote those lessons across the Council. We use the information from compliments, comments and complaints to learn, make improvements, and respond positively to our customers’ needs and expectations.

East Suffolk Council has a dedicated team handling the customer feedback processes and all teams of the council through to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), share a common standard objective for complaint handling.

The portfolio holders for both Housing and Customer Services will receive annual reports regarding complaint handling and will report to Cabinet.

Complaints are also monitored as part of our Corporate Governance KPIs, reported regularly to CLT.

## 2. Aims of the policy

What is in the policy

The policy sets out our approach to customer compliments, comments, and complaints by outlining:

- what we consider to be a service request versus a compliment, comment or complaint;
- a fair, consistent and timely approach to complaint resolution;
- why customer feedback is important;
- how we will learn from compliments, comments and complaints;
- how we ensure objectivity in our investigations and reviews; 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.

### 2.1. 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;

- acknowledge and apologise to our customers when we haven't got it right;
- share learning across different teams where there are wider implications; and
- acknowledge that our customers are individuals and respond accordingly.

## **2.2. Improving customer service and customer satisfaction**

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

- having an accessible, simple complaints process;
- recording customer compliments, comments and complaints;
- handling complaints fairly and consistently;
- investigating each complaint thoroughly;
- reviewing complaint appeals thoroughly and objectively;
- 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 implement training;
  - effectively manage our relationship with our partners and contractors;
  - report on complaint trends, changes and improvements; to share learning across departments;
- adhere 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 will publicise the Customer Feedback policy**

This policy is published on the East Suffolk Council website.

There is also information regarding the Local Government and Social Housing Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman (HO) on our website.

All staff will be trained on the feedback policy and how to access it. All relevant staff will be further trained in complaint handling and investigation.

## 4. Who is responsible for our feedback process?

The Head of Service is accountable for the performance of their service area and for overseeing all complaints and service requests.

East Suffolk Council takes a corporate approach to managing customer feedback including complaints. We have a corporate Customer Relations team who coordinate the process across all service areas and departments. The Customer Relations operational lead is the Complaints Officer for East Suffolk Council. Heads of Service are responsible for ensuring the Customer Relations team have unrestricted access to staff at all levels to facilitate the prompt resolution of complaints.

All employees are responsible for listening to customer feedback and reporting complaints to the Customer Relations team.

## 5. How we define service requests, compliments, comments, and complaints

A **service request** may come into the Council under the guise of being a customer complaint, in that the request is something that can be easily dealt with. Where this is the case the service request will be actioned and the customer notified of the outcome, if the customer is still unhappy then the matter can then be escalated to a complaint. We will continue to action the service request as appropriate even if a valid complaint is made about the same issue at the same time.

Many service requests are referred to in everyday conversation as 'complaints', for instance noise complaints about neighbours, reports about a missed bin collection, or reports about repairs needed to a public toilet or a park bench to name just a few examples. These are still service requests or reports, rather than 'complaints' in the meaning of this policy.

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."*

A **comment** (or suggestion) 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."*

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 6, below.

## **6. Complaints we will and will not investigate under this policy**

### **6.1. Complaints covered by the policy**

Complaints about the Council pertaining to:

- 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.

### **6.2. Complaints not covered by the policy**

- Complaints about services provided by other councils (for example, street lighting, potholes, schools).
- Complaints where there is an existing right of appeal outside the complaint procedure (e.g. 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 [FOI and EIR pages of the East Suffolk website](#).
- Complaints about district, town, or parish councillors. Complaints about councillors are investigated by the Monitoring Officer. Further information is available on the [Conduct pages of the East Suffolk 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.
- Expressions of dissatisfaction made in a survey carried out by or on behalf of the Council, although survey respondents are advised how to make a complaint to the Council as a part of the survey process.
- 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. Suspected breaches should be reported to [dataprotection@eastsoffolk.gov.uk](mailto:dataprotection@eastsoffolk.gov.uk).

Whilst the above covers the majority of exclusions, each complaint will be judged on its own merits on an individual basis. We do not apply a blanket approach when assessing complaints.

### **6.3. 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).

It is expected that contractors will forward any complaints made direct to them regarding a service they provide on behalf of East Suffolk Council to the ESC Customer Relations Team to record and coordinate the complaint response.

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.



#### **6.4. 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; 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](#).

Where the council decides not to accept a complaint, an explanation will be provided to the complainant in writing, setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process and their rights to take that decision to the Ombudsman and how to do this.

### **7. Making a compliment, comment, or complaint**

Customers can register a compliment, comment or complaint via [an online form](#), [email to customer.feedback@eastssuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:email.to.customer.feedback@eastssuffolk.gov.uk), social media direct message, phone, letter or face to face.

Customers can direct their feedback to any officer or department.

Customers will not be treated differently by East Suffolk Council just because they make a complaint.

#### **7.1. 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.

## **7.2. 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.

## **7.3. 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.

## **7.4. 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 8 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.

## **8. 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.

### **8.1. 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. At this stage the matter will not be dealt with as a complaint.

### **8.2. 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.

### **8.3. Stage 1 complaint: Investigation**

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

The complaint will be issued to the relevant service area and will be investigated by a member of that team. The investigating officer will undertake a detailed investigation into the complaint, speaking with the complainant and considering the background, evidence, and circumstances of the complaint. They will decide if action needs taking to resolve the issue, and whether the Council acted fairly and reasonably. They will

also issue an apology if they consider this to be appropriate. If there are any conflicts of interest (perceived or actual) these will be addressed.

The investigating officer may phone the customer with their subsequent response, but all responses will be followed up in writing by the investigating officer and (where different) copied to the relevant Head of Service.

#### **8.4. Stage 1 complaint: Response**

We aim to respond to a stage 1 complaint within 10 working days of a complaint being acknowledged. Where it is not possible to reply within the usual timescales, the Council will contact the complainant to notify them of an extension, providing the reason why and a revised date. Any extension would not normally exceed 10 working days. The complainant will also be provided with the relevant Ombudsman details at this point.

We will respond to the complaint as soon as possible, even if there are outstanding actions. These actions will be tracked and actioned promptly with appropriate updates to the complainant.

We will address all points raised in the complaint providing clear reasons for any decisions and referencing the relevant policy or law where appropriate.

If additional complaints are raised during an investigation, these will be incorporated into the initial stage 1 response providing they are related to the same issue and the stage 1 response has not yet been issued. If however, the additional complaint would significantly delay the issue of the stage 1 response we may log this as a separate complaint. Where the stage 1 response has already been issued or the new complaints are unrelated these will be treated as a new complaint.

A stage 1 response will include details of:

- The complaint stage;
- The complaint definition;
- The decision on the complaint;
- The reasons for any decisions made;
- The details of any remedy offered to put things right;
- Details of how to escalate the matter to stage 2 if the individual is unhappy with the response.

#### **8.5. Stage 2 complaint**

If the complainant remains dissatisfied following our investigation at stage 1, they can request that the response is reviewed as a stage 2 complaint. The appeal must be made within three months (for instance if the response is sent on 28 March, then the

complainant must appeal by 28 June). Appeals received outside this timescale will not usually be reviewed. We will aim to acknowledge receipt in writing within five working days.

There is no requirement to explain why the complainant is dissatisfied with the stage 1 response but where feasible, an explanation and provision of any extra information will greatly help the stage 2 investigation.

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

#### **8.6. Stage 2 complaint: Review**

Stage 2 reviews will aim to be objective and will be overseen by the Head of Service relevant to the complaint. The Head of Service will either take on the role of reviewing officer or assign this role to a senior team member not connected with the associated stage 1 complaint(s).

The reviewing officer will review the original complaint and response, carry out their own investigation considering the complainant's reasons for appeal if provided considering the background, evidence, and circumstances of the complaint. They may decide that the original response was fair or may make different recommendations. All responses will be made in writing by the reviewing officer and will be copied to the Strategic Director accountable for the topic of the associated stage 1 complaint.

We will address all points raised in the complaint providing clear reasons for any decisions and referencing the relevant policy or law where appropriate.

We will respond to the complaint as soon as possible, even if there are outstanding actions. These actions will be tracked and actioned promptly with appropriate updates to the complainant.

A stage 2 response will include details of:

- The complaint stage;
- The complaint definition;
- The decision on the complaint;
- The reasons for any decisions made;
- The details of any remedy offered to put things right;
- Details of how to escalate the matter to the relevant ombudsman if the complainant remains dissatisfied;
- Signed by the appropriate Head of Service and copied to the relevant Strategic Director.

In the circumstance where there is no other position the Council can take with regards to rectifying a complaint, for example where we have followed policy and there is no scope to alter this to satisfy the complainant, the Council may dispense with the stage 2 review and instead signpost the complainant directly to the relevant ombudsman. This approach is preferred by the ombudsman as it avoids the need for the complainant to go through the stage 2 process where there is no chance of the original decision being overturned and avoids unnecessary delay.

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 or logged as a new stage 1 complaint. The response to a stage 2 complaint marks the end of the Council's internal complaints process.

We aim to respond to stage 2 complaints within 20 working days of acknowledgement of receipt. Where it is not possible to reply within the usual timescales, then the Council will contact the customer to notify them of an extension up to a maximum further 20 days, providing the reason why and revised date. The complainant will also be provided with the relevant Ombudsman details at this point.

On rare occasions, a stage 2 review may need to be conducted by the Council's Chief Executive, for example if the matter directly relates to a complaint about a Strategic Director.

## **9. Putting things right**

### **9.1. Remedies**

When the Council is at fault, we will put things right by acknowledging our mistakes and apologising for them, explaining why things went wrong and what we will do to prevent the same mistake happening again.

A complaint can be remedied at any stage of the complaints process without the need for escalation.

We work to the [LGSCO Guidance on Remedies](#) a key principle of which is that a remedy should put a complainant back in the position they would have been had the error not occurred. When dealing with a complaint about the Council's landlord service we follow [Housing Ombudsman guidance](#) as well as the Council's own housing compensation policy.

Sometimes, this is not possible, and the Council will consider whether financial or other compensation is appropriate.

We call the action we take to put things right the “remedy.”

The complaint response will include details of what remedy is being offered and what will happen to achieve this, and by when.

A remedy could include:

- **Non-financial compensation**

Taking specific action, such as reassessing a decision or carrying out repairs. We may offer vouchers as an acknowledgement of inconvenience.

- **Financial compensation**

If people are out of pocket because of our mistakes we may, in exceptional circumstances, pay financial compensation in line with the LGSCO’s guidance on remedies.

If people have been caused undue hardship, inconvenience, or distress because of our mistakes, we may pay financial compensation, again in line with LGSCO guidance.

Where the customer owes money to the Council, for example rent or Council Tax arrears, any compensation will usually be offset against those arrears. However, this will not usually apply where there is a legitimate dispute about that debt (for example if the customer is waiting for a Housing Benefit claim to be decided) or if the compensation is for a specific purpose, such as replacing damaged possessions.

Should the complainant later opt to take legal action, the payment of any compensation should not be inferred as an admission of liability on the part of the Council.

- **Exceptions to financial compensation**

This policy only covers financial compensation for complaints handled under this customer feedback policy. Court settlements, insurance claims, and matters subject to current legal action are not within the scope of this policy. Matters relating to the Council’s landlord service are subject to the Council’s housing compensation policy.

## 10. 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.

### 10.1. 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 related tenancy issues; and
- the [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#) (LGSCO) investigates other complaints about the Council.

An 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.

## 11. Policy review

The Council will review the policy and procedure at least annually and additionally in response to new circumstances and any changes to relevant advice or guidance from ombudsman services.

In addition to ongoing learning from customer feedback, we will review statistics, trends, and key learning points at least once a year, 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 are available.



## Appendix A: 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:

[How to Complain - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)

[HOS Dispute Resolution Principles - Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code](#)

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

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