

Southampton City Council  
Corporate Services (including Adult  
Social Care & Housing)  
Customer Comments, Compliments and  
Complaints Policy



**Southampton City Council**  
**Corporate Services including Adult Social**  
**Care and Housing**  
**Customer Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy**

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<b>Lead officer</b>	Kim Newington	<b>Review date</b>	23/9/2026
<b>Contact</b>	Complaints.review@southampton.gov.uk	<b>Effective date</b>	23/9/2025

## 1. Introduction

We acknowledge that – despite our best intentions – things do sometimes go wrong. When this happens, we want to put things right. We want our customers to be satisfied with our services. We welcome hearing our customers' comments, compliments, and complaints to better understand how they view our services and to use these valuable opportunities to learn and improve for the future.

## 2. Aims

We aim to deliver a comments, compliments, and complaints provision that:

- Is simple for everyone to use and understand.
- Is led and supported by the very top of the organisation.
- Consistently ensures excellent service standards are delivered.
- Fulfils the needs of our customers.
- Encourages us to learn from customer feedback to improve.
- Complies with the relevant legislation and council policy.
- Focuses on fair, proportionate resolution at the earliest stage.
- Works in an open-minded and impartial way.
- Complies with the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Codes.

## 3. Comments and Compliments

We understand that customers may wish to share their experiences of using our services, express a concern, or tell us about services which they would like to receive. Sometimes, customers may want to tell us when we are doing something particularly well. Comments of this nature are welcome.

## 4. Definition of a Complaint

*'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 a resident or group of residents.'*

*A customer does not have to use the word 'complaint' for it to be treated as such.*

*A customer expressing dissatisfaction has a choice to make a complaint.*

## 5. Complaint Stages

### Stage 1 – Service Recovery Response

The Council will acknowledge, define, and log the complaint within 5 working days of receipt and issue a full response within 10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged. This time limit is extendable to 20 working days for complex matters; however, any extension will be no more than 10 working days without good reason. The reason(s) will be clearly explained to the customer and an expected timescale for response will be given. Where this is necessary, the customer will also be notified in writing of the details of the relevant Ombudsman.

### Stage 2 –

The Council will acknowledge, define, and log the complaint within 5 working days of receipt and issue a full response within 20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged. This time limit is extendable to 40 working days for complex matters. Stage 2 complaint extensions cannot exceed 20 working days without a good reason. The reason(s) will be clearly explained to the customer and an expected timescale for response will be given. Where this is necessary, the customer will also be notified in writing with the details of the relevant

Ombudsman.

Stage 2 Complaints will be investigated and responded to by a Senior Manager within the Service area complained of unless a complaint relates to Children's Social Care matters (separate Policy), or some tenant or leaseholder (in a SCC managed block) initiated Housing matters (Complaints Resolution Team) or a complex, multi-agency or multi department complaint, in which case the relevant Executive Director and Complaints Resolution Manager may discuss an appropriate lead on a particular stage 2 complaint to ensure independent and correct resolution and response.

The person undertaking a stage 2 response must NOT be the same person who responded at stage 1.

Final Stage - Further escalation to the relevant Ombudsman/Regulator (if appropriate).

Acknowledgement of any stage 1 complaints or escalations to stage 2 will set out its understanding of the complaint, the outcomes the customer is seeking and which aspects it is and is not responsible for. Additionally, if any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the council will ask the customer for clarification.

If the council has been unable to issue a full complaint response following the initial period and the extended timescales set out above, we will contact the customer to agree suitable intervals for being updated on the progress of the complaint.

Where customers raise additional complaints during the investigation, these must be incorporated into the stage 1 response if they are related and the stage 1 response has not been issued. Where the stage 1 response has been issued, the new issues are unrelated to the issues already being investigated or it would unreasonably delay the response, the new issues must be logged as a new complaint.

## 6. Service Recovery

~~Requests for service~~ "Requests for service" are not treated as complaints but where a service has not been delivered to the published standard, we will seek to secure early 'Service Recovery' within the service area itself. For example, if a customer reports a pothole, tells us that a streetlight is not working or that their bin has not been collected, we will arrange for the matter to be dealt with without fuss and in line with a 'service recovery' process. If the service can be successfully delivered through this route and the customer is satisfied with the response, the service request will not enter the complaints process. If, however, the customer expresses dissatisfaction with the response to the service request, a complaint will be raised, even if the handling of the service request remains ongoing. A complaint will not prevent or impact on actions needed to resolve any immediate issues.

## 7. Complaints service standards

- We will apply the **Customer Access Strategy** [Customer access strategy 2022-2026](#) to all our dealings with complaints and adhere to the Council's accepted response time limits.
- We will protect personal information given to us during a complaint.
- We will work to specific response targets and agree with the customer if we need more time to investigate and resolve the matter, within those timescales and permitted extensions detailed in the Complaints policy
- We will ensure that customers are informed of the options to request escalation through the complaints process – or signpost to the appropriate body or avenue – if they remain dissatisfied following our response.

- We will ensure that complaint outcomes are communicated to customers and recorded and implemented within the indicated timescale for completion. Services will keep customers informed if there are any delays to expected actions and for stage 1 and stage 2 complaints, updates will be provided to the resident on outstanding actions

## **8. What the complaints scheme covers**

The formal complaints process will deal with any form of persistent service fault or failure that has not been adequately addressed through Service Recovery. Examples could include:

- Delay
- Omission or failure to act.
- Failure to follow procedures or the law.
- Failure to provide information (Does not include Freedom of Information or requests for Access to Records).
- Failure to keep records or incomplete or Inadequate record-keeping.
- Failure to investigate matters reported to the council, without good reason.
- Failure to respond to issues reported/ communications received.
- Issuing Misleading or inaccurate statements.
- Inadequate liaison or consultation.
- Failure to deliver on agreed action.
- Behaviour of our staff (Separate HR policy exists for staff issues which may be more relevant dependent on complaint detail).
- Other issues causing unfairness or injustice.

## **9. Where special arrangements apply**

Sometimes there is a different, more appropriate procedure which must be used instead of the complaints procedure e.g., Appeals processes, Safeguarding procedures, or Human Resources (HR) procedures.

If this applies, we will advise the customer of the appropriate procedure. Here are some examples:

- Complaints relating to the Council's Whistleblowing - Duty to Act or Health & Safety policies.
- Refusal of a planning application, or the failure to decide within the given period - Appeals process for the applicant (Where applicable).
- The conduct of Councillors; these are dealt with according to the Members' Code of Conduct.
- Some Children's Social care complaints - follows a statutory procedure.
- Schools' attendance, admissions, or exclusion - appeal process available.
- Special Educational Needs (SEND) provision - appeal process available.
- Freedom of Information or Data Protection Act matters
- Any other matters for which an alternative statutory or Constitutional appeals mechanism exists (including parking fines, Universal Credit claims etc.)
- Safeguarding procedures – proceedings under Safeguarding Adults procedures may warrant the Local Authority deferring consideration of some complaints or aspects of complaints.
- The customer is seeking compensation through the Council's insurers.
- The customer or Local Authority has started legal proceedings.
- Complaints by an employee of the Local Authority about any matter relating to that employment.
- Decisions made by Approved Mental Health Professionals (not

employed by SCC) - dealt with via the appeals procedure under the Mental Health Act

## 10. Direct Payments and Self-funded services

Complaints, which are about direct payments and individual budgets (Social Care), are excluded from the procedures once the service user has taken control of their care provision. There are procedures in place to appeal decisions.

This does not apply to complaints about the processes involved in the application, e.g., assessment, allocation of funds, or the support available to enable people to manage the payments.

## 11. Other/concurrent procedures

Occasionally, a complaint may require us to start another procedure, such as an internal disciplinary procedure, and the complaint response will be provided to the customer when the answer to the complaint is known.

For stage 1 and stage 2 complaints, updates will be provided to the resident on any outstanding actions.

## 12. Exclusions

The following issues **cannot** be dealt with under the Complaint procedure:

- The issue or awareness of the issue giving rise to the complaint occurred over 12 months ago. Please see point 19 for further information and details of exceptions.
- The complaint is about services or matters which fall outside the control of the Council.
- Complaints regarding schools – each school has its own complaints process.
- Complaint by another professional body or organisation.
- Complaints which relate to contractual arrangements or other business arrangements made with the Local Authority.
- Services delivered for or on behalf of other Local Authorities or Partner organisations (that Partner / organisation complaints policy must be used instead).
- Complaints where the subject matter (or substantially the same subject matter) has previously been investigated under these procedures or previous procedures prior to this one.
- Any complaint which is being or has previously been investigated by the relevant Ombudsman or other relevant body.
- Where a court or a tribunal has made, is making, or is about to make, a determination on the specifics of the complaint (this will be determined by the Complaints Resolution Manager and/or legal team).

## 13. Who Can Complain?

- Any individual receiving or looking to receive a service from the Council.
- Any person acting on behalf of an individual or group of individuals, provided they have written consent to do so (this includes Advice Agencies and other advocacy groups).

- In regard to matters raised by MP's and Councillors on behalf of constituents – those matters will generally be treated as a representation and dealt with outside the complaints process.
- Where MP's and Councillors have gained specific signed consent to advocate for a vulnerable member of the public as a formal complaint these matters will be dealt with under the complaint's procedure.

#### **14. Help from someone else to make a complaint.**

A complainant may wish to involve someone else to help and support them through the process of making a complaint. A complaint that is submitted via a third party or representative will be handled in line with the complaints policy. Written signed consent **will** be required from the complainant. The complainant may wish to choose one of the following:

- Friend
- Relative
- Neighbour
- Independent Advocacy Service

The Local Authority do not provide advocacy services (except where the complaint falls under the Children's Statutory process). However, there are a few organisations and voluntary groups who provide such services dependant on the complainant's needs for support.

#### **15. Anonymous complaints**

The Local Authority does not accept or investigate anonymous complaints. However, any anonymous complaints relating to safeguarding issues will be considered and where necessary referred to the appropriate Executive Director to progress as a safeguarding investigation.

#### **16. Access and Equalities**

Customers may make a comment, compliment, or complaint in the simplest way for them, using any of the following contact methods:

- By using the online forms found on the Council's website  
<http://www.southampton.gov.uk/council-democracy/have-your-say/comments-complaints/complaints.aspx>
- Email ([customer.services@southampton.gov.uk](mailto:customer.services@southampton.gov.uk))
- By using the form with a leaflet or factsheet (available from Libraries, Local Housing Offices and Gateway/Civic Reception)
- By letter
- By telephone (written confirmation will normally be required except where there are valid reasons and reasonable adjustments must be made)
- In person to any member of staff

**Please note: A complaint may be made to any member of staff, who will take the details and forward them to the involved service area manager.**

#### **17. Complaints involving multiple agencies or internal council teams.**

Customers may wish to make a complaint which straddles other organisations e.g., National Health Service or Mental Health Services. Also, council complaints may involve several departments. In these cases, the investigating manager will consult

with colleagues within the other organisation / department to provide a co-ordinated response.

In these cases, the time taken to respond may exceed the target times given below in the policy. However, in these cases, the complainant will be updated with any delay/extension required.

Data Protection - The Local Authority now deals with a wide variety of partner agencies and companies. The nature of some complaints means that we need to share details of the complaint and complainant's details, to fully investigate complaints, with relevant partners and third parties.

If this is the case, the Investigator will contact you as soon as reasonably practicable to make you aware that we may need to share relevant details of the complaint and/or personal details with specified third parties, giving reasons why we feel we need to contact the third parties and the information we need to share. We would ask for your views on this, and whilst we would only ever share the minimum amount of information necessary to investigate the complaint, if there were any information you would not want us to share, you would be given the opportunity to make this known. We would then decide about whether to share this information, depending on the nature of the complaint.

## **18. Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customer Behaviour**

A copy of our policy can be viewed on our website:

[Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customer Behaviour Policy 2021](#)

## **19. Time limit for initiating a complaint.**

You must make your complaint within 12 months of the disputed occurrence or incident or within 12 months of you becoming aware of the issue, unless the complaint is excluded on other Grounds. We will only investigate complaints relating to issues or awareness of issues that are more than 12 months old at the discretion of the relevant Executive Director following consultation with the Complaints Resolution Manager where there is good reason to do. The complainant will need to explain why it was not possible for the complaint to be raised within the required 12-month period, for matters to be considered.

## **20. Reporting and Feedback**

We produce an annual report which includes information about the council's comments, compliments and complaints experience and learning from complaints (anonymised), which is published on the website.

## **21. Resolution and remedies**

Upheld/Not Upheld/Partially upheld definition.

Where a complaint is found to be upheld, consideration will be given to the question of an appropriate remedy. Any remedy should be proportionate in the circumstances and, where possible, put the complainant back in the position they were in before the complained about occurrence.

Where a complaint has been partially upheld, the response will make clear the elements of the complaint that have been upheld and those that have not and the remedy guidance that supports this policy applied accordingly.

## 22. Complaint Escalation

Complaints are dealt with as a 2-stage process. No additional stages are included. Mediation may be an option for resolving complaints with the consent of the customer, but where this happens, it will be integrated into both stage 1 and stage 2, with a written response provided for each stage.

The initial Service Recovery and confirmation of action taken is the responsibility of the Service Area responsible for the issue complained of. Formal Stage 1 complaints, where service recovery has not been possible within a reasonable time is also dealt with at service area level. Where matters complained of cover more than one area, one manager will be responsible for collating individual responses to provide one Local Authority response to the service recovery response.

If the customer receives their formal stage 1 response from the service area complained of and remains dissatisfied, they may ask for escalation to Stage 2 (formal complaint investigation by a more Senior Manager in the service area). The escalation process is set out on the Council's website, together with contact details and online forms to assist customers in directing their query as appropriate.

If a customer wishes to explain their reasons for escalating their complaint to stage 2, they can do so through various means. We would prefer customers to explain, in writing, the reasons for their dissatisfaction and why they are requesting a stage 2 response, however, customers are under no obligation to confirm this in writing or tell us their reasons. We can simply review the stage 1 investigation and response. However, it can be helpful to understand why the customer remains dissatisfied as this will provide clarity and a focus for the stage 2 investigation.

Where the matter relates to Local Authority Housing and the complainant is a tenant, the complainant has the option to choose a review by the Tenant's Panel instead of a Senior Manager.

The Tenants Panel operated by Southampton City Council is not a Designated Tenants Panel as defined by the Localism Act 2011.

There may be circumstances where the stage two investigation cannot be undertaken by the service area and will instead be referred to the Complaints Resolution Team ' for further advice as to who may be most appropriate person to deal with the complaint. Where this occurs, the complainant will be informed of the referral to the complaints team and the reasons for that and any changes to the timescales needed to enable a thorough investigation of the matter.

In some cases, where it can be shown to be an appropriate and reasonable method of resolving a complaint, the Head of Service / Executive Director of the relevant service area may invite the parties to the complaint to participate in an informal mediation process, but it will be integrated into both stage 1 and 2, with a written response provided at each stage, together with escalation options if the customer remains dissatisfied.

## 23. Further Escalation

An explanation will be given to the customer when a complaint has not been accepted. When a complaint has not been accepted, an explanation as to why this action has been taken will be given to the customer and their right to take the decision to the Ombudsman will be explained. Complainants have the right to contact the relevant Ombudsman or other appropriate body for advice at any time before, during and after the complaint process has commenced and if they remain dissatisfied once all stages of the complaint's procedure have been exhausted. The relevant Ombudsman will usually require all stages of the Council's complaints policy to have been concluded before they will consider investigating.

Up to date contact details will be included in the formal stage two response/communication.

Further advice and assistance on the Ombudsman's role and the stage at which they will accept a complaint may be obtained from:

**The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman**

PO Box 4771

Coventry CV4 0EH

Telephone: **0300 061 0614**

Website: [www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk)

**Housing Ombudsman Service** (for issues relating to Local Authority housing)

PO Box 1484

Unit D

Preston

PR2 0ET

Telephone: 0300 111 3000

Email: [info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk)

Website: [www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk)

## **24. WITHDRAWING A COMPLAINT**

A complaint may be withdrawn verbally (written confirmation will be requested) or in writing at any time by the complainant. The Local Authority will write to the complainant to confirm the withdrawal of the complaint.

## **25. ACCESSIBILITY OF POLICY**

The Council will publish details of its Complaints policy, including information about the Ombudsman and the Complaint Handling Code on its website. The Council is committed to ensuring that all customers can access our services and information. We recognise that some individuals may require information in alternative formats to meet their needs. Upon request, we will consider providing our Complaints Policy in accessible formats, such as large print, audio, Braille, or translated versions, to ensure it is inclusive and accessible to all.

To request the Complaints Policy in an alternative format, please contact the Complaints Resolution team at [Complaints.review@southampton.gov.uk](mailto:Complaints.review@southampton.gov.uk) 023 8083 3000 & ask for Complaints Resolution Team

