

Complaints, comments, and compliments policy

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The council welcomes customer feedback about our services and staff as it provides the opportunity to understand people's views about our services and improve what we do.
- 1.2 This policy sets out how the council manages complaints, comments and compliments received regarding its services.
- 1.3 Through this policy we want to make sure that:
 - it is simple for people to let us know their views and experiences of our services
 - we learn from customer feedback and complaints to improve our services and ways of working
 - complaints are dealt with fairly and consistently
 - complaints are responded to within the agreed timescales (unless there is a valid reason as to why this is not possible)

2 What is a complaint?

- 2.1 The council uses the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman definition of a complaint.

“Any expression of dissatisfaction about a council service (whether that service is provided directly by the council or by a contractor or partner) that requires a response.”

- 2.2 A complaint may include:

- a failure to deliver a service
- poor quality of service
- a delay in providing a service
- dissatisfaction with procedures
- providing incorrect information
- no action taken against customer request or complaint
- unfair treatment
- staff attitude

Users, or potential users, of services provided by the council or anyone acting on behalf of that person may make a complaint.

3 What is a comment?

- 3.1 A comment is any feedback sent to the council regarding a council department or service. This could include a suggestion for service improvement or information regarding how well a service was performed. Once we receive a comment the council records it on a central system so that it can be shared with the relevant service for review and action.

4 What is a compliment?

- 4.1 A compliment is positive feedback provided to the council or any member of council staff where the service provided exceeded expectations. Once we receive a compliment the Council records it on a central system so that it can be shared with the relevant manager and member of staff.

5 Complaints procedure

- 5.1 There are two stages to the council's complaints procedure.

6 Stage 1

- 6.1 We expect to be able to fully resolve most of our complaints at stage 1.
- 6.2 When a customer raises an issue, we will check to see whether we should treat it as a complaint under this procedure.
- We will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within three working days.
 - A senior officer from the service being complained about will oversee an investigation to try and resolve the issues.
 - We will provide a written response within 10 working days.
 - We will tell the customer if we are not able to respond within these timescales for example if the complaint is very complex or if we need to handle the complaint differently. Any extension should be no more than 10 working days without good reason, and the reason(s) will be clearly explained to the customer. We will provide the customer with the details of the [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#) when we inform them about an extension.
 - When a customer raises any additional complaints during the stage 1 procedure, these should be incorporated into the stage 1 response if they are related, and the stage 1 response has not been provided. If the stage 1 response has been provided and the new issues are unrelated, or if it would unreasonably delay the response, the new issues should be logged as a new complaint.

In the response to the complaint, we will:

- outline the investigation methods
 - make findings on each aspect of the complaint, e.g. upheld, not upheld, partially upheld or no conclusion
 - outline any remedial action
 - inform the complainant how to escalate their complaint to stage 2
- 6.3 The response may be reviewed by a senior manager before being sent to the complainant.
- 6.4 We will accept complaints via different channels and the response will usually be sent via the same channel the customer made the initial contact through i.e. usually through the online form, email or where requested by the complainant, a letter will be sent in the post.

7 Stage 2

- 7.1 If a resolution is not reached at stage 1, the person making the complaint has the right to escalate matters to stage 2.
- 7.2 This can be done by contacting us through the online complaints form or in writing within 15 working days of receiving our response. The customer should provide the reference number of

the stage 1 complaint (if available) and detail which parts of the complaint remain unresolved. In addition, a desired outcome should be given.

- 7.3 We will acknowledge and log requests for stage 2 complaints within 5 working days of the request being received. Within the acknowledgement, we will set out our understanding of any outstanding issues and the outcomes the customer is seeking. If any part of the complaint is unclear, we will ask the customer for clarification.
- 7.4 The relevant Service Delivery Lead will review the stage 2 complaint and refer the complaint to an appropriate handling officer for investigation and response.
- 7.5 Where appropriate, and with the complainant's agreement, the handling officer may make arrangements for conciliation, mediation, or other services to help resolve the problem.
- 7.6 We will aim to provide a written response within 10 working days. If we are not able to do this, we will decide whether an extension is needed and inform the customer of the expected timescale for response.

Any extension should be no more than 20 working days without good reason, and the reason(s) should be clearly explained to the customer.

- 7.7 In the response to the complaint, we will:
- outline the investigation methods
 - make findings on each aspect of the complaint, e.g. upheld, not upheld, partially upheld or no conclusion
 - outline any remedial action
 - inform the complainant how to escalate their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
- 7.8 The response may be reviewed by the Service Delivery Lead, or where the response has been drafted by the Service Delivery Lead another appropriate Senior Manager, before being sent to the complainant.
- 7.9 It may, in certain circumstances such as if the complaint is particularly complex or contentious, be decided that an external investigating officer is required to investigate a complaint. Should this be the case we will inform the customer of this course of action and inform them of any revised timescales for providing a full response to the complaint.
- 7.10 We reserve the right to refuse a complaint at either stage 1 or stage 2 of the complaints procedure for example if there is any other process available to deal with the issue. If we do refuse a complaint, we will explain why and tell the person making the complaint where else they can take their complaint (e.g. to Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman).

8 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

- 8.1 If the customer remains dissatisfied at the end of the complaints procedure, they can approach the [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#) who will decide whether to carry out an independent investigation into the complaint.

9 Complaints related to Shared Services Service

- 9.1 Complaints regarding services provided where the Council is in a shared service arrangement with another council should be addressed by the council who is providing the service on behalf of Watford at both Stage 1 and Stage 2.
- 9.2 If a complaint about the service is escalated to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, Watford will liaise directly with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman but will expect the council who provided the service to assist it in answering the complaint. Likewise, where Watford is undertaking a service for its shared service partner it will respond directly using the stage 1 and stage 2 process described above but any escalation to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman will be dealt with directly by the partner council with assistance from Watford.

10 What is not covered under the complaints procedure?

10.1 We may deal with some complaints under a separate procedure. There are a number of appeals or other procedures which cover decisions on:

- A request for service (e.g. to request a replacement bin or a report of fly-tipping)
- Offers of housing
- Council Tax bills
- Council Tax and Housing Benefit decisions
- Licensing decisions
- Planning decisions
- Parking tickets
- Appeals to legal notices
- Decisions our councillors have made

10.2 Under our complaints procedure we also do not deal with:

- complaints about something the customer knew about more than one year ago and did not pursue at the time.
- complaints about something that has been to court or will be going to court or where a formal caution has been given.
- insurance claims against us. This is dealt by the councils Insurance Officer, please email insurance@watford.gov.uk

11 Complaints about commissioned services

- 11.1 If a customer has a complaint about an organisation who are providing a service on behalf of the Council (other than another council), they should approach the provider so they can consider the complaint through their complaints procedure in the first instance. Once this has

happened and if the customer remains dissatisfied then we will consider their complaint under stage two of the Councils complaints procedure.

12 Anonymous complaints

- 12.1 Anonymous complaints will be recorded in the same way as other complaints and referred to relevant senior managers who will take appropriate action based on their judgement of the information received. No reply can be made.

13 Management of unreasonable customer behaviour

- 13.1 Occasionally, service users act in an abusive, unreasonably persistent, or vexatious manner. When this happens, we follow guidelines from our Vexatious and Persistent Customer Policy.

14 Learning from complaints

- 14.1 Our customers' opinions are really important to us, and we use feedback from complaints to learn about and improve our services. We provide information about complaints to senior managers across the council. We also track the learning and changes made as a result of complaints.
- 14.2 An annual report will be drafted at the end of each financial year summarising compliments and complaints received throughout the year. The report will identify trends and highlight any action taken as a result of feedback given. The annual report will be signed off by senior officers and members of the council and will be published on our web pages.

15 Record keeping

- 15.1 We record complaints, comments, and compliments on our corporate complaints management system. This allows us to:

- ensure customer feedback is handled in-line with our procedures and quality standards
- identify problem areas so that remedial action can be taken and improvements to services identified
- inform future service planning

- 15.2 Records kept will include the following:

- contact information about complainants and associated service users
- each comment, concern, compliment, or complaint received and associated documents
- investigation and panel reports where appropriate
- complaint responses
- compliance with timescales
- outcomes of complaints at all stages
- agreed actions
- resulting service improvements

16 Publicising

- 16.1 We will publicise details of our complaints policy, including information about the [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#) and the Complaints Handling Code on our website and on any related literature.
- 16.2 Where we ask for feedback about our services through a survey, we will advise individuals on how they can complain so they can pursue any dissatisfaction if they so wish.