

## **Responding to Complaints** A guide for Team Managers

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# 1. Introduction

Nobody likes to be the subject of a complaint – however the way in which the Local Authority investigates, responds to and acts on complaints is an indicator of the extent to which we respect and value the opinions of our residents. It is therefore important that we get it right.

Complaints can be received in a variety of formats – through letters, emails, using the council's complaints form, or through conversation.

Complaints can be regarding all manner of concerns and in its simplest form is an expression of dissatisfaction by our residents.

When residents take the time to communicate with the Local Authority and express their concerns we should ensure that we respond formally addressing the issues raised.

## Key principles:

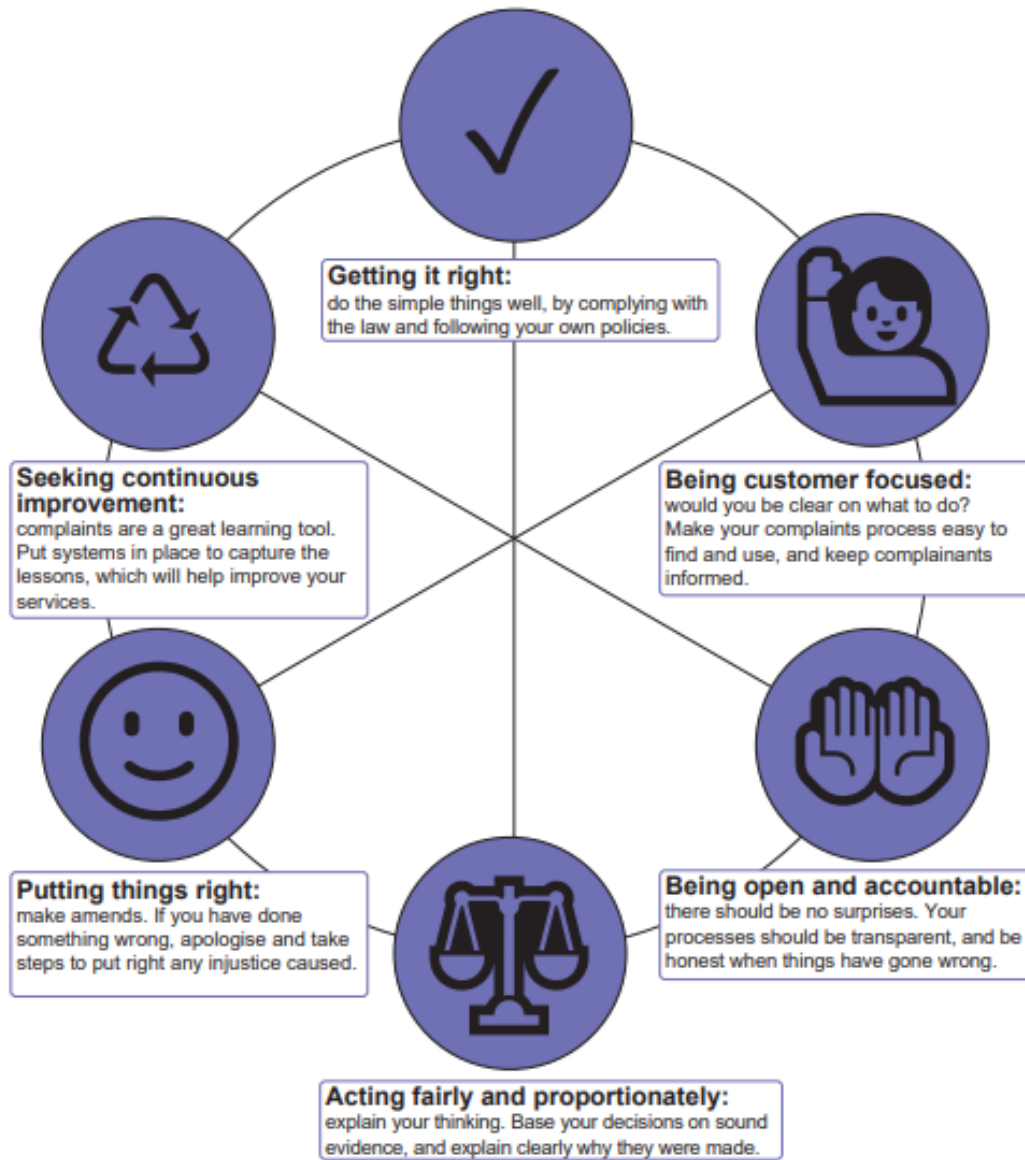
All complaints need thorough investigation. Some will be upheld and others will not, but all deserve to be considered in a consistent manner and in line with the council's complaints procedure.

There are exceptions in which we would not deal with complaints and these are listed clearly in our complaints procedure.

There is always room for us to learn from complaints and, as a result, to improve services and service delivery.

Managers always need to be aware that staff may experience a complaint investigation as a stressful process. There are procedures in place to provide support to staff in these situations.

Occasionally there will be service users who become persistent and litigious complainers and advice should be sought from the Feedback Team in how we deal with these situations.



Two key questions that underpin all complaint responses:

1. What happened?
2. What should have happened?

## 2. Top Ten Tips

The following pages provide guidance on 10 key areas of complaint responses.

1. Timeliness
2. Formal Procedures
3. Acknowledge and Inform
4. Personable and Professional
5. Apologise
6. New ways forward
7. Outcomes and Action
8. Judgement and Decision
9. Check It Out
10. Log It

**For each of these areas we will consider:**

- **Possible actions**
- **What the action hopes to achieve**
- **What the consequence might be if we don't follow the action**
- **Guidance on the action suggested**
- **Forms of working to use in your complaint response to cover this action**

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
Timeliness	<p>Respond as soon as possible. Endeavouring to meet the time scales outlined in the procedure.</p> <p>Don't wait until the due date to start.</p>	<p>The complainant's annoyance is likely to decrease. It helps hold a situation if the complainant knows when to expect a response by and from whom.</p>	<p>The complainant may feel they are not being listened to and they may become more frustrated and angry. This is likely to lead to increased enquires and complaint escalation.</p>	<p>Where an investigation into a response is complex and may take more time to respond ensure you keep the complainant fully informed on:</p> <p>Why it is taking longer</p> <p>Revised timescales for a full response.</p> <p>Be realistic rather than keep extending response times.</p>	<p>I may need to investigate with other teams</p> <p>Unfortunately key members of staff are currently absent.</p>

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
Formal Process	Deal with the complaint formally and in line with the correct procedure	Complainants should be confident that their complaint is dealt with fairly, consistently and under the correct process.	The complainant can become frustrated and feel that they are being treated unfairly and it can lead to complaint escalation.	<p>If you don't know the procedure ask the Feedback Team for advice and guidance.</p> <p>Keep up to date on policies, procedures etc relating to service delivery levels and complaints resolution</p>	We are investigating your complaint at Stage 1 of the complaints process I am INSERT NAME JOB TITLE and I will respond to your concerns below

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
<p>Acknowledge and Inform</p>	<p>Feedback Team will send the acknowledgement in which we confirm timescales for response.</p> <p>In your response acknowledge that the resident has taken the time to complain, state the complaint points and respond to each point.</p>	<p>It shows that you value the resident and contribution.</p> <p>It demonstrates that you have read the complaint and that each point has been considered.</p>	<p>The complainant may feel that you do not value their time and effort and that you have not taken the time to read the complaint.</p>	<p>Keep communication open and clear.</p> <p>Respond to all points raised.</p> <p>Take responsibility for the complaint until resolved. Not all issues will be resolved by writing the letter sometimes there will be outstanding tasks to complete.</p>	<p>Thank you for taking the time to send us your concerns</p> <p>We take all complaints seriously</p> <p>I appreciate you taking the time to raise the issue</p> <p>I would like to respond to the issues you have raised</p> <p>In summary I understand that your complaint is that</p>

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
Personable and Professional	Be polite and empathetic in your response while outlining your role and responsibility	<p>Courtesy shows respect for the complainant</p> <p>Clear and justified explanations can help to clarify, defuse and resolve issues.</p>	The complainant may feel personally challenged and offended with the response and explanations.	<p>Endeavour to be positive, empathetic and constructive.</p> <p>Think about how you would like to be treated by an organisation.</p> <p>Keep focused on customer care even if the complaint is not justified.</p>	<p>I am sorry to hear that you feel</p> <p>I can only apologise that you feel</p> <p>In our role as ... we have a responsibility to ensure that</p> <p>I appreciate how frustrating this has been for you</p> <p>The officer was following the service policy which states that</p>



Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
Apologise	Apologise as appropriate being aware that an apology can be to acknowledge someone's feelings, view point, or the way they have been treated.	This show the complainant that although you may disagree with them you have empathy with their situation.	<p>The complaint may feel that you or the service have no compassion or empathy.</p> <p>It shows contempt where an apology or recognition would be appropriate.</p> <p>It may encourage escalation of a complaint.</p>	<p>You cannot dispute the persons feelings so it is best to acknowledge them</p> <p>Apologise for how the situation has made a complainant feel</p> <p>Recognise if errors or misunderstanding have taken place and apologise for these actions.</p>	<p>I am very sorry that the situation has made you feel</p> <p>It is unfortunate that our miscommunication has resulted in</p> <p>We regret any inconvenience you have experienced.</p>

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
<p>Other Ways Forward</p>	<p>Complaints can occur because people do not know or understand what to expect</p> <p>Where appropriate the standard investigation process can be adapted to meet any special needs</p>	<p>The complainant may prefer or respond better to alternative methods of communication.</p> <p>The process maybe much quicker and less time consuming for example on quick cases to make a telephone call and resolve directly</p>	<p>The complainant may feel that their views are not being listened to.</p> <p>The complainant may feel the process is too formal and insensitive</p>	<p>Follow up with a telephone call, visit, or invite in to discuss concerns.</p> <p>Direct contact can be effective when trying to diffuse conflict and rebuild trust</p> <p>Think about a complainants needs and how best we can work with them to resolve the complaint/s.</p>	<p>For future support and information you may wish to contact</p> <p>I would appreciate it if we could meet to discuss your concerns and agree a way forward</p> <p>Please contact me should you have any further cause for concern.</p> <p>I would like to visit you to listen to your views and issues.</p>

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
<p>Outcomes and Actions</p>	<p>Be clear on the process and outcomes of your investigation and how you came to your decision</p> <p>State what action/improvements/learning will take place as a result of the complaint.</p>	<p>This shows that a full and thorough investigation took place</p> <p>The complainant is made aware what steps will be taken to redress the complaint and avoid a repeat in the future</p>	<p>It suggests the complaint has not been fully investigated and outcome may be considered unfair or biased.</p> <p>The complaints may be dissatisfied that no action will be taken as a result of the complaint.</p>	<p>Identify what actions have/will be put in place or considered in the future as a result of the complaint.</p> <p>Redirect them to alternative support or specialist groups for advice.</p>	<p>We take great care to ensure that important matters such as this are fully investigated...</p> <p><b>We have know take the following steps to address the issue you have raised...</b></p> <p>I would like to reassure you that we are aiming to resolve/improve....</p> <p><b>In light of this we have decided to XXXX which we hope will be acceptable to you</b></p>

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
Judgement and Decision	<p>State in a clear and appropriate way whether the complaint/s have been upheld, partially upheld or not upheld.</p> <p>Indicate how the decisions were reached</p> <p>Signpost the way forward for dissatisfied complainants.</p>	<p>Clarify on the complaint process and judgement will demonstrate thoroughness and fairness.</p> <p>The complainant is more likely to accept the outcome.</p> <p>It provides final resolution to the complaint.</p>	<p>The complainant may feel that they have not been taken seriously</p> <p>The overall outcomes and judgements may be unclear leaving the view that the complaint/s is still unresolved.</p>	<p>The complainant should feel that their complaint has been effectively dealt with even if they disagree with the outcomes</p> <p>The final judgement is essential as they are reported on corporately and to senior leadership</p> <p>Outlining the options for escalation is vital</p>	See Slide 15 for suggestions

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
<p>Check it out</p>	<p>Before sending out a response letter get someone to proof read it to check that it is clear without typo's and of an appropriate tone.</p> <p>Send to the Feedback Team who will send out the response.</p>	<p>A well written clear and sensitive letter with no mistakes can both defuse and resolve a complaint.</p> <p>It portrays the sender and service as being professional and competent</p>	<p>A confrontational or poorly written letter with mistakes can increase a complainant's anger and dissatisfaction.</p> <p>Escalation of the complaint</p> <p>It portrays the manager and service as unprofessional</p>	<p>Before you send anything read it back to yourself and ask: what would I do if I received this? How would I feel? If your answers are less than positive review the letter further.</p> <p>Ask a colleague or complaints officer to read and comment frankly on the letter.</p> <p>Be careful about accepting liability for a situation.</p>	

Top 10	Top Tips	Why?	If Not?	Comments	Suggested wording to use in a response
Log it	Keep records of all complaints correspondence and any activity undertaken to resolve the complaint across services	<p>If the complaint escalates you have a record and audit trail of how and when you dealt with the complaint.</p> <p>All documents relating to a complaint may be passed to senior managers and or external investigators for scrutiny</p>	<p>There is no evidence of how and when we dealt with the complaint</p> <p>Timelines and procedures cannot be evidenced.</p> <p>Portrays the manager and the service as unprofessional</p>	All complaint responses needed to be recorded with the feedback Team.	

# 3. Outcomes of Complaints

When responding to complaints we need to make sure that there is a clear outcome as to whether the investigating manager feels that the complaint is justified in some way.

This is important for the complainant so that they can make a decision about whether they wish to escalate the matter.

It is also important for the Council as we are required to collect statistics on the numbers of complaints that are upheld.

Complaints are judged as **upheld**, **partially upheld**, or **not upheld**.

An alternative wording would be **I agree**, **I partly agree**, or **I do not agree**.

The following wording are examples of how to the outcome of your investigation.

If there are several aspects to the complaint, each area requires a separate judgement about whether it is upheld.

## Upheld

*On this occasion our expected standards have clearly not been met..  
I agree that we have not performed to a required/appropriate standard*

...

*I am sorry that we have not responded in a timely manner....*

*I conclude that your complaint was fully justified...*

*In light of the failure to.....*

*In order to address the issues you have raised in your complaint the following action will be taken .....*

*I therefore uphold this aspect of your complaint*

## Partially Upheld

Select from above and below and amend as required

*I therefore partly uphold this aspect of your complaint*

## Not Upheld -

*Having fully investigated your complaint I can find no evidence to .....*

*My findings are that there is no evidence to support your complaint*

*I have to conclude that there is no indication that the service failed in its responsibilities*

*Therefore I am unable to uphold your complaint*

*Although we have not clearly not succeeded in meeting your*

*expectations I have found that procedures have been followed.....*

## 4. Response Template

Responses to complaints need a beginning, a middle and an end. The length of the 'middle will depend on the nature of the complaint.

The following is a suggestion of how to structure your response.

### Beginning:

*Dear Mrs Example*

*I am writing with the outcome/s of my investigation into your complaint which was received on (insert date) and dealt with under stage 1 of the Complaints Procedure.*

*I would like to thank you for taking the time to send in your concerns and apologise for any anxiety/inconvenience/upset this incident/issue/period has caused you.*

*As part of my investigation I met with the staff from the following teams (insert names/roles) and read the relevant case files/electronic records/report. I will respond individually to each of the issues raised in your complaint and hope that this addresses your concerns.*

### Middle:

- 1. Complaint 1 (Insert complaint or give a brief summary)*
- 2. Outline your findings in relation to this complaint, how this was evidenced*
- 3. Outline your judgements and views and how you came to these conclusions*
- 4. Clearly and appropriately indicate whether you have found the complaint to be upheld, partially upheld or not upheld (wording examples below)*
- 5. Outline what actions have/will now take place or be considered to resolve the issue/s and or what lessons have been learnt*

*Repeat the process 1-5 as above and for all other complaints*



## **End:**

*I conclude that (insert summary of overall findings/judgement/action/lessons learnt)*

*Once again I thank you for taking the time to send in your complaint. It is important that we investigate and learn from complaints in order to improve our service.*

*I trust that I have dealt with your complaint satisfactorily. If, however you are not satisfied with my explanation, in some circumstances we may consider a request that your complaint is treated as a Review. Any appeal should be made in writing within 28 days and addressed to: The Corporate Complaints Team, Room 218, Town Hall, 1 Town Square, Barking, IG11 7LE or you can email [complaints@lbbd.gov.uk](mailto:complaints@lbbd.gov.uk) In some circumstances we may not escalate your complaint, however, we will write to you giving our reasons for this.*

A good decision letter consists of:

- The statement of complaint.
- > The steps you have taken to investigate the complaint.
- > What you have taken into account.
- > Your decision and reasons for it.
- > What will happen next: if action is to be taken, how, when, and by whom?
- > Any changes you will make to processes and procedures following the complaint.
- > If the complainant disagrees, how they can challenge the decision