

1. Introduction

We believe that the needs of our customers are our top priority and we are committed to providing our customers with quality services in the most effective and efficient way possible. East Cambridgeshire District Council values feedback about its services and recognises the right of all its customers to complain compliment or make a suggestion. The Council is committed to ensuring that it uses customer feedback to help improve services and to focus on the needs of all our customers.

The Council will endeavour to resolve problems at the time they are brought to its attention to the customer's satisfaction. In order to achieve this all staff are empowered to deal, where possible, with issues at source. Where this is not possible, the formal complaints procedure will be applied.

2. Scope

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

This policy supports the Council's commitment to manage customer contact in a fair and positive way.

3. Comment, Compliments and Complaints - Definitions

3.1 Comments

A comment is a volunteered personal opinion or belief, feedback or remark expressed by the customer or an idea for making changes or improvements to any part of the Council's services.

3.2 Compliments

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

3.3 Complaints

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about the standard of service, actions or lack of actions undertaken by the District Council and its staff, which affects an individual 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.

4. Comments, Compliments and Complaints – Process

4.1 Comments Process

We will thank the Customer for taking the time to help us improve Council services.

Comments will be forwarded to the appropriate Service Lead 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 must be sent within 10 working days.

4.2 Compliments Process

We will thank the Customer for taking the time to let us know we are providing a good service.

Compliments will be forwarded to the appropriate Service Lead.

Service Leads are encouraged to celebrate and share information of this nature at regular team meetings and acknowledge performance of said individual and or team via the Council's appraisal process.

4.3 Complaints Process

The formal Complaints Procedure has three stages. Stage one and two complaints are investigated by the Council and Stage 3 complaints are investigated independently by the Local Government Ombudsman.

A complaint at any stage of the procedure can be made:

- By Telephone
- In Person
- In writing
- On a Customer feedback leaflet
- By e-mail
- Via the Council's website

In all circumstances the Council will act in accordance with its values to provide a service driven by and built around the needs of the customer.

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.

4.4 Informal Stage – Frontline Resolution

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, this is likely to result in an efficient resolution rather than waiting for 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 the Council's formal procedure will be followed.

4.5 Stage 1 - Investigation

- Stage one complaints will be registered and acknowledged within one working day by the Customer Service Team.
- The customer should provide details of what they are unhappy about and what they would like us to do to put things right.
- Registered complaints will be passed to the appropriate Service Lead, who will review the complaint and either respond personally or arrange for an appropriate Senior Officer to respond within 10 working days of the acknowledgement. If it is a complex case and likely to take longer, an alternative date must be agreed with the Customer.
- The Service Lead or responding Senior Officer will send the response directly to the complainant, providing a copy of the response to the Customer Services Team via feedback@eastcambes.gov.uk email address.
- The complainant shall be informed they have 28 days to advise that they are dissatisfied with the response.

4.6 Stage 2 - Investigation

A complaint will enter the stage 2 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 2 complaints will be registered and acknowledged within one working day by the Customer Services Team.
- Registered stage 2 complaints will be passed to the appropriate member of the Council's Management Team, who will review the complaint and liaise with the appropriate Service Lead.
- The Service Lead or Management Team member will send the response directly to the complainant, within 10 working days of acknowledgement, providing a copy of the response to the Customer Services Team via feedback@eastcambs.gov.uk email address.

4.7 Stage 3

If a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the stage two process 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 fully investigate the complaint itself.

If the Local Government Ombudsman does become involved:

- LGO complaints will be registered and acknowledged within one working day by the Customer Services team.
- LGO complaints will be passed to the appropriate member of the Council's Management Team, to respond to the LGO direct within 28 calendar days and ensure appropriate action is taken.
- A copy of the response will be sent to the relevant Service Lead and to the Customer Services Team via feedback@eastcambs.gov.uk email address.

5. Exceptions

The following exceptions apply to this policy:

- Unless the Chief Executive determines that there are exceptional circumstances the Council will not investigate complaints relating to issues that are greater than 12 months old.
- Matters of law or central government policy
- Complaints made by our suppliers, partners and other public authorities regarding our business relationships.
- Complaints regarding the conduct of Council Members, complaints of this nature should be directed to the Monitoring Officer via the Breach of Code of Conduct by District, parish or Town Councillor complaint form available to complete online or download from the Council's website.
- Complaints where a customer or the Council has started legal proceedings but not where a customer has only threatened legal action.
- Complaints that have already been decided by a court or independent tribunal.
- Services for which there are alternative statutory appeal or tribunal processes including appeals against the refusal of planning permission or planning enforcement.

6. Learning from Complaints

The Council values complaints and uses the information to inform service planning and to develop services that support the needs of the customer. 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 accompany a copy of the response sent to the Customer Services Team before the complaint can be deemed closed.

Learning from complaints will be recorded centrally by the Customer Services team and reported to Management Team and Service Leads on a quarterly basis. Lessons learnt will be shared across the Council.

7. Anonymous complaints

Anonymous complaints are unlikely to be effectively dealt with under this procedure as the Council needs to correspond with and in most cases liaise with the complainant in order to address their concerns. However, these complaints will still be recorded and investigated by the Service involved in order to identify possible areas for service improvement. When taking details of a complaint, staff should always encourage customers to provide their identity in order for their complaint to be effectively processed.

8. Unreasonable and 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 disproportionate resource requirement upon an 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 handling unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants should be used when considering restrictive measures with customers. A copy of this policy is available on request from the Customer Services Team or via the Council's website.

Violent and abusive behaviour towards staff will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

9. Monitoring and Reporting of Comments, Compliments and

Complaints

Comments, compliments and complaints handling performance will be reported to the Council's Management Team and Service Leads on a quarterly basis.

These reports will include the following quantitative data:

- Volume of complaints
- Complaints by stage
- Complaints by service
- Acknowledgement and response rates
- Theme of complaints (if any)
- Learning from complaints

Qualitative feedback will also be gathered via a survey of closed complainants. The survey will gather the following satisfaction:

- Complaint handling satisfaction
- Communication satisfaction
- Complaint process satisfaction
- Speed of response satisfaction

The Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy should be reviewed in 6 months and on an annual basis or when statutory requirements change.