

BRIEFING ON CUSTOMER SERVICES: COVID-19 CONTACT HANDLING AND CORPORATE COMPLAINTS POLICY.

Summary: A Customer Service Briefing, in order to inform the Committee of the Customer Services Covid-19 customer contacts and the management of complaints including details of the number of complaints resolved and/or outstanding.

Options considered: This is a briefing report only.

Conclusions: Not applicable.

Recommendations: **To note the report.**

Reasons for Recommendations: To brief Members customer contacts and the current complaints procedure.

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS AS REQUIRED BY LAW

(Papers relied on to write the report, which do not contain exempt information and which are not published elsewhere)

North Norfolk District Council Compliments, Complaints and Comments Policy
North Norfolk District Council Customer Service Strategy

Cabinet Member(s)	Ward(s) affected
Cllr. Sarah Bütikofer	All

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1. Introduction

At a meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee in August 2019, Members requested a Customer Service Briefing, in order to bring the Committee up to speed on customer contacts and the current complaints procedure.

The new Corporate Plan introduced in 2019 recognised customer focus as a key challenge and the associated delivery plan included a number of actions including procuring and conducting an annual resident survey and customer satisfaction survey. Good progress was being made to deliver on the action plan when due to Covid-19 it became necessary to prioritise resources to managing the council's response to Covid-19.

This report will provide a briefing on the variety and quantity of contacts received by Customer Services from individuals and businesses seeking direct help and guidance due to the impact of Covid-19.

The current corporate Compliments, Complaints and Comments policy (Appendix 1) was produced in 2016 having regard to guidance provided by the Local Government Ombudsman at that time and is consistent with the complaints handling process operated by the majority of Councils.

The corporate plan recognises the need to improve customer insight and the need to have a robust complaints policy and procedures to inform service improvements and decision making is recognised. Guidance from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LG & SCO) will also help to inform the future review of the complaints policy and will improve how managers can learn from the insight provided and use this knowledge to improve customer satisfaction when customers contact and access services from the council.

2. Customer Contacts – Covid-19

2.1 Customer Contact Volumes

The customer services team managed 62,425 customer contacts in 2019/20 taking thousands of customer telephone enquiries and hundreds of face to face meetings, web chats, web forms and emails every week. The customer services team consistently resolves over 90% of all telephone enquiries and 99% of all face to face enquiries at the first point of contact. The following table shows the number of customer contacts that were managed by the customer services team across all contact channels throughout 2019/20. The 2020/21 column is for general customer contacts for the period 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020 (This excludes Covid-19 related contacts).

Table 1 – Customer Contacts managed by the Customer Services Team

Customer Contacts received by Customer Services	2019/20	2020/21
Calls Answered	39781	7136
Face to Face visits (Cromer)	14761	0
Face to Face visits (Fakenham)	4407	0
Workbench Contacts	2416	1005
Web Chats	1060	298
Emails		
Totals	62425	8439

Customers are increasingly able to self-serve by using our online web forms with 34,842 transactions completed digitally throughout 2019/20. Not all these transactions can be fully automated end-to-end therefore, they require customer services or back office action to complete the service request.

In 2019/20 a total of 97,267 customer contacts through customer services or online transactions have been recorded and there will be thousands of customers who directly contact service area staff by telephone, letter and email and are therefore cannot be included within this figure.

2.2 Customer Services support for NNDC Covid-19 activities

In recent months Customer Services have been taking all calls, and emails from individuals and businesses seeking help from the council on our dedicated Covid-19 Helpline and email inbox.

In order to free up back office staff to focus on essential services such as Council Tax, Business Rates, and Housing Benefit, the Customer Services team has taken all incoming calls for these service areas. Table 2 shows that Customer Services

took an additional 13,110 customer contacts between 26 March 2020 and 30 June 2020.

Table 2	Benefits Direct Line	Council Tax & Business Rates Direct Line	COVID-19 Helpline
Calls Answered	2959	3312	4984
Workbench Contacts			139
Emails			1716
Totals	2959	3312	6839
Total Additional Contacts			13110

The 4984 calls received through the covid-19 helpline can be broken down into five service areas as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 - Covid - 19 Helpline Call Breakdown	
Benefits	112
Council Tax	252
Business Support/NDR	1717
Communities/Vulnerability	2332
Other	572
Total	4984

In the period from 26 March through to 30 June 2020 the Customer Services team have managed 21,459 customer contacts which equates to 35% of all contacts received in the previous year.

At the outset of the pandemic customer demand was at its peak and has gradually fallen away as time has moved on. The council acted swiftly to deal with the anticipated peak in calls by redeploying staff with previous experience of working in our customer services team back into customer services on a temporary basis. The support of the redeployed staff was essential to maintaining quality customer service at that time and the redeployed staff have all now returned to their service areas.

The customer services team has also provided additional support to individuals and business affected by covid-19 by;

- Operating extended hours to cover the Covid-19 Helpline and email inbox between 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 10am to 4pm on Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holidays.
- Taken all Covid-19 calls and email enquiries from individuals and customers and offered assisted service for Business Support Grant applications.

- Made calls to 695 businesses to ensure they were able to apply for the Business Support Grant.
- Made calls to 848 businesses to support the business survey initiative.
- Made calls to 70 businesses to assist them claim the discretionary grant.
- Implemented an electronic Food Bank voucher system to enable those in need to obtain food for their families.
- Taken all calls on the Covid-19 Helpline and email inbox from vulnerable people and Norfolk County Council Social Services Staff seeking assistance with obtaining food, prescriptions and other support for vulnerable people.
- Completed all necessary information required to enable the delivery of services vulnerable persons and liaised with the Local Coordination Centre's.
- Provided information to support businesses to comply with lockdown restrictions.
- Provided advice and signposted to information and support agencies for businesses and individuals in need of assistance.

3. Customer Compliments, Complaints and Comments Policy

3.1 Complaints Process Summary

The full Customer Compliments, Complaints and Contacts Policy is attached at Appendix 1. The following is a brief summary of the policy process;

Stage 1

The complaint is logged onto the Corporate Customer Contact database by the Corporate Customer Contact Coordinator and passed to the relevant service area for investigation. An acknowledgment letter/email is sent within 3 working days to confirm receipt.

The service will investigate the complaint and send their final or interim response within 15 working days.

Stage 2

If the customer is not satisfied by the stage 1 response they can request that a further investigation by the relevant service area manager for further investigation.

The manager will investigate the complaint and reply within 28 working days.

Stage 3

If the customer remains dissatisfied with how their complaint has been handled or with the results of the investigation they can request a further investigation from

somebody external to the service department concerned usually a Head of Paid Service and their response will be made within 28 working days.

If the customer remains dissatisfied the council's response they are able to contact the Local Government Ombudsman who investigates complaints of inefficient or dishonest administration against local authorities.

4. Complaint Data

Complaints are received and recorded by the complaints coordinator at each stage of our complaints process. Table 4 below shows 204 customer complaints were recorded across all three stages of the complaints process. As one complaint can go through all three stages this does not mean that 204 customers made complaints the number is likely to be lower than this.

Table 4 - shows all complaints recorded from 1 June 2019 to 30 June 2020

	TOTAL
Stage 1	148
Stage 2	28
Stage3	28
Total	204

As explained at 2.1 above a complaint that is not satisfied at stage 1 can progress through the complaints process stages 2 and 3 which takes time, therefore a proportion of the stage 2 and stage 3 complaints will have been raised as a stage 1 prior to 1 June 2019. The actual number of complaints received in this period is therefore less than 204 for both the reasons identified above. The record of stage 1 complaints received is reflective of the number of new complaints made to the council in this 13-month period which equates to approximately 11 complaints a month.

Of the 148 stage 1 complaints recorded in this 13-month period 28 (19%) customers continued through to stage 3 of the complaints process.

Customer complaints are received across all service areas and they are categorised into one of the following types of expression of dissatisfaction;

1. Decisions – the decision reached on their application
2. Staff – staff attitude or behaviour when contacting the council
3. Process – how the council delivered its service
4. Failure – the service not being delivered on time or not provided at all.

Table 5 - shows the breakdown of complaint types by service area received between 1 April 2019 through to 30 June 2029 placed into these 4 generic categories.

Complaint Type	Eco Dev	Env H	Legal	Assets	Planning	DT & IT	CLT	Total	
Decision	0	9	2	1	19	8	0	39	17%
Staff	1	4	0	8	7	1	0	21	9%
Process	14	10	5	57	38	1	2	127	56%
Failure	7	23	1	6	2	0	0	39	17%
	22	46	8	72	66	10	2	226	

The complaint type with the majority of complaints recorded in this period are those categorised as process complaints at 56%. Process complaints are generally where the customer considers that the council should have acted differently, such as requiring evidence or proof documents that causes delay in assessing applications for council tax support, or failed to sufficiently take account of their views on a planning application.

Table 6 shows a more detailed breakdown of complaints received over the 13 months between 1 June 2019 and 31 June 2020 by Head of Service Area and then broken down into service areas.

Table 6 – showing breakdown of complaints by Head of Service Area - 1 June 2019 to 30 June 2020

H of S Eco Dev		
Leisure	17	
Eco Dev	1	
Strategic Housing	1	
Total	19	9.3 %
H of S Env Health		
EHO	37	18.1 %
H of S Legal Service		
Benefit	5	
Legal	0	
Dem Service	2	
Total	7	3.4 %
Head of Assets		
Property	13	
Council Tax & B Rates	56	
Finance	0	
Accountancy	0	
Total	69	33.8 %
H of S Planning		
Building Control	0	
Planning	63	
Total	63	30.9 %
H of S DT & IT		
Customer Services	1	
Housing Options	7	
IT	0	
Total	8	3.9 %
Corporate Leadership		
Elections	1	0.5 %
Grand Total	204	

The table shows that 76% of all complaints made by customers in the period 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2020 relate to the 3 main regulatory services with Planning receiving 30.9%, Assets, specifically Council Tax & Business Rates with 56 complaints or 27% and Environmental Health (46) & or 18.1% of all complaints received. This is not surprising as they represent the council's services that make decisions that directly influence the quality of life of individuals, businesses and communities.

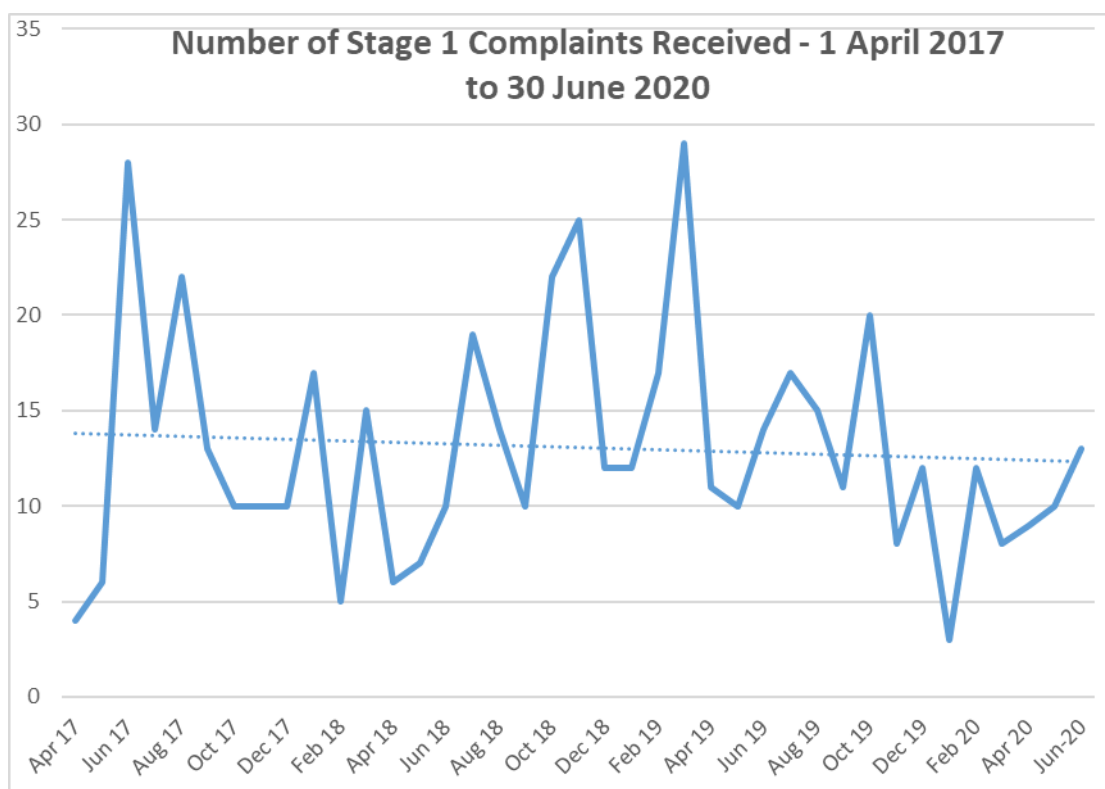
Currently the council has 15 recorded complaints that are being processed within the 3 stages of the complaints process as shown in table 7 below

Table 7 - Complaints recorded at 9 July 2020

Stage 1	10
Stage 2	3
Stage 3	2

5. Stage 1 Customer Complaints Trend

The following graph shows the trend in Stage 1 complaints received between 1 April 2017 and 30 June 2020.



The number of stage 1 customer complaints received by the council has been consistently low over this three-year period and the trend line is showing a gradual decline in complaints being made over time. The number of complaints per month remains exceptionally low given the many thousands of varied customer transactions completed by the council in that time.

6. Compliments

It should not be overlooked that the council and its staff receive compliments from customers, here are just a 4 of the 20 recorded compliments received since January 2020;

- 6.1 *I'd like to say how helpful XXXX XXXXX from waste / bins has been his help advise and sharp communications have made my contract and covid adjustments easy
Thank you XXXX*
- 6.2 *I was absolutely delighted to read of the installation of a Changing Places assisted accessible facility in the Cromer Visitors' Centre, and your intention to install these first rate "disabled loos" in other places within North Norfolk. Thank you - it will make such a difference to both visitors and residents. Many of us have to plan outings, even to the shops, around the availability of accessible toilets, and to have such a marvellous facility available will be a great incentive to visit Cromer. I have been quick to criticise the Council's attitude to disability issues in the past, but this installation deserves praise and thanks. XXX XXXXXX - Chairperson, Norfolk Association for the Disabled*
- 6.3 *In these extremely difficult and trying times the speed at which you dealt with my car park permit application deserves credit. Thank you for your speed and efficiency*
- 6.4 *I felt I had to drop you an email to say a huge "Thankyou" to your team (Customer Services) for all their help regarding the council grants and general business rate queries etc. I am fully aware they are working from home in what must be such difficult circumstances however they have still maintained such a high level of professionalism during this period and I must say I am extremely impressed. Regarding the grants, I have three business premises and was only paid the grant for two and queried not receiving the third payment. Between XXXXX and XXXX they got to the route of the problem only to find I had put the incorrect sort code on the third one on the form!! Your two "detectives" have been amazing along with all the staff I have spoken to previously in your department, (XXX,XXX,XXX,XX), amongst others I have spoken to at various times at one point or another and they have always been incredibly helpful and a breath of fresh air when sometimes situations are complicated. Please convey my thanks and appreciation to all concerned particularly XXXX and XXXX who have been fantastic. I hope you and your team are keeping safe and keep up the good work. If I was their manager I would be recommending a pay rise for all the employees in your team, they are a credit to you!*

7. Conclusion

The Customer Services team manage customer enquiries as the first point of contact for the majority of the council's customers on a daily basis. With the effects of covid-19 and lockdown restrictions impacting on daily life the Customer Services team and their colleagues throughout the council have stepped up to the frontline in playing their part in managing the council's response to provide vital support to individuals, businesses and communities at this unprecedented time.

The council receives a very low number of customer complaints with 204 complaints in 13 months in comparison to the 100,000+ customer contacts it manages each year across the extensive and diverse services it provides to the residents and visitors of North Norfolk.

The majority of complaints are resolved at Stage 1 of the complaints procedure with only 19% moving onto Stage 2.

By recording and monitoring customer complaints it is possible to provide valuable insight and learning about how the council's performance is perceived and how it can be improved. The council is committed to embedding the customer at the heart of all that we do and the management of complaints is recognised as an integral part of service provision by all Heads of Service. Complaints systems are not mechanisms for apportioning blame but an important part of the council's learning and development. Heads of Service and Managers review complaints to identify how they can learn from them and improve services.

The Council has recognised the importance of customer focus by making it a key area within the Corporate Plan 2019-23. The Corporate Plan states "We want our customers to be at the heart of everything we do and will strive to improve access to our services further through stronger community engagement, developing more formal mechanisms of inviting customer feedback and comment and, where possible and practical, seek to deliver our services at a more local level through strengthening partnerships with local Town and Parish Councils. The Council will seek further to improve democratic engagement and participation by people of all ages, but particularly through working with schools and colleges to ensure that the voice young people is heard and informs council decision-making." The tasks in the Corporate Delivery Plan will drive improvements throughout the council so that customers can influence how the services are delivered.

Insight from customer complaints and guidance from the Local Government Ombudsman will help inform the changes and new ways of working that will be focused on improving customer satisfaction when contacting all service areas.

8. Implications and Risks

Prompt action to deal with any performance issues identified by this report will reduce the risk to delivery of the Annual Action Plan and the achievement of the Council's priorities as laid out in the Corporate Plan.

9. Financial Implications and Risks

There are no financial implications and risks directly arising from this report

10. Sustainability

There are no sustainability implications directly arising from this report

11. Equality and Diversity

There are no equality and diversity implications directly arising from this report

12. Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

There are no Section 17 Crime and Disorder implications directly arising from this report.

Appendix 1.

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**Customer
Complaints,**

**Compliments and
Contacts Policy**

16 September 2016

Version Final

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Introduction

This policy sets out how customers can make a complaint about Council services, and how we will respond to and learn from complaints received.

North Norfolk District Council is committed to delivering excellent customer service. Listening to our customers and learning from customer feedback enables the Council to improve its services and meet the needs of customers more effectively.

We want to make it as easy as possible for customers to let us know their views, including how to make a complaint.

Compliments, Complaints and Suggestions can be made through any of our contact channels:

- In person
- Telephone
- Email
- Website
- Letter
- Social media

Compliments, Complaints and Suggestions can be received by a variety of people:

- Customer Services Team
- Service area teams
- CEO/Director
- Corporate PA team
- Any member of staff

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- Councillors (personally or on behalf of residents/constituents)

All compliments, complaints and suggestions however received must be logged onto the Corporate Customer Contact database. The Corporate Customer Contact Co-coordinator will ensure that the customer is sent an acknowledgement and will monitor and review the progress of the contact to ensure compliance with the policy.

Having a corporate repository of all customer contacts for compliments, complaints and suggestions will ensure consistency of the standard of replies to customers and will enable analysis of trends and reporting across the Council.

Our Customers

This policy applies to any customer of the Council, or a person or body acting on behalf of the Council.

A customer of the Council is anyone who:

- accesses, uses or receives any Council service
- is affected by any Council policy or action
- contacts the Council to seek or report information

Compliments

Definition of a compliment:

A compliment is an expression of praise for an action completed or a standard of service delivered. This includes compliments to the Council by a customer relating to the quality of service provided by individual staff members or service teams.

Once the compliment is logged on the corporate customer contact database, a thank you letter will be sent to the customer and a copy will be passed through to the appropriate Head of Service, the Corporate PA Team and Communications Team.

The Head of Service or Service Manager will notify the member of staff or team members in person either by letter or email to thank them for the excellent service delivered.

The coordinator will provide a summary of compliments received to be included in the monthly data report to Management Team.

Complaints

Definition of a complaint:

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about the Council's action (or lack of action) or about the standard of service, regardless of whether the action was taken. This includes standards of service provided by the Council itself or by a person or body acting on behalf of the Council.

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The response may be to put things right straightaway, or to investigate the matter further. A complaint could include any of the following concerns:

- a customer cannot access a service
- we delay or fail to deliver a service
- we provide a poor quality service
- we reduce or withdraw a service
- a policy is inappropriately applied or disadvantages a customer
- a policy unfairly discriminates against a customer
- a member of staff's attitude or competence causes concern
- we fail to meet our statutory responsibilities

A complaint is not:

- a first request for service
- avoidable contact (although this can be)
- dissatisfaction about other bodies i.e. central government, etc.

The Customer Complaints Policy does not apply under certain circumstances or conditions including:

- employee complaints relating to employment issues or disciplinary and grievance processes – which are dealt with through the Council's Human Resource policies and procedures
- Council decisions where there is an existing appeals process, such as planning applications
- matters that are already subject to legal proceedings

- complaints relating to ongoing insurance claims against the Council
- issues that have arisen and are being handled through the Council's 'Whistleblowers' scheme

Complaints Procedure

Customers may make a complaint about the Council:

- In person
- Telephone
- Email
- Website
- Letter
- Social media

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Stage 1 - Informal Resolution

Wherever possible we aim to resolve complaints at the point of service delivery and as quickly as possible but within a maximum of 15 working days.

We encourage customers in the first instance to contact the service they wish to complain about. Service staff will do all they can to put things right and resolve the issue informally.

If a customer is unsure they should call Customer Services to identify who they should contact.

If it is not possible to resolve a customer's complaint informally, the complaint will be investigated through the Council's formal procedure.

Stage 2 - Formal Resolution - Complaints Process

We will acknowledge all formal customer complaints within 3 working days. The corporate complaints coordinator will ensure an appropriate service manager investigates the complaint and provides the customer with a full response within 28 working days.

If the customer is not satisfied with the Stage 2 response, they will be required to identify why they feel the response failed to satisfy their complaint and ask for the complaint to be reconsidered – within 28 working days of receipt of the Stage 2 response.

Stage 3 – Formal Resolution – Review

A Corporate Director (or a senior officer nominated by a Director) will investigate the complaint – re-examining the complaint and the Stage 1 and 2 responses; a response will be sent to the complainant in the Corporate Director's name within 28 working days.

How to appeal against the outcome of a complaint

Where a complaint has progressed through all stages of the Council's complaints procedure and the customer is still not satisfied, they may appeal to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Exceptions

Where a customer complains about the behaviour of a Director or Senior Manager, the complaints coordinator should seek advice from the Chief Executive or Leader of the Council, who will advise on the most appropriate person to investigate the complaint.

Responding to Complaints

On receipt of a formal complaint we will:

- At each stage respond to complaints or send a holding letter or email to the customer in line with the timescales indicated in the 3 stage procedure.
- We will, at all times, deal with customer complaints courteously, openly and fairly.

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Complaints – Upheld

Where we have made a mistake or failed to provide the expected standard or quality of service, we will acknowledge and apologise for this. We will also set out the actions we will take to put things right and improve our services. This could include:

- reinstating a service to a customer
- changing how we deliver our services
- reviewing and amending information about our services
- reviewing Council policies or procedures
- providing appropriate staff training and guidance

Complaints – Not Upheld

Where we have investigated and do not uphold the complaint, we will:

- explain the reasons for our decision clearly
- provide any relevant evidence to support the decision
- inform customers how to progress their complaint if they remain dissatisfied

The coordinator will provide a summary of the complaints received to be included in the monthly data report to management team.

Unreasonably Persistent Complainants

We aim to respond to all complaints positively, and ensure that customers are satisfied with the way their complaint has been handled.

Very occasionally, a complainant will persist in communicating about a matter after they have received a full response to their complaint which impacts on Council resources and capacity to respond to the complaint effectively.

Continuing to respond to these complainants can take up a lot of time and reduce capacity to deal with other complaints effectively.

The Council has adopted an Unreasonably Persistent Complainants Policy that should be followed if an officer considers that a complainant's actions or behaviour is unacceptable or unreasonable.

Learning from Complaints

We collect and review feedback from our customers, and use this information to drive service improvement.

All formal customer complaints are recorded on the Council's corporate tracking system. Data about complaints is collated and shared across the Council to identify performance trends and review how we handle and respond to customer feedback. This includes:

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- how well we meet our target response times
- how effective we are in capturing complaints across the Council
- how customers prefer to contact us

Customer complaints are regularly reviewed across the Council to identify how we can improve our services. This includes:

- service managers making operational improvements in response to specific complaints
- regular review of upheld complaints at directorate and corporate performance reviews to identify issues that need addressing
- development of action plans to improve services, based on specific issues or trends in complaints

The Council will publish information about complaints – to inform customers about

how we handle complaints and show how we make changes as a result of customer feedback.

Confidentiality

Any personal data provided to the Council will be managed in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1988. The Council will use this information to respond to the customer and improve services.

Personal data will be kept anonymous in producing and sharing information about complaints with other services and partners.

Document Information and Version Control

Document Name Customer Complaints, Compliments and

Contacts Policy

Document Description This policy sets out how customers can

make a complaint about Council services, and how we will respond to and learn from complaints received.

Document; Status Current

Lead Officer; David Williams

Sponsor Nick; Baker

Produced by; Customer Services

Relevant to the services listed or all NNDC; All NNDC

Approved by CLT

Approval date September 2016

Type of document; Policy

Review interval Every 5 years

Next review date September 2021