

COTSWOLDS CONSERVATION BOARD

COMMENTS, COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS POLICY

Introduction

The Board is committed to providing high quality services to achieve its statutory purpose. The Board needs to know what people think of the services it provides and the actions it takes so that it can review and improve them.

The Board values every comment, complaint, and compliment it receives.

Objectives of the Policy

1. To ensure a consistent process - so that service users receive a fair, consistent and structured approach to any comment, complaint or compliment they make.
2. To provide a positive process - so that the outcome of a comment, complaint or compliment and any action is used as a positive method of monitoring performance and improving services.
3. To provide a prompt response to complaints.

Comments, Complaints and Compliments Processes

A comment, complaint and compliment may be received and dealt with at three levels within the Board:

1. It may be handled by the officer at the point of service delivery.
2. It may be referred to the Chief Executive where it is more serious or it cannot be resolved at service delivery level.
3. It may be referred to the Executive where the issue (particularly a complaint) is very serious or cannot be resolved at Chief Executive level.

Complaints, compliments and comments and any action taken in response will be recorded and reported in accordance with the Monitoring and Review section below.

Standards to be Adopted

When a complaint is received, the officer will:

1. deal with it promptly, efficiently, courteously and systematically.
2. respond within 15 working days.
3. keep the complainant informed about the progress of any investigation.
4. inform the complainant in writing about the outcome and findings and what action will be taken to prevent recurrence (as appropriate) and set out details of any rights of further redress such as Chief Executive or Executive level complaints or the Local Government Ombudsman.

Vexatious Complaints

The Chief Executive may, at any stage of the complaints policy, review a complaint and give a decision, without formal investigation, where he/she considers it to be deliberately repetitious or vexatious. No further action will be taken by the Board on vexatious complaints.

Monitoring and Review

The Finance and Operational Support Officer will be a central point of information and advice about the Policy and will co-ordinate, monitor and review its implementation. The Chief Executive will present the record of complaints and an annual summary to the Board.

COMMENTS, COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS PROCESS

Introduction

Complaints, comments and compliments will be dealt with in accordance with the Board's Comments, Complaints and Compliments Policy using the Process set out below.

The benefits of a common statement of how to deal with these matters, particularly in relation to complaints, are:

- Everyone knows how to complain and the way their complaint will be handled.
- Team members and volunteers will be confident about what to do when they get a complaint.
- Everyone is treated equally.
- Managers and Board Members can see how to improve services.

Employees who handle complaints need to be positive, understanding, open-minded and helpful; and they should let it be seen that the Board takes complaints seriously and deals with them sympathetically.

Sometimes members of the public may want to register a comment or compliment rather than make a complaint. The Board will ensure that it acts appropriately in response to such comments and compliments.

Definition of a complaint

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

Members of the public may complain but without describing their issues as complaints. Complaints should not be overlooked because they are not formally described as such.

The Board recognises that some people may need help to make a complaint. It will treat every approach from a member of the public considerately and fairly.

Who should deal with complaints?

1. Other procedures for dealing with complaints may be more appropriate to the complainant than the Board's Complaints Procedure. For example,
 - a. complaints against Board members should be reported to the Monitoring Officer and dealt with through Standards Committee procedures.
 - b. data compliance related complaints should be reported to the Data Protection Officer.
 - c. some complaints may be better dealt with through the courts.
2. Allegations of criminal behaviour require special care. The Board should ensure that it does not deal with an allegation in a way which could hamper a police investigation. The safest course is to consult the police before taking any action.
3. The Monitoring Officer should be alerted to other kinds of alleged illegal actions by the Board.
4. Complaints of financial impropriety should be referred to the Board's Head of Finance, the Monitoring Officer and/or the Chief Executive.

5. Complaints about Board policy will be dealt with by the Chief Executive, who will consider whether the issue needs to be reported to the Board. Members of the public can raise questions with or make representations to the Board and its sub-committees and with individual members of the Board. These are not subject to the Comment, Complaints and Compliments Procedure.
6. Where the Board enters into a formal partnership or contract, the partnership or contract documents should specify how complaints are to be handled and these should be at least as good as the Board's own procedures.
7. A complaint may lead to disciplinary action against Board employees. Disciplinary action will be taken in accordance with the Board's disciplinary procedures. The Board should not await the result of disciplinary action before putting right the issue that is the subject of the complaint.

Privacy

The identity of the person making the complaint should be made known only to those who need to consider the complaint and should not be revealed to any other person or made public by the Board. Care should be taken to maintain confidentiality where circumstances demand. Where this is not possible, the complainant should be advised.

The Board will ensure that complaints will be dealt with impartially, objectively and professionally and people need not fear that they might suffer adverse treatment because of their complaint.

Stages of responding to a complaint

A complaint may be dealt with at three levels within the Board:

- Stage 1: It may be handled by the officer at the point of service delivery.
- Stage 2: It may be referred to the Chief Executive where it is more serious or it cannot be resolved at service delivery level.
- Stage 3: It may be referred to the Executive Committee where the complaint is very serious or cannot be resolved by the Chief Executive.

At the end of each stage, the complainant should be told that, if they are not satisfied, they may escalate the matter to the next stage. If this is after stage 3, the complainant should be advised of alternative ways to pursue the complaint, including through the Local Government Ombudsman.

Employees are encouraged to deal with complaints at the point of service delivery or on receipt. If they think they do not have authority to deal with the matter, they should refer it to the Chief Executive immediately.

Time targets

Complaints should be dealt with as quickly as possible.

- The Board has set a target of responding to the complainant within 15 working days.
- Some complaints necessarily take longer to resolve. If this is the case, the complainant should be told why and when they should expect a resolution.

How complaints should be made

- At Stage 1, there is no formal requirement of how a complaint should be made. It may be verbally face to face, over the telephone, by fax, email, letter or on a complaints form. Receipt of the complaint should be acknowledged promptly.
- Complaints at Stage 2 and 3 should be the subject of a formal letter, complaints form or report.
- The Board should aim to have a clear record of what the complaint is about before it considers how to deal with it.

Coordination and record keeping

- The Chief Executive is responsible for the Comments, Complaints and Compliments Process.
- The Finance and Operational Support Officer will be a central point of information and advice about the Policy and Process and will co-ordinate, monitor and review their implementation.
- The Finance and Operational Support Officer will maintain a file of complaints, comments and compliments, including a record of any action taken.
- Complaint correspondence will be retained for three years after closure of file. A register of Comments, Complaints and Compliments will be retained permanently.

Putting things right

- The Process is there to put things right if they have gone wrong. The remedy should fit the harm or injustice to the complainant. Complainants should be asked to say what they think should be a reasonable and fair outcome.
- The officer dealing with the complaint should offer a remedy which is in accordance with their level of delegated authority and which they consider is appropriate to the complaint.
- Local authorities have general powers under the Local Government Act 2000 to pay compensation or take remedial action. It is not clear at present whether the Board has similar powers. Until this is resolved, the Board should not make monetary payments by way of compensation.

If a complaint is not upheld

When the Board gives a decision that a complaint is not upheld, great care should be taken not to increase the feeling of grievance on the part of the complainant. The response to the complainant should contain a clear, full and sympathetic explanation.

Publicity

The complaints system should be publicised by displaying posters in the Board's offices, summarising the Process and publication on the Board's website.

Monitoring and Review

The Policy and Process will be reviewed annually by the Chief Executive and revisions reported to the Board for approval.

ENDS