

ANTRIM BOROUGH COUNCIL

CUSTOMER CARE POLICY

SEPTEMBER 2003

ANTRIM BOROUGH COUNCIL

Complaints Procedure

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1.0 Summary

Antrim Borough Council has in place a Council-wide Complaints Procedure to help individuals who are unhappy about Council's services or facilities. These guidance notes aim to provide all staff with a basic understanding of the Council's procedures for dealing with complaints.

***"A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the Council or its staff affecting an individual customer or group of customers."
(Commission for Local Administration)***

The Complaints procedure has three stages as detailed below:

Stage 1: First Complaint

In the first instance the department responsible deals with complaints. We will issue an acknowledgement to the complainant either in writing or by phone within 3 days and aim to resolve complaints within 15 working days after receipt.

Stage 2: The complaint has been investigated, but the complainant is not satisfied

At this stage the Departmental Director will deal with the complaint. Again, we will acknowledge the re-complaint within 3 days and aim to resolve in within 15 days.

Stage 3: The complainant is still not satisfied

If the complaint has still not been settled to the complainant's satisfaction, they have the right to request the Chief Executive to review the response and take appropriate action. The complaint may then be referred to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman if the complainant is not satisfied with the Chief Executive's response.

Complaints should be dealt with courteously, quickly, confidentially and fairly.

When it becomes apparent that a member of public wishes to complain, then you must:

- Confirm that the person wishes to pursue the matter as a formal complaint.
- Highlight the different ways that the person can complain
- Offer to use the method most preferable to the person to capture the complaint
- Offer to write down the complaint for the complainant
- Get all the information about the complainant i.e., their name, address, telephone number
- Confirm (read back) what you have written to the complainant
- Tell the complainant what will happen next
- Ask the complainant what they consider to be a reasonable outcome of the complaint ie, what they want out of complaining

If you have any queries in relation to dealing with complaints from customers please contact Catherine McFarland, Assistant Director - Admin on 9446 3113.

2.0 Introduction

Antrim Borough Council has introduced a Council-wide Complaints Procedure to help individuals who are unhappy about Council's services or facilities. Everyone working for the Council needs to understand the corporate complaints procedure if our customers are to get the best possible service.

Antrim Borough Council provides a broad range of services to thousands of people, delivered collectively by our staff. It is inevitable that we will not satisfy all of our customers all of the time, and that there will be occasions when the Council has failed to deliver, or has delivered services badly. On the other hand, there may be things that people are particularly happy with, which they wish to tell us.

We need to provide a way for customers / users / citizens / ratepayers / visitors to express dissatisfaction which is easy, quick, honest, fair and user friendly. The Council's Complaints Procedure aims to provide this mechanism.

These guidance notes aim to provide all staff with a basic understanding of the Council's procedures for dealing with complaints. We want to move away from a blame culture and see complaints as a source of useful information which will help us to continually improve our services, develop policies, target resources, etc.

If you have any comments (or complaints!) about this handbook, please contact Liz Johnston, Assistant Director - Admin on 9446 3113.

3.0 Defining a Complaint

3.1 What is a Complaint?

"A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the Council or its staff affecting an individual customer or group of customers."
(Commission for Local Administration)

A complaint is a customer's expression of dissatisfaction with the Council or its facilities and services.

It can be about:

- Something we have done
- Something we have not done
- The way we deliver our services
- The staff who work with us

Complaints can cover things such as:

- Refusal of a service
- Withdrawal of a service
- Delay in delivering a service
- Quality of service or standards
- The way in which we deal with our customers
- Suitability of a service
- Dissatisfaction with the Council, its staff or its services
- The quality of a service, the reduction of a service, the denial of a resource, the attitude of staff, the outcome of an assessment etc.

Many expressions of dissatisfaction are made in the day-to-day work of the Council and many of these are resolved by staff immediately or very soon after they have been voiced. These should not be recorded as complaints.

In order to ensure consistency, complaints will be recorded when given in writing by the customer or when the customer states that they would like their query registered as an official complaint.

3.2 When is a 'complaint' not a complaint?

Complaints do not cover requests for a service, requests for information and general enquiries.

It will be important to ensure that clarity exists within each department regarding what is a complaint and what is a service request or enquiry.

The following should not be regarded as complaints:

- Requests for service, eg, reporting a stray dog. However, a request for service may become a complaint if not properly dealt with, within a reasonable period of time.
- Requests for service provision, eg, requesting a litterbin or a play centre.
- Requests for information or an explanation of Council policy or practice.
- Matters for which there is a right of appeal and/or a legal remedy.
- Human Resources issues, which should properly be dealt with under other Council policy and procedures. However, HR issues may become complaints if not properly dealt with.

If you are unsure whether a complaint is actually a complaint, seek advice from your Line Manager, or alternatively Catherine McFarland, Assistant Director - Admin on 028 9446 3113. **In order to ensure consistency in recording across departments guidelines have been developed for each service area defining complaints.**

The important thing is not to make this an issue with the complainant.

If the complainant wishes to pursue what he or she feels is a complaint, then we will tell them that it will be pursued through the complaints procedure. The complainant will not want to argue about the semantics or definitions of complaints.

Resolving the 'complaint' (or enquiry) should be your priority.

Service requests or requests for information should be recorded by each department to enable tracking of the requests if the person rings back complaining that their request was not dealt with.

4.0 Complaints Procedure

4.1 How can customers complain?

The Council wishes to be as flexible as possible in receiving complaints. Unnecessary blocks must not be put in the way, eg insisting that complaints are put in writing. We want to make it as easy as possible for people to complain.

Customers can complain:

- By using the leaflets (now available)
- By letter
- By phone or fax
- In person at the Civic Centre, Antrim Information Centre, Clotworthy Arts Centre, Antrim Forum or Allen Park Golf Centre.
- By email via corporate@antrim.gov.uk
- Via a local Councillor

Customers can request a copy of the Complaints Procedure, which is included in the Complaints Leaflet. It is likely that the majority of complaints will come into the relevant department. It is therefore important that all staff are aware of the complaints procedure.

4.2 Aims of the Complaints Procedure

A clear and well-publicised complaint procedure helps us to provide good-quality services to our customers. We want to:

- Give customers an effective way to complain about the services we provide
- If possible, resolve complaints straight away
- Accept that things can go wrong but we can put things right and learn from them
- Deal with complaints fairly and consistently
- Give customers an opportunity to have their complaint reviewed by someone independent of the service they have complained about
- Regularly monitor complaints and ensure we meet our standards.

Our complaint procedure should:

- Be open, easily accessible and well publicised
- Be simple to use and understand
- Be confidential
- Allow quick resolution of complaints, with set time limits for action to be taken
- Keep customers informed about their complaint
- Deal with all issues raised by customers and give an effective reply and appropriate remedy
- Be fair for staff. We recognise the right of staff to be kept informed about complaints against them. We also recognise their right to be represented or accompanied at any interview concerning a complaint.

4.3 Complaints Procedure

The aim of the complaints procedure is to ensure that customer complaints are dealt with quickly, effectively and in a consistent manner and that complainants are listened to and treated with respect. We will monitor and analyse complaints in order to help us improve our services.

Stage 1: First Complaint

In the first instance, complaints will normally be referred to the relevant Department, where the basic details will be recorded (see Appendix 1 for complaints recording form) and if appropriate, the complaint will be passed to the relevant person for it to be resolved. **Complaints can be taken by any member of staff but must be passed onto the appropriate staff member to be recorded and dealt with.**

We will acknowledge the complaint either in writing or by phone with details of the complaint procedure. **We will aim to acknowledge the complaint within 3 working days of receipt and to resolve the complaint within 15 working days.** To ensure consistency, the standard acknowledgment letter available in Appendix 2 must be used and issued to the complainant who initially registers the complaint.

The customer will be informed whom they should contact if they are not satisfied with the response they receive, which means that we are telling the customer about the second stage of the procedure. If this target of 15 days cannot be met, the complainant will be informed of the delay, the reason for the delay and the revised target for responding.

Stage 2: *The complaint has been investigated, but the complainant is not satisfied*

At this stage the complainant should contact the Departmental Director. On the day of receipt of the re-complaint a letter of acknowledgement will be sent to the complainant and the complaint dealt with within 15 working days from the date of receipt. If this target cannot be met, the complainant will be informed of the delay, the reason for the delay and the revised target for responding.

The customer will be informed whom they should contact if they are not satisfied with the response they receive, which means that we are telling the customer about the third stage of the procedure. If this target of 15 days cannot be met, the complainant will be informed of the delay, the reason for the delay and the revised target for responding.

Stage 3: *The complainant is still not satisfied, what to do next?*

If the complaint has still not been settled to the customer's satisfaction, they have the right to request the Chief Executive to review the response and take appropriate action.

Our complaint procedure does not remove the customers right to complain to the Commissioner of Complaints known as the Ombudsman. However, the Ombudsman will normally expect complainants to have used the Council's complaints procedure first. The Ombudsman is completely independent of Antrim Borough Council and of the Government and the service is free.

If the customer still feels that the complaint has been dealt with unsatisfactorily they can then contact the Northern Ireland Ombudsman:

By telephone:	0800 343424
By fax:	028 9023 4912
In writing to:	The Ombudsman Freepost Belfast BT1 6BR
By calling at:	The Ombudsman's Office 33 Wellington Place Belfast BT1 6HN

The Ombudsman investigates complaints made about mal-administration against Councils. Examples of 'mal-administration' include:

- The Council has taken too long to take action without good reason
- The Council did not follow its own rules or the law
- The Council has broken its promise
- The Council has given the customer the wrong information
- The Council has not taken a decision in the correct way.

The Ombudsman can investigate complaints about how the Council has done something. They cannot question what a Council has done simply because a customer / user does not agree with it.

4.4 Complaints Procedure

Internal procedures for processing a complaint are clearly explained below:

- Complaints should taken by any member of staff and should always be recorded on the standard template held on the public drive
- The complainant should always be informed of the complaints procedure and who will be dealing with their complaint
- 2 copies should then be e-mailed; one to the appropriate department to record and deal with the complaint, and one to AIC to be retained for records.
- It is important that the person resolving the complaint completes the second part of the form, detailing progress, contact and outcome. This should then be e-mailed to AIC who will hold a central record of all complaints, a further copy should be retained for future reference.

4.5 Comments/Compliments

- Comments should taken by any member of staff and should always be recorded on the standard template held on the public drive
- 2 copies should then be e-mailed; one to the appropriate department to record and deal with the comment, and one to AIC to be retained for records.

5.0 Questions on the Complaints Procedure

5.1 What do you do when the customer has left or put the phone down?

Once the customer has left, you will either have a written letter of complaint, a complaint form (filled in), or a record of the complaint that you have recorded for the complainant.

1. Complete a copy of complaints template held in your complaints folder
2. E-mail one copy to the appropriate person to deal with the complaint
3. E-mail one copy to AIC
4. Retain a copy in your complaints folder
5. Send the standard acknowledgement letter (Appendix 2) within three working days.

5.2 How should staff deal with complaints?

Complaints should be dealt with courteously, quickly, confidentially and fairly. When it becomes apparent that a member of public wishes to complain, then you must:

- Confirm that the person wishes to pursue the matter as a formal complaint.
- Highlight the different ways that the person can complain.
- Offer to use the method most preferable by the person to capture the complaint.
- Offer to write down the complaint for the complainant.
- Get all the information about the complainant i.e., their name, address, telephone number.
- Confirm (read back) what you have written to the complainant tell the complainant what will happen next.
- Ask the complainant what they consider to be a reasonable outcome of the complaint ie, what they want out of complaining.

When you record a complaint, try to get down details of dates, names of officers involved, which offices have been involved and any other avenues, which have been used by the complainant.

Do not:

- Insist that the complaint is in writing, as the complainant is unlikely to do so.
- Insist that the person who is the originator of the complaint personally visit the office.

5.3 What are our standards?

The target for dealing with complaints is 3 working days for acknowledging and 15 working days for responding. Any delay by you in passing the complaint to the appropriate person will result in delays further down the line and may even mean that we do not reach the targets.

When a complaint is received, it should be resolved as quickly as possible.

When it becomes clear that it will take more than 15 working days to resolve the complaint, then the complainant must be informed by letter. This letter will be sent by the person resolving the complaint and should clearly state the reason why the complaint cannot be resolved within the 15 working days and the expected time it will take before the complaint can be resolved. If you find this to be the case, then the important thing to remember is to keep the customer informed of the reason for the delay and the expected time it will take to resolve the complaint. A copy of such a letter must be forwarded to the AIC for records.

5. 5.4 What if the complaint is about more than one department?

Interdepartmental complaints are those that involve more than one department in resolving the complaint. The department that received the complaint has responsibility for acknowledging the complaint within 3 working days.

The department with the main involvement will identify a lead officer who will be responsible for co-ordinating a response to the complaint. They will ensure that the complainant will not be sent individual responses from all departments involved (ie the complainant will receive one response from the Council addressing all of their points in the complaint).

The lead officer will be the main point of contact for the complainant and will represent the Council and not just the department that he or she works for. The lead officer must own the complaint and make sure that it reaches a satisfactory conclusion. At all times, the service manager and the lead officer must keep each other informed and co-ordinate the Council's response.

5.5 What if the customer wishes to complain about another department?

If you receive or record a complaint about another department, then this must be passed onto the correct department on the same day. In most cases, it will be clear as to which is the correct department.

Complaints received verbally about another department can either:

- Be recorded by the officer receiving the complaint direct from the complainant and passed onto appropriate person on the same day.
- Be transferred to the appropriate person (where the complainant is complaining by phone or email) in the relevant department.

Do not insist that the complainant has to contact the relevant department direct to complain about that department. Be prepared to receive and record complaints about another department.

Don't get into a blame conversation with complainants about other departments.

REMEMBER, WE ALL WORK FOR THE SAME COUNCIL.

5.6 Serious complaints

Complaints that may be deemed serious, about a staff member or may result in the complainant suing the Council should be forwarded directly to the relevant Director and copied to the Chief Executive. Any letters in response to such complaints should have the wording 'Without Prejudice' at the top of the letter in order to ensure that we are not liable.

5.7 What about training?

Information sessions will be available for all staff in relation to dealing with complaints.

6.0 Guidance when dealing with complaints

6.1 Why do people complain?

People complain because they have had a bad experience with the Council and feel angry and frustrated as a result. People complain because they feel that they are being denied a service, or have been unfairly or unjustly treated by the Council.

Customers complain because;

- They feel that the Council has taken too long to respond, been rude with them or has acted illegally.
- They have had the same problem occur again, been given wrong or inaccurate information, suffered as a result of the Council's action (or inaction), and a whole range of other reasons.

Whatever the reason, the person will be angry, frustrated and annoyed by the time he or she makes the decision to complain.

6.2 What do people expect out of complaining?

"Most people do not complain purely for reasons of self interest. Most often complainants say they did so to make the relevant organisation improve services and to prevent another person experiencing the same problem." *Complaints Handling in the Public Sector, by the Citizen's Charter Complaints Task Force - June 1995.*

Reasons for complaining include:

- To make the Council improve its services
- To get money they were due / eligible to receive
- To get an explanation
- To prevent the same thing happening to someone else
- To get an apology
- To let us know what they think
- To get compensation
- To vent anger / frustration

We want a situation where both the complainant and the Council arrive at a happy conclusion!

To help the Council to deal with complaints, you may wish to ask him/her what they expect as an outcome. Remember to think how you might feel in the same situation!

6.3 What prevents people from complaining?

Few people actually like making complaints and will be deterred by the following:

- The feeling that nothing will happen as a result
- Fear that they could in some way be later penalised
- Not being aware of their right to complain
- Not knowing where to complain
- Not knowing how to complain
- Not knowing who to complain to
- Feeling of making a fuss
- Facing a large bureaucratic organisation
- Complicated procedures
- Requires too much determination
- Previous bad experience with the Council
- Language difficulties
- Speech / Hearing impairment
- Unfriendly staff
- Being fobbed off
- Being nervous

6.4 A few tips for dealing with awkward complainers

Some Do's and Don'ts!

Do:

- Give your name.
- Be polite and sensitive.
- Let the customer decide if they wish to pursue their complaint as a complaint.
- Tell the customer what will happen next, the stages of the procedure and time limits.
- Tell the customer what they can reasonably expect you to do.

- Get their details, eg names, addresses, telephone numbers, dates.
- Get the facts / make notes.
- Listen and be sympathetic.
- Look at the problem from the customer's point of view.
- Stay calm even if the person gets angry.
- Give the customer a contact name and phone number.
- Act quickly once the complainant has finished.
- Take the person seriously.
- Make sure the customer does not have to repeat their complaint to various staff.
- Let the person have their say.
- Keep the customer informed of what you are doing to deal with their complaint.
- Carry out any required actions you have made.

Don't:

- Argue with the complainant
- Get angry
- Get into a blame conversation
- Undermine the Council or another department
- Accept abuse from a complainant, eg swearing
- Ask them to complain in writing or in person or come back later
- Deter people from making a complaint/s
- Consider the complaint as a personal criticism
- Use jargon when writing back to the complainant

7.0 A few words to finish off!

We hope that you find this booklet useful.

If you have any comments about the booklet, we would be very happy to hear from you. Please let us know if you feel that we have missed anything out, or have included inaccurate information, or need to take certain parts out etc. We would also welcome any comments on how this booklet can be improved as well as improving the way that the Council deals with complaints.

LIZ JOHNSTON

ELISH MARTIN

Appendices

CUSTOMER COMMENT FORM

REF

Received by: _____	Department: _____	Date: _____
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Telephone
 In Person
 By Letter
 By Email
 Local Councillor

ENQUIRER DETAILS

Name: _____	Email: _____
Address: _____	
Postcode: _____	Home Telephone: _____
Work Telephone: _____	

NATURE OF COMMENT

Record date of incident, site details if appropriate, department/staff involved. Nature of comment and, if it is a complaint, how the complainant would like it resolved.

Nature of Comment:
Complainant's solution: (if required)

Processed by: _____

Forwarded to: _____ Date: _____

COMPLAINTS

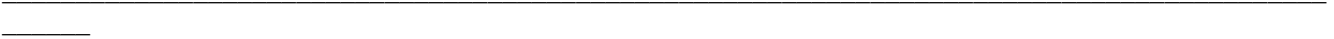
STAGE 1

Date acknowledgement letter sent ____/____/____ *(Within 3 working dates of receipt)*

Department / section: _____

Progress Notes:

Please record contact made with the complaint, staff involved and notes on the Outcomes/actions taken. If appropriate, please attach a copy of any written correspondence.



Required Completion date by the department ___/___/___ (Within 15 working days of receipt)

Resolved date: ___/___/___ Signature: _____

If not resolved – Forward to: _____ Date: _____

STAGE 2

th

Progress Notes:

Please record contact made with the complainant, staff involved and notes on Outcomes/actions taken. If appropriate, please attach a copy of any written correspondence.

Required Completion date by the department ___/___/___ (Within 15 working days of receipt)

Resolved date: ___/___/___ Signature: _____

If not resolved – Forwarded to: _____ Date: _____

STAGE 3

Progress Notes:

Record contact made with the complainant, staff involved and notes on the Outcomes/action taken. If appropriate, please attach a copy of any written correspondence.

Required Completion date by the department ___/___/___ (Within 15 working days of receipt)

Resolved date: ___/___/___ Signature: _____

General Notes:



Customer Acknowledgement Letter

Dear

Thank you for your telephone call/ letter on . Your complaint has been acknowledged and forwarded on to [Officer's name, Department name and tel no.] who will be in touch with you shortly to discuss this matter further.

The Council has in place a **Complaints Procedure**, which aims to ensure that complaints are dealt with fully, fairly and as quickly as possible.

The Complaints procedure has three stages as detailed below:

Stage 1: First Complaint

In the first instance the department responsible deals with complaints. We will issue an acknowledgement to the complainant either in writing or by phone within 3 days and aim to respond to complaints within 15 working days after receipt.

Stage 2: Your complaint has been investigated, but you are not satisfied

At this stage the Departmental Director will deal with the complaint. Again, we will acknowledge the re-complaint within 3 days and aim to resolve it within 15 days.

Stage 3: You are still not satisfied, what can you do?

If your complaint has still not been settled to your satisfaction, you have the right to request the Chief Executive to review the response and take appropriate action. You may refer your complaint to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman if the Chief Executive's response is not satisfactory.

If you have any queries in the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me on [telephone no.]

Yours sincerely

Name

Department position