



POLICIES & PROCEDURES

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS PROCEDURE V3.0

Related Policy:	Customer Complaints and Compliments Policy V3.0
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1. Background

1.1. This Standard Operating Procedure outlines the process the College will follow in dealing with customer complaints, compliments and comments.

1.1. For the purposes of this procedure customers include students, external customers, members of the public and third party stakeholders.

2. Scope

2.1. The procedure will apply to all staff. The procedure is summarised in a customer feedback process flowchart for ease of staff reference (Appendix 10).

3. Procedure

The College will:

- Provide a process for customers who wish to express their dissatisfaction.
- Process all complaints in a fair, consistent, and unbiased manner.
- Communicate with the customer within agreed timeframes throughout the process.
- Learn from complaints if we have made a mistake, in order to improve future performance standards.
- Ensure no customer is disadvantaged as a result of making a complaint.
- Promote equality of opportunity and good relations in line with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998).
- Respect confidentiality and protect customers' data in line with legislation.

- Monitor and review complaints for quality assurance and equality monitoring purposes.

4. Exemptions to this procedure

- Anonymous complaints which will not usually be investigated but will be recorded.
- Matters where another policy or procedure applies; for example, academic appeals¹.
- Unreasonable or vexatious complaints which the College reserves the right not to investigate.

5. Compliments and Comments

5.1. If a customer believes that the College has exceeded the expected standard of service or wishes to leave a positive comment, they can either:

- Complete a 'Customer Compliments Form' (Appendix 1). Forms may be downloaded from the College website or are available at Reception.
- Email the College via the Quality Assurance Manager joanne.lucas@swc.ac.uk

5.2. Staff members who receive verbal positive comments or compliments from customers should ensure these are passed on to the Quality Assurance Manager for recording. All compliments received will be recorded and retained centrally, in line with the FE Sector Retention and Disposal Schedule.

5.3. Written compliments received by the College will be acknowledged by letter/email within 5 working days from receipt.

5.4. Working days are those days on which the College is open. Weekends, statutory days, Bank Holidays and other College closures are classed as '**non-working**' days.

5.5. Written compliments received by the College will be passed on to the staff members / students/department to which the compliment relates; as well as line manager where applicable.

6. Informal Complaint

6.1. If a customer is unhappy with the standard of service provided by the College, we would encourage customers to seek to resolve the issue informally with the relevant member of staff e.g. face-to-face discussion. Where a resolution cannot be found or if the complaint is sufficiently serious, the customer may submit a formal complaint in writing. Staff should be familiar with the complaints process and should be able to direct a complainant to the forms which can be downloaded from the website at [Link to Customer Complaints and Compliments Forms](#)

7. Formal Complaint

7.1. If there is an occasion where a customer is not satisfied with the service we provide; they have a right to complain.

7.2. If a customer wishes to make a formal complaint, they can either:

- Complete a 'Customer Complaints Form' (Appendix 2). Forms may be downloaded from the College website or are available at Reception.
- Email the College on complaints@swc.ac.uk

7.3. If the complaint relates to an academic matter, students have the right to contact and engage with the relevant Awarding



Organisation directly, however Awarding Organisations will normally only consider a complaint after it has been managed in accordance with the College's complaints policy.

- 7.4. If a customer wishes to complain verbally, they will be asked to confirm details of their complaint in writing.
- 7.5. If assistance is required with the completion of or the submission of a complaint, customers should contact the Reception or Student Services.
- 7.6. Complaints should be submitted to the College no later than three months from the date of the issue arising. In exceptional circumstances, the College may exercise discretion with this timescale.
- 7.7. Complaints may be submitted on behalf of someone else, for example a person under the age of 18 or a vulnerable adult. Consent of the individual may be required.
- 7.8. All formal complaints will be forwarded to the relevant Responsible Owner for an open and objective investigation. The Responsible Owner may wish to appoint an Investigating Officer to commence the investigation, establish the facts surrounding the customer complaint, and prepare a response within the agreed timeframe.
- 7.9. The College will endeavour to adhere to the timeframes detailed below (Table 1).

Communication	Response Time
Complaint acknowledgement letter/email issued to customer by Quality Assurance Manager (See Appendix 3)	5 working days* from receipt of complaint
Letter/email issued to customer by Responsible Owner if further information required to progress complaint (See Appendix 4)	Clarification information to be returned within 10 working days of receipt.
Responsible Owner will forward findings and draft complaint response to the Quality Assurance Manager	15 working days from date of acknowledgement letter/email issued.
Complaint response letter/email to customer by Quality Assurance Manager / nominee (See Appendix 6)	20** working days from date acknowledgement letter / email issued

Table 1 Complaint Timeframes

**Working days are those days on which the College is open. Weekends, statutory days, Bank Holidays and other College closures are classes as 'non-working' days. Complaints specific to course admissions will be acknowledged within 2 working days from receipt of complaint.*

***Complaints specific to course admissions will be responded to within 5 working days from date acknowledgement letter/email is issued.*

7.10. On occasion, it may be necessary to investigate comments received under the Staff Disciplinary procedure rather than Customer Complaints procedure. In such cases the Responsible Owner will notify the Quality Assurance Manager for the complaint to be closed down on the register.

7.11. In cases where a clarification letter is issued and the customer does not respond within 10 working days, the College will assume the customer no longer wishes to pursue their complaint and the record will be closed. For the purposes of this procedure, where a complaint relates to the curriculum, the response period will align to the academic calendar. Customers will be notified of the response timeframe in the acknowledgement letter/email.

- 7.12. If, for reasons beyond the Colleges control the investigation and outcome exceeds the timeframe, the customer will be notified in writing. (See Appendix 5). Should it become clear to the Responsible Owner that additional time is needed to investigate, this should be communicated to the Quality Assurance Manager for this purpose.
- 7.13. Upon completion of the investigation, a draft written response must be returned to the Quality Assurance Manager within agreed timeframes (Table 1). The Quality Assurance Manager will quality check the draft response to ensure all relevant points are included and issue final response to the Customer.
- 7.14. The complaint will be closed down on the electronic register following the issue of the final response, if no right of appeal is exercised. All complaints and associated documentation will be recorded and retained centrally on an electronic register; in line with the FE Sector Retention and Disposal Schedule.

8. Appeals

- 8.1. If a customer is dissatisfied with the College response to their complaint, they have the right to appeal. Appeals should be submitted in writing, with full details of the grounds for appeal, to the Principal and Chief Executive.¹
- 8.2. The College must endeavour to adhere to the timeframes detailed below. The standard template responses should be used in all communications.

¹ ² In the event a complaint made is about the Principal and Chief Executive, the Chair of the Audit Committee will appoint a suitable person to investigate and report. Any subsequent appeal will be addressed by the Governing Body.

Communication	Response Time
Customer submits appeal to the College	10 working days from date customer receives complaint response.
Appeal acknowledgement letter/email to customer by Quality Assurance Manager (See Appendix 7)	5 working days from receipt of appeal from customer
Appeal response letter/email to customer (See Appendix 9)	20 working days from date acknowledgement letter/email issued.
Appeal Panel will notify the Quality Assurance Manager if extra time is needed to review complaint and appeal	15 working days from date of acknowledgement letter/email issued.

Table 2 Appeal Timeframes

8.3. The Principal and Chief Executive will identify a suitable panel to hear the appeal.

8.4. The Appeals Panel will consist of one or more senior staff members who have no previous connection to the original complaint. The constitution of the panel will depend on the nature of the feedback and the appeal lodged. The Responsible Owner (or any Investigating Officer) should not form part of the Appeals Panel.

8.5. The Appeals Panel will record and retain minutes of the appeal meeting, which will include names of the panel member(s), the date of the meeting, details of the customer complaint and the decision of the panel.

8.6. If, for reasons beyond the Colleges control the investigation and outcome exceeds the timeframe, the customer will be notified in writing (See Appendix 8).

9. Customer Communications

9.1. **Telephone communications** College employees have a reasonable expectation of privacy in the workplace and to protect their privacy, the College has made it explicitly clear in the Complaints Policy that it does not consent to telephone calls being recorded, unless express consent has been obtained.

9.2. **Face-to-Face communications** Complaint meetings are confidential. If a meeting is required to resolve the issue, minutes/a record should be taken and made available upon request to those in attendance. Staff members involved in complaint investigations should ensure that a minute or record of any meeting is kept.

9.2.1. If the complainant identifies any inaccuracies, the minute/record should be reviewed, and where an amendment is agreed a revised minute/record will be issued. As minutes/records will be kept, recordings of the meeting or conversations in relation to the complaint are not required. College employees have a reasonable expectation of privacy in the workplace and to protect their privacy, and the College has stated in the complaint's policy that it does not consent to recording of complaints meetings, unless express consent has been obtained.

10. If a Customer Remains Dissatisfied

10.1. It is hoped that we will be able to resolve any complaint through the complaint's procedure. However, if the customer remains dissatisfied with the outcome they have the right to raise



the matter with the Northern Ireland Public Sector Ombudsman's Office (in his/her role as Commissioner for Complaints).

- 10.2. The customer can complain to the Ombudsman; however, the Ombudsman will normally only consider a complaint after it has been managed in accordance with the College's complaints policy and where it is received within six months of completing the College's complaints process.

Contact details for the Ombudsman are:

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman
Progressive House
33 Wellington
Place Belfast
BT1 6HN
www.nipso.org.uk

- 10.3. The Ombudsman will normally only consider a complaint after it has been managed in accordance with the College's complaints policy, and where it is received within six months of completing the College's internal complaints process.

11. Recording and Confidentiality

- 11.1. The Quality Assurance Manager will maintain a database of complaints for each academic year.
- 11.2. In order to ensure that the customers' data is protected and remains confidential, the Quality Assurance Manager will retain all data relating to the complaint in dedicated channels in Microsoft Teams which have restricted access.



APPENDIX 1 – The Acknowledgement Letter

Ref

Date

Name

Address

Dear

Complaint Acknowledgement

I acknowledge receipt of your letter/email on _____ The College welcomes all comments from customers in the spirit of continuous improvement.

In line with College procedure, a senior member of staff has been identified to investigate your comments.

A response will be offered to you within 20 working days; no later than _____. If this is not possible, an explanation will be given, in writing, for the delay.

Yours sincerely



APPENDIX 2 – Request for Clarification

Ref

Date

Name Address

Dear

Request for clarification

I acknowledge receipt of your letter/email on _____. The College welcomes all comments from customers in the spirit of continuous improvement.

In order for the College to progress and investigate your complaint, can you please provide further details as outlined below:

- Question 1
- Question 2
- Etc.

We would be grateful if you could return this information within 10 working days of receipt of this letter. If we do not hear from you, we will assume you no longer wish to pursue your complaint and close the record.

Yours sincerely



APPENDIX 3 – Update on Complaint

Ref

Date

Name

Address

Dear

Update on Complaint

Further to our acknowledgement letter issued on _____, I wish to inform you that the College is still investigating your complaint.

We appreciate your co-operation in giving the College adequate time in which to respond. A response will be offered to you no later than _____

Yours sincerely



APPENDIX 4 – The Complaint Response

Ref

Date

Name

Address

Dear

Complaint Response

The College has now completed an investigation into your comments received on _____ and would offer you the following response.

I trust that the outcome of the College investigation satisfactorily addresses all the concerns you raised.

If however you are not satisfied with this response, you have the right to Appeal. Appeals must be submitted in writing to the Principal and Chief Executive within 10 working days.

Yours sincerely



APPENDIX 5 Appeal Acknowledgement

Ref

Date

Name

Address

Dear

Appeal Acknowledgement

I acknowledge receipt of your letter of appeal in connection with _____ received by the College on _____.

In line with College procedure an independent 'Appeals Panel' will be convened to investigate your appeal request, and you will be notified of their decision within 20 working days. The Appeals Panel will consist of one or more senior staff members who have no previous involvement with your original complaint.

A response will be offered to you no later than _____. If this is not possible, an explanation will be given, in writing, for the delay.

Yours sincerely



APPENDIX 6 - Update on Appeal

Ref

Date

Name

Address

Dear

Update on Appeal

Further to our acknowledgement letter issued on_____. I wish to inform you that the College is still investigating your complaint.

We appreciate your co-operation in giving the College adequate time in which to respond. A response will be offered to you no later than _____

Yours sincerely



APPENDIX 7 – Appeal Response

Ref

Date

Name

Address

Dear

Appeal Response

An Independent Appeals Panel has now completed an investigation into your appeal request received on_ and would offer you the following response:

I trust that the outcome of the appeal investigation satisfactorily addresses all the concerns you raised.

If however you are not satisfied with this response, you have the right to raise your concerns with the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO). Please note that Ombudsman will normally only consider a complaint where it has been received within six months of completing the College's complaints process. NIPSO will assess and determine if the College has not met its expected performance standards.

NIPSO contact details are:

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Progressive House

33 Wellington Place Belfast

BT1 6HN

www.nipso.org.uk

Yours sincerely

APPENDIX 8 – Summary Complaints Procedure

