

How to Handle Complaints/Feedback

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to explain your responsibility for handling complaints and feedback and the internal processes you need to follow.

Gloucester City Council actively encourages all customer feedback about its services, including complaints and wants to hear from customers or their representatives about their experiences whether good or bad. This will help us to shape and improve the services we deliver.

To do this we must:

- listen carefully to people;
- take their views seriously and act on them where we can.

We need to:

- find out when things have gone well and customers are happy;
- improve our services by making the most of bright ideas or comments about our services;
- find out when things go wrong and put them right;
- learn from our mistakes and make sure they don't happen again.

All complaints, compliments and comments need to be recorded on our corporate complaints system so we can monitor how we are doing.

Definition of a Complaint

A Complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction by a customer about:-

- The Council's actions or lack of action
- The standard of service received

This is where the responsibility for the action, or the service provided, rests with the council or a person or body acting on behalf of the Council.

The following will **not** be treated as Complaints in their first instance :-

- Initial Requests for Service e.g. my bin has not been emptied, reporting graffiti, reporting overhanging vegetation.
- Initial report of faults or defects unless they concern work that the council has carried out.

We will not exclude these requests but will deal with them as normal work requests.

A repeat request (i.e. where the original request was not actioned/completed) should be treated as a complaint.

Officer Role

Any member of staff, person or body acting on behalf of the Council receiving a Complaint/Feedback needs to report this:-

- Via the web using our online "Report it" form
- By emailing the details to heretohelp@gloucester.gov.uk
- By telephoning Customer Services on ext 5319 (*This is an internal number only please do not release to customers. Customers should ring 396396*).
- Completing/arranging for customer to complete a comment form and sending through to Customer services.

The customer should be asked how they would like to receive their response e.g. letter, email, telephone or visit.

Note: Customers may ask for a different service or officer with no previous involvement with their case to investigate their complaint. This request will need to be included within the complaint so Customer Services can arrange and send to the correct officer.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

The Head of Paid Service is accountable to the Council for the Complaints system but the Customer Services Manager is responsible for monitoring the complaints process and analysing complaints for reporting purposes. Each Service Manager is responsible for ensuring the complaints process is adhered to in their service.

Customer Services will be responsible for the day-to-day administration of complaints system e.g. sending initial requests, chasing responses, producing monthly reports and monitoring complaint responses.

Each Service Manager is responsible for making sure that timescales for Stage 1 & 2 Complaints are adhered to and a response is given to the customer within the relevant timescale. The Service Manager is also responsible for ensuring that details of the response are posted into the complaints system and all mandatory fields completed. The Service Manager may delegate this process to a member of their team but ultimate responsibility for complaints lies with the Service Managers.

If you receive a complaint about your own service you should be aiming to deal with the complaint within 1 working day. Where this is not possible:-

- We must aim to complete the investigation and respond to the customer within 10 working days using the customers preferred response channel. (This will be monitored by the Customer Service Manager and monthly reports sent to the Corporate Director for Services & Neighbourhoods).
- Where a Complaint deadline is extended beyond the initial response date the customer must be informed and the information recorded on the complaints system as an event.

Where a complaint is received directly by Customer Services they will acknowledge receipt of the complaint and advise the customer which service/officer will be dealing with the complaint.

Where a complaint is received directly by the service they will enter the complaint onto the Corporate Complaint system and acknowledge receipt.

If you need access to the complaints system ask your manager to arrange access via the Civica Service Desk.

Managers are responsible for ensuring that all staff are trained on the Complaints/Feedback process.

Partner Complaints

The Council is responsible for ensuring that partner organisations either have their own complaints policy in place or that they agree to follow the Council's process. We should have clear accountability for complaints handling for each partner and complaints should be monitored to ensure they are resolved correctly.

If a complaint relates to more than one problem and across different organisations the Service Manager will need to ensure either a joint response is issued or ensure that a response is issued by each party.

Organisations funded by the council will be expected to have a complaints procedure in place that can be monitored by the council. There should be a strong commitment from all our partners to learn from complaints with a system in place to disseminate learning.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Services will treat all customer information as confidential. Names and addresses will not be published or disclosed outside of the Council. We will not accept anonymous complaints.

Equalities

Information about the Complaint's Policy will be available in large print, appropriate languages and audio tape if requested. Help will be provided to any customer requiring assistance in completing the form.

Complaint Handling Procedure

Stage 1

On receipt of a complaint, the Customer Services officer will enter it onto the complaints system, send an acknowledgement to the customer and confirm which service or individual will be dealing with the complaint. They will also notify the service/officer/partner concerned. The service, officer or partner will receive notification of a stage 1 complaint via an email.

Officers can use the email link to provide information back to the system or can access the system directly and process the complaint from there.

If officers, other than Customer Services, receive a complaint, they should email all details of the complaint to heretohelp@gloucester.gov.uk for Customer Services to enter it onto the complaints system.

If a response to the complaint has not been issued to the customer and logged into the complaints system a reminder will be sent to the Service Manager prior to producing the monthly reports to remind them that the complaint is still outstanding.

When closing the matter the officer will need to update the system with the action taken and where a written response has been sent they need to attach a copy of the response. Finished complaints require completion of **4 mandatory fields** which describe how the complaint was resolved.

1. **Date Answered:** Full date should be entered e.g. 06/08/2013.
2. **How Resolved:** Whether Justified (e.g. found to be our fault) complaint is valid from our viewpoint. Example – City Council employee or partner employee was rude to the customer, caller complaining about the time they had to queue to talk to us.
Unjustified (e.g. customer found to be at fault) on investigation customer is proved to be incorrect. Example – customer advises officer was rude to them but on listening to the call the officer was not rude.
Misunderstanding (e.g. Customer misunderstood instructions or policy). Once explained customer satisfied. Example – Customer waited in all day for officer to visit but customer had the wrong day.
No Action (e.g. complaint wrongly assigned to GCC but not us). Example customer reports refuse crew were rude to them but we were not in the area so was not our crew.

For each of the options above “how the complaint was resolved” you will need to select from a drop down list (e.g. whether it was a call made, email sent or the customer was visited etc).

3. **Action Taken:** you will need to select from a drop down list (e.g. Was coaching/training required, system or process amendment, policy to be reviewed or no action as not Gloucester City Council).
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4. Details of Action Taken: A text box to write a brief description of the action taken.

Where a service needs to extend the deadline for a response to be provided due to the complexity of a complaint, the customer should be contacted and Focus updated stating the date by when the complaint will be responded to.

Responses to customers should not be delayed unnecessarily because of outstanding procedures (e.g. disciplinary hearing awaited). We should respond to the customer and if appropriate apologise to them explaining the action we are taking.

Where a member sends in a complaint on behalf of a customer or is copied in on a customer complaint email the officer responding to the complaint must ensure that the member is updated with the action taken.

The response to a stage 1 complaint needs to include what they need to do if they are unhappy with the response received. (See example paragraphs for letters and emails in Appendix 1).

Once a response has been given and the matter status set to “Finished” stage 1 is complete.

Stage 2

On receipt of a Stage 2 complaint, the Customer Services Officer receiving the complaint will determine if the Complainant has reported the complaint before and received a response.

Customer Services will establish if this is a second level complaint and, if it is, will enter on the system as a stage 2 complaint. They will send an acknowledgement to the customer confirming who the complaint has been referred and advise the customer the anticipated response date.

If a Stage 2 complaint is received by an officer, other than Customer Services, details of that complaint should be emailed to: heretohelp@gloucester.gov.uk and a Customer Services officer will enter it onto the system.

The Complaint will then be sent to the next tier of Management to that which dealt with the previous complaint.

The relevant Manager/Director will:-

- Review the complaint and discuss with Service Managers and where necessary Legal and the Chief Executive to formulate a response.
- The response will notify the Customer of Stage three and give details of the Local Ombudsman if they wish to take this further.
- All correspondence must be recorded on the complaints system at the time of action pending queries in the future from the Ombudsman.

The response to a stage 2 complaint needs to include information referring customers to the Local Government Ombudsman if they are not satisfied with the response received. See example letters and emails attached.

Once a response has been given and the complaints system status updated to “Finished” stage 2 is complete.

Stage 3

If the customer is not satisfied with the responses received for stages 1 & 2 they can refer their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, P.O. Box 4771, Coventry CV4 0EH. The Ombudsman will review the complaint and responses received and may write to the Council for additional information. All Ombudsman complaints are administered through Democratic Services. If the Ombudsman feels that the complaint is justified or the handling of the process is at fault, the complaint will be forwarded to the Monitoring Officer for consideration/further action.

Unreasonable Behaviour/Vexatious Complaints

Where a complaint is considered to be unreasonable or vexatious the Service Manager should report this through to their Manager/Director for guidance. Corporate Directors may authorise action to be taken to restrict contact with the customer. Action may be taken under our Unreasonable Behaviour Policy which could include providing a single point of contact for a customer or contact via a specific channel.

Reviews

If a complaint is justified, managers should, as a matter of routine, consider whether there is a need for a change in procedures or whether there are lessons to be learnt which may have wider implications for the City Council.

Freedom of Information (FOI)

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives the customer the right to request information from any public authority. It promotes openness and accountability among public sector organisations, so that everyone can understand how authorities make decisions, carry out their duties and spend public money. For full details please read our Corporate Freedom of Information Policy.

When the customer has received a response to a Freedom of Information request where they are not satisfied with the way they have been treated or the information provided they can complain or appeal. Complaints or appeals should be sent in writing to the Freedom of Information Officer. These will be reviewed by the Head of Legal and Policy Development and a response provided to the customer.

Where the customer is still not satisfied with the response received from the Head of Legal and Policy Development the customer can write to the Information Commissioners Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF.

Reporting

Monthly reports will be produced to Service Managers detailing any complaints that have been assigned to their service that are still outstanding. A week later a report will be produced for the Corporate Director of Services & Neighbourhoods detailing the number of complaints raised for the month, the number resolved within 10 days and the number still outstanding.

The Corporate Director for Services & Neighbourhoods will review the report and contact the necessary manager to discuss any issues identified on the report.

Appendix 1

Letter or email footer following Stage 1 complaint.

If you are not satisfied with the response to this complaint you can request a more senior manager investigate under Stage 2 of our Complaints Policy. Please complete the complaints form on our web site at <https://forms.gloucester.gov.uk/contactusforms/ComplaintForm.aspx>, email heretohelp@gloucester.gov.uk or ring 01452 396396 to speak to a Customer Service Officer.

Letter or email footer following Stage 2 complaint.

If you are not satisfied with the response to this Stage 2 complaint you can contact the Local Government Ombudsman, an independent body, who will review your complaint and may consider acting on your behalf. They can be contacted by email advice@lgo.org.uk, via telephone on 0300 061 0614 or 0845 602 1983, via text “call back” on 0762 480 4299 or by writing to the Local Government Ombudsman, PO Box 4771, Coventry CV4 0EH.
