

# **Corporate complaints policy**

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## Introduction

The council recognises the right of its customers to complain and indeed welcomes complaints as a valuable form of feedback about its services. Portsmouth City Council is committed to using information gained from complaints to help drive forward improvements to services and to better meet the needs of customers.

This policy framework document outlines in broad terms the council's core aims and intended approach to the management of complaints. Fundamentally this policy is designed to enable the council to establish a framework for handling complaints that:

- sets out a definition of a complaint that can be clearly communicated to both customers and staff
- establishes clear minimum service standard that are capable of being monitored and reported
- is responsive to the needs of our customers
- is transparent and easy to understand
- reflects best practice
- helps the council to learn from complaints
- enables our staff to deal with complaints effectively at the earliest stage in the process

## Definition of a complaint

Portsmouth City Council has adopted the following definition of a complaint:

“A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction about a service provided by the council, a member of staff or someone acting on behalf of the council.”

## Complaint service standards

The following represent the minimum complaint standards:

- The complaint will be recorded – this will assist in subsequent complaint analysis.
- Specific response targets will be set for every stage of the complaints process.
- The complaint will be acknowledged – where the complaint cannot be resolved immediately, customers will be provided with a written acknowledgement that provides them with a named contact officer, phone number, email address and date by which they can expect to receive a full response.
- The progress of outstanding complaints will be monitored- complaint officers will work closely with individual service managers to ensure investigations are completed and responses sent within the required time scale.
- Customers will be kept informed – where a full response cannot be provided for whatever reason, the customer is to be sent an interim response informing them of current progress.
- The council encourages easy access to the complaints process – customers will be able to make complaints in writing, in person at any council office, over the phone and by e-mail.
- Plain English is to be used in all responses.
- The right to further review – customers are to be informed of their right to have the matter escalated to the next stage of the complaints process if they were dissatisfied with the previous response.
- When requested customer information will be available in Braille, large print, audio-tape, audio CD or in another language.

# Complaints Procedure

Portsmouth City Council has a three-stage complaint process. Following the completion of each stage the customer will have the right to have the complaint escalated to the next stage of the process – subject to them explaining why they were dissatisfied with the outcome of the investigation at the earlier stage.

The customer can complain to the Ombudsman direct, but the Ombudsman will only deal with complaints that have been through Portsmouth City Council's three stage complaint procedure.

This policy establishes time scales for the three stages of the complaint's process that are realistic and reflect best practice.

The following are the time scales for stages 1, 2 and 3:

- Stage 1 – acknowledgement within 3 working days and response within 10 working days.
- Stage 2 – response within 15 working days.
- Stage 3 – response within 20 working days.

The complainant will be kept informed of any delays and when a full response will be expected.

Any complaints made concerning harassment or discrimination by an employee on a customer will use the same three stage process. The service will deal with these complaints and the equality and diversity team will be available for support and information if required.

## Definition of harassment and discrimination

### Harassment

This is unwanted behaviour, which has the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, sex, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

### Discrimination

Treating an individual or group differently and less favourably than others under comparable circumstances. It may be based on a person's race, ethnic origin, gender, disability, age, religious or other belief, or their sexual orientations. It may be unlawful and can include harassment.

## Issues/subject areas falling outside of the complaints policy

Though designed to be as comprehensive as possible it is recognised that certain types of complaint are not intended to be dealt with by the complaints policy and are more appropriately dealt with through other channels. These include:

- Complaints by council employees about matters relating to their employment that would be more appropriate to be dealt with under the HR personnel policies and procedures.
- Issues for which statutory appeal bodies or tribunals have been established, for example school admission appeals or benefit appeals tribunal.
- Social care complaints are dealt with under their own procedure.
- All schools have their own complaints process.

- Complaints regarding councillors are dealt with on an appropriate form in line with the national guidance from the Standards Board of England.

## **Responsibilities of Portsmouth City Council's contractors**

Organisations contracted to provide services on behalf of the council will be required to comply with the policy. This includes responding to council officers with information as requested concerning the complaint and providing assistance in the connection with further investigations as appropriate.

Portsmouth City Council will reply on behalf of the contractor. If the contractor receives a complaint direct they will ensure that it is sent to the relevant service to record and action as appropriate.

## **Role of the complaints network group**

The complaints network members will have a key role in ensuring the effective implementation of the policy. Their role will include:

- Ensuring complaints are recorded, acknowledged and allocated to the appropriate officer for investigation.
- Ensuring interim responses are sent where the full response cannot be sent within the target time.
- Ensuring that complaint recording systems remain accurate and up to date to safeguard the integrity and security of the personal data held on these systems.
- Providing management teams with complaints analysis information as and when required.
- Learning from complaints. Identifying areas of service where changes and improvements need to be made and ensuring that the changes have been actioned in a timely manner.

## **Role of the complaints steering group**

The complaints steering group will draw up detailed procedures to support the practical application of the policy. Though understandably departmental procedures will vary to reflect their particular service set-up, the key factors that will be reflected in all procedures will include:

- The acceptance of verbal (not just written) complaints
- The importance of resolving the complaint at the earliest stage possible
- Informing the customer of the right to have the matter escalated if they are dissatisfied with the response
- Recording details of complaints to aid the council in the learning process

Departmental procedures will be agreed by the relevant departmental management team and will be subject to regular and comprehensive audit to ensure they are being complied with.