

Customer Feedback Policy.

Dealing with customer
comments, compliments and
complaints

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1. Introduction

This document sets out how South Ribble Borough Council manages and responds to customer comments, compliments and complaints.

South Ribble Borough Council is committed to providing excellent customer service and since 2001 has achieved Customer Service Excellence accreditation for a number of services, including the front line provision provided by Gateway. This policy supports the Council's service standards and helps us maintain a culture of excellent customer service as an organisation which listens to its customers, recognises good practice, and acknowledges and investigates when things have gone wrong, putting in place actions to learn and improve in the future.

The views of our customers are important to the Council. They help us to: shape services to support the needs of our communities; provide insight into what we are doing well and where we can improve; and provide a responsive service that changes and adapts in accordance with customer need.

The Council will treat comments, compliments and complaints with respect and seek to understand the customer's point of view.

The Council will endeavour to resolve problems at the time they are brought to its attention, to the customer's satisfaction. In order to achieve this, all staff are empowered to deal, where possible, with issues and complaints at source. Where this is not possible, the formal complaints procedure will be applied.

2. Scope

This document sets out how South Ribble Borough Council manages and responds to comments, compliments and complaints.

This policy supports the Council's priority of "Excellence, investment and financial sustainability" and it incorporates the Council's Policy on Dealing with Vexatious and Unreasonable Complainants.

3. Comments, Compliments and Complaints - Definitions

3.1 Comments

A comment can be described as a volunteered personal opinion or belief, feedback or remark expressed by a customer. Unless specifically requested, there is not an automatic assumption that the Council will reply to comments.

3.2 Compliments

A compliment is defined as a customer statement of positive recognition or praise for a service or member of staff.

3.3 Complaints

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction or concern made by the customer about the standard of service, actions or lack of actions by the Council and its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers.

A complaint is not a service request. A service request is defined as a customer contact that, for the first time, brings a matter to the Council's attention and requests a service offered by the council.

3.4 Social Media

The Council receives an increasing amount of feedback via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Where possible comments, compliments and service requests should be dealt with at the first point of contact, which in many cases will involve a response using social media. Complaints should be dealt with in accordance with the Complaints Process below, although it will be appropriate to reply immediately via social media to confirm that the matter is being dealt with as a formal complaint and in accordance with the Council's policy.

4. Comments, Compliments and Complaints – Process

The processes that are outlined below detail the maximum response times for responding to feedback – such as 10 or 20 working days. However, it is expected that feedback that is received will be treated as a priority and responded to expeditiously with the vast majority of cases having been investigated and responded to well within this timescale.

4.1 Comments Process

Customer comments are managed outside of the complaints process. Comments made to the Council will be forwarded to the appropriate Manager Team Leaders to consider.

Unless specifically requested, there is not an automatic assumption that the Council will reply to comments. However, where it is felt appropriate or where the customer indicates they expect a reply, this should be sent within 10 working days.

Managers are encouraged to share information of this nature at regular team meetings and acknowledge the performance of the relevant individual and/or team.

4.2 Compliments Process

Copies of all compliments should be forwarded to the Head of Customer Experience who will maintain a central register of compliments.

Compliments should be celebrated and shared by Managers amongst teams and service areas and may be publicised via the Council's communication channels (Connect, website, and at Leadership Team meetings).

4.3 Complaints Process

The formal complaints process has a three stage structure. Stage one and two complaints are investigated by the Council, stage three complaints are investigated independently by the Local Government Ombudsman.

In all circumstances the Council will act in accordance with its Values; Teamwork, Integrity, Excellence, being a Learning Organisation and having a Positive Attitude to improve services and customer service.

Officers responding to complaints are encouraged to speak with complainants during the investigation of the complaint to help gain a greater understanding of the complainant's point of view.

Informal Stage

Customers are asked, before submitting formal complaints, to contact us to establish whether we can resolve their concern promptly and satisfactorily. In cases such as a missed bin collection, this is more likely to result in an efficient resolution than awaiting a formal written response.

At the initial point of contact with the customer the officer should, where possible, determine the extent to which the concerns being raised can be addressed through simple steps, or an apology, to put things right without recourse to the formal procedure. Where such a solution is not possible or appropriate, the customer should be advised that the Council's formal procedure will be followed.

Stage 1

Stage one complaints will be registered and acknowledged (within three working days) by the Head of Customer Experience/Gateway Team Leader. Where complaints are received directly by a service area, the Head of Customer Experience must be provided with a copy immediately upon receipt so it can be input onto the Firmstep system.

Registered complaints will be automatically passed to the appropriate Team Leader or Manager by the system, and they will review the complaint and either respond personally or arrange for an appropriate officer to respond (within 10 working days of receipt of the complaint, unless exceptional circumstances exist). A response may be sent by letter or email, or by any other method requested by the complainant.

The response will automatically contain details of what the complainant needs to do if they remain dissatisfied with the outcome and wish to progress the complaint to stage two.

Stage 2

A complaint will enter stage two of the process if they advise that they are dissatisfied with the result of stage one.

Stage two complaints will be registered and acknowledged (within three working days) by the Head of Customer Experience. The Head of Customer Experience must be

provided with a copy of any stage two complaints, immediately, where they are received directly by a service area for uploading to Firmstep.

Registered complaints will be passed to the appropriate Manager or Director, who will review the complaint and either respond personally or arrange for an appropriate officer to respond (within 20 working days of receipt of the complaint, unless exceptional circumstances exist). A response may be sent by letter or email, or by any other method requested by the complainant.

The response must contain details of what the complainant needs to do if they remain dissatisfied with the outcome and wish to progress the complaint to stage three. A copy of the response must be sent to the Head of Customer Experience.

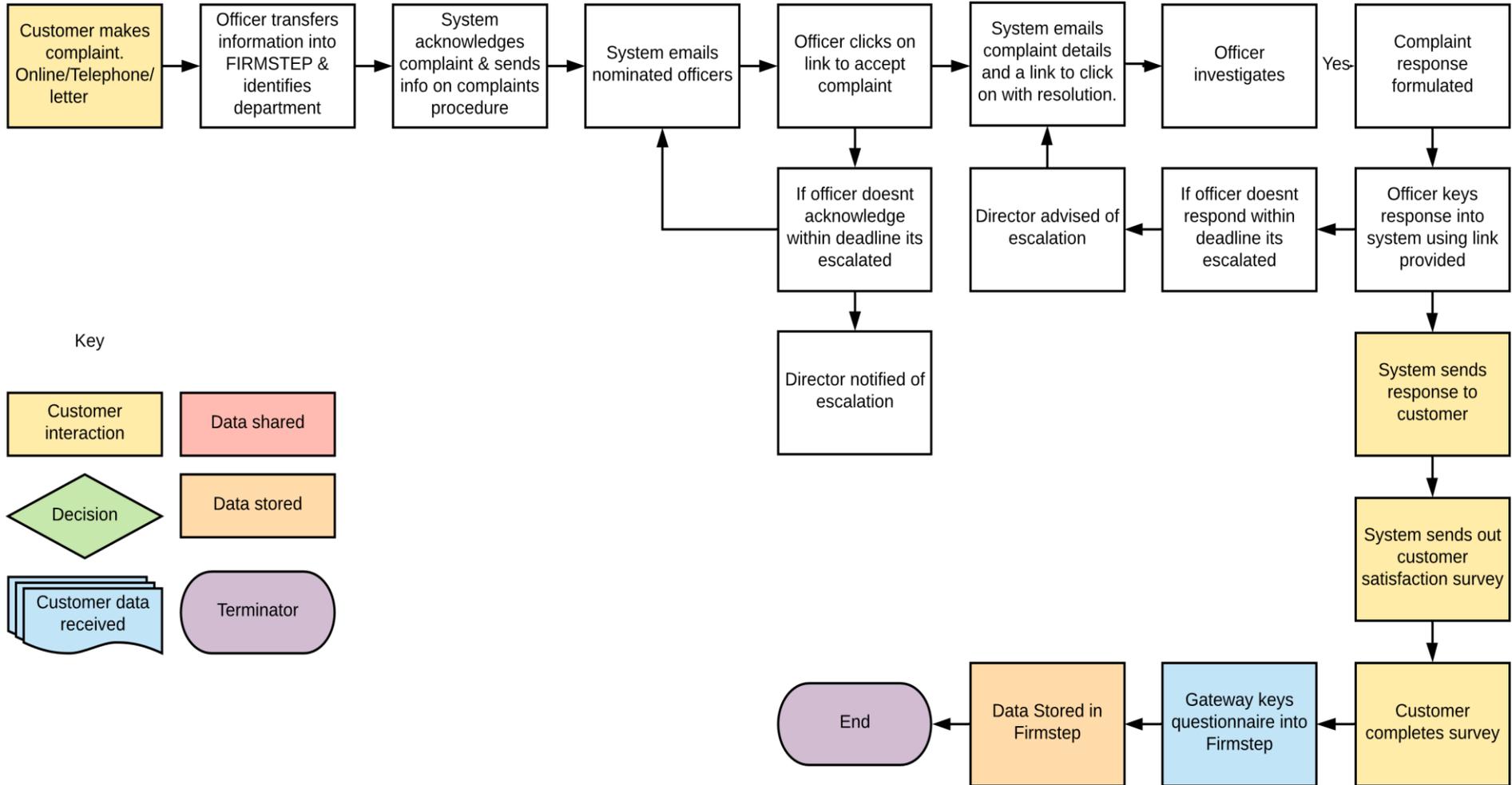
Stage 3

If a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the stage two complaint, they may wish to enter stage three of the complaints process and contact the Local Government Ombudsman directly.

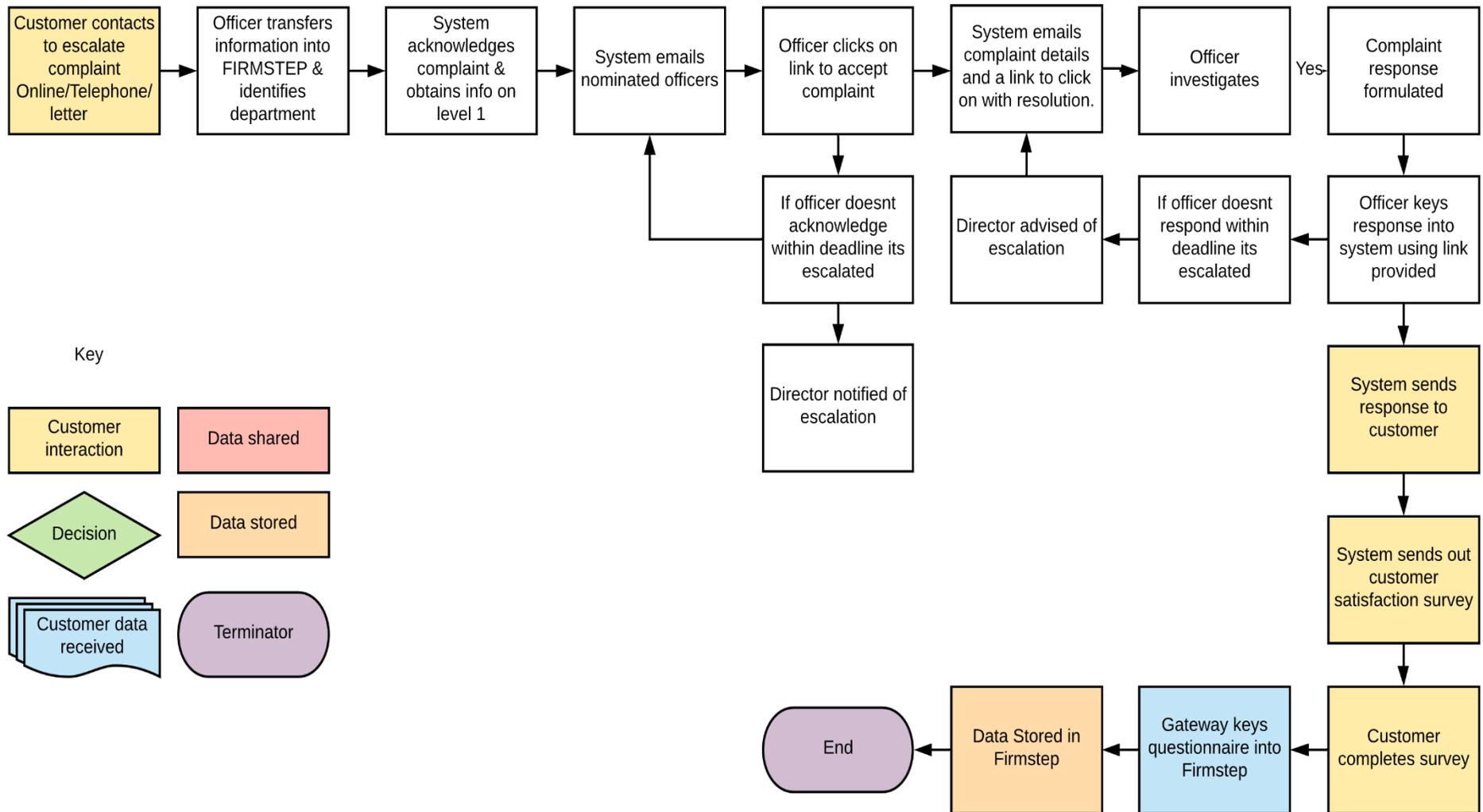
A complainant may approach the Local Government Ombudsman at any stage of the complaints process, although the Ombudsman will not usually investigate complaints unless the Council has had an opportunity to investigate at stages one and two first.

Stage three complaints will be registered and acknowledged (within three working days) by the Head of Customer Experience or Gateway Team Leader. The response will be automatically generated and this will direct the customer to contact the Local Government Ombudsman to progress their complaint

Customer Complaints - Level 1



Customer Complaints - Level 2



5. Exceptions

The following exceptions apply to this policy:

- The complaints process outlined above will not be used to deal with matters where an alternative statutory appeals process is in place to enable a decision to be challenged. Examples of this include planning applications, entitlement to housing benefit and decisions made in respect of homeless applications. For example, a customer may complain to the Council about the length of time taken or the process to determine entitlement to benefit but could not complain about the decision itself, with that decision being dealt with by the Social Security Appeals Tribunal.
- Unless the Chief Executive or a Director determines that there are exceptional circumstances, the Council will not investigate complaints relating to issues that are greater than 12 months old.
- The complaints process cannot be used to complain about the conduct of Councillors. Complaints of this nature should be directed to the Monitoring Officer at South Ribble Borough Council.
- The complaints process excludes complaints made by our suppliers, partners and other public authorities regarding our business relationships.

6. Learning from complaints

The Council values complaints and uses the information to inform service planning to shape services that support the needs of the customer. To this end all respondents to complaints are required to complete a 'Learning from Complaints Form'. This forms part of the process and must be completed on Firmstep at the same time as the response is being provided.

The Learning from Complaints Form provides an opportunity for officers to review the complaint and identify any lessons learnt and any corrective action taken. Learning from Complaints forms will be recorded centrally on the Firmstep system.

7. Reporting complaints and compliments

Complaints information will be reported to the Leadership Team and the Portfolio Holder on a quarterly basis as part of the Corporate Performance monitoring process.

Shared Assurance Services will include compliance with this policy on the annual Service Assurance Statements that are completed by services. When undertaking an audit of a service, Shared Assurance Services will ensure, where they deem it to be necessary, that the service is recording and dealing with complaints in accordance with this policy and will include their findings in the Final Report as appropriate. They may liaise with the Head of Customer Experience to ensure that complaints are being correctly recorded and responded to within the timescales outlined in this policy.

The Customer Feedback Policy will be reviewed on bi-annual basis or when statutory requirements change.

8. Unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complaints

The Council recognises that customers may exert pressure on the authority when making a complaint, as they believe that the Council has failed in its service to them. Such pressure may be persistent, but in most cases this is reasonable and acceptable.

A small minority of complainants may pursue their complaints in ways that can impede the investigation of their complaint or impose a significant and disproportionate resource requirement on the authority. Such actions can occur during the investigation of a complaint, or once investigations have been completed. In these cases, a complainant may be considered unreasonably persistent.

The Council's Policy on Dealing with Vexatious and Unreasonable Complainants should be used when considering restrictive measures with customers.

Violent or abusive behaviour towards staff will not be tolerated under any circumstances. In the event that such an incident occurs action should be taken in accordance with the Council's Verbal and Physical Abuse Policy and should be reported in accordance with the Council's procedure for reporting incidents of verbal or physical abuse, as appropriate.

9. Anonymous complaints

Anonymous complaints should be passed to the Head of Customer Experience who will register the complaint and pass to the appropriate Manager or Team Leader for investigation.

10. Confidentiality

The Council will maintain the confidentiality of all personal information, and not disclose it outside of South Ribble Borough Council without the express permission of the customer. Records of complaints will be stored securely and access will be limited to officers who have a valid need to know it in order to deal with the complaint. Records will be disposed of in strict accordance with government guidance.

11. Role Descriptions

This section describes the roles and responsibilities of individuals and teams involved in the Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy.

11.1 Members and Officers of the Council

Members and Officers of the Council are required, in the first instance, to forward all complaints and compliments to the Head of Customer Experience.

Where Members are submitting complaints on behalf of residents, and are acting as advocates for residents, they will receive copies of all relevant correspondence relating to the complaint and may be the principal point of contact.

In all cases, Members are invited to liaise with the Head of Customer Experience to determine when an enquiry should be treated as a complaint, based upon the guidance given in Section 3 above, and explore how the Council can provide the optimum support to ensure a satisfactory resolution for all parties.

Members and Officers receiving customer comments should forward these comments to the appropriate Manager or Team Leader.

11.2 Head of Customer Experience/Gateway Team Leader

The Head of Customer Experience will register and acknowledge all complaints within three working days. Compliments will also be registered and maintained on a central record.

Complaints will be passed to the appropriate Manager or Team Leader. The system will also provide the response due date and issue reminders as the due date is due to expire.

Responses and Learning from Complaints forms will be registered with the original complaint and a central record will be maintained. The Relevant Manager/Team Leader will analyse Responses and Learning from Complaints forms and consider whether there are any opportunities for the Council to improve customer service. This may be in a specific service area or across the Council as a whole.

Complaints and compliments will be reported in accordance with section 7 of this policy.

11.3 Directors and/or Managers

Directors and/or Managers are responsible for reviewing all complaints for the services under their management, although a complaint may be responded to by a Team Leader.

11.4 Responding Officer (Manager or Team Leader)

The responding officer is responsible for investigating and responding to a complaint in accordance with the standards detailed below:

- The timescales for responding to complaints that are outlined in this policy will be adhered to.
- If, due to exceptional circumstances, the investigation into the complaint will not be completed within the appropriate timescale, a letter will be sent to inform of the progress and expected timescales by the responding officer.
- The responding officer will also provide a copy of this letter to the Head of Customer Experience, who will maintain a central register of complaints and response times.

The investigation of a complaint should be conducted in accordance with the Council Values; Teamwork, Integrity, Excellence, being a Learning Organisation and having a Positive

Attitude to improve services and customer service. Investigations should be carried out objectively and responding officers should aim to resolve the complaint to the customer's satisfaction within the limitations that apply.

The response will be automatically be sent direct to the complainant by the system

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