

Corporate Policies and Procedures

Customer Feedback Policy (Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions)

Version	4
Date ratified by Advance Northumberland Board	28/02/2025
Policy Owner	Head of Business Transformation
Date Issued	25/11/2024
Review Date	As necessary
Target Audience	This policy applies to all Advance Northumberland Group employees and staff who are seconded to the Advance Northumberland Group regardless of length of service. It also applies to agency workers or self-employed contractors. The Advance Northumberland Group, for the avoidance of doubt, shall include Advance Northumberland and any subsidiary company thereof which forms part of the Group. The policy provides guidance to all employees, including Directors, and Non-Executive Board Members.

Working on behalf of



History of previous versions of this document:

Approved Where	Approved When	Version	Issue Date	Review Date	Contact Person
Advance Northumberland Board	27/09/2019	1	01/10/2019	As necessary	Performance and Governance Manager
Advance Northumberland Board	27/05/2022	2	06/06/2022	As necessary	Head of Business Operations
Advance Northumberland Board	30/09/2022	3	October 2022	As necessary	Head of Business Operations

Approved Executive Leadership Team	Ratified by Advance Northumberland Board	Version	Issue Date	Review Date	Contact Person
17/12/2024	28/02/2025	4	01/03/2025	As necessary	Head of Business Transformation

Statement of changes made in most recent version:

Version	Date	Description
2	Issued 06/06/2022	Policy Owner updated to Head of Business Operations. Number formatting corrected. References to Managing Director and Chief Finance Officer removed and replaced with Chief Operating Officer or Head of Finance throughout. Who can provide feedback updated in 3.3 Contact methods updated in 3.4 Appendix 2: Form CC2 removed and replaced with online form.
3	Issued 31/10/2022	Section 4.3 added for vexatious complaints. Section 4.4 updated to updated Policy name – Code of Conduct
4	11/10/2024	Chief Operating Officer replaced with Chief Executive throughout. Head of Business Operations updated throughout to Head of Business Transformation. Section 1: updated to Introduction and information condensed. New policy statements added to confirm company commitments, and clarification of group or old complaints.

		Section 2 Scope: expanded to clarify the complaints process is not to displace internal and external procedures. Section added specifically for Definitions, existing definitions moved to this section (section 3). Numbering sequence updated to reflect new section. Section added for new text on Responsibilities (section 4). Section added specifically for providing feedback, existing text moved to this section and further details added re: social media (section 5). Section added called Resolving Complaints (section 6) to replace the headers Standards and Guidance on Standards. Timescale defined for the issuing of acknowledgements. Section added called Other Feedback (section 6), existing information on compliments and suggestions move to this section. Later numbering sequences updated to reflect addition of new sections. Section on associated document references removed. Text added to introduction to read on conjunction with other policies. Appendix 1 flow chart updated. Appendix 2 flow chart amended in format only. Content remains the same.
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1. Introduction

This Policy outlines our commitment to dealing with complaints, compliments and suggestions about the services and products provided by the Advance Northumberland Group of companies (from here on referred to as Advance Northumberland or the Company). It provides information and guidance to colleagues about how to manage, respond to and learn from customer feedback.

The Company will:

- Offer customers different methods of providing feedback, to meet a range of communication needs.
- Accept feedback from people acting on behalf of our customers where appropriate permission has been given by the customer.
- Listen to customers.
- Embrace feedback, treat it seriously and ensure that complaints, concerns, suggestions and issues raised are properly investigated in an unbiased, non-judgemental, transparent, timely and appropriate manner.
- Train colleagues to understand how to deal with feedback.
- Use feedback to improve performance in a consistent manner throughout the Company.

This policy document should be read in conjunction with other Advance Northumberland policies.

2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- The handling of customer feedback including complaints or concerns relating to services or products provided by Advance Northumberland and those companies within the Advance Group of companies.
- This policy is not intended to displace an established internal process for service requests, for example the process for logging and resolving repairs and maintenance issues for tenants, or the snagging process for new builds.
- This policy will not apply to any matter for which there is an established internal or external appeals process allowing the matter to be properly investigated and resolved by another route, for example the warranty process for new builds, or an employee matter.
- For clarity, matters already considered as a formal complaint will not be reviewed again unless new information is made available.
- Where a complaint is raised by a group, this will be investigated as per the process for an individual, and the lead complainant will be issued with the response.
- We will review any complaints made more than 12 months after the individual first became aware of the issue. We will apply discretion and review on a case by case basis. It is possible a complaint logged more than 12 months later may not be investigated, unless exceptional circumstances caused the delay in reporting.

3. Definitions

3.1 Complaint: A complaint or concern is an expression of dissatisfaction however made about an act, omission or decision of Advance Northumberland, whether colleagues or those acting on our behalf, and whether justified or not, which requires a response. There is a clear distinction between a complaint and a request for a particular service to be provided. For example, a tenant contacting us to advise their tap is leaking is a request for a service, if the contractor who fitted the tap was rude or the department repeatedly failed to complete the work, then this should be treated as a complaint.

3.2 Compliment: A compliment is an expression of satisfaction or praise for someone or something at Advance Northumberland, which may be for a service delivered or the person delivering the service.

3.3 Suggestion or other feedback: A suggestion is a recommendation from an external party that requires no formal investigation, or response other than to thank the individual for taking the time to provide us with the feedback.

3.4 Service Request: A service request is customer contact relating to one of the services we offer that can be dealt with within that department, such as logging a repair, logging a snagging issue, logging an estate management issue. It may also be a query for information or an explanation (note this could be a Freedom of Information request, or a Subject Access Request. Requests for information should be reviewed carefully and guidance sought from the Head of Business Transformation where needed).

4. Responsibilities

Responsibility for this Policy sits within Corporate Services, and the policy owner is the Head of Business Transformation. They are responsible for:

- Policy development and review, for approval by the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) and Board.
- Definition and ongoing maintenance of the centralised register of complaints and compliments.
- Resourcing, via Corporate Services, the issue of complaint acknowledgments.
- Co-ordinating responses to complaints within defined time periods.
- Performance reporting.
- Identification and reporting of trends to ELT.

Service delivery departments are expected to:

- Manage their customers effectively through defined operational procedures.

- Communicate effectively with their customers to ensure they understand how our services will be delivered to them, together with any associated timescales.
- Establish clear and fair escalation processes for operational matters.
- Peer review general customer dissatisfaction to identify local themes or operational inefficiencies (and where applicable seek further support for operational improvements through the Head of Business Transformation and Corporate Services).
- Conduct a peer review prior to escalation of an operational issue to a formal complaint.
- Cooperate fully with the formal complaints investigation process and provide information and supporting evidence as required.

4.1 Responsibilities regarding Social Media

The Head of Marketing and Communication is responsible for all aspects of Social Media. These channels include, but are not limited to Linked in, X, Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram and online engagement via any social groups. Detailed guidance is available in the Social Media Policy, and the general responsibilities are summarised below:

- The Head of Marketing and Communication has access and overall responsibility for monitoring comments and Company communications via Social Media channels.
- Digital Marketing Executives are responsible for routine, day to day monitoring of social media channels. All comments are to be tracked and monitored daily, excluding weekends and bank holidays.
- The Head of Marketing and Communication is responsible for Ascent Homes, including liaison with department heads and arranging any additional resources required for their weekend operations.
- All compliments or complaints made via a digital channel must be responded to in line with this Policy and escalated appropriately. The Digital Marketing Executives are responsible for responding to the individual and making the relevant notification to the Department Head or Manager. If a response is needed where further information, dates, updates are required, the Digital Executive is responsible for liaison with the delivery department and to respond online and see the action through until completion.

5. Providing Feedback - Who and How.

5.1 Who can provide feedback?

Customers can provide feedback directly or via another person acting on behalf of a customer. Other members of the public may also provide us with feedback because of the breadth and range of company activity. We will accept anonymous complaints even though it can be difficult to conduct a full investigation without knowing the identity of the complainant.

This must be explained to the complainant, and they should be asked how they want to be advised of the outcome of the investigation.

5.2 How can people provide feedback?

The following mechanisms are available to provide feedback:

- By email to (a dedicated feedback@advancenorthumberland.co.uk email address).
- By email to a member of staff or department mailbox.
- Via social media channels.
- Via contact forms on Company websites.
- By telephone.
- By responding to surveys.
- By post to Customer Feedback, Advance Northumberland Limited, Wansbeck Workspace, Rotary Parkway Ashington NE63 8QZ

6. Resolving Complaints

As far as reasonably possible, we should attempt to resolve issues within 48 hours through normal operational procedures, within the delivery departments, even where the customer is unhappy. This is our First Call Resolution (FCR) approach, set out in 6.1. Where these operational procedures are not sufficient to address the customer issues, the matter should pass to the formal complaints process, which has 2 separate stages, set out in sections 6.2 and 6.3.

For clarity, local operational procedures should be exhausted before referral to a formal complaints process. A colleague or customer cannot seek to displace the operational process by directly logging a complaint.

A flow chart for the complaints procedure is included at Appendix 1a.

6.1 First Call Resolution (FCR)

The colleague answering the customer contact should take responsibility for maintaining contact with the complainant and addressing the issues at that first point of contact if possible either with an apology, explanation or other action during the initial conversation or by contact with the complainant within 48 hours of receiving the complaint.

As far as possible, the colleague should aim to resolve concerns through the operational procedures of the department. Where these operational procedures are not sufficient to effectively deliver our services, or address the customer issue, the matter can be investigated as a formal complaint.

Where the complaint has been received from a Shareholder Senior Officer, an Elected Member or an MP, a notification should be sent to the Chief Executive. This notification should be sent even where this is to be logged as FCR.

6.2 Formal Complaint Stage 1 Resolution

All formal complaints should be handled with the strictest confidence. Any personal data must be processed lawfully and in accordance with the Data Protection Policy.

- Formal complaints should be logged by colleagues using the Customer Feedback form, available via the intranet.
- On receipt of a formal complaint, this should be logged on the Central Register by Corporate Services, allocated a unique reference number, and the complainant issued with an acknowledgement within 72 working hours of the complaint being received.
- Where the complaint has been received from a Shareholder Senior Officer, an Elected Member or an MP, a notification should be sent to the Chief Executive. This notification should be sent by Corporate Services if this has not already been done by the delivery department / complaint handler.
- An investigation is to be carried out by the Head of department, or alternative if agreed with the Head of Business Transformation and the delivery department.
- The investigation must be carried out in a timely manner and either (a) or (b) below, the approach to be taken will be agreed at the time of recording the complaint:
 - a) A response provided in writing direct to the complainant within 15 working days of the date the complaint was logged, copied to Corporate Services, or
 - b) A draft of a full response (e.g. in a format that could be issued) provided to Corporate Services within 12 working days for review and issue within the requisite 15 days.
- If no further response is received from the customer within 7 working days, the complaint file is to be closed.

6.2 Formal Complaint Stage 2 Resolution

If a complainant remains dissatisfied with all or part of the Stage 1 Response, this can be escalated to Stage 2. The following steps apply:

- A review will be by a Senior Manager, or member of ELT who has not previously been involved at Stage 1.
- A request for an escalated review must be acknowledged within 72 working hours of receipt.
- A further investigation is to be carried out by a more Senior Manager than Stage 1.
- The response should be reviewed by the ELT member for the department concerned and approved.
- The response should be provided to Corporate Services for issue.
- The response must clarify this as our final response on the matter.

- The complaint file should be closed upon issue of the response.

6.3 Vexatious or Malicious Complaints

The presumption should be that feedback, including complaints, is given in good faith. Every complaint must be considered on its merits, not the attitude of the complainant, and even if someone has made a vexatious or malicious complaint in the past, it must not be assumed that any other complaint they make will also be vexatious or malicious.

A **vexatious complaint** is one that is pursued, regardless of its merit, solely to harass or annoy someone, or something that is unreasonable, without foundation or repetitive.

A **malicious complaint** is one that is made with the intention of causing harm, for example deliberately seeking to defame a colleague or lying about an issue in the knowledge this will cause harm.

A complaint could be considered vexatious and / or malicious if the complainant (this list is not exhaustive):

- Seeks to prolong contact by continually changing the substance of the complaint or by continually raising further concerns or questions whilst the complaint is being addressed.
- Fails to identify the substance of a complaint, or the precise issues which may need to be investigated despite reasonable efforts to assist them.
- Complains solely about trivial matters to an extent which is out of proportion to their significance.
- Makes excessive contact or seeks to impose unreasonable demands or expectations on resources, such as responses being provided more urgently than is reasonable or necessary.

When a colleague believes a complaint has not been made in good faith and is instead vexatious, a different course of action (from the procedure set out in 6.1 and Appendix 1a) may be appropriate. Note however, an individual colleague determining a complaint is vexatious does not mean no further action is required. Steps on dealing with a vexatious or malicious complaint are outlined in Appendix 1b, and the following applies:

- Where a complainant has not contacted us before, the issue must be investigated as per the standard procedure. If the complainant seeks to escalate the issue, Stage 2 of the existing complaints procedure should be used to validate the investigation and the complainant informed in writing that the matter is now closed.
- Where a complainant has contacted us before, a matter investigated and a decision communicated, a copy of the complaint should be passed to the Head of Business Transformation for review.

- Where no new and important information has been provided, the complainant will be informed by the Head of Business Transformation that the Complaints procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is closed.
- The complainant should be informed that future correspondence will be read and detailed recorded on their original complaints file, but not acknowledged unless it contains important new information.

Before taking action, employees must be satisfied that the complainant's individual circumstances have been taken into account, including age, disability, gender, race, and religion or belief. Any actions taken, must be recorded on the central register maintained by Corporate Services.

6.4 Complaints involving alleged misconduct

Any allegations of fraud or financial misconduct should be referred to the Executive Director of Governance and Sustainability and / or the Chief Executive and will be dealt with via the Whistleblowing Policy or other process as deemed appropriate by the circumstances.

6.5 Complex Feedback

If feedback is deemed complicated or in exceptional circumstances, it may take longer to investigate than the published timescales. Where this is the case, we will write to the individual concerned to tell them this, giving them the reason why, and advising them of the new timescales. This should be done before the original reply timescale has elapsed and the timescale can be extended by a maximum of 10 working days.

6.6 Members of Staff

Staff members that are the subject of a complaint cannot investigate that complaint. Discretion and sensitivity is required. Guidance should be sought from the Head of HR wherever a staff member is cited in a formal complaint to ensure the correct policy is followed. If the staff member concerned is a member of the HR Team, or is the Head of Business Transformation, this should be referred instead to the Executive Director of Governance and Sustainability for review.

6.7 Record Keeping

Clear and accurate records of complaints should be retained within the centralised records and retained in line with the Document Retention Policy.

7. Other Feedback

7.1 Compliments: all compliments should also be recorded on the central register. Where a colleague receives a compliment, this should be recorded by the individual receiving the compliment, or by their Line Manager. Compliments are to be included in performance

reporting to the Executive Leadership Team and Board. Compliments should be logged on the day they are received or as soon as possible.

7.2 Suggestions: any suggestions received should be acknowledged and a thank you issued by the colleague receiving the suggestion, using the same format as the suggestion was submitted. The content of the suggestion should be passed to the relevant department manager for review and consideration. Standalone suggestions do not need to be recorded on the central register of complaints and compliments.

8. Performance Monitoring

8.1 Monitoring

The central tracker is to be reviewed and monitored by the Head of Business Transformation.

8.2 Reporting

Information relating to customer feedback is to be available for real time reporting.

A monthly summary is to be reported to ELT.

Where applicable and relevant to individual staff performance, customer feedback will also be monitored through the Performance Management process.

An assurance report is to be provided to Audit Committee and Board through individual performance papers, or within the operational report of the Chief Executive.

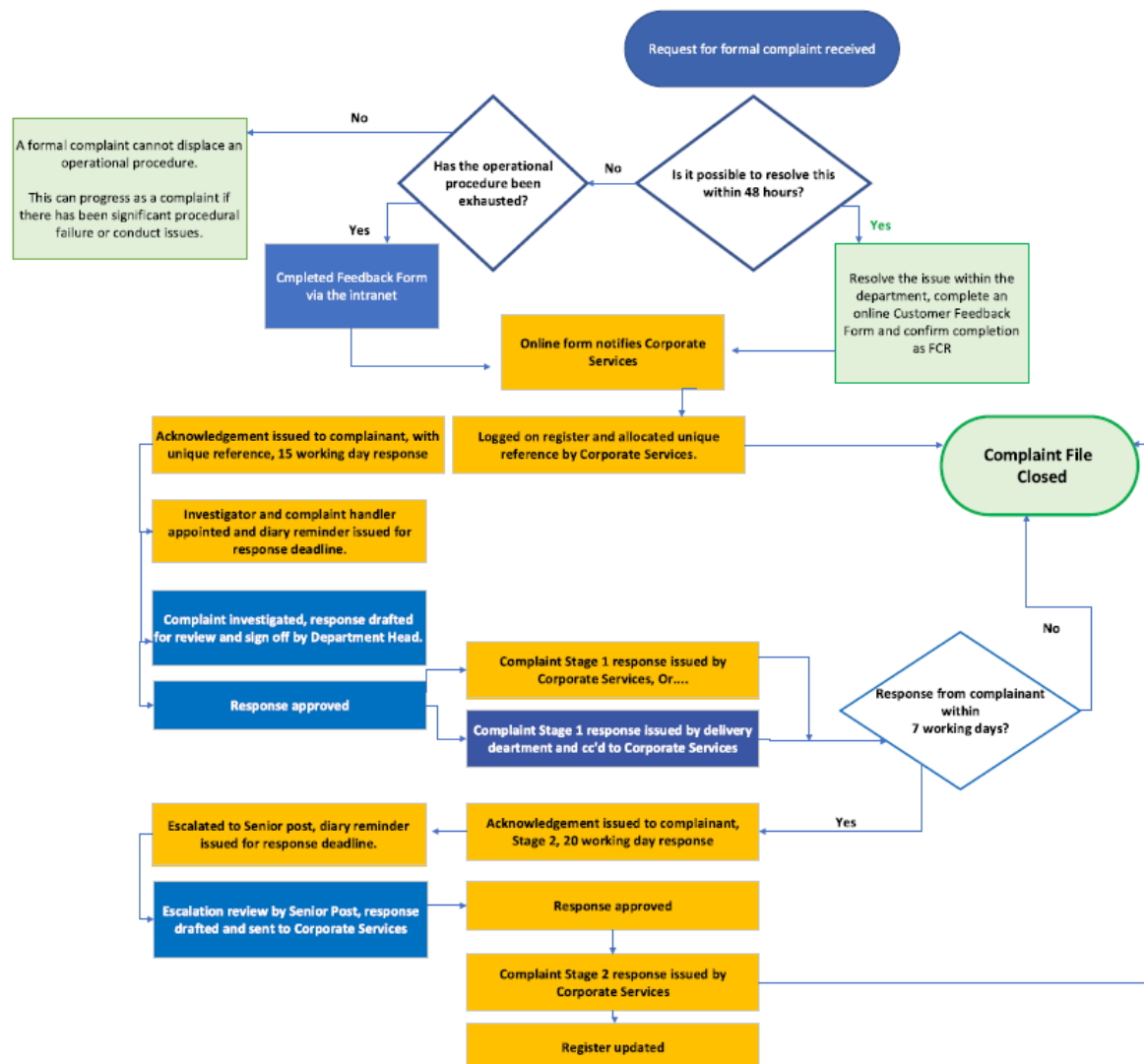
9. Training and Support

Information on this policy will be included within the Corporate Induction.

Further training will be the responsibility of each Head of Department to ensure all staff are familiar with policy content.

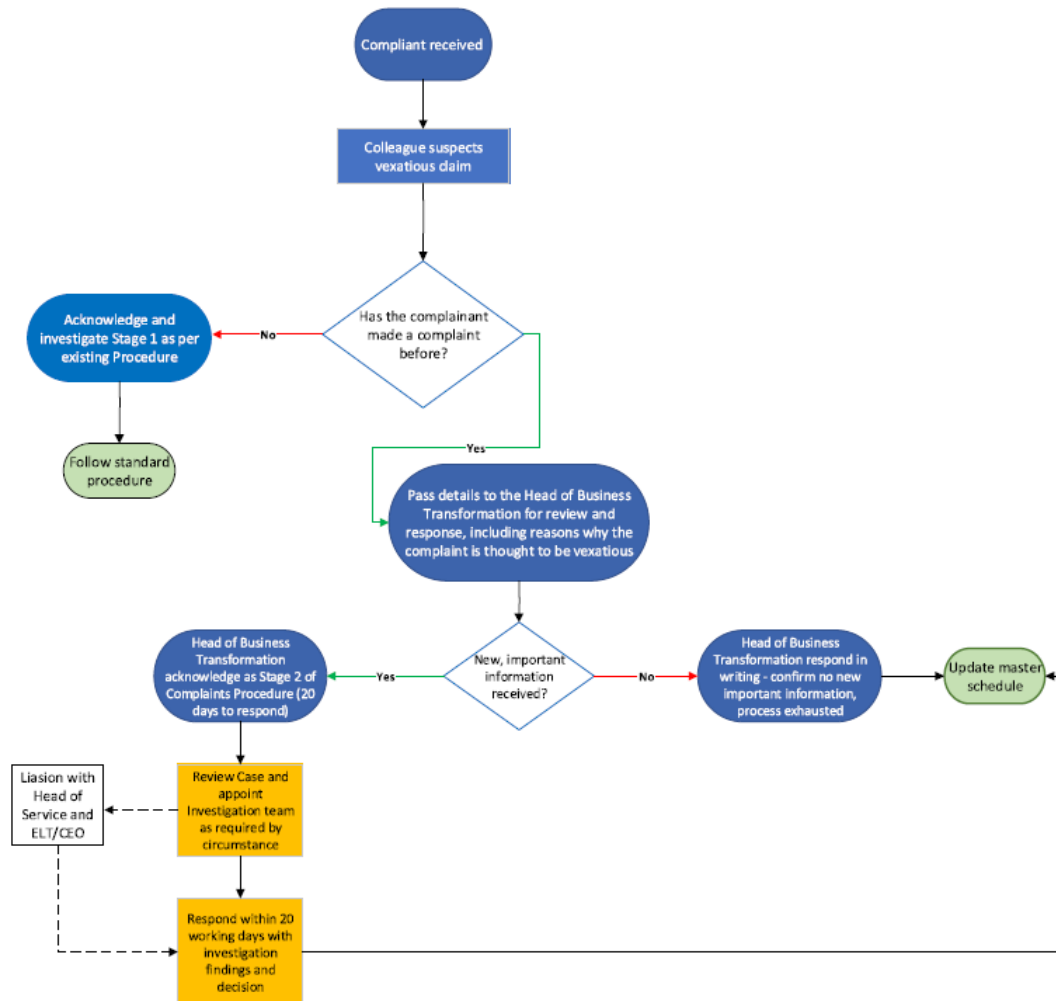
10. Appendices

Appendix 1a: Complaints Process - attached as PDF Flow Chart



Appendix 1b: Vexatious and Malicious Complaints – attached as PDF Flow Chart

Vexatious or Malicious Complaints



Appendix 2: Reporting Form

The Customer Feedback reporting form is available to staff via the intranet. It can be completed via a laptop or mobile device. To access the [live form](#), go to the Advance Northumberland Intranet Home Page and go to the section for Customer Feedback – logging customer compliments and complaints. When opening an internet browser, the home page for staff defaults to the intranet.

Appendix 3 – Complaint Response Templates

Note these templates can be copied to an email format, hard copy letters are not mandatory. The templates are intended as guidance and indicative of minimum content, they are not prescriptive and should be adapted to suit the nature of the issue being dealt with. For support on drafting responses, advice can be sought from the Head of Business Transformation.

Stage 1 Complaint Acknowledgement

Name / Address

Date

Dear [Name],

Re: Complaint Reference: [Add unique reference]

Thank you for taking the time to provide us with feedback on the services delivered by Advance Northumberland. We are sorry to hear that you are not happy with the service that you have received.

Please accept this letter as acknowledgement of receipt and confirmation this matter will now be investigated in accordance with our Customer Feedback Policy and a response provided to you within 15 working days of the date of this letter.

If you need to contact us in the meantime, please use the contact details below.

Kind Regards

Complaint Handler Name

Complaint Handler Position

Stage 1 Complaint Response

Name / Address

Date

Dear [Name],

Re: Complaint Reference: [Add unique reference]

I write further to our recent correspondence regarding the complaint you made on «Date_Complaint_Received». We have now completed our investigations into the matter, and I have outlined our findings below.

You told us that *[insert detail regarding nature of complaint, including key dates etc. and advise of actions that have been taken]*.

We agree in this instance that we have not delivered our usual high standard of service that we strive to achieve in all cases. Sometimes we get it wrong, and we acknowledge in this instance that *[insert detail i.e. we should have attended the appointment when planned, and should this not have been possible, we should have phoned to advise you of the delay – for a missed appointment for example]*.

Please accept our sincere apologies for the inconvenience you have experienced as result of us *[failing to attend the appointment on time]*.

We appreciate the time it has taken you to make us aware of this issue and would like to take this opportunity to advise that we are committed to maintaining a high quality service, and that we use the feedback you have provided to continuously improve our service.

As our investigations are now complete and we have communicated our findings to you, we will take the necessary steps to close your complaint within 7 days, should we not receive any further communication from you.

Yours sincerely

Complaint Handler Name

Complaint Handler Position

Stage 2 Customer Acknowledgement



Name / Address

Date

Dear [Name],

Re: Complaint Reference: [Add unique reference]:

Thank you for reviewing the outcome or our investigations provided in response to your recent complaint.

I am sorry to hear that you are not satisfied with the response that you have received. As a result your complaint has been escalated to the next stage in our policy.

A further investigation will now be conducted and a response from will be provided to you within 20 working days of the date of this letter.

If you need to contact us in the meantime, please use the contact details below.

Kind Regards

Complaint Handler Name

Complaint Handler Position

Stage 2 Customer Response

Name / Address

Date

Dear [Name],

Re: Complaint Reference: [Add unique reference]:

I write further to your recent correspondence regarding the complaint you made on «Date_Complaint_Received» when you told us that *[insert detail regarding nature of complaint, including key dates etc. and advise of actions that were taken]*.

As you are aware, your complaint was escalated to Stage 2 of our Customer Complaints process and further investigations into the matter have now been concluded and the findings outlined below.

[State conclusions of the Stage 2 investigation].

Please accept my sincere apologies for the inconvenience you have experienced as result of us *[state any service failures] * delete if not applicable.*

I appreciate the time it has taken you to make us aware of this issue and would like to take this opportunity to advise that we are committed to maintaining a high quality service, and that I will ensure that the feedback you have provided is used to continuously improve our service provision.

As our investigations are now complete and we have communicated our findings to you, your complaint will be closed accordingly.

If you are unhappy with our resolution, you can *[contact add any options for further contact if appropriate.]*

Yours sincerely

Responder Name

Responder / Senior Manager Position