



CORPORATE COMPLIMENTS, SUGGESTIONS AND COMPLAINTS - POLICY AND PROCEDURES

May 2025

1.0 Introduction

This document details Cheshire East Council's policy on dealing with compliments, suggestions and complaints received from our customers.

The Council is committed to providing consistently high-quality services, but we acknowledge that sometimes things do go wrong. We welcome feedback from our customers and we recognise that compliments, suggestions and complaints are a valuable source of information to help us:

- improve the standard of services we deliver
- put things right when they have gone wrong
- learn from our mistakes and make sure they do not happen again.

The aim of this policy is to provide a fair, consistent and structured process for members of staff to follow when customers are providing feedback. We will ensure staff understand their responsibilities under this policy, so they can deal with feedback effectively, and lessons learned from complaint investigations will be used to inform service improvements.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman ('the Ombudsman') defines a complaint as follows:

'an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual or group of individuals.'

They also define a service request as follows:

"a request that the organisation provides or improves a service, fixes a problem or reconsiders a decision".

In most cases the Council should be able to put things right through normal service delivery processes. However, when this does not happen or is not possible, a complaint may be made. A customer does not need to use the word 'complaint' for it to be treated as such.

All complaints about Council services, other than those excluded under Section 8, will be recorded as complaints and administered under this policy.

This policy has been revised taking into account the guidance in the Complaint Handling Code launched in February 2024 by the Ombudsman.

2.0 How to complain

A customer can make a complaint in a number of ways;

- Visit our website - www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/customerfeedback
- Call us on 0300 123 5038
- Email us at letusknow@cheshireeast.gov.uk
- Write to us at: Customer Feedback Team, Customer Services, Floor 1, Macclesfield Town Hall, c/o Delamere House, Delamere Street, Crewe, CW1 2LL

3.0 What a customer can expect

Customers can expect all compliments, suggestions and complaints to be dealt with promptly, efficiently and with courtesy, and can expect to receive a consistently high quality service when they contact any member of staff. We will:

- treat all compliments, suggestions and complaints seriously and confidentially
- act impartially, objectively and professionally
- maintain a record of all compliments, suggestions and complaints received in accordance with the requirements of the UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018
- aim to resolve the problems brought to our attention as soon as possible and, wherever possible, at a local level
- keep the customer informed about the progress of the investigation into their complaint when necessary
- provide a response within the timescales specified in this policy either verbally or in writing
- take appropriate action to resolve the complaint when necessary
- inform the customer of their right of further redress, i.e. progressing to the next stage of the complaints procedure, or contacting the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
- record, monitor and evaluate complaints so that we can continually improve and develop Council services, as well as identifying training and development needs for our staff
- monitor and report our performance in complaint handling.

4.0 Accessibility

The Council is committed to equal opportunities and our aim is to make our Corporate Compliments, Suggestions and Complaints policy easy to use and accessible to all customers. It will be publicised and available in a variety of formats on request.

Staff will provide information on the complaints procedure for customers wishing to make a complaint and provide any assistance they may require, for example:

- assist with the completion of a customer feedback form or the taking of a complaint over the telephone
- assist in making the appropriate arrangements for customers who may have specific requirements, e.g. British sign language interpreter, wheelchair access, etc.
- assist in arranging for the services of an interpreter where appropriate
- assist in the provision of an advocate where appropriate or if requested by the customer. The appointment of an advocate will be done in consultation with the relevant manager or Head of Service from the service being complained about. Disability Positive is one organisation based in Northwich that provides a general advocacy service for adults with disabilities and you can contact them via the link below: -

<https://disabilitypositive.org/service/advocacy/>

5.0 Compliments and Suggestions

All staff should remember to record compliments so we can report on the good news received from our customers. The compliment should always be forwarded to the member of staff's line manager. Details of all customer compliments should be recorded on the Customer Feedback database. If a member of staff does not have access to this, details of the compliment should be forwarded to the Complaints Coordinator for their service or directly to the Customer Feedback Team via email.

An acknowledgement letter, thanking the customer for their compliment, should be sent within 5 working days unless the compliment has already been acknowledged. Some compliments may be received anonymously and these can still be recorded on the Customer Feedback database.

Suggestions - a customer may wish to supply information but they may not wish to be involved in any subsequent action which may be taken. It is important that all suggestions are recorded on the Feedback database, so that we can analyse trends and learn as an organisation. When a suggestion is received, the information will be passed to the relevant service to consider and respond to within 10 working days. The customer will be informed of any action to be taken as a result of the suggestion.

Timescales for the acknowledgement of compliments and suggestions are as follows:

- Compliments – acknowledged within 5 working days
- Suggestions – acknowledged and responded to within 10 working days.

6.0 Complaints

The Council's complaints procedure is a two-stage process. When a complaint is received, the Council has discretion over the stage at which the complaint is investigated, although this will usually be Stage 1. However, in some instances it may be necessary for the Council to refer the matter directly to either a Stage 2 review or even to the Ombudsman, particularly when the complainant has already exchanged correspondence with the Council addressing the issues raised and these cannot be further elaborated upon.

There will be occasions when the Investigating Officer at either stage of the process will need more time to investigate the complaint. Should this be the case, the complaint may be placed on hold and/or the deadline for response may be extended. This extension should not exceed *12 weeks and the new deadline must be communicated to the complainant.

*The Ombudsman expects a Council to consider and respond to a complaint within 12 weeks. If a Council has not responded within 12 weeks the Ombudsman has discretion to consider whether to investigate the complaint.

6.1 Stage 1

This is the first opportunity to try to resolve a customer's complaint, and the majority of complaints will be resolved at this stage. The complaint will be investigated by an officer of the department or service which has caused the customer dissatisfaction, allowing the service concerned the opportunity to resolve the issue. It is not appropriate for any staff member named in a complaint to be the Investigating Officer, but they should be informed of the complaint and given an opportunity to comment. If the complaint includes or involves a Head of Service, then the complaint will automatically be escalated to Stage 2.

Any member of staff may receive a customer complaint and should attempt to resolve the issue. If it is not possible to resolve a complaint immediately, the complainant will be informed of the complaints procedure and the timescales involved. Any member of staff receiving a complaint should forward it to the Complaints Coordinator for their service or directly to the Customer Feedback Team. If the service has a Complaints Coordinator, then they will then appoint an Investigating Officer (which could be the Complaints Coordinator themselves). The Customer Feedback Team will forward the details of the complaint to either the Complaints Coordinator or other service contact for complaints in order to arrange an investigation and a response. Should a service receive a complaint and it is not for their service they should return it immediately to the Customer Feedback Team.

The Customer Feedback Team is responsible for issuing an official acknowledgement of the complaint to the customer. This will include a brief summary of the key issues being complained about and should be done within 5 working days. This will state which service the complaint has been passed to and the timescale for providing the complaint response. Should the substance of the complaint be unclear, further information will be requested from the customer in order to ensure the

complaint is properly understood. The complaint will be placed on hold until this additional information/clarification is received.

Timescale

The Investigating Officer will carry out the initial investigation into the complaint, seeking to establish all the facts surrounding the complaint and responding to the customer with their findings **within 10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged**. However, it may be necessary to extend this deadline and the customer will be notified if this is the case.

Extensions may be given for the following reasons: –

- Staff being complained about are absent
- The complaint is complex
- Contact needs to be made with a third party.

Extensions can be given up to an additional 10 working days, thus giving a total response time of 20 working days. After this time, a complaint response will be issued late unless extenuating circumstances necessitate a further extension and the customer is in agreement. The Customer will be notified of any extension.

Quality Assurance

The Customer Feedback Team carry out quality assurance checks of complaint responses before they are issued to the customer. This will include checks for the following: -

- That it is addressed correctly to the customer
- That spelling and grammar is correct
- That the complaint issues have been addressed
- That the outcome of the complaint is indicated
- That the appropriate closing paragraphs have been included.

Should the response deadline be breached, the Investigating Officer will be asked to provide an update and an indication of the expected response date. Depending on severity, it may be necessary to escalate the complaint to Stage 2, although this escalation will be at the discretion of the Complaints Manager.

Following this stage of the procedure, a complainant has a maximum of 20 working days from the date of the final response to appeal against the outcome and request that their complaint be progressed to the next stage. Appeals in excess of this timescale will be considered where there are extenuating circumstances but may be directed to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

6.2 Stage 2 (Review)

Prior to the complaint being considered at Stage 2, it will be reviewed to assess if it is appropriate for it to proceed to the next stage. For example, where a response to a complaint is purely a legislative issue (and therefore cannot be changed by any Council officer), it would not be appropriate for this to proceed to Stage 2, and the customer will be informed accordingly. General dissatisfaction or disagreement with a decision is unlikely to change a Stage 1 decision. For a complaint to progress to the second stage, credible new information or other matters which call the original

decision into doubt need to be provided. In some instances it may be more appropriate for a further response from the Stage 1 Investigator to be issued rather than escalating the complaint to Stage 2. If an appeal is considered appropriate, the details of the original complaint and appeal are passed to the Stage 2 Investigating Officer. The appeal stage of the process is an independent review carried out by an officer who has not previously been involved in dealing with the complaint.

A complaint should not generally be escalated to Stage 2 if one or more of the following criteria are met:

- The Customer is dissatisfied with an outcome or decision of what they are complaining about e.g. the outcome of a planning application or a school admissions application. A Stage 2 review will not be able to change such a decision.
- The outcomes sought by the Customer are not achievable or realistic e.g. Customer would like a member of staff to be disciplined or dismissed.
- The outcome sought by the Customer is unlikely to change from the response provided at Stage 1 e.g. Customer would like a stretch of road re-surfacing more quickly.

In all cases where an escalation has been requested, the final decision will rest with the Complaints Manager or a Complaints Officer.

Stage 2

The Customer Feedback Team will acknowledge the appeal, inform the complainant of the name of the Stage 2 Investigating Officer who is undertaking the review (if known) and provide the date by which a response can be expected. **The acknowledgement will be issued within 5 working days of the request being received.**

Most services have designated staff who complete Stage 2 reviews for their service. It is the responsibility of the service to appoint a senior officer to complete the Stage 2 investigation. The officer appointed as Investigating Officer at Stage 2 will be a more senior Investigating officer than that appointed at Stage 1. An impartial review will be carried out by the Stage 2 Investigating Officer who will make contact with the customer to agree the details of what they remain unhappy with, review the Stage 1 correspondence, review any appropriate records and speak to relevant staff. They will either support the original investigation findings, provide further clarification or propose a different solution to the customer. The independent officer does not need to be from a different team or service, as specialist knowledge of the service and issues being complained about may be required. However, they should not have had any involvement in the case or issue being complained about or the complaint previously.

Timescale

The timescale for responding to a Stage 2 complaint is **20 working days**, unless further time is needed (see reasons for extensions under 6.1 above), in which case the Stage 2 Investigating Officer will inform the customer of this. Any extension should be no more than 20 working days without good reason and the reason(s) for the extension should be clearly communicated to the customer.

Quality Assurance

The Customer Feedback Team carry out quality assurance checks of complaint responses before they are issued to the customer. This will include checks for the following: -

- That it is addressed correctly to the customer
- That spelling and grammar is correct
- That the complaint issues have been addressed
- That the outcome of the complaint is indicated
- That the appropriate closing paragraphs have been included.

If corrective actions have been recommended, these should be recorded and followed up either by the Complaints Coordinator or by the Customer Feedback Team. If the customer feels that the complaint has not been drawn to a satisfactory conclusion, they may appeal to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) at the address below. The standard closing paragraph referring a customer to the Ombudsman should always be included at the conclusion of a Stage 2 response letter as this is the council's final response. The LGSCO will not normally respond to such an appeal until the Council's own complaints procedure has been exhausted.

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
PO Box 4771
Coventry CV4 0EH
Tel: 0300 061 0614

More information about the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman can be found on their website: www.lgo.org.uk.

Further communication with the customer should be avoided after the Stage 2 response has been issued, unless to verify certain details of the response. If the customer remains unhappy with the Stage 2 response they should be referred to the Ombudsman.

6.3 Policy Complaints

Complaints about a Council policy are classed as 'Policy Complaints'. Following acknowledgement, these are responded to within 10 workdays (or 20 working days if more complex) at Stage 1 as per **6.1** of this policy. There is no Stage 2 process for a policy complaint. If a customer remains unhappy with the Stage 1 response, they will be referred directly to the LGSCO.

6.4 Anonymous Complaints

Anonymous complaints will be considered and recorded when appropriate, but they will not be responded to. However, if a customer wishes to remain anonymous to the service being complained about, the complaint will be responded to, and the name withheld from the service.

6.5 Complaints about services delivered by third parties

A number of Council services are delivered by other bodies on behalf of the Council. However, the Council remains responsible as the commissioning authority for the actions of its partners or contracted service providers when they are carrying out services on behalf of the Council.

In such instances, complaints should be directed to the Council as already detailed in this policy. However, should the matter be about a service delivered by the third party, but not a service provided on behalf of the Council, the customer will be requested to contact the relevant provider directly to invoke their complaints procedure.

In respect of care providers commissioned to provide adult social care services, a customer may wish to complain direct to the care provider in the first instance. However, if they remain unhappy with the response from the care provider they can then refer the complaint to the Council as the commissioning authority, although equally they could refer the complaint direct to the LGSCO if they choose to do so.

6.6 Timescales

The timescales to be followed for complaints are:

Stage 1	The complaint will be acknowledged within 5 working days, with a full response issued within 10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged, unless it is identified that more time will be needed (see Section 6.1) In exceptional cases a timescale beyond 20 working days may be agreed with the customer.
Stage 2	The complaint will be acknowledged within 5 working days of the escalation request being received, with a full response issued within 20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged. In exceptional cases a timescale beyond 20 working days (and up to 40 working days) may be agreed with the customer.

6.7 Roles & responsibilities

Role	Definition
Receiving Officer	The individual member of staff who takes or receives the initial details from the customer.
Complaints Coordinator	This person receives the details of the complaint for their service and is responsible for allocating the complaint to a manager for investigation and a response. They are also responsible for ensuring a full response is provided within the timescale.
Customer Feedback Team	This team is responsible for ensuring that feedback is administered in accordance with this policy. They will ensure that complaints are logged, acknowledged and allocated to the relevant service. They will also consider Stage 2 review requests and provide advice and guidance to staff, and produce reports on complaints.
Stage 1 Investigating Officer	The person appointed by the Complaints Coordinator for the relevant service or by the Customer Feedback Team to investigate and respond to the complaint.
Stage 2 Investigating Officer	This person is appointed by the Complaints Coordinator for the relevant service or by the Customer Feedback Team to review a complaint at Stage 2. This senior officer, who will have had no prior involvement in dealing with the complaint, will review it, carry out a further investigation if necessary, and respond directly to the customer.
Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman	The LGSCO (formerly known as the Local Government Ombudsman or LGO) is an independent service that investigates complaints from the public about Council's in England. It also investigates complaints about registered adult social care providers. It is the last stage of the complaints process for people who remain dissatisfied once they have completed the Council's complaints process. It is a free service.

7.0 Remedies

If something has gone wrong and the customer has suffered as a result, the Council will consider what action needs to be taken to remedy the situation. The aim is to apologise and to try to put things right. However, an apology in itself does not amount to an admission of negligence or a breach of statutory duty (Compensation Act 2006 – Section 2).

Remedies can include:

- An apology
- An acknowledgement that things have gone wrong
- An acknowledgement that the service provided was below what is expected
- An explanation or reason for a service failure or a delay
- Reconsidering or changing a decision
- Changing policies, procedures or practices
- Providing a financial remedy (see below).

In some circumstances it may be appropriate to consider monetary compensation, especially where there has been a quantifiable loss. In such cases, the service should seek approval from the Service Manager before a final decision is reached. Consideration should also be given to the LGO Guidance on Remedies.

<https://www.lgo.org.uk/information-centre/staff-guidance/guidance-on-remedies>

8.0 Exclusions

Some types of complaints, detailed below, are excluded from this policy. Furthermore, the Council reserves the right to reject a complaint if the customer is rude, vexatious/unreasonably persistent, uses profanities, is using a pseudonym or makes racist, sexist or homophobic remarks in their communication. The complaint may also be rejected if the complainant is unable to identify/evidence the alleged injustice.

8.1 Requests for service

Requests for service will not be considered under this policy. However, if a request for service is not dealt with within the appropriate timescales, an unfulfilled request for service can then be logged as a formal complaint.

8.2 Social Media Complaints

When a complaint is received on the Council's Official Social Media account(s), complainants will be requested to make contact by email/online form to ensure that the requisite details are captured in order that an appropriate response can be issued.

8.3 Compliments, suggestions and complaints from employees of Cheshire East Council or 'arms-length' companies.

These will not be covered by this policy, unless the employee is acting as an external user of the service.

8.4 Complaints where the customer or the Council has started legal proceedings or there is a right of redress in law and where it is reasonable to have expected the complainant to have pursued that course of action.

8.5 Complaints about the conduct of Elected Members

Such complaints should be directed in writing to the Monitoring Officer/Director of Legal Services, as follows:

- Via email: monitoringofficercec@cheshireeast.gov.uk
- Via Post: The Monitoring Officer, c/o Delamere House, Delamere Street, Crewe, CW1 2LL

Further information can be found via the following link:

https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council_and_democracy/your_council/councillor_conduct.aspx

8.6 Complaints about Parish or Town Councils

These complaints should be submitted to the Parish or Town Council in question.

8.7 Complaints covered by separate Appeals Processes

For example, appeals to the Planning Inspectorate, Special Educational Needs Tribunal or the Benefits Tribunal.

8.8 Complaints about parking tickets/penalty charge notices

There are certain legal processes which need to be followed in challenging the issue of a penalty notice (PCN). Further information can be found via the following link:

<https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/car-parks-and-parking/parking-regulations-enforcement/challenge-pcn.aspx>

8.9 Complaints about Social Care Services

Depending on the nature of the issue being complained about these are dealt with under separate processes. Further information can be found via the following link:

https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council_and_democracy/customer-services/complaints_and_feedback/social_care_compliments_and_complaints.aspx

8.10 Complaints about personnel issues, including recruitment, disciplinary and grievances.

Current employees should use the grievance procedure rather than the complaints procedure.

8.11 Complaints made by staff under the Whistleblowing Policy

8.12 Complaints about individual schools/academies

Each school operates under a system of local management and has its own Complaints Procedure. A copy of the Complaints Procedure should be made available by the school. Complaints are normally directed to the Head Teacher of the school or the Chair of Governors at the school address. Where the school is unable to satisfy the complaint, it should be referred to the Secretary of State for Education or Ofsted.

8.13 A complaint which the customer was aware of for more than 12 months before they contacted or formally complained to the Council.

8.14 Complaints regarding personal injury or motor claims against the Council.

Further information can be found via the following link:

https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/highways_and_roads/highways-licences-and-permits/making-a-claim.aspx

8.15 Allegations of criminal behaviour or financial impropriety.

Such allegations are unlikely to be handled under this policy. The matter may need to be directed to the police, treated as a tip off via the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy or handled by another more appropriate process. The customer will be advised of the route to be followed once the information has been considered.

8.16 Complaints already considered by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

We will not investigate complaints which have previously been considered by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman as these will have already been referred to the Council for investigation.

8.17 Freedom of Information

Appeals or complaints relating to Freedom of Information or Environmental Information requests are handled by the Information Rights Team in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Environmental Information Regulations 2004. The Council expects requesters to appeal within 20 working days of the initial response having been issued.

Customers should contact the Information Rights Team by replying to the initial response or by writing to:

informationrequests@cheshireeast.gov.uk

or

Information Rights Team

c/o Delamere House, Delamere Street, Crewe, CW1 2LL

The request will be reviewed by a senior officer who has had no involvement in the response to the initial request. A response will be issued within 20 working days, unless the review is considered to be complex, in which case it may take up to 40 working days from receipt of the appeal. If, following the review, a requester remains dissatisfied with the Council's decisions, they may appeal to the Information Commissioner's Office for them to determine whether or not the request has been dealt with in accordance with the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act and Environmental Information Regulations. Requesters can contact the Information Commissioner's Office at:

<https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint>

Tel: 0303 123 1113

Information Commissioner's Office

Wycliffe House

Water Lane

Wilmslow

SK9 5AF

More information about the Information Commissioner's Office can be found on their website:

<https://ico.org.uk>

8.18 Data Protection

All requests to review or complain about the information supplied in relation to a Subject Access Request are exempt from this policy but will be considered by the Information Rights Team. Requesters seeking a review or wishing to complain about their subject access request should submit their concerns in writing to:

informationrequests@cheshireeast.gov.uk

or

Information Rights Team, c/o Delamere House, Delamere Street, Crewe, CW1 2LL

The request will then be reviewed to ensure that the initial response complies with the UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018. The Council will consider and respond to the issues raised within one month. If you are not satisfied with the review or outcome of your complaint, you may complain to the Data Protection Officer at dp@cheshireeast.gov.uk or make a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office as detailed below.

Complaints relating to a Breach of Data Protection Rights are also exempt from this policy. Such complaints should be made in writing to the Data Protection Officer at dp@cheshireeast.gov.uk or to the postal address above. The Council will consider and respond to the issues raised within one month.

If a requestor or complainant is still dissatisfied with the Council's response, they may appeal to the Information Commissioner's Office for them to determine whether or not the matter has been dealt with in accordance with the UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018. Requesters or complainants can contact the Information Commissioner's Office at:

<https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint>

Tel: 0303 123 1113

Information Commissioner's Office

Wycliffe House

Water Lane

Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF

More information about the Information Commissioner's Office can be found on their website:

<https://ico.org.uk>

9.0 Unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complainants

Occasionally, during the course of or following the conclusion of a complaint investigation, a customer may demonstrate unreasonable behaviour with regard to the handling or outcome of the complaint. The Council's policy with regard to such behaviour can be found via the link below:

<https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/pdf/council-and-democracy/customer-services/managing-unreasonable-and-unreasonably-persistent-behaviour.pdf>

10.0 Support, monitoring, evaluation and review

This policy is overseen and managed by the Customer Feedback Team, who provide guidance and support to staff on best practice in handling complaints. The team also monitor and report on the Council's performance in complaints handling and resolution and support the individual services in identifying learning and putting action plans into place to reduce repeat complaints.