

Appendix 1

1. Introduction

We hope that members of the public will be happy with the services delivered by the Council. However, we recognise that, for any number of reasons, we may fall short at times.

The way we handle complaints, resolve issues, and use the feedback to improve our services is a key component of our corporate values. [Our values](#) promise that we will be helpful and respond to requests from our customers. We will be approachable and take ownership of an issue or complaint when it arises. Delivering on these elements of our service is crucial to support the Council's priority of improving customer satisfaction.

Anyone who is affected by our services can make a complaint. This includes:

- Residents
- People who work or visit the district
- Local businesses
- Community groups

We are happy to work with a representative or local councillor who has been asked to support or take forward a complaint on behalf of someone. We will need confirmation of the appointment verbally or in writing from the complainant or other legal representative.

Most of the time we get it right and we will promote compliments and feedback via our online form on the website [feedback on our services](#). We will use this feedback to highlight compliments about individuals or teams. Customers can also use this form if they have views on how we deliver our service or suggestions on the way we can improve the way we do things.

2. Purpose of this policy

The purpose of this policy is to provide a clear and transparent process for customers if they wish to make a complaint or share feedback about the Council. It also provides guidance for staff, so they are aware of their responsibilities in respect of complaints from members of the public, partners and the organisations and businesses that operate within Hart district.

This policy applies to:

- All staff working for the Council, including those working from home.
- Consultants, third party suppliers, agency staff and contractors working for the Council while engaged on Council business.

There is a separate policy for [complaints about elected members](#)

3. What is a complaint?

We define a complaint as any expression of dissatisfaction about the way in which we have provided a service.

A complaint could be in relation to:

- A delay in taking action without good reason
- A failure to provide a service
- Mistakes in the way a decision has been taken
- Not following the law or the Council's own policies
- Broken promises
- Bias or unfair discrimination
- Rude, unhelpful, or inappropriate behaviour by staff
- Poor communication from staff

Information is provided on the complaints page on the Council's website <https://www.hart.gov.uk/help-advice-1> to provide customers with information on how to make a complaint about specific services.

4. What we don't consider a complaint

Certain types of issues and complaints fall outside of the Council's complaints policy because there are other ways of dealing with them, or because they are outside of the Council's control. These include:

- Matters of law or central government policy which should be referred to your [local MP](#)
- Freedom of Information requests for reviews, or complaints about the decision, the information provided or how a request was handled. These are dealt with under [the Freedom of Information policy](#)
- Council policies. If customers are unhappy with a policy, they should be encouraged to contact the relevant Councillor who leads on that topic [known as a Portfolio Holders](#). Alternatively, you can ask [your local Councillor](#) to raise this issue on your behalf
- Where a customer is unhappy about the **outcomes** of an application, an appeal or tribunal decision these have separate review procedures that remain outside of the Council's complaint policy, including:
 - Planning application Decisions or Appeals against the refusal of planning permission or planning enforcement
 - Parking appeals
 - Housing Benefit appeals

However, if a customer is unhappy about the **way** that an appeal was handled, this should be dealt with under the Council's complaint policy and procedure

- Services provided by other layers of local government (e.g. town or parishes or Hampshire County Council) they will have their own complaints handling processes.

5. Informal stage/ issue resolution

Before reaching the formal stage, we will try to resolve issues quickly and efficiently without having to raise as a formal complaint. It will be managed by an Officer who will work with the customer to try and resolve the issue within 10 working days.

If the issue cannot be resolved to the customer satisfaction or in a timely manner, they will be invited to follow the formal route and submit a Stage 1 complaint. Examples of an issue include:

- staff not getting back to you within the times set out in our [customer care standards](#)
- a missed bin collection, having left out at the right time and [reported it as missed](#)
- information you find unclear, incorrect, or unable to be easily understood.

A customer can go straight to Stage 1 to report a complaint if they choose. They do not have to complete the informal stage.

6. Different stages of the complaints process

Complaints should be made to the Council as soon as they are aware of a problem. It should be within six months of when a customer feels that something has gone wrong. If it is longer the Council may not be able to investigate effectively. While we still hold records, staff may no longer be able to recall the exact content of conversations. As such we may not be able to investigate complaints over six months. We will advise you if this is the case with your complaint when you raise it.

If it is longer the Council will ask customers to explain and justify why they could not complain sooner.

6.1. Stage 1 complaints

Following submission, an assessment will be made about the type of complaint and passed to the relevant service area. An Officer or Manager will be allocated to the complaint and will be the point of contact throughout this stage. They will be responsible for recording, investigating, and responding to the complaint.

We will ask the customer to provide as much information as is reasonable in support of their complaint. They will also be asked what they would like the Council to do as a result of their complaint to see if this can be met. The Officer will work with the customer to try and resolve at this stage. We will attempt to investigate and resolve the complaint within 10 working days. If the complaint cannot be resolved in this timescale due to staff sickness or leave, an Officer will need to contact the customer to agree an extension of time.

If a customer is unhappy with the formal response to their complaint at stage 1, they can ask for the complaint to be escalated to stage 2.

6.2. Stage two complaints

All stage two complaints will be investigated by the respective Head of Service. They will be responsible for the recording, investigating, and providing a detailed response. Once their investigation has been completed, the response will be reviewed and signed off by the Joint Chief Executive.

The maximum amount of time expected for responding to a stage two complaint in full is 20 working days, with a customer receiving an acknowledgement within the first three days of this timeframe. If a complaint is complicated and likely to take longer to resolve, the Head of Service will keep the customer updated on its progress and inform the Joint Chief Executive of this situation.

The response will inform the customer that if they remain dissatisfied with how the complaint has been handled, they can complain to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

6.3. What are the possible outcomes of a complaint at Stage 1 or 2?

There are three potential outcomes when a complaint is investigated.

- Upheld. We find that the complaint is reasonable, there has been a failing on our part and the Council will rectify the problem
- Not upheld. We do not agree with the complaint
- Partially upheld. We agree that there are some parts of the complaint where we need to improve our service and rectify any failings.

All complaint responses will confirm what outcome has been reached with clear reasons for our findings. At each stage of the process, the customer will be given details of their next point of contact if they remain dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

6.4. Communication to customers at informal stage, Stage 1 and 2

It is important the Officer or Manager investigating the issue or complaint takes ownership of communicating with the customer throughout the entire process.

- Start of the issue or complaint. Each issue or complaint should be acknowledged within three days with the target date for completion confirmed. This will depend on the stage the customer has reached. When a Stage 1 or 2 complaint is recorded on the system, a unique identifier will be generated. This will be provided to the customer and should be used throughout the complaint
- During the complaint. If there are delays to the investigation, the Officer or Manager should contact the customer to confirm when the complaint will be resolved

- End of the complaint. Each complaint should receive a written response of the decision within the published timescales depending on the Stage with a clear outcome and any next steps open to the customer.

Communication to the customer should be in writing, email, or telephone. Any updates to and from the customer should be included on the complaints system.

6.5. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman complaints

If, after a stage two investigation, the customer is still not satisfied, they have the right to refer their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. This is an independent service which investigates complaints against Councils. For more details, go to [Local Government Ombudsman](#).

When the Council is informed of a complaint to the Ombudsman these cases will be coordinated by the Joint Chief Executive to ensure they have responded to the Local Government Ombudsman enquiry and appropriate action is taken to resolve them.

A summary of the different stages is included as appendix 1. It includes the timescales that will be used to manage the complaint through the different stages.

7. How can complaints be made?

Stage 1 complaints can be received via:

- The Council's complaint form on the website <https://www.hart.gov.uk/help-advice-1> . A hard copy can be made available
- By email. At stage 1, this should be sent to the relevant Officer if known or complaints@hart.gov.uk
- By post to: Hart District Council, Civic Offices, Harlington Way, Fleet GU51 4AE
- Made in person at the Hart District Council office
- By telephone.

When a Stage 1 complaint is received, this will be recorded on the complaints system by the receiving Officer or Manager to ensure that all complaints are managed consistently.

At Stage 2, all complaints should be sent to complaints@hart.gov.uk or by post to Complaints Coordinator, Joint Chief Executive Office Hart District Council, Civic Offices, Harlington Way, Fleet GU51 4AE. This will allow the complaint to be recorded on the complaints system and forwarded to the relevant Head of Service.

8. Privacy and customer information

We will need to process customer's personal information such as contact details in dealing with complaints. We are committed to looking after the information we hold on customers. There is more information in the [privacy notice](#) published on our website.

9. Anonymous complaints

When an anonymous complaint is made, it will not be possible for a response to be provided back to that customer. If a member of the public wishes to raise a complaint anonymously, they should be encouraged to include as much detail as possible to enable the Council to investigate the issues raised in the complaint.

Customers with concerns about confidentiality may raise issues through their elected Councillors. We reserve the right to not investigate anonymous complaints.

10. Dealing with unreasonable customer behaviour

Customers have the right to be persistent and make any number of complaints. However, Officers will need to consider when persistence becomes unreasonable, and the customer may be judged as unreasonably persistent or vexatious. We have an [unreasonable customer behaviour](#) procedure which is available for staff and customers.

11. Learning from complaints

All complaints will be investigated thoroughly, objectively and without bias. If the Council is found to be at fault, we will issue an apology and steps will be put into place to put things right.

The Council's complaints system will be used to ensure that lessons from complaints are captured, shared, and embedded into operational practice and processes. Management Team will monitor complaints, analyse trends, and review the lessons learned on a quarterly basis.

We will use the complaints system to identify trends across service areas and types of complaint to assess if operational practice or policies need to be amended. This insight will be reviewed on a regular basis by the Senior Leadership team.

12. Reporting and monitoring

A formal report including analysis on complaints and compliments will be reported on quarterly basis to Overview & Scrutiny Committee as part of the existing performance report.

13. Responsibility of the procedure

The overall responsibility for complaints monitoring and management rests with the Monitoring Officer/ Joint Chief Executive who will delegate specific responsibility to Heads of Service to manage and monitor complaints within departments.

It is the responsibility of Heads of Service to ensure that complaints are correctly managed throughout their lifecycle in their service areas including being recorded on the Council's complaints platform at Stage 1 and 2.

All staff will be provided with access to training and guidance on this policy.

14. Version control

	Date	Author	Comments
1.0	20 December 2021	S. Bennett	Draft version created
1.1	31 January 2022	P. Hughes	Comments & revisions on draft
1.2	7 January	C. Dorn	Comments & revisions on draft
1.3	10 January	M. Saunders	Suggestion for review period in S.11
1.4	18 January	S. Bennett	SLT – edit to create separate section for informal stage. Now S.5
1.5	19 th January	P. Hughes	More comments and reordering of stage 1
1.6	26 January	S. Bennett	T&F group amendments
1.7	27 January	S. Bennett	Inclusion of S6.4 communication

Appendix 1

Channel
 Complaint form
 In person
 By letter
 By telephone
 By email
 Via councillor
 Via representative
 Via social media

Channel
 Via www.lgo.org.uk
 Complete online
 complaint form

