

Corporate Customer Feedback policy

This policy may be revised from time to time to reflect changes in legislation, good customer practice and operational requirements.

A current version of the policy can be accessed on the council website www.n-somerset.gov.uk and searching for “customer feedback policy”.

For any enquiries about this policy, please contact:

Customer Services team

North Somerset Council

Town Hall

Walliscote Grove Road

Weston-super-Mare

BS23 1UJ

Email: customer.services@n-somerset.gov.uk

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Introduction

We value our customers and their feedback. This Corporate Customer Feedback Policy describes how we expect to manage and respond to customer feedback, whether suggestions, compliments or complaints. It is designed to reflect best practice both for the customer and the council. Complaints about social care are managed through separate policies. See Appendix 1.

The policy – purpose and definition

The main purpose of the customer feedback policy is to enable any matters raised by customers to be received and resolved quickly at the initial point of contact.

Customer feedback may include:

- general feedback and suggestions for improvement
- reports about service failure
- compliments about good service
- complaints.

Customer feedback is actively encouraged, tracked, monitored and used positively to make service improvements and changes where appropriate. For example, early diagnosis of customer problems with a new business process or a number of repeat requests may decrease the number of complaints if improvements are made quickly and issues resolved.

We work hard to avoid and minimise complaints but where they do occur this policy defines how complainants will be fairly and courteously treated.

This policy:

- confirms how to give feedback or make a complaint
- highlights any exceptions to the standard customer feedback procedure, for example where specific issues are treated using a defined complaints procedure
- defines the standard of service, including response times, what to expect when making a complaint
- recognises the importance of customer feedback in providing insight to council services and performance
- sets out how we monitor customer feedback and use information to improve services and identify training needs.

For the purposes of this policy, a complaint is defined as:

“an expression of dissatisfaction from someone who has used our service”.

You can complain about things like:

- not providing a service
- inadequate standard of service
- how we communicated with you
- how long we took to deal with your case
- treatment by or attitude of a member of staff
- not following the appropriate administrative process.

This list does not cover everything and there may be other reasons to make a complaint.

Exclusions to this policy

1. This policy is not intended to include appeals against, or objections to, council decisions which should generally be pursued by way of the appropriate statutory or other appeals procedure.

2. We will not normally investigate a complaint which is received more than 12 months after the complainant became aware of the issue.

3. We will not consider a complaint that relates to matters that we do not deal with or that is covered by other legislation. For example, we are not responsible for protecting private land or property.

4. We will normally only consider a complaint from someone who has been personally affected by the issue.

Some complaints are dealt with under separate procedures, for example complaints about social care or about elected members.

See Appendix 1 for guidance on how to make other complaints not dealt with by the council's main Corporate Customer Feedback Policy.

Please note: A complainant cannot demand that this procedure is used. The discretion about how to deal with a complaint lies with the council. In certain circumstances we may decide that alternative means of dealing with complaints would be more appropriate and this will include the consideration of offering or agreeing to mediation. The Customer Services team will decide this in consultation with the relevant service manager. In such cases the complainant will be informed of the alternative approach.

How we review and respond to complaints

We have a two-stage approach with a third level of escalation to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) that incorporates and reflects local government good practice:

- Stage 1 response to the complaint by the relevant council service team
- Stage 2 review by one of the council's directors
- Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman external independent review

Stage 1

Whenever we receive a complaint, we will ensure that it is directed to the appropriate service team that is responsible for the issues raised. Stage 1 involves the service themselves understanding and reviewing the complaint, whether informally through direct customer contact or more formally through an investigation and written response. We aim to respond to stage 1 complaints within 10 working days. If the matter cannot be resolved within the agreed timescales, we will inform you of the reason for delay and give you a target date for our final response. In extenuating circumstances, we may be required to extend this timescale and will publish this on our website.

Our policy is for our services to respond to customer complaints directly and have the opportunity to explain or put things right if there has been a mistake. We aim to resolve matters at Stage 1 with a single and accurate response but, if this is not possible or if the

customer remains dissatisfied, we may consider a second Stage 1 before progressing to Stage 2.

If a customer is not satisfied with the outcome of the Stage 1 process, they may request a Stage 2 review. If the matter cannot be resolved within the agreed timescales, we will inform you of the reason for delay and give you a target date for our final response.

Stage 2

Stage 2 provides the opportunity for the relevant director of the service to investigate the complaint by undertaking an independent review. They will review the Stage 1 investigation to consider whether all matters raised in the original complaint have been comprehensively and accurately addressed, and if not, may refer it back to the service to ensure this now happens. Through consideration of Stage 1 communications between the complainant and the service concerned, the Stage 2 review will determine:

- if your complaint may still reasonably be resolved by any further Stage 1 consideration by the service, or
- if a full independent Stage 2 investigation is appropriate.

Key to this decision will be a review of communications with the customer to understand the outcome or remedy that the complainant seeks and the best way that may be achieved, if possible.

We aim to respond to Stage 2 complaints within 17 working days. In extenuating circumstances, we may be required to extend this timescale and will publish this on our website and/or inform customers individually.

Role of the Local Government Ombudsman

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) looks at complaints about councils. It is a free service. Their job is to investigate complaints in a fair and independent way - they do not take sides.

If there is a problem with a council service, customers should first complain to the council so that there is an opportunity to resolve the problem before the LGSCO considers it. Customers must usually complete council complaint stages 1 and 2 before the LGSCO will look at a complaint.

If a case is accepted by the LGSCO it will be allocated to one of their investigators for them to consider an independent review.

The LGSCO Advice Team contact details are:

Telephone: 0300 061 0614

Website: www.lgo.org.uk/contact-us

Write to: Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, PO Box 4771, Coventry CV4 0EH

Classification of customer complaints

We record information on all the complaints we receive. We identify which services are receiving complaints and the reason for them. We also look for any trends in complaints. We monitor via quarterly performance reports in order to understand and seek improvements to our services.

How to contact us to give feedback

Who can make a complaint, suggestion or compliment

Any member of the public or their representative, businesses, public and voluntary bodies may give us feedback and make a complaint, suggestion or compliment.

Steps to making a complaint

To make a formal complaint, use our website to complete a form which will capture all the information that we need to investigate:

www.n-somerset.gov.uk/complaints

Steps to making a comment or suggestion

To send us a comment or suggestion, use our website to complete a form which will capture all the information that we need:

www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/complaints-feedback/make-comment-or-enquiry

Steps to giving a compliment

To send us a compliment, use our website to complete a form which will capture all the information we need:

www.n-somerset.gov.uk/compliment

Assistance in giving feedback

If you need assistance in giving any form of feedback whether it be a complaint, compliment or suggestion, we will provide this as promptly as possible. Some assistance, such as translation services, can involve a delay. We will tell you when the assistance can be provided and let you know what is happening. Officers dealing with a complaint will ensure that any required assistance is made available throughout the procedure.

Who will respond to your feedback

Our roles and responsibilities

Services

Council services are responsible for:

- ensuring that all customer feedback and complaints received directly by the service are logged and processed in accordance with this policy and using our Case Tracker system
- liaison with relevant service colleagues and managers to ensure the feedback is reviewed appropriately and responses are properly considered
- tracking progress at each stage
- informing customers of any delays in responding, and the reasons why
- ensuring responses are issued within timescales
- communicating and recording outcomes.

Contact centres

Our contact centres will usually be the first point of contact via the phone. They will ensure that they capture all relevant details about a customer and their feedback on the council's Case Tracker system.

Corporate Customer Services team

The Corporate Customer Services team will oversee the complaints process and will monitor complaints held within the Case Tracker system. They will compile quarterly management reports to look at trends and offer suggestions for improvement.

They will also manage the Stage 2 process to ensure that complaints are dealt with appropriately and in a timely manner. They will liaise with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman over any referrals or investigations. They will give guidance on the investigation of individual complaints, ensuring cross-service complaint investigations are co-ordinated.

They will also deliver corporate training for customer service.

Record retention

Schedule for customer feedback correspondence

The council will hold records of customer feedback for the periods of time shown in the table below:

Complaints resolved at Stage 1	Two years from closure/last contact
Complaints resolved at Stage 2	Two years from closure/last contact
Complaints referred to the LGO	Three years from closure/last contact

The length of time a case remains is dependent on the case type and stage. After that time the case is marked for deletion.

Complaint	Stage 1, Stage 2	2 years
Complaint	LGO	3 years
Comment		2 years
Compliment		2 years
Adults	All stages	6 years
Childrens	All stages	75 years

Unacceptable and unreasonable customer behaviour

There may be a small number of individuals who pursue their complaints with us in a way that is unreasonable. They may behave unacceptably, or be unreasonably persistent in their contacts with us, which can take up a considerable amount of staff time and resources. This can happen either while the complaint is being investigated, or once the council has finished dealing with the complaint.

We are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly, comprehensively and in a timely manner.

The aim of the policy on unacceptable and unreasonable customer behaviour is to develop a proportionate approach when responding to unreasonable complaint behaviour, based on the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's view of good practice in dealing with these complaints.

Behaviour may be considered unreasonable or unacceptable when a customer is:

- making a complaint only to annoy (or for reasons that he or she does not admit or make obvious) and there are insufficient or no grounds for their complaint
- refusing to specify the grounds of a complaint, despite offers of assistance
- refusing to co-operate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved
- refusing to accept that issues are not within the remit of the complaints policy and procedure despite having been given the information about the scope of the policy and procedure (for example planning appeals)
- insisting on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are not in accordance with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice (for example, insisting that there must not be a written record of the complaint, or that it should not be dealt with by a particular officer)
- refusing to accept that the issue is not within the power of the council to investigate, change, influence or resolve (something that another organisation is responsible for)
- making unjustified complaints about the member of staff who is trying to deal with the issue, and seeking to have them dismissed
- changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds
- denying or changing statements he or she made at an earlier stage
- making an unreasonable amount of contact with us in relation to a specific complaint or complaints
- expecting us to respond to numerous, detailed questions which we believe are unnecessary to our understanding and resolution of the complaint
- introducing trivial, irrelevant or new information at a later stage
- covertly recording meetings and conversations
- submitting falsified documents from themselves or others
- adopting a 'scattergun' approach when the complaint is already under investigation - pursuing parallel complaints on the same issue with different people – for example, their MP, the Chief Executive, their councillor, the police, a solicitor or the Local Government Ombudsman
- submitting repeat complaints with minor additions/variations that the complainant insists are 'new' complaints
- refusing to accept that documented evidence is factual
- complaining about or challenging an issue that is based on an historic or irreversible decision or incident

- continually requesting the complaint response is reviewed despite being informed that the council's complaints procedure has been exhausted
- a combination of some or all of the above.

Procedure for dealing with unreasonable or unacceptable behaviour

When a council officer considers the unreasonable complainant policy should be implemented, the Customer Services team will write to or email the individual in question. They will advise them that their behaviour has led to the unreasonable complainant policy being considered and as such, will consult with all key council officers and councillors who have been involved in the matter before a decision is made.

If a decision is taken to apply restricted access, we will write to the complainant, with a copy of this policy, to explain:

- why the decision has been taken
- what it means for his/her contact with the council
- how long the restrictions will last
- what the complainant can do to have the decision reviewed.

We will not discuss the implementation of the unreasonable behaviour policy with external parties.

Only the Customer Services team will be authorised to write to the complainant, and they will keep records that show:

- when a decision was taken to apply the policy and the evidence that this was based on
- the date the decision is due for review.

Customer information such as file notes, telephone logs and correspondence will still need to be kept by the relevant service area.

When a decision is taken not to respond to further correspondence, any further letters/emails will need to be checked to pick up any significant new information.

Feedback on this policy

We welcome any feedback that you have on the use of the Corporate Customer Feedback Policy. Please send your comments for the attention of the Customer Services team, North Somerset Council, Town Hall, Walliscote Grove Road, Weston-super-Mare, BS23 1UJ, or email us at customer.services@n-somerset.gov.uk.

Appendix 1

Complaints not dealt with by the council's main corporate complaints procedure

Examples of the most commonly raised matters that are not within the remit of the council's corporate complaints procedure:

Complaints dealt with under other procedures:

- **Complaints about Adult Social Care services.** Adult Social Care Services concerns, comments or complaints about the service received should be referred to the Complaints and Directorate Governance Team. See our website at:

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/complaints-feedback/complaints-about-social-services>

or contactable at complaints.manager@n-somerset.gov.uk

We will also deal directly with complaints about:

- charges for services including the assessment of an individual's ability to pay for services.
- safety and safeguarding
- some aspects of mental health services including Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DOLS) and the Approved Mental Health Service.

There is a complaints procedure which sets out how these complaints will be dealt with in accordance with the relevant legislation.

- **Complaints relating to Children's Social Care Services.** Complaints about children's social care services (including child protection; disabled children and children in need; children and young people in care; fostering and adoption) are dealt with under a separate complaints procedure which is set out in regulations and statutory guidance. Complaints about all other aspects of Children's Services will be dealt with under the council's customer feedback procedure. The Complaints and Directorate Governance Manager will assess each complaint and identify the correct procedure to be used.

Complaints should be directed to the Complaints and Directorate Governance Manager. See our website at:

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/complaints-feedback/complaints-about-social-services>

or contactable at complaints.manager@n-somerset.gov.uk

- **Complaints about individual schools and academies (including those about the National Curriculum).** Each school operates under a system of local management and has its own complaints procedure. For more information see our website:

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/complaints-feedback/complaints-about-schools>

- **Matters where there is a formal right of appeal external to the council or other legal remedy, such as with the refusal of planning permission or matters of contract.** In these circumstances the complainant will be advised to follow the prescribed legal procedure and, where possible, how to do so.
- **Disagreements with properly made council, executive and committee decisions,** including council policies and budget decisions.

Please refer to the Council Constitution on our website:

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/councillors-committees/council-constitution>

- **Complaints about the conduct of councillors or the way in which complaints about their conduct are investigated.**

Please refer to our website:

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/council-democracy/complaints-feedback/complaints-about-councillors>

- **Complaints about parking tickets/penalty charge notices.** As the issue of a penalty charge notice is a legal matter, it must be dealt with formally. Information about how to appeal can be found on our website:

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/my-services/parking-travel-roads/parking-access/civil-parking-enforcement/how-challenge-penalty-charge-notice>