



Handling of Customer Complaints Comments and Compliments

Corporate Policy Document

January 2010

Contents

Section	Page No.
1. Introduction	3
2. Scope	3
3. Complaints, comments and compliments – definitions	3
3.1 Complaint	
3.2 Comment	
3.3 Compliment	
4. Complaints, compliments and comments process	4 - 6
4.1 Complaints Process	
4.2 Comments Process	
4.3 Compliments Process	
5. Exceptions	6
6. Learning from complaints	6
7. Reporting complaints and compliments	7
8. Unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants	7
9. Anonymous complaints	7
10. Confidentiality	8
11. Role descriptions	8 – 9
11.1 Members and Officers of the Council	
11.2 Customer Services Coordinator	
11.3 Appointed Service Coordinator	
11.4 Responding Officer	

1. Introduction

South Cambridgeshire District Council is committed to providing excellent customer service and aims to be a listening council, providing first class services to all.

The views of our customers are important to the Council, they help us shape services to support the needs of our communities. Providing insight into what we are doing well and where we can improve enables the Council to provide a responsive service that changes and adapts with the needs of customers.

Committed to improving services and providing excellent customer service, the Council will treat complaints, comments and compliments with respect and seek to understand the customer's point of view.

The Council will endeavour to resolve problems at the time they are brought to attention, within the constraints that apply and to the customer's satisfaction. Where this is not possible the formal complaints procedure should be applied.

2. Scope

This document sets out how South Cambridgeshire District Council manages and responds to complaints, comments and compliments.

This policy supports the Customer Service Strategy and is linked with the Handling of Unreasonable or unreasonably Persistent Complaints Policy.

3. Complaints, comments and compliments – Definitions

3.1 Complaint

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction or concern, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of actions by the District Council and its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers.

A complaint is not a service request. A service request is defined as a customer contact that for the first time brings a matter to the Council's attention and requests a service offered by the council.

3.2 Comment

A comment can be described as a volunteered personal opinion or belief, feedback or remark expressed by a customer. Unless specifically requested, there is not an automatic assumption that the Council will reply to comments. However, where it is felt appropriate or where the customer indicates they expect a reply, this should be sent within 10 working days.

3.3 Compliment

A compliment is defined as a customer statement of positive recognition or praise for a service or member of staff.

4. Complaints, comments and compliments – Process

4.1 Complaints Process

The complaints process has a three stage structure. Stage one and two complaints are investigated by the Council, stage three complaints are investigated by the Local Government Ombudsman.

In all circumstances the Council will act in accordance with its values; Trust, Mutual Respect, Customer Service, Commitment to improving services.

Officers responding to complaints are encouraged to speak with complainants during the investigation of the complaint to help gain a greater understanding of the complainant's point of view.

Stage 1

Stage one complaints will be registered and acknowledged (within three working days) by the Customer Service Coordinator.

Registered complaints will be passed to the appropriate Corporate Manager, who will review the complaint and either respond personally or arrange for the appropriate Service Manager to respond (within 10 working days of acknowledgement). All stage one responses will be signed by the Corporate Manager, or in absence of a Corporate Manager a Service Manager.

The Corporate Manager or Service Manager will send the response directly to the complainant, providing a copy of the response to the Customer Service Coordinator.

Stage 2

A complaint will enter stage two of the process if the complainant advises that they are dissatisfied with the result of stage one. In exceptional circumstances a complaint may be escalated to stage two in the first instance.

Stage two complaints will be registered and acknowledged (within three working days) by the Customer Service Coordinator.

Registered complaints will be passed to the appropriate member of the Senior Management Team, who will review the complaint and liaise with the appropriate Corporate Manager and/or Service Manager.

The Senior Management Team member will send the response directly to the complainant (within 20 working days of acknowledgement), providing a copy of the response to the Customer Service Coordinator. All stage two responses will be signed by a member of the Senior Management Team.

Stage 3

If a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the stage two complaint they may wish to enter stage three of the complaints process and contact the Local Government Ombudsman directly.

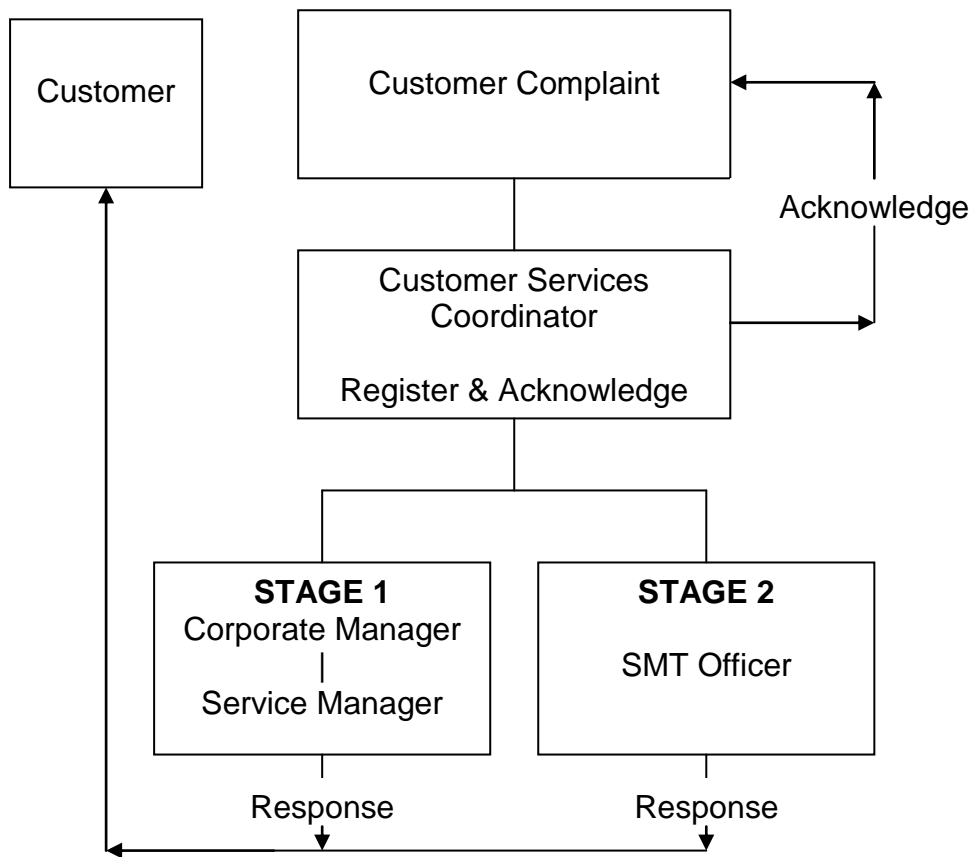
A complainant may approach the Local Government Ombudsman at any stage of the complaints process, although the Ombudsman will not usually investigate complaints unless the Council has had an opportunity to investigate at stages one and two first.

Stage three complaints will be registered and acknowledged (within three working days) by the Customer Service Coordinator.

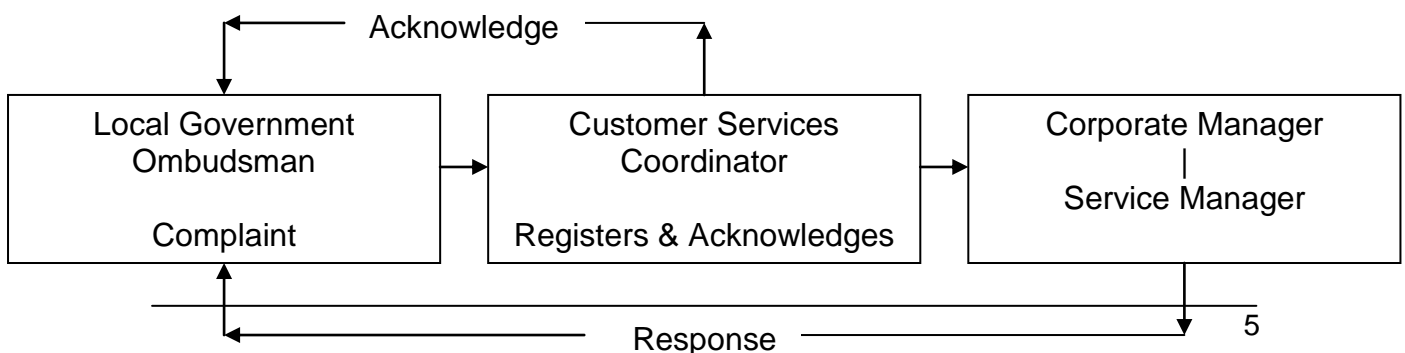
Registered complaints will be passed to the appropriate Corporate Manager, who will review the complaint and either respond personally or arrange for the appropriate Service Manager to respond within 28 days. Note the response deadline is 28 days not 28 working days. All stage three responses will be signed by the Corporate Manager, or in absence of a Corporate Manager a Service Manager.

The Corporate Manager or Service Manager will send the response directly to the Local Government Ombudsman, providing a copy of the response to the Customer Service Coordinator.

Stage 1 & 2 Complaints Flowchart



Stage 3 Local Government Ombudsman Complaints Flowchart



4.2 Comments Process

Customer comments are managed outside of the complaints process. Comments made to the Customer Services Coordinator will be forwarded to the appropriate Service Manager to consider.

Unless specifically requested, there is not an automatic assumption that the Council will reply to comments. However, where it is felt appropriate or where the customer indicates they expect a reply, this should be sent within 10 working days.

Service Managers are expected to record comments relating to their Service Area.

4.3 Compliments Process

Copies of all compliments should be provided to the Customer Services Coordinator, who will maintain a central register of compliments.

Compliments should be celebrated and shared amongst Service Areas.

5. Exceptions

The following exceptions apply to this policy:

- Under normal circumstances the Council is unable to investigate complaints relating to issues that are greater than 12 months old.
- The complaints process cannot be used to complain about the conduct of Councillors of a Councillor. Complaints of this nature should be directed to the Monitoring Officer at monitoring.officer@scambs.gov.uk.
- The complaints process excludes complaints made by our suppliers, partners and other public authorities regarding our business relationships.
- Staff grievances cannot be dealt with through the complaints process. Staff grievances are covered in the Grievance Policy and Procedure.
- Where statutory procedures are in place, complainants should use these procedures to pursue their complaint.

6. Learning from complaints

The Council values complaints and uses the information to inform service planning that shape services that support the needs of the customer. To this end all respondents to complaints are required to complete a 'Learning from Complaints Form'.

The Learning from Complaints Form provides an opportunity for officers to review the complaint and identify any lessons learnt and any corrective action taken. A copy of the form should accompany a copy of the response sent to the Corporate Customer Service Coordinator.

Learning from complaints will be recorded centrally by the Customer Service Coordinator and reported to Senior Management Team and the Lead Member on a quarterly basis. Lessons learnt will be shared across the Council.

7. Reporting complaints and compliments

Quarterly reports are made to Senior & Executive Management Teams, Service First Steering Group and the Lead Member for customer service.

These reports include the following quantitative data:

- volume of complaints
- complaints by stage
- complaints by corporate area
- acknowledge and response rate
- theme of complaints

Qualitative feedback will also be gathered via a quarterly survey of closed complaints. The survey will gather the following information:

- complaint handling satisfaction
- communication satisfaction
- complaint process satisfaction
- speed of response satisfaction

The Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy will be reviewed on an annual basis or when statutory requirements change.

8. Unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complaints

The Council recognises that customers may exert pressure on the authority when making a complaint, as they believe that the Council has failed in its service to them. Such pressure may be persistent, but in most cases this is reasonable and acceptable.

A small minority of complainants may pursue their complaints in ways that can impede the investigation of their complaint, or impose a significant and disproportionate resource requirement on the authority. Such actions can occur during the investigation of a complaint, or once investigations have been completed. In these cases, a complainant may be considered unreasonably persistent.

Unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants are not covered within this policy. The policy for Unreasonable or Unreasonably Persistent Complainants should be used when considering restrictive measures with customers.

Violent or abusive behaviour towards staff will not be tolerated under any circumstances. Please refer to the Council's policies and reporting guides relating to health and safety and violence at work for further information.

9. Anonymous complaints

Anonymous complaints should be passed to the Customer Service Coordinator who will register the complaint and pass to the appropriate Corporate Manager for investigation.

10. Confidentiality

In accordance with the 1998 Data Protection Act, the Council will maintain the confidentiality of all personal information, and not disclose it outside of South Cambridgeshire District Council without the express permission of the customer.

11. Role Descriptions

This section describes the roles and responsibilities of individuals and teams involved in the Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy.

11.1 Members and Officers of the Council

Members and Officers of the Council are required, in the first instance, to forward all complaints and compliments to the Customer Service Coordinator.

Members and Officers receiving customer comments should forward these comments to the appropriate Service Manager.

11.2 Customer Service Coordinator

The Customer Service Coordinator will register and acknowledge all complaints within three working days. Compliments will also be registered and maintained on a central record.

Complaints and Learning from Complaints Form will be passed to the appropriate Corporate Manager. The Customer Service Coordinator will also provide the response date.

Responses and Learning from Complaints Forms will be registered with the original complaint and a central record will be maintained.

Complaints and compliments will be reported in accordance with section seven of this policy.

11.3 Corporate Managers

Corporate Managers are responsible for reviewing all complaints for the services under their management. Corporate Managers may respond personally to a complainant or may ask a Service Manager to respond. All responses must be signed by the Corporate Manager or in their absence a Service Manager.

11.4 Responding Officer

The responding officer is responsible for investigating and responding to the complaint in accordance with the Customer Service Standards detailed below:

Responding to Complaints, Comments and Compliments

- If the investigation into your complaint will not be completed within ten working days, you will receive a letter informing you of the progress and expected timescales.
- If we have made a mistake, you will receive an apology.
- If we were at fault, you will be told what measures are being taken to put things right.

A letter template, attached as Appendix 1, has been created to help managers ensure responses to complainants meet the customer service standards.

The investigation of a complaint should be conducted in accordance with the Council values; trust, mutual respect, commitment to improving services and customer service. Investigations should be carried out objectively and responding officers should aim to resolve the complaint to the customer's satisfaction within the limitations that apply.

The response should be sent direct to the complainant and a copy provided to the appointed Customer Service Coordinator.