

# **CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY AND COMPLAINTS AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION PROCEDURES**

## **Introduction**

Bideford Town Council promotes the culture that feedback from our customers gives us opportunities to learn and improve. We value feedback and recognise the importance of complaints, compliments and suggestions to improve our services and focus on the needs of our customers and communities.

Customers are persons who contact us for any reason, or are affected by anything we do.

## **Our Aims**

We:

- respond to all correspondence within three working days
- use plain language in all communications
- contact customers where we cannot resolve a query straight away, providing a named contact, phone number, e-mail address and target date for a response
- keep customers informed if we cannot reply within the target timescale
- inform customers how to escalate a complaint if dissatisfied with our response
- review all complaints, compliments and suggestions carefully to establish what lessons we can learn and if we can improve our services as a result.

## **Compliments and Suggestions**

We value our staff and it is important that they know when they are doing a good job or have exceeded expectations in delivering a service. We can use compliments to build on our success and continue to provide exceptional levels of service.

## **Complaints**

A complaint constitutes any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about our services, employees or policies. A complaint could include one or more of the following problems:

- We delay in providing a service
- We fail or refuse to provide a service
- We provide a poor-quality service or make a mistake
- We provide an inappropriate service
- We charge an inappropriate cost for a service
- An employee's behaviour causes upset
- A policy unreasonably disadvantages a customer

- We unfairly discriminate against a customer
- A customer is unable to access a service

## **Complaints Procedure**

### **Stage 1**

In order to raise a complaint or submit compliments or suggestions, customers are welcome to contact us in the first instance via:

Bideford Town Council  
Riverbank House  
Bideford  
Devon  
EX39 2QG

T: 01237 428938

E: [townclerk@bideford-tc.gov.uk](mailto:townclerk@bideford-tc.gov.uk)

The Town Clerk or an officer representative will, on receipt of a complaint, try to resolve the problem straight away, investigating whether we followed policy, procedure and legislation and that customers have not been unfairly disadvantaged. If we cannot resolve the complaint straight away, at Stage 1 we will:

- a) send an acknowledgement within three working days, explaining who is dealing with the complaint and give a timescale for response
- b) fully respond within 20 working days or if we are unable to do so will explain why
- c) if we have made a mistake, we will act to put things right

### **Stage 2**

If a customer is dissatisfied with our response at Stage 1 and advises us accordingly, Stage 2 of the complaints procedure is triggered. The Town Clerk or an officer representative will acknowledge the Stage 2 request within three working days. We will then pass the complaint to the Chair of the Council to investigate and respond. The Chair will do so within 20 working days or keep the customer informed of any delays, including the reasons for those, as well as the timescale for a full response. The Chair will share the details of the complaint as well as his response with the full Council.

In case of a complaint against the Chair of the Council, the Vice-Chair of the Council will perform this role.

### **Stage 3**

If a customer remains dissatisfied with our response at Stage 2, they might be able to escalate their complaint to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman in certain cases. The Ombudsman may be able to consider a complaint about the Town Council if it is acting on behalf of another council. So, for example, if the

County Council has arranged that the Town Council should maintain the grass verges, then the Ombudsman may be able to look at a complaint about this.

<https://www.lgo.org.uk/how-to-complain>

### **Complaint Resolution**

If we make a mistake, we will apologise and try to take action to put things right. We may ask the customer to suggest what they would like us to do. We will always try to put the customer back to the position which he or she would have been in but for our mistake. We will also try to ensure that the same mistake does not happen again. We may decide that one or more of the following can be done to put things right:

- Provide an explanation or information to the customer
- Provide or change a service to the customer
- Review customer literature (leaflets, website, posters etc.)
- Review a policy or procedure
- Arrange training or guidance for employees
- Give a refund in appropriate circumstances

### **Vexatious Complainants**

A vexatious complainant is a person who complains about issues, either formally or informally, on a frequent basis or frequently raises issues which the complainant considers to be within the remit of the Town Council, and whose behaviour is unreasonable. Such behaviour may be characterised by:

- actions which are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, repetitious
- prolific correspondence or excessive e-mail or telephone contact about a concern or complaint
- uses Freedom of Information requests excessively and unreasonably
- an insistence upon pursuing unsubstantial complaints and/or unrealistic or unreasonable outcomes
- an insistence upon pursuing complaints in an unreasonable manner
- an insistence on only dealing with a particular councillor or employee on all occasions irrespective of the issue and the level of delegation in the administrators to deal with such matters
- an insistence upon repeatedly pursuing a complaint when the outcome is not satisfactory to the complainant but cannot be changed, for example, if the desired outcome is beyond the remit of the Town Council.

Harassment is the unreasonable pursuit of such actions above in such a way that they:

- a) appear to be targeted over a significant period of time towards one or more councillor(s) or employee(s)
- b) cause ongoing distress to individual councillor(s) or employee(s)
- c) have a significant adverse effect on the whole/parts of the organisation
- d) are pursued in a manner which can be perceived as intimidating and oppressive by the recipient. This could include situations where persistent demands and criticisms, whilst not particularly taxing or serious when viewed

in isolation, have a cumulative effect over time of undermining confidence, well-being and health.

### **Actions in Cases of Vexatious Complaints or Harassment**

In the first instance the Town Council will inform the complainant verbally and in writing that their behaviour is considered to be becoming unreasonable / unacceptable and, if it is not modified, action may be taken in accordance with this policy.

If the behaviour is not modified the Town Council will take some or all the following actions as necessary, having regard to the nature of the complainant's behaviour and the effect of this on the staff/community:

- Inform the complainant that all contact with a councillor or employee will be conducted with a second person present and that notes of meetings will be taken in the interests of all parties.
- Inform the complainant that, except in emergencies, all routine communication with the complainant to the Town Council should be by email only.
- Establishing a specific procedure for dealing with the complainant, i.e. only with a delegated person to be identified, who will investigate, determine whether the concern / complaint is reasonable or vexatious and then advise the Town Council accordingly.
- In the case of physical or verbal aggression, consider warning the complainant about becoming banned from the Town Council offices, or proceed straight to a temporary ban.

### **Freedom of Information Procedure**

You have the right to ask to see recorded information held by public authorities.

You must make a Freedom of Information (FOI) request in writing. You can do it by Letter, email and social media.

If you cannot make your request in writing because of a disability, please contact us. We can help you to make the request another way, for example over the phone.

You should include:

- your name (not needed if you're asking for environmental information)
- a contact postal or email address
- a detailed description of the information you want, for example, you might want all information held on a subject, or just a summary

You can ask for information in a particular format, such as:

- paper or electronic copies of information

- audio format
- large print

We will send you the information within 20 working days of receiving your request and we will tell you when to expect the information if we need more time.

If you've sent an FOI request to several local government organisations, we may share your name and request between us. This is to help deal with your enquiry more effectively.

No other details will be shared and your information will not be used for any other purpose.

Most requests are free but you might be asked to pay a small amount for photocopies or postage. We will tell you if you have to pay anything.

## **Bideford Town Council**

Date of Approval: 30 April 2026

Date of Review: May 2027