

Customer Complaints and Feedback Policy

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1.0 Overview

- 1.1 Newark & Sherwood District Council recognises the importance of listening to the views of its residents about the service they receive from us.
- 1.2 One of our values is to be “Welcoming and Responsive”. To achieve this we strive to be approachable, open to feedback and challenge and swift to act. This policy seeks to outline how we will achieve this through customer feedback.
- 1.3 We aim to provide services which are accessible to all residents. If a customer needs additional support or reasonable adjustments to provide their feedback, we will ensure this is provided.
- 1.4 This policy provides us with the opportunity to capture, investigate, respond, and learn from customer feedback to assist with the delivery and shaping of our services in the future.
- 1.5 This policy should be read in conjunction with:
 - Reasonable Adjustments Policy
 - Managing Unacceptable Behaviour Policy
 - Compensation Policy (Housing)

2.0 Scope of the policy

2.1 This policy is designed to cover complaints, praise, comments and suggestions received through any channel related to the services we provide.

2.2 Whilst we welcome all customer feedback, there are some circumstances in which a matter will not be considered as a complaint. Neither does this policy cover issues where there is a separate process for reporting a matter to us or there is a statutory right of appeal. These include:

- Service requests. reporting a missed bin collection or a repair to a Council property
- an expression of dissatisfaction with services made through a survey
- complaints regarding formal decisions taken by a committee for which there is an existing right of appeal – either within the Council itself or to an independent tribunal
- any matter where there is an alternative statutory process or appeal process
- complaints about Councillors
- requests for information or explanations of our policies or practices
- the issue giving rise to the complaint occurred over twelve months ago
- housing disrepair claims
- legal proceedings have started. This is defined as details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, having been filed at court
- matters that have previously been considered under this policy

2.3 If we determine that it is not appropriate for a complaint to be escalated through our feedback process, we will advise the complainant of what that process or right of appeal is.

3.0 Reporting Feedback

3.1 A customer may feel hesitant in submitting feedback, especially if wanting to make a complaint, as they might be concerned in doing so, they could receive poor service or suffer unpleasant consequences of their action. It is important for customers to understand that making a formal complaint will not have a detrimental impact on the level of service we provide.

3.2 Feedback can be made either directly by the complainant or by someone appointed to act on their behalf e.g. a friend, relative or a voluntary agency, providing we have their consent.

3.3 Feedback can be submitted through these contact channels:

- online – via the online form
- email
- to any of our staff including by telephone
- letter
- social media

If a customer submits a complaint via social media, they will be contacted to be advised for the complaint to be progressed via a different method to ensure confidentiality and privacy is maintained.

4.0 Complaints – what is a complaint?

- 4.1 Complaints provide an opportunity for us learn from feedback and gives insight into the drivers of customer satisfaction. We use complaints to review the services we deliver.
- 4.2 A complaint is defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions, or lack of action by the Council, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual resident or group of residents”. This is whether the service is provided directly by us or by one of our contractors or partners. You do not need to use the word complaint for it to be treated it as one.
- 4.3 We acknowledge that customers will at times, feel dissatisfied with the service they have received. We are committed to providing all of our customers with a positive experience no matter what the circumstances are. In the first instance, the customer will be encouraged to resolve their issue directly with the staff member or business unit and if applicable a service request will be raised.
- 4.4 A service request is a request from a customer to the Council, requiring action to be taken to put something right e.g. to report a missed bin collection or to carry out a repair. Service requests will be recorded, monitored and reviewed regularly. They can be defined as a request that the council provides or improves a service, fixes a problem, or reconsiders a decision.
- 4.5 If the customer raises dissatisfaction with the response to their service request, or it cannot be resolved in the above manner, or if further enquiries are needed to resolve the matter, or the customer requests it, then the issue will be logged as a formal stage one complaint, even when the handling of the service request is ongoing.
- 4.6 Each complaint will be considered on its own merit. We will accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so. There are certain issues which we cannot treat as a complaint and where this is the case, we will let the customer know by setting out the reasons why it is not suitable for the complaints process. These are detailed in section 2.2 above.
- 4.7 If we are your landlord and decide not to accept a complaint, a detailed explanation will be provided to you as the tenant setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process. If you are not happy with the decision, you have the right to refer your concerns to the Housing Ombudsman.
- 4.8 A complaint can be made either directly by the complainant or by someone appointed to act on their behalf e.g. friend, relative, voluntary agency, elected member or other third party/representative, providing the complainant provides the consent for them to act on their behalf.

4.9 An expression of dissatisfaction with services made through a survey is not defined as a complaint. Surveys carried out by the Council will include details on how residents can submit a complaint.

5.0 The Complaint Process

5.1 We will accept complaints within twelve months of the issue occurring or the complainant becoming aware of the issue unless the complaint is excluded as per the reasons detailed in section 2.2. We will consider whether to apply our discretion to accept complaints made outside this time limit where there are good reasons to do so. If we decide not to accept a complaint, we will provide an explanation setting out the reasons why and provide details of your right to take our decision to the relevant Ombudsman and record all correspondence on our system.

5.2 The investigating officer will discuss with the complainant about any reasonable adjustments which are required during the complaint process, including being given the opportunity to have a representative deal with their complaint and to be represented/accompanied at any meeting. Other adjustments may include for decisions or letters to be discussed in person or by telephone prior to being issued, home visits or less telephone contact.

5.3 Where a service is provided by a third party on behalf of the Council, they will be expected to follow our Customer Complaint and Feedback Policy.

5.4 Complaints will be responded to when the answer/remedy is known, not when the outstanding actions required to address the issue are completed. These actions will be tracked and actioned with appropriate updates to the complainant.

5.5 If during the course of an investigation, additional complaints are raised, if they relate to the existing complaint, they should be incorporated into the response. Where matters are unrelated or it would be unreasonable to delay the response further, the issues will be logged as a new complaint.

6.0 Complaint stages

6.1 There are two stages to our process.

6.2 Stage 1

Once a complaint has been received by channels mentioned in section 3.3, it will be recorded by a customer services team leader or senior advisor. They will allocate the complaint to the relevant business unit and a senior officer will then, where appropriate, speak to the complainant. This enables them to:

- check their understanding of the issue the complainant wants investigating and confirm it is a complaint which we can investigate
- understand any reasonable adjustments required and any support needed during the complaint process

- identify opportunities to resolve the complaint at the earliest opportunity
- manage the customers' expectations and answer any questions about the process
- hear the complainant's view of what has gone wrong and how they say it has affected them
- understand the outcome they are wanting and explain if the desired outcome is unreasonable or realistic

The contact stage between the Council and complainant is valuable. It is a way of finding out whether the complainant needs assistance to pursue the complaint and to agree a way of dealing with and responding to the complaint.

When submitting a complaint, the complainant will receive notification by either an automated email or letter informing them that the senior officer who is investigating their complaint, will contact them within **5 working days**.

Within these **5 working days**, the investigating officer will issue an acknowledgement email or letter which will include the details of the complaint and the outcome requested. This is known as the "complaint definition".

The investigating officer will conduct a thorough investigation of the complaint and provide a response directly to the complainant within **10 working days** from the date the 5 day acknowledgement was issued.

Where it is not possible to provide a full response within this timescale, prior to the 10 day deadline, the investigating officer will contact the complainant and explain why this is the case and advise of an estimated date of response. This extension will not exceed a further **10 working days** without good reason. The reason for the extension will be clearly explained and suitable intervals agreed for updating the complainant.

At this stage, the complainant will be provided with the contact details of the relevant Ombudsman.

6.3 Stage 2

If the complainant is unhappy with the outcome of the stage 1 complaint, they can request it progresses to stage 2.

The stage 2 complaint will be investigated by a director or business manager who was not involved in the stage 1 complaint. The allocation and acknowledgment processes are the same as for a stage 1 complaint. The investigating officer will contact the complainant to ensure that the nature of the stage 2 complaint is understood, any outstanding issues and the desired outcome as well as any reasonable adjustments required. Where this is not possible, the stage 2 investigation will be a review of the stage 1 response.

The investigating officer will conduct a thorough investigation of the complaint including a review of the response provided at stage 1. The response will be issued within **20 working days** from the date the 5 day acknowledgment was issued.

Where it is not possible to provide a full response within this timescale, prior to the deadline, the investigating officer will contact the complainant and explain why this is the case and advise of an estimated date of response. This extension will not exceed a further **20 working days** without good reason. The reason for the extension will be clearly explained and suitable intervals agreed for updating the complainant.

7.0 Ombudsman information and additional information for Council tenants

- 7.1 If at the end of the stage 2 process, the tenant remains unhappy with the outcome of their complaint, they can refer it to the Housing Ombudsman.

The Housing Ombudsman also welcomes tenants to contact them at any point for additional support and they do not have to complete the Council's full complaints process before doing so.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied – all other complaints.

If after receiving the stage 2 response, the customer is still unhappy with the outcome they can refer it to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

In most circumstances the Ombudsman will expect the complainant to have followed the Council's complaint process. However it is acknowledged that in some very rare cases, there is nothing to be gained from progressing with both stages. In these situations the Ombudsman may be prepared to consider complaints without both stages being completed.

8.0 Anonymous complaints

- 8.1 Customers are encouraged to provide their identity when submitting a complaint. Complaints may be made anonymously and will still be treated with the same degree of importance and within the relevant timescales set out in our procedure above. Anonymous complaints may be more difficult to investigate, and therefore in most cases will be recorded as a service request to the appropriate business unit. They will be investigated by the relevant senior officer.

It is at the discretion of the relevant business manager receiving the anonymous complaint whether to investigate it or not. The business manager will consider the following when make the decision:

- seriousness of the complaint
- credibility of the complaint
- likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources
- whether the allegations have been investigated previously

9.0 Complaint outcomes

9.1 The complainant will be informed of the outcome of the investigation of their complaint, including what we have found and how and why we came to that conclusion. If we find there is a fault in our systems or the way we do things, we will advise of this and explain how we plan to change things to stop it happening again. If we have got something wrong, we will apologise. Where issues have been raised regarding the conduct of officers, we will tell you if we think we have got it wrong but matters relating to any potential disciplinary action will not be divulged as these need to remain confidential. Within the response to your complaint, we will advise you how you can escalate your complaint should you remain dissatisfied.

9.2 Complainants should appreciate that not all complaints may be resolved to their satisfaction; however, we will always apologise and try to make things right if we find we are at fault. We will not tolerate abusive or unreasonable behaviour whilst investigating your complaint and ask that our staff are treated with courtesy and respect.

10.0 Praise

10.1 Praise is an expression of satisfaction, a compliment, thanks, or congratulations. These provide an additional overview for us to learn from when we have done something well and learn valuable insight into customer satisfaction.

It is appreciated when a customer takes the time to thank or praise us or our staff for when we have done something well.

11.0 Comments and Suggestions

11.1 A comment is a general statement about our policies, practices or the service we provide and can be positive or negative. A suggestion is about how we could change what we do.

These are welcomed as valuable sources of information as to how we could improve the service we deliver. It may not always be possible to implement or make changes because of a customer's comment or suggestion, but they are still important as the feedback might influence decisions we make in the future.

12.0 Publicising the Complaints and Feedback Policy

12.1 It is important that customers understand that there is a policy. As a minimum it will be publicised:

- on our website
- in our customer facing buildings
- in regular social media campaigns
- in tenant communications e.g. newsletters and rent statements including guidance on how to make a complaint and our complaint process

- 12.2 The details of the Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, including links to their Complaint Handling Codes are published on our website.

<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/>

<http://www.lgo.org.uk/>

13.0 Managing Unreasonable Behaviour

- 13.1 In a minority of cases, complainants pursue their complaints in a way which is unreasonable. They may behave unacceptably or be unreasonably persistent in their contacts and submission of information. This can impede investigating their complaint (or complaints by others) and can have significant resource issues for us. These actions can occur either while their complaint is being investigated, or once an organisation has finished the complaint investigation.
- 13.2 A copy of our policy detailing how we manage these customers can be found on our website.

14.0 Review

- 14.1 The Policy is to be reviewed every two years or in response to changes in relevant legislation and or other Newark & Sherwood District Council policies, procedures, and agreements.

Approval, Consultation and Review Timetable

Document title	Customer Complaints and Feedback Policy		
Version number	DRAFT v.1 – replaces 1 February 2022 policy	Protective marking	Official
Lead Director	Director Customer Services and Organisational Development		
Lead Business Unit	Customer Services		
Lead Contact	Customer Services Business Manager		
Date approved (SLT)	14 May 2024	Date approved (Members)	31 July 2024 Audit and Governance Committee
Reviews due:	July 2026		
Consultation			
Consultee	Date	Comments received	Material change requested (yes/no)
Involved tenants			
PPIC			

