

COMMENTS, COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS POLICY

Policy Number	CCG/1/14
Version Number	1.1
Author	Director of Performance

Date of Screening of Policy	TBC
EQIA Recommended?	
Date Adopted by Council	TBC
Date Policy Revised	October 2016 Draft CPR161115; Draft CPR170117 Draft CM170124

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1. INTRODUCTION

Causeway Coast and Glens Council is committed to delivering the highest quality public services to the residents of, and visitors to, this area. As part of our policy of continuous improvement the Council welcomes all comments, both positive and negative, on the services and facilities that it offers.

Any feedback on our services and facilities is most welcome. Causeway Coast and Glens Council recognises, however, that there will be occasions when its services and actions do not meet the reasonable expectations of the public. To maintain the highest level of service the Council needs to know when things go wrong or if we are not meeting the needs of the public. In line with the Council's desire to be able to respond to customer demands the following policy and procedure establishes how the Council will effectively receive, deal with and assess complaints.

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Clarify how the public may submit any complaints, comments and compliments on Council services or facilities and outline the procedure for dealing with complaints;
- Define the standards the public can expect from officers when they make a complaint;
- Recognise the importance of comments, compliments and complaints in providing feedback about Council services and performance;
- Set out how the Council will consistently monitor comments, compliments and complaints and use that information to review services and identify training needs.

2. POLICY STATEMENT

Causeway Coast and Glens Council is committed to delivering the highest quality public services and will, as far as possible, fully and effectively respond to any comments or complaints received from the public relating to its services or the actions of its workforce. The procedures contained in this policy and procedure document will assist the Council in recording, assessing and responding to any complaints as diligently as possible.

Signed: _____ Date: _____
Mayor
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Signed: _____ Date: _____
Chief Executive,
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

3. DEFINITIONS

Please find below an explanation of what certain terms mean in the context of the policy:

“A Comment”

For the purpose of this policy and procedure “a comment” is defined as:

“An expression of opinion, either positive or negative, relating to the services and/or facilities provided by the Council.”

“A Compliment”

For the purpose of this policy and procedure “a compliment” is an expression of satisfaction about a service or function provided by the Council.

“A Complaint”

For the purpose of this policy and procedure “a complaint” is defined as:

“An expression of dissatisfaction with the standard of service provided by the Council, or with something the Council or a member of its workforce may or may not have done.”

Complaints under this policy may, for example, include issues relating to:

- Delays in delivering services
- Failure to follow agreed policies and procedures
- Inadequate or unsatisfactory services
- Rudeness or inappropriate or offensive behaviour
- Unfair discrimination or unequal treatment.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The implementation and effectiveness of the policy will be overseen by the Chief Executive of the Council or by officers so designated by him.

5. PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

5.1 Purpose of the Procedure

The purpose of this procedure is to ensure that:

- As many complaints as possible are resolved at the initial point of contact without the need for the customer to pursue the matter further;

- Any faults on Council's behalf are acknowledged and an apology is offered;
- The customer is given a clear and relevant explanation where this is requested;
- Acknowledged deficiencies in the Council's services are identified and remedied as quickly as possible;
- Effective action is taken to avoid similar complaints in future;

Best practice in dealing with complaints is shared across the Council.

5.2 Who Can Make a Complaint?

The Council encourages local residents, local businesses, visitors, community groups and any other group or individual that uses or is affected by our services to give us feedback.

5.3 How Can Complaints Be Received?

Complaints may be made in person, by phone, by e-mail, letter or using Council's complaints, comments and compliments form and online via Council's website. If a customer has any difficulties in making a complaint at any stage of the procedure, they can request assistance or submit their complaint in an alternative form. Where the complaint is made verbally Council officers will record the details of the complaint in writing.

Council wishes to ensure access for all and will provide for additional requirements such as alternative formats on request for customers with a disability or alternative language access for those customers for whom English is not their first language.

5.4 Standards Expected of Staff

The minimum standards expected of staff are as follows:

- Complaints made verbally (in person or by phone) must be formally recorded on Council's Comments, Compliments, Complaints Form with all relevant details included in this record of the complaint, i.e. nature of the complaint, dates, times, contact details for the complainant, who dealt with the complaint, etc.
- Complaints received in writing, either in the form of a letter, e-mail or on the official complaints form must be date stamped on receipt and acknowledged.
- It is not absolutely necessary for the complainant to have completed the Council's official complaint form although they should be made aware of this method of making a complaint.

- Each Service section will have a nominated officer who will be responsible for ensuring complaints are logged and tracked and outcomes recorded.

5.5 Handling Complaints – The Three Stage Process

In most cases service delivery problems reported by the public can be resolved satisfactorily by the member of staff they first contact without any need for further action. If the complainant is not satisfied, however, with the response given at this informal stage, they are entitled to ask for their complaint to be dealt with formally under the Council's Complaints Procedure which has three formal escalating stages.

Details of the three formal stages are included in **Appendix 1**.

5.6 The complaints procedure does not cover:

- A request for service
- Reporting a fault
- Requests for service provision
- Complaints about something that happened more than 12 months ago, unless it concerns delays by the Council.
- Where there is a statutory process such as an appeal or tribunal
- Employees' human resources matters which may be subject to other council policies.
- Access to information requests

5.7 Vexatious complaints and complainants

The Council has taken account of the NI Local Government Ombudsman's guidance that 'there may be a small number of people who act in a vexatious manner or in bad faith'. The policy on dealing with persistent and vexatious complaints and complainants is included at Appendix 2.

6. RECEIVING COMMENTS AND COMPLIMENTS

6.1 How can comments and compliments be received?

The Council welcomes comments and suggestions from its customers. These can play an important part in improving service delivery. Comments and compliments may be made in person, by phone, by email, letter and in any language other than English.

Comments and suggestions will be acknowledged and recorded by the nominated officer in each department.

If a response is required the officer responsible will respond no later than 20 working days from receipt advising of the action taken to implement the suggestion or give reasons why it cannot be. The response can be in writing, by phone or in person or in another format if the complainant agrees.

Comments and suggestions might include:

- Comments on the services provided i.e. not a complaint
- Comments on how a service could be improved
- Suggestions for new or changes to existing services
- Comments on procedures or service levels

6.2 Compliments

Compliments from customers can play an important part in staff morale and can be used to gauge complainant satisfaction. Compliments received will be recorded by the nominated officer in each department.

6.3 Staff members who are named in compliments will receive notice of the compliment and details of the compliment will be noted in the staff member's record.

7. **RECORDING FEEDBACK AND MONITORING**

Quarterly statistical reports will be presented to the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee and Senior Management Team, for information, on the number, type and resolution of complaints and any associated trends.

An annual report on complaints, including any comments and compliments will be produced for consideration by the Council at year end.

As well as reporting on the number, type and resolution of complaints, the report should also:

- identify improvements to service delivery introduced in response to complaints;
- recommend action to minimise or avoid similar complaints in future;
- recommend procedural improvements for handling and resolving complaints;
- identify training and information needs.

8. **EVALUATION AND REVIEW OF THE POLICY**

This Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy and Procedure will be reviewed on an annual basis by the Senior Management Team and Corporate Policy and Resources Committee and, as part of this review, an evaluation will be conducted on the effectiveness of the policy and procedures in relation to receiving, handling, assessing and resolving complaints received by the Council.

9. **SECTION 75 EQUALITY AND GOOD RELATIONS**

Causeway Coast and Glens Council is fully committed to meeting its obligations in relation to Equality and Good Relations under Section 75 of the Northern

Ireland Act. In this regard this policy will be screened using Section 75 guidelines and will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment if found necessary as a result of the screening process.

10. CONTACT DETAILS

Any issues or queries relating to this policy should be addressed to:

Moira Quinn
Director of Performance
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
66 Portstewart Road
Coleraine
BT52 1EY

Tel: 028 7034 7034

E-Mail: moira.quinn@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk

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HANDLING COMPLAINTS – THE THREE STAGE PROCESS

Stage One

When a complaint is made this will be dealt with by the relevant officer within the section the complaint relates to.

- The name of the complainant and nature of the complaint are recorded by the section and the complaint is dealt with by the relevant officer in the section.
- Complaints about a member of staff must go directly to the appropriate Service Manager or Director and not to the person about whom the complaint has been made. Complaints about a Director must be made directly to the Chief Executive.
- If the complaint is not settled immediately, the complainant will receive an acknowledgement within **five working days** and a reply no later **than twenty working days**.
- If this is not possible the complainant should be contacted explaining why there is a delay and advising them when a full response will be received.

Stage Two

- If the complainant is not satisfied with the response they have received they can refer the matter to the relevant member of the Senior Management Team for investigation
- They should be asked to detail clearly in writing why they are still not satisfied including as much detail as possible or they can complete the official complaint form.
- If the complaint cannot be dealt with immediately, an acknowledgement of receipt of the complaint should be sent to the complainant within **five working days** in an appropriate medium and language.
- Where the complaint relates to a specific Director, the Chief Executive will allocate another Director or an independent person to investigate the complaint.
- Where a complaint relates to a number of different Departments or Directorates, it should be responded to by the Director where the bulk of the complaint rests. This Director must also take responsibility for co-ordinating a response within the specified time period.

- A reply to the complainant in relation to their complaint should be furnished within **no later than twenty working days**.
- In the response the complainant must be told how they may pursue their complaint further, i.e. to the next stage.
- In exceptional circumstances the time period for the investigation and furnishing of a reply can be extended but the complainant must be kept informed of when a likely response can be expected.
- All reasonable steps must be taken to ensure that information about complaints remains confidential.

Stage Three

- If the complainant is dissatisfied with the response they have received in Stage Two then the complainant has the right to ask the Chief Executive of Council to review the matter.
- The Chief Executive will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within **five working days**
- In the absence of the Chief Executive another senior officer or independent person may be authorised to undertake the review.
- The Chief Executive (or nominated person) will carry out a review of the matter and will reply to the complainant **no later than twenty working days**.
- In the event that these timescales cannot be met the complainant should be informed about any delay and given a new date for when a response will be received.
- The aim of the review is to ensure that all matters raised in the original complaint have been comprehensively and accurately addressed and, if not, to ensure that this now happens.
- In the response the complainant must be told how they may pursue their complaint further, i.e. to the next stage.

If the complainant is still not satisfied with the Council's response, they must be advised that they have the right to refer their complaint to:

The Northern Ireland Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints
 Freepost BEL 1478
 Belfast
 BT1 6BY

Tel: (028) 90233821
Text Phone: 028 90897789
E-Mail: ombudsman@ni-ombudsman.org.uk

OR

By calling between the hours 9.30 am and 4.30 pm at the address below:

The Ombudsman
33 Wellington Place
Belfast
BT1 6H

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Policy on handling vexatious complaints and complainants

1. Introduction

- 1.1 A small number of complainants make complaints in a persistent or vexatious way which can take up a considerable amount of time and resources or impede the investigation into their complaint. The aim of this policy is to identify situations where the complainant making the complaint could be considered vexatious or persistent and how to deal with such situations.
- 1.2 It is important to distinguish between people who make a lot of complaints, because they genuinely think something has gone wrong, and those who are simply being difficult. Reasonable allowances should be made in all cases for people acting out of distress or anxiety.
- 1.3 Staff are not expected to tolerate unacceptable behaviour by complainants. Unacceptable behaviour includes behaviour which is abusive, offensive or threatening and may include; using abusive or foul language in person or on the telephone, sending multiple emails or leaving multiple voicemails.
- 1.4 This policy has been drafted taking into account the NI Ombudsman's Framework for Effective Complaint Handling; Responsibilities of Complainants. Consideration should also be given to the complainant's other contact

2. Persistent and vexatious complaint policy

- 2.1 A vexatious complainant is someone who consistently raises a complaint, without grounds, in order to cause annoyance or disruption.
- 2.2 A persistent complainant is someone who contacts the Council and raises the same complaint or similar complaint many times. Many times is defined as 'more than three separate occasions.
- 2.3 The types of complaint and complainant behaviour that this policy covers are listed below. This list is not exhaustive nor does one single type of complaint or behaviour imply that the person will be considered as being a vexatious complainant or a persistent complainer.
- Refusing to specify the grounds of a complaint.
 - Insufficient grounds or no grounds for their complaint.
 - Refusing to accept that the issues are not within the remit of Council's Comments, Compliments and Complaints Procedure.
 - Insisting on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the procedure.
 - Making groundless complaints about the staff dealing with the complaint.
 - Changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation continues.

- Introducing irrelevant new information during the investigation into the complaint.
 - Electronically recording meetings and conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of staff dealing with the complaint.
 - Multiple lines of enquiry made regarding the same issue, for instance, pursuing the same complaint with and MLA, MP, Elected Members or other bodies and statutory agencies.
 - Submitting repeat complaints after the complaints process has been exhausted.
 - Refusing to accept the outcome of the complaints procedure, repeatedly arguing the point.
 - Making persistent and unreasonable demands of staff or the complaints process.
- 2.4 If staff believe that any of the behaviours above are displayed for a reason related to a disability or because the complainant's first language is not English then immediate steps should be taken to address these issues.
- 2.5 Based on the behaviour and actions of a complainant staff may consider the following restrictive actions while dealing with the complaint:
- Requesting contact from the complainant in a particular form only.
 - Requesting that the complainant uses an advocate to interact with Council staff.
 - Placing restrictions on who the complainant can contact within Council and requiring the complainant to have contact with a named member of staff only.
 - Requiring any face-to-face contact to take place in the presence of a witness.
- Letting the complainant know that any further contact will not be acknowledged or replied to on the specific topic of the complaint.
- 2.6 In some circumstances the Council may decide that it is appropriate to severely reduce or completely stop responding to a particular complainant.
- 2.7 The decision to restrict or stop a complainant's access to the Council's offices and officers can only be taken by the appropriate member of the Senior Management Team following consultation with Party Group Leads within Council.
- 2.8 The Manager of the service area affected will contact the relevant Director to discuss why the complainant's behaviour is causing concern, giving clear documented evidence to support this.
- 2.9 The Director will send a letter to the complainant outlining the discussion which has taken place with the Manager and enclosing a copy of this policy. The letter will explain the action the Council will take if the behaviour continues.

2.10 If the behaviour continues the Senior Management Team will make a decision on the action to take. A letter will then be sent to the complainant outlining the decision. The letter will include:

- Why we have taken the decision we have.
- What specific action we are taking.
- The duration of that action.
- The date of the three month review.
- The complainant's right to appeal.
- The right of the complainant to contact the NI Local Government Ombudsman.

2.11 The decision made and letters sent will be logged on the Council's complaints system.

2.12 All complainants have the right of appeal. Appeals will be heard by the Chief Executive or a Director who has not already been involved.

2.13 All decisions will be reviewed after three months.

3. Procedure

The procedure is detailed below.

Complainant raising the same complaint or similar complaints repeatedly or seems to be raising a complaint without grounds to cause annoyance or disruption. Director writes to complainant with a copy of the contact and this policy and advises of the actions available to Council should the type of contact continue.

