

# South Norfolk Council's Complaints Policy

## Introduction

South Norfolk Council's aim is to provide an excellent customer experience, ensuring we meet the needs of our residents and customers. However, we recognise that there are times when we do not meet the expected level of service and where this is the case, it is important that we provide customers with a simple and accessible way to report this and that the complaints are resolved promptly, politely, and fairly.

South Norfolk Council takes every complaint seriously and uses complaints as an opportunity to put things right and take learning to enable us to continuously improve.

This policy outlines how we will resolve complaints, adhering to the current Housing Ombudsman and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman complaint handling codes.

We will adhere to this policy when handling all complaints. This policy is supported by an internal complaint handling process and in some cases, service area specific guidance.

We publish this policy on our website and make it available upon request. We also promote awareness of the complaints process through customer communications and service delivery.

This policy is available in alternative formats on request. We will consider individual needs and provide the policy in a format that is accessible, such as large print, easy read, or translated versions.

### Our definition of a complaint is:

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‘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.’

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A complaint is where you express dissatisfaction with a service you have received from us. When you express dissatisfaction with a service, we will always give you the opportunity to have this treated as a complaint. We will not require you to use the term 'complaint' and will support you in choosing the most appropriate route.

A complaint that is submitted via a third party or representative will be handled in line with this policy. You may appoint a representative to act on your behalf at any stage of the complaints process, including the right to be supported, represented, or accompanied at any meeting with us.

### **Our definition of a service request is:**

A service request is a request from you to us requiring action to be taken to provide a service.

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

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Service requests are not complaints, but we will record, monitor and review these regularly.

We will raise a complaint when you express dissatisfaction with our response to your service request, even if the handling of the service request remains ongoing.

We will not stop our efforts to address the service request if you complain.

### **Exclusions:**

We will accept a complaint unless there is a valid reason not to do so. If we decide not to accept a complaint, we will evidence our reasoning. We will consider each complaint on its own merits.

We may exclude a complaint for the following reasons:

- The issue giving rise to the complaint occurred more than twelve months ago, or more than twelve months have passed since you became aware of the issue (we may apply discretion where there are good reasons for delay). Legal proceedings have started. This is defined as details of the claim, such as the Claim Form and Particulars of Claim, having been filed at court.

- Challenging the Council's duty to discharge its legal obligations.
- Matters that have previously been considered under the complaints policy.
- Where the Council has already enacted the use of the unreasonably persistent complaints policy.
- The complaint is already being considered by the Local Government or Housing Ombudsman.
- If it is a complaint about a Councillor, which should be considered under the [Council's process for handling councillor complaints](#).
- If it is not about a Council service or a matter for which we are responsible.
- Planning objections (comments) on live Planning applications, which should be considered under the [Planning comments process](#).
- Issues where the Council has no legal power or discretion to change or influence the outcome (e.g., cancellation of elections, statutory planning decisions with no third-party right of appeal). Where this is the case, we will explain this clearly at Stage 1 and signpost the appropriate route.
- Matters for which there is an existing right of appeal or legal remedy, these types of matters are dealt with according to the specific nature of the appeal:
  - Parking ticket disputes
  - Planning and licensing application appeals
  - Housing benefit appeals
  - Choice-based lettings reviews
  - Council Tax reduction appeals
  - Council Tax banding appeals
  - Regulatory matters for which there is a formal route of appeal

If we decide not to accept a complaint, we will give an explanation to you setting out the reasons why the matter is not suitable for the complaints process and the right to take that decision to the Ombudsman. If the Ombudsman does not agree that the exclusion has been fairly applied, the Ombudsman may tell us to take on the complaint.

We will take a considered approach when deciding whether to exclude a complaint from our policy, noting the individual circumstances of each case.

## The Complaint Handling Process

When a complaint is logged, we will set out our understanding of the complaint and the outcomes that you are seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, we will seek clarification from you.

When we acknowledge a complaint, we will be clear which aspects of the complaint we are not responsible for and clarify any areas where this is not clear.

At each stage of the complaints process, our complaint handlers will:

- a) deal with complaints on their merits, act independently, and have an open mind;
- b) give you a fair chance to set out your position;
- c) take measures to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest; and
- d) consider all relevant information and evidence carefully.

If we need longer to respond to a complaint, we will agree with you suitable intervals for keeping you informed about progress. This will include updates beyond any extended timescales where a response is still outstanding.

### **How to Make a Complaint:**

You can make a complaint to us in a number of ways:

- Online via our website
- By email
- By telephone
- In writing (post)
- In person

We will ensure our services are accessible and make reasonable adjustments where needed, in line with the Equality Act 2010. If you need support to make a complaint, please let us know and we will assist you.

### **Stage 1:**

This is the investigation stage. Responsibility for complaints at this stage sits with the first level manager for the team.

We will acknowledge your complaint **within 5 working days of the complaint being received.**

We will issue a response to your complaint **within 10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.**

If an extension to this timescale is required when considering, we will inform you of the expected timescale of response. **An extension will be no more than 10 working days without good reason and if this is the case, the reason(s) will be clearly explained to you.**

When we inform you of the extension to the timescale, we will provide the contact details for The Ombudsman.

We will issue a response to the complaint when the answer to the complaint is known, not when the outstanding actions to the request have been completed. Any outstanding actions will be tracked and actioned promptly with updates provided you. If you raise additional complaints during the investigation and these are related to the same complaint, we will incorporate these into the Stage 1 complaint if the Stage 1 response hasn't been issued. Where the stage 1 response has been issued, the new issues are unrelated to the issues already being investigated or it would unreasonably delay the response, the new issues will be logged as a new complaint.

When we respond to the complaint at Stage 1 we will include in our response, in clear plain language:

- a) the complaint stage;
- b) the complaint definition;
- c) the decision on the complaint;
- d) the reasons for any decisions made;
- e) the details of any remedy offered to put things right;
- f) details of any outstanding actions; and
- g) details of how to escalate the matter to stage 2 if the individual is not satisfied with the response.

## **Stage 2:**

This is the review and (where required) further investigation stage, complaints at this stage are dealt with a second level manager.

If the complaint hasn't been resolved to your satisfaction at Stage 1, you can request that this is escalated to Stage 2. Stage 2 is the Council's final response stage.

It provides:

- an independent review of whether the Stage 1 complaint was handled fairly and appropriately; and
- where necessary, further investigation into issues that remain unresolved.

The purpose of Stage 2 is transparency, fairness, and ensuring that all relevant matters have been properly considered.

Requests for Stage 2 should normally be made within 20 working days of the Stage 1 response. However, we will apply discretion on this decision especially where there are valid reasons for a delayed request.

We will acknowledge, define and log a request for Stage 2 **within 5 working days of the escalation request being received.**

In our acknowledgement of your Stage 2 request, we will set clear expectations about the scope of the review.

For example, where the issue relates to a decision, the Stage 2 review may focus on whether the decision-making process was properly followed rather than reopening the full case.

You are not required to explain your reasons for requesting a stage 2 consideration. We will make reasonable efforts to understand why you remain unhappy as part of our stage 2 response.

The complaint handler considering the Stage 2 complaint will be a different person to the complaint handler at Stage 1.

We will issue a final response to the complaint **within 20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.**

If an extension to this timescale is required when considering, we will inform you of the expected timescale of response. **An extension will be no more than 20 working days without good reason and if this is the case, the reason(s) will be clearly explained to you.**

When we inform you of the extension to the timescale, we will provide the contact details for The Ombudsman.

We will issue our Stage 2 response when the answer to the complaint is known, not when any outstanding actions required to address the issue have been completed. Any outstanding actions will be tracked and completed promptly, and we will provide you with appropriate updates on progress until these actions are resolved.

When we respond to the complaint at Stage 2 we will include in our response, in clear plain language:

- a) the complaint stage;
- b) the complaint definition;
- c) the decision on the complaint;
- d) the reasons for any decisions made;
- e) the details of any remedy offered to put things right;
- f) details of any outstanding actions; and
- g) details of how to escalate the matter to the Ombudsman Service if the individual remains dissatisfied.

### **Putting things right:**

Where something has gone wrong, we will acknowledge this and set out the actions we have already taken, or intend to take, to put things right. These can include:

- Apologising;
- Acknowledging where things have gone wrong;
- Providing an explanation, assistance or reasons;
- Taking action if there has been delay;
- Reconsidering or changing a decision;
- Amending a record or adding a correction or addendum;
- Providing a financial remedy;
- Changing policies, procedures or practices

Any remedy we offer will reflect the impact on the resident as a result of any fault identified.

We will be clear in our remedy offer what will happen and by when, in agreement with you where appropriate. Any remedy we propose will be followed through to completion.

We will take account of the guidance issued by the Ombudsman when deciding on appropriate remedies.

## Next Steps

If you have been through all stages of our complaints procedure and are still dissatisfied, you can ask the Local Government Ombudsman or Housing Ombudsman to review your complaint.

Both Ombudsman investigate complaints in a fair and independent way - they do not take sides. It is a free service.

Both Ombudsman expects you to have given us chance to deal with your complaint, before you contact them. If you have not heard from us within a reasonable time, they may decide to look into your complaint anyway, this is usually up to 12 weeks.

The Local Government Ombudsman looks at individual complaints about councils and some other organisations providing local public services.

The Housing Ombudsman make the final decision on disputes between residents and landlords that are registered members of its Scheme - including tenants and leaseholders of social landlords (housing associations and local authorities), as well as for voluntary members (private landlords and letting agents).

## Contact

### Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Website: [www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk)

Telephone: 0300 061 0614

### Opening hours

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday: 10am to 1pm

Wednesday: 1pm to 4pm

### Housing Ombudsman

Website: [www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk)

Email: [info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk)

Telephone: 0300 111 3000

Opening hours

Monday to Friday: 9am to 5pm (Thursday telephone lines close at 3:30pm)

### **Self-assessment, Reporting and Compliance**

We will produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge which will include:

- a) the annual self-assessment against the Ombudsman Code to ensure our complaint handling policy remains in line with its requirements.
- b) a qualitative and quantitative analysis of our complaint handling performance. Which will also include a summary of the types of complaints we have refused to accept;
- c) any findings of non-compliance with the Ombudsman Code;
- d) the service improvements made as a result of the learning from complaints;
- e) any annual report about our performance from the Ombudsman; and
- f) any other relevant reports or publications produced by the Ombudsman in relation to our work.

### **Continuous Improvement**

We are committed to learning from the complaints we receive and promoting a culture of continuous improvement. To do this we will:

- Regularly report the complaints received to senior leaders along with lessons learned.
- Review and make changes to policies and procedures where necessary.
- Provide relevant training to staff.

### **Other types of feedback or enquiries**

The following will not be dealt with under this policy but will be dealt with under their own policy/procedure:

- Complaints of fraud or corruption
- Whistleblowing
- Hate incidents
- Information requests (FOIs, SARs and ACV reviews)
- Member misconduct
- Staff conduct or behaviour

Concerns relating to the conduct or behaviour of Council employees will be considered under the Council's internal HR policies (such as Disciplinary, Grievance, or Code of Conduct processes).

These concerns should be reported to us, and we will:

- acknowledge the complaint;
- confirm it will be handled through internal processes; and
- explain that, due to confidentiality, we cannot share the outcome.

Where the issue also relates to service delivery, that part will be considered under this Complaints Policy.

## Retention Guidelines

The following sets out our retention guidelines for all complaints received:

### **Stage 1 & Stage 2 Complaints**

- Destroy 2 years after the closure of the complaint. Unless the complaint has been escalated to the Ombudsman (see Ombudsman retention guidance).
- Files will be reviewed and destroyed on a monthly basis.

### **Ombudsman Complaints**

- Destroy 6 years after the closure of the complaint.
- Files will be reviewed and destroyed on a quarterly basis.