

# **Handling of Customer Comments, Compliments and Complaints**

Corporate Policy Document

July 2011 review (v1)

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## 1. Introduction

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

South Cambridgeshire District Council is committed to providing excellent customer service and aims to be a listening council, providing first class services to all. In June 2011 the Council achieved national Customer Service Excellence accreditation for all its front-line and support services. The policy supports the Council's service standards and helps us maintain a culture of excellent customer service as an organisation which listens to its customers, recognises good practice, acknowledges and investigates when things have gone wrong, putting in place actions to learn and improve in the future.

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

~~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 its attention, ~~within the constraints that apply and~~ to the customer's satisfaction. In order to achieve this, all staff are empowered to deal, where possible, with issues and complaints at source. Where this is not possible, the formal complaints procedure ~~will~~ 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.

Do these statements need qualifying? E.g if customer says it's a complaint then it's a complaint but in any case SCDC would endeavour to resolve at first contact. Do missed bins need a separate section, as a 'universal service'?

### 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 formal complaints process has a three stage structure. Stage one and two complaints are investigated by the Council, stage three complaints are investigated independently 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.

#### Informal Stage

Customers are asked, before submitting formal complaints, to contact us to establish whether we can deal with their concern promptly and satisfactorily. In cases such as a missed bin collection, this is more likely to result in an efficient resolution than awaiting a formal written response.

At the initial point of contact with the customer, the officer should, where possible, determine the extent to which the concerns being raised can be addressed through simple steps to put things right or an apology, without recourse to the formal procedure. Where such a solution is not possible or appropriate, the customer should be advised that the Council's formal procedure will be followed.

#### **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.

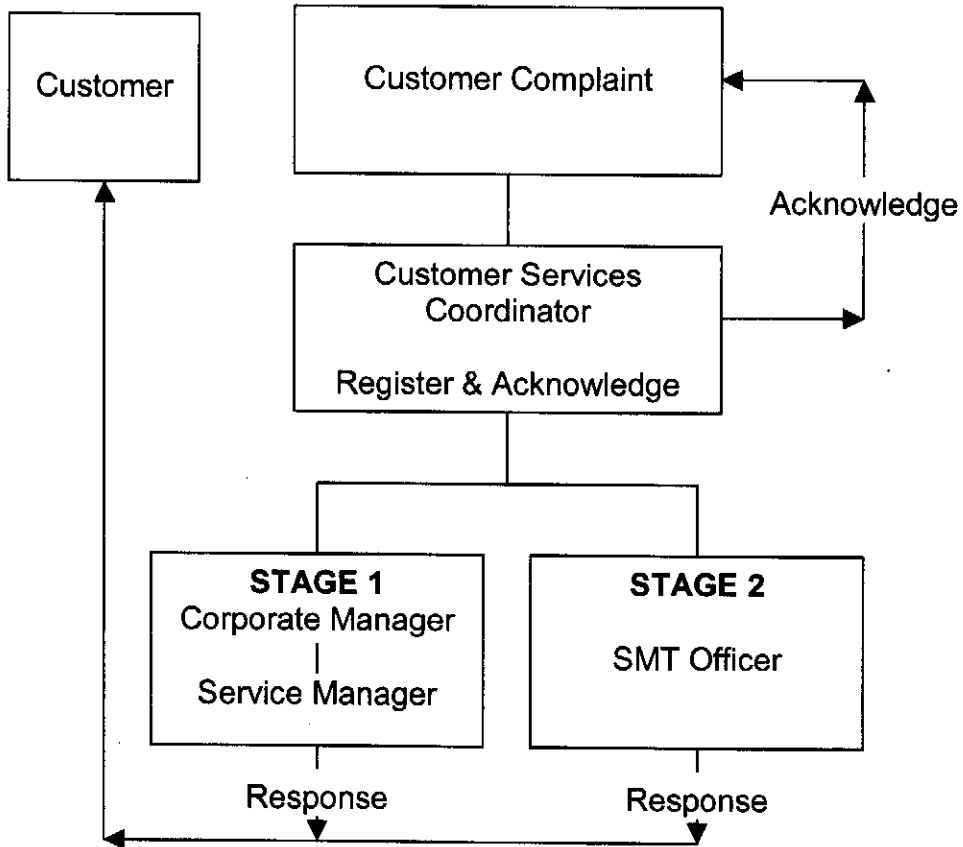
A complainant may approach the Local Government Ombudsman at any stage of the complaints process, although the Ombudsman will not usually investigate complaints unless the Council has had an opportunity to investigate at stages one and two first.

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

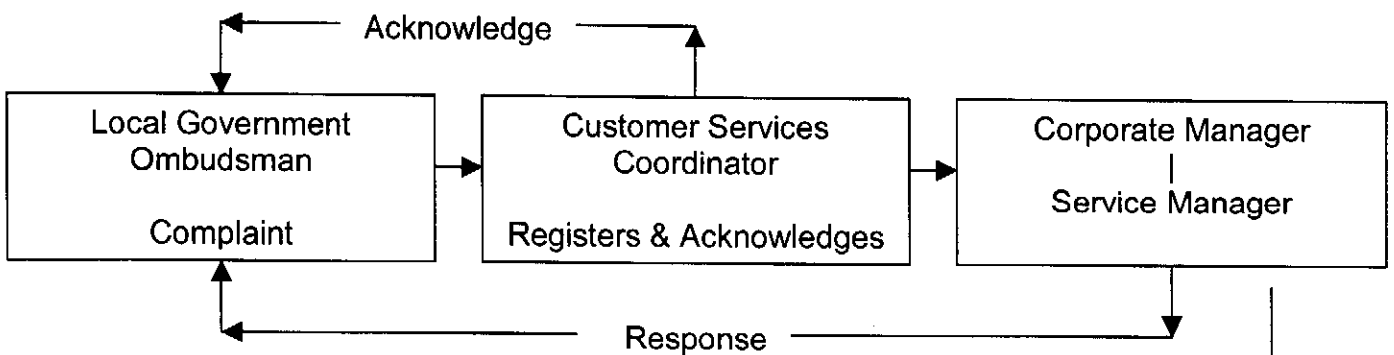
Registered complaints will be passed to the appropriate Corporate Manager, who will review the complaint and either respond personally or arrange for the appropriate Service Manager to respond within 28 days. Note the response deadline is 28 days not 28 working days. All stage three responses will be 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, and will be publicised via the Council's regular communication channels (Intranet, website and magazines).

## 5. Exceptions

The following exceptions apply to this policy:

- Unless the Chief Executive determines that there are exceptional~~der normal~~ circumstances the Council ~~is unable to~~will not 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@scams.gov.uk](mailto:monitoring.officer@scams.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 ~~must~~ should accompany a copy of the response sent to the Corporate Customer Service Coordinator before the complaint can be deemed closed.

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.

### **Internal complaints**

The Council recognises the crucial importance of effective internal customer relationships between services, without which an efficient and effective front-line service to external customers cannot be provided.

Inevitably, with severe resource pressures on all services, there will be occasions when internal customer relationships become strained or break down. In such situations, concerns around the conduct and actions of internal colleagues and teams should be addressed through the Council's normal management arrangements, and should be raised via the employee's line manager or team's Service or Corporate Manager in the first instance. Such issues should be addressed through effective inter-service discussions, or escalated via corporate manager to the Chief Executive and management team if required

Unless exceptional circumstances prevail, it is not appropriate to use the Council's Grievance Procedure to resolve internal service-level disputes.

## **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~~ Complaints handling performance and key learning points will be reported to the Council's management team and Portfolio Holder on a quarterly basis.

These reports include the following quantitative data:

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

Where Members are submitting complaints on behalf of residents, and are acting as advocates for residents, they will receive copies of all relevant correspondence relating to the complaint and may be the principal point of contact. In all cases, Members are invited to liaise with the Customer Service Co-ordinator to determine when an enquiry should be treated as a complaint, based on the guidance given in Section XX above, and explore how the council can provide the optimum support to ensure a satisfactory resolution for all parties.

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 Forms 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:

- 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.