



Corporate Complaints Procedure

Corporate complaints – how we will put things right

together for
children
SUNDERLAND

Introducing our procedure

Together for Children is committed to providing high quality services to all children, young people and families in Sunderland and working in an open and accountable way that builds the trust and respect of all our customers. One of the ways in which we can continue to improve our services is by listening to the views of our children, young people and families and by responding positively to complaints, and by putting any mistakes right.

Our principles when responding to complaints:

- We will deal with complaints impartially, objectively, and professionally and all concerns will be taken seriously.
- We will make sure that as many complaints as possible are resolved swiftly and satisfactorily at the earliest stage of the process and we will ensure adequate support for everyone involved in the complaint.
- We will keep customers informed about the progress of their complaint and will provide a full response without delay.
- The identity of the person making a complaint will be managed in line with data protection legislation and only shared when it is necessary to do so to enable the investigation of the complaint.
- We will secure sensible and effective links with other procedures in local government to ensure the effective resolution of complaints.
- We will safeguard the child or young person's rights of access to other means of redress, such as the Local Government Ombudsman.
- We will monitor our performance in handling complaints, and we will learn from our mistakes to improve services for everyone who uses them.
- We will ensure that the complaints process remains accessible, easy to read and that the information we publish is accurate and up to date.

What is a Complaint?

We consider a complaint to be 'where a customer is dissatisfied with the service they have received from Together for Children and want us to take action or respond'. This includes services delivered by a person or body on behalf of Together for Children.

We will accept complaints from third parties acting on behalf of the customer. Representations often include advice organisations; professionals, solicitors; family members or friends; and those with Power of Attorney who are legally empowered to act on behalf of the complainant. We will ask the customer for written authority (or copy of Power of Attorney) for Together for Children to communicate with or through the representative.

What is not a complaint?

- **Complaints about data protection:** customers who have concerns about how Together for Children has processed personal data, will be referred to the Data Protection service who will investigate and respond to the concern.
- **Complaints relating to children's social care services:** complaints relating to children's social care services should be considered under our statutory complaint's procedure and will be routed via our Customer Feedback Team.
- **Employment issues:** employment issues, including those related to recruitment and selection cannot be dealt with under this procedure and will be routed accordingly by our Customer Feedback Team
- **Financial impropriety:** customers who raise concerns about improper use of the Together for Children's finances will be referred in the first instance to the Director of Finance.
- **Allegations against adults who work or volunteer with children:** allegations will be referred immediately to the TFC Designated Officer.
- **Misconduct of Together for Children staff:** complaints raised about staff misconduct will be referred to our Human Resource Service to be dealt with under the staff disciplinary procedure. The complaint will be investigated, but for confidentiality reasons, the details of disciplinary proceedings will not be shared with the complainant.
- **Where there are other rights of appeal/legal action available:** complaints involving legal proceedings or cases where customers have a separate right of appeal may also fall outside of this procedure
- **Policy:** complaints about Together for Children policy will be brought to the attention of senior management by our Customer Feedback Team. Generally, any response will be limited to an explanation of the policy, possibly to include advice on how policies are reviewed and how any comments can be considered.
- **Unpopular decisions:** decisions that customers do not agree with, but which were made correctly, will be explained but not investigated.
- **Complaints which have already been investigated:** customers wishing to make a complaint where this has already been investigated by Together for Children or by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman will not be considered.
- **Complaints about Schools, Academies or Partner organisations:** customers will be signposted to the individual organisations such as schools, academies, and partner organisations, who have their own complaint's procedures.
- **Complaints made anonymously:** complaints received anonymously will be recorded and considered, but action may be limited if further information is required to ensure a full and fair investigation.

Timescale for making a complaint

There is a 12-month timescale for making a complaint. Generally, consideration will not be given to complaints made more than a year after the date of the event which gives rise to the complaint, or the date the complainant became aware of it. This is to assist Together for Children in dealing with current complaints rather than historic matters.

Complaints reported after 12 months of the matter arising will only be investigated if there are special circumstances surrounding the delay.

How to make a complaint

There are lots of ways that customers can contact us about their concerns:

- Ring the Customer Feedback Team on **0191 561 7997**
- Email the team at customer.feedback@togetherforchildren.org.uk
- Visit www.togetherforchildren.org.uk where a complaint can be logged via the 'get in touch' form
- Write to the Customer Feedback Manager at:
Together for Children, City Hall, Plater Way, Sunderland, SR1 3AA

Resolving Complaints

Initial Contact

When a complaint is received, the Customer Feedback Service will acknowledge within 24 hours and record all the details. Customers will be asked to provide the information below to ensure a rapid response to their concerns:

- Contact details (unless submitting an anonymous complaint)
- Details of the complaint including dates and times to assist with the enquiries
- A desired outcome to help us understand what the customer would like to happen as a result of submitting your complaint

Once the details of the complaint are received the Customer Feedback Manager will decide whether the customer concerns can be dealt with as an immediate resolution or whether the issues require further investigation under stage 1 of the procedure.

Stage 1

At Stage 1, the complaint will be looked at by an Officer within the Customer Feedback Team and the Manager that has responsibility for the service that is being complained about. The Officer will contact the customer to discuss their concerns in more detail and will consider the information, processes and thinking behind decisions that have been made to help agree a way forward.

The Officer will then write to the customer setting out their findings and any action that they will take to resolve matters.

We will always aim to provide the customer with a full written response within 10 working days. If the complaint is complicated it may take longer than 10 working days, but the customer will be kept updated about the timescale that we are working to.

We hope to satisfactorily resolve the complaint at this stage of the process. However, if at the end of Stage 1 the customer remains dissatisfied, they can contact the Customer Feedback Team and request that their complaint is escalated to the next stage of the process, Stage 2. Customers are asked to request this within 20 working days so that momentum in resolving the complaint is not lost.

Stage 2

Customers can ask us to review their complaint at Stage 2 if:

- they are unhappy with their complaint response or the outcome at stage 1;
- If they are dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled; or
- If they did not receive a response within the set timescale provided.

At Stage 2, we will arrange for a full and considered investigation of the complaint to take place without delay. To do this, an Investigating Officer will talk to the customer about their complaint so they can get a full understanding of the concerns. The Investigating Officer will review how the complaint was dealt with and will establish whether they agree with the findings and the outcome from Stage 1.

The Investigating Officer will write a letter setting out their findings and any action that they will take to resolve the customer's complaint. We will always aim to provide the customer with a full written response within 25 working days. We will always ensure that customers are kept updated about the timescale that we are working to.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

If, at the end of the process the customer remains dissatisfied, they will be advised of their right to refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman. Customers can complain to the Ombudsman at any time; however, the Ombudsman will usually only consider a complaint after it has been through all stages of our procedure first. The Customer Feedback Team will work with Sunderland City Council's LGO Link Officer to respond to LGO enquiries at any point during our complaints processes.

Resolution and Remedies

Where justification is found for a complaint, consideration will be given to an appropriate remedy. An apology and/or explanation will always be needed where any part of the complaint is upheld. Remedies will be considered that are appropriate and proportionate to the findings and where agreement has been reached with the appropriate Senior Manager.

Learning from Complaints

Listening to feedback about our services can identify potential problems and provides us with an opportunity to put things right. We are determined to learn from complaints and make any changes that will prevent a recurrence. The Customer Feedback Team highlights trends and themes to our Leadership Team on a regular basis for discussion and further dissemination to our operational teams. We share learning from complaints to line managers together with measures of performance, feedback on communication with customers and information that will contribute to practice development and service improvement.

The Customer Feedback Team present an annual and 6-monthly customer feedback report to the Together for Children Board, Senior Leadership Team and appropriate Scrutiny Committee. The report includes details of the activities of the Customer Feedback Team, any changes to the procedures and a review of the operation and effectiveness of the complaint's procedure.

Withdrawing a Complaint

A Customer may withdraw their complaint at any time. The relevant service will consider whether the issue of concern requires further consideration under appropriate internal management review systems.

Advocacy & Support

A customer can be represented or helped by someone of their choice at all stages of the complaints process. Although there is no requirement on Together for Children to provide an advocacy service under this procedure, we will consider how to meet the varying needs of adults particularly in relation to those whose first language is not English and those with communication difficulties. If a child or young person wishes to raise an issue or complaint, the Customer Feedback Team will ensure appropriate advocacy services are offered via the Statutory Children's Complaints Procedure.

Support for staff

We recognise that staff may need support to help them co-operate with this procedure and to work positively with the complainant. Staff who are named in complaints, or whose evidence might be required as part of an investigation, should receive support through the line management structure. Anyone interviewed as part of a complaint's investigation may wish to have a support person with them.

Unreasonably Persistent Complainants

We are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially and to provide a high-quality service to those who make them. However, there may be occasions when contact from a customer becomes too frequent, so that it hinders our consideration of their complaints, or those made by other people.

Persistent Complainants

Features of a persistent complainant may include:

- A person who makes the same complaint repeatedly (with minor differences), but never accepts the outcomes.
- A person who seeks an unrealistic outcome.
- A person with a history of making other unreasonably persistent complaints.

Unreasonably Persistent Complaints

An unreasonably persistent complaint is likely to include some or all the following:

- An historic and irreversible decision or incident.
- Frequent, lengthy, complicated, and stressful contact with staff.
- The complainant behaving in an aggressive manner to staff or being verbally abusive or threatening.
- The complainant changing aspects of the complaint partway through the investigation.
- The complainant making and breaking contact with TfC on an ongoing basis.
- The complainant persistently approaching TfC through different routes about the same issue in the hope of getting different responses.

Action in Response

Where the Customer Feedback Manager decides to treat someone as an unreasonably persistent complainant, we will write to tell the customer:

- Why we believe the behaviour falls into this category
- What action Together for Children will be taking.

- The duration of that action, how, and when it will be reviewed.

Where a customer's complaint is closed and they persist in communicating about it, the Customer Feedback Manager may decide to terminate contact with the customer.

Unacceptable Behaviour

Together for Children does not expect its staff to tolerate behaviour by complainants which is unacceptable, abusive, offensive or threatening, and will take action to protect staff from such behaviour. When we consider that a customer's behaviour is unacceptable, we will tell the customer why we find their behaviour unreasonable and ask them to change it. If the unacceptable behaviour continues, we may take action to restrict the customer's contact with our service. In all cases, we will write to tell the customer what action we are taking and the duration of that action.

Restricting Access

The decision to restrict access to the complaint's procedure or access to our service will be taken by the Customer Feedback Manager and should follow a prior warning to the complainant. The options that the Customer Feedback Manager is most likely to consider are:

- Requesting contact in a particular form (for example, letters only).
- Requiring contact to take place with a named officer.
- Restricting telephone calls to specified days and times.
- Asking the customer to enter into an agreement about his future contact with TfC.
- Informing the customer that if they still do not cooperate with the advice given, any further correspondence that does not present significant new matters or new information will not necessarily be acknowledged but will be kept on file.

Where a customer continues to behave in a way which is unacceptable, TfC may decide to terminate contact with the customer and discontinue any investigation into the complaint. Where behaviour is so extreme that it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of staff, TfC will consider other options, for example reporting the matter to the Police or taking legal action. In such cases TfC may not give prior warning to the customer.

Appendix A: Customer Feedback Flowchart



0191 561 7997



customer.feedback@togetherforchildren.org.uk



www.togetherforchildren.org.uk



Ask a member of staff to contact us on your behalf



Write to: Customer Feedback Team,
Together for Children, City Hall, Plater Way,
Sunderland, SR1 3AA