

Waverley's policy on dealing with complaints and improving services

Introduction

Customers' complaints give us a chance to deal with problems and improve our services. When things go wrong we should say we are sorry and learn from any mistakes.

The following paragraphs set out Waverley's policy on dealing with complaints about our services.

What is a complaint?

A complaint is:

An expression of dissatisfaction about the standard of service, actions, or lack of action by Waverley (whether the service is provided directly by Waverley or by a contractor or partner) that requires a response.

Complaints do not always come 'neatly packaged' in a letter, email or telephone call. It is also sometimes difficult to see if a customer is making a complaint or just requesting a service or an explanation of a decision. This is demonstrated by the following examples:

Example 1

'I disagree with the reasons for refusing my planning application' is not a complaint. However, when responding to this statement it would be helpful to give the customer an explanation of why their application was refused and remind them of their right to appeal to the Secretary of State.

'I believe that the Council has behaved in an unprofessional way and was biased in dealing with my planning application' is a complaint.

Example 2

'The dustmen missed emptying my bin today'... is not a complaint but arrangements should be made for the customer's bin to be emptied as quickly as possible.

'For the past three weeks the dustmen have not emptied my bin' is a complaint.

In cases where the customer's intentions are unclear, it is helpful to clarify with them whether they are trying to make a complaint and, if so, what their expectations are.

Waverley's standards for dealing with complaints

Verbal complaints

Complaints made by telephone or in person to be should be responded to within 3 working days and, if possible, sooner.

Customers who make a complaint over the phone or in person, that concerns a complex issue or involves a serious allegation about an officer or action taken by the Council, should be encouraged to put their concerns in writing.

Written complaints

Complaints received by email, letter, via the Council's website or on a complaints form should be acknowledged within 3 working days of the receipt date, and a full response should be given within 10 working days. If it is not possible to meet this timescale because the matter is complex, the officer investigating the complaint should send a holding response.

A complaint that may lead to an insurance claim should be put in writing so it can be passed to the Council's insurers.

Waverley's complaints procedure

Level 1

As a first step, customers can raised their concerns with a member of staff in the service they are complaining about. Contact phone numbers are on Waverley's website and in the complaints leaflet.

Level 2

If the customer is unhappy with the response to their Level 1 complaint they can ask the appropriate Head of Service to investigate their concerns.

Level 3

If a customer remains unhappy with the response they receive from the Head of Service they can ask the Executive Director to review their complaint.

If the customer is still unhappy having received a response from the Executive Director, they can raise their concerns with the Local Government Ombudsman, or if they are a Council tenant or leaseholder and their complaint concerns landlord issues eg responsive repairs, they can make a complaint to the Housing Ombudsman.

Roles and responsibilities in Waverley's complaints handling procedure

Logging, tracking and closing complaints

All complaints received by Waverley should be logged on the SharePoint database by the appropriate Service Complaints Administrator (SCA). A list of all SCA's and their deputies is attached as Appendix 1.

The complaints database holds the following information:

- contact details for each complainant
- copies of the incoming correspondence and Waverley's response,
- the outcome of the complaint ie whether it is upheld, partly upheld or not upheld; and
- where appropriate, lessons learned and action taken.

Once a complaint has been logged on the database, the SCA will send out an acknowledgement within 3 working days confirming the name of the officer who will be investigating the complaint and the date when a full reply will be sent to the complainant.

As soon as the complainant has been sent a response, the SCA will close the complaint, record the outcome of the complaint and whether any lessons have been learned.

At the end of each month, the SCA will send customer satisfaction monitoring forms to all those complainants who have received a response to their complaint in that month. The completed forms are sent back to the Corporate Complaints Officer who prepares an analysis of the responses for inclusion in the annual report to Members on complaints handling. Additional comments made by complainants about the outcome or handling of their complaint are passed to the appropriate Head of Service for further action.

Investigation of complaints

Level 1 complaints are investigated by the most appropriate officer in the relevant service.

Level 2 complaints are investigated by the appropriate Head of Service.

Level 3 complaints are investigated by the Corporate Complaints Officer, who discusses the issues raised with the relevant Head of Service and other officers, and prepares a draft response for the Executive Director.

All responses to complaints should signpost the complainant to the next level of the complaints procedure if they feel that their concerns have not been answered properly. All responses sent to Level 3 complaints will remind the complainant of their right to raise their concerns with either the Local Government Ombudsman or the Housing Ombudsman if they remain unhappy with the Council's response to their complaint.

A note on the general principles to be followed when investigating complaints is attached as Appendix 2.

Remedies

When a complaint is upheld or partly upheld there needs to be a remedy which should be appropriate to the nature of the complaint. In some cases it may be helpful to ask the complainant how they would like their complaint to be resolved, bearing in mind that the Local Government Ombudsman advises that: *'As far as possible the complainant should be put in the position he or she would have been in had things not gone wrong'*.

Remedies include:

- An apology.
- An explanation of the way the matter was handled and what went wrong.
- Action by Waverley to make sure that the problem complained about does not happen again which could include a review of policy and procedures, and feedback to the complainant on how their complaint has been used to improve the service.
- A face to face discussion/interview.
- Compensation, which may not always be money but could include vouchers or an offer to provide another form of assistance to the complainant.

A note on the issues to bear in mind when considering paying compensation to a customer is attached as Appendix 3.

Unreasonably persistent or vexatious complainants

We consider an unreasonably persistent complainant is a person who:

- Repeatedly makes an unreasonable complaint or expects an unrealistic outcome; or
- Makes a reasonable complaint in an unreasonable way (for example by making excessive demands on time and resources of staff, changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds, refusing to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of our complaints procedure or refusing to accept the Council's response).

Waverley aims to deal fairly, honestly and properly with customers who complain, and recognises the right of customers to complain whenever they are unhappy with the service they have received. However we also want to make sure that other customers or officers (or Waverley as an organisation) do not suffer as a result of anyone making repeated or unreasonable complaint, or by anyone behaving in an unreasonable way.

If a customer makes a complaint that is considered to be unreasonable, the service area dealing with the complaint will send the customer a letter explaining that:

- They should contact only the person named in the letter; and
- They can contact that person only in specific ways (for example only by letter or email).

Once the customer has completed the complaints procedure, they will be informed in writing that the matter is at an end and that Waverley will not deal with their complaint any more unless there has been a material change in the problem they have been complaining about.