



COMPLAINTS HANDLING **PROCEDURE**

Title	Complaints Handling Procedure
Who should use this	All Staff
Author	SAC
Approved by Management Team	
Approved by Joint Board	
Reviewer	Head of Valuation Services
Review Date	January 2022

Review History

REVIEW NO.	DETAILS	RELEASE DATE
1	Assessor details updated – April 2015	27 APRIL 2015
2	SPSO Freepost details updated – April 2016	25 APRIL 2016
3	Amendment to SPSO Address only	JANUARY 2019
4		
5		

Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board

Complaints Handling Procedure

Foreword

Our Complaints handling procedure reflects Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board's commitment to valuing complaints. It seeks to resolve customer dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of service delivery and to conduct thorough, impartial and fair investigations of customer complaints so that, where appropriate, we can make evidence-based decisions on the facts of the case.

The procedure has been developed using the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's (SPSO) Local Authority Model Complaints Handling Procedure. This procedure aims to help us 'get it right first time'. We want quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with local, early resolution by capable, well-trained staff.

Complaints give us valuable information we can use to improve customer satisfaction. Our complaints handling procedure will enable us to address a customer's dissatisfaction and may also prevent the same problems that led to the complaint from happening again. For our staff, complaints provide a first-hand account of the customer's views and experience, and can highlight problems we may otherwise miss. Handled well, complaints can give our customers a form of redress when things go wrong, and can also help us continuously improve our services.

Resolving complaints early saves money and creates better customer relations. Sorting them out as close to the point of service delivery as possible means we can deal with them locally and quickly, so they are less likely to escalate to the next stage of the procedure. Complaints that we do not resolve swiftly can greatly add to our workload.

The complaints handling procedure will help us do our job better, improve relationships with our customers and enhance public perception of the Joint Board. It will help us keep the user at the heart of the process, while enabling us to better understand how to improve our services by learning from complaints.

Helen D. M. McPhee

Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer

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How to use this Model Complaints Handling Procedure

This document explains to staff how to handle complaints and supplements the Employee Guide on Handling Complaints. A separate document provides information for customers on the complaints procedure. Together, these form our complaints handling procedure.

This document is designed to be an internal document for staff to refer to it. It contains references and links to more details on parts of the procedure, such as how to record complaints, and the criteria for signing off and agreeing time extensions. These explain how to process, manage and reach decisions on different types of complaints.

When using this document, please also refer to the 'SPSO Statement of Complaints Handling Principles' and best practice guidance on complaints handling from the Complaints Standards Authority at the SPSO.

<http://www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk>

We are committed to making our service easy to use for all members of the community. In line with our statutory equalities duties, we will always ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to help customers access and use our services. If a customer has trouble putting their complaint in writing, or want information in another language or format, such as large font, or Braille, the designated complaints handling employee must offer appropriate assistance.

If the complaint relates to an equality matter the designated complaints handling employee must notify the Board's Equality Officer.

What is a complaint?

Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board's definition of a complaint is:

'An expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about the Joint Board's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the Joint Board.'

A complaint may relate to:

- Failure to provide a service
- Failure to achieve standards or quality of service promised by the Joint Board
- Dissatisfaction with Joint Board policies or the way they are being applied or administered
- The Joint Board's failure to follow the appropriate administrative process.
- Failure, negligence or delays in responding to customers' inquiries or requests
- Inappropriate/unacceptable treatment by, or attitude of, a member of staff

This list does not cover everything.

Appendix 1 provides a range of examples of complaints we may receive, and how these may be handled.

A complaint is **not**:

- A routine first-time request for a service
- A request for compensation
- An issue that is in committee, court or a tribunal or has already been heard by a committee, court or a tribunal
- A disagreement with a decision where a statutory right of appeal exists, for example in relation to council tax or non-domestic rating appeals
- Formal complaints concerning valuations under the Valuation Acts
- An attempt to reopen a previously concluded complaint or to have a complaint reconsidered where we have already given our final decision.
- Objections to inclusions in the Electoral Register

You must not treat these issues as complaints, and should instead direct customers to use the appropriate procedures.

Appendix 2 gives more examples of 'what is not a complaint' and how to direct customers appropriately.

Handling anonymous complaints

The Joint Board values all complaints. This means we treat all complaints including anonymous complaints seriously and will take action to consider them further, wherever this is appropriate. Generally, we will consider anonymous complaints if there is enough information in the complaint to enable us to make further enquiries. If, however, an anonymous complaint does not provide enough information to enable us to take further action, we may decide not to pursue it further. Any decision not to pursue an anonymous complaint must be authorised by a member of the Assessor's Management Team.

If an anonymous complaint makes serious allegations, we will refer it to a senior officer immediately.

If we pursue an anonymous complaint further, we will record the issues as an anonymous complaint on the complaints system. This will help to ensure the completeness of the complaints data we record and allow us to take corrective action where appropriate.

What if the customer does not want to complain?

If a customer has expressed dissatisfaction in line with our definition of a complaint but does not want to complain, tell them that we do consider all expressions of dissatisfaction, and that complaints offer us the opportunity to improve services where things have gone wrong. Encourage the customer to submit their complaint and allow us to deal with it through the complaints handling procedure. This will ensure that the customer is updated on the action taken and gets a response to their complaint.

If, however, the customer insists they do not wish to complain, record the issue as an anonymous complaint. This will ensure that the customer's details are not recorded on the complaints database and that they receive no further contact about the matter. It will also help to ensure the completeness of the complaints data recorded and will still allow us to fully consider the matter and take corrective action where appropriate.

Who can make a complaint?

Anyone who receives, requests or is affected by our services can make a complaint. Sometimes a customer may be unable or reluctant to make a complaint on their own. We will accept complaints brought by third parties as long as the customer has given their personal consent.

Complaints involving more than one service or organisation

If a complaint relates to the actions of both the Joint Board and one or more local authority services, you must tell the customer who will take the lead in dealing with the complaint, and explain that we may only be able to provide a response in respect of the actions of the Joint Board.

If a customer complains to the Joint Board about the service of another local authority, agency or public service provider, but the Joint Board has no involvement in the issue, the customer should be advised to contact the appropriate organisation directly. However, where, a complaint relates to the Joint Board service and the service of another agency or public service provider, (for example a housing association or a government department), and the Joint Board has a direct interest in the issue, you must handle the complaint about the Joint Board through the CHP. If you need to make enquiries to a local authority or an outside agency in relation to the complaint always take account of data protection legislation and our guidance on handling our customer's personal information. The Information Commissioner has detailed guidance on data sharing and has issued a data sharing code of practice.

Such complaints may include:

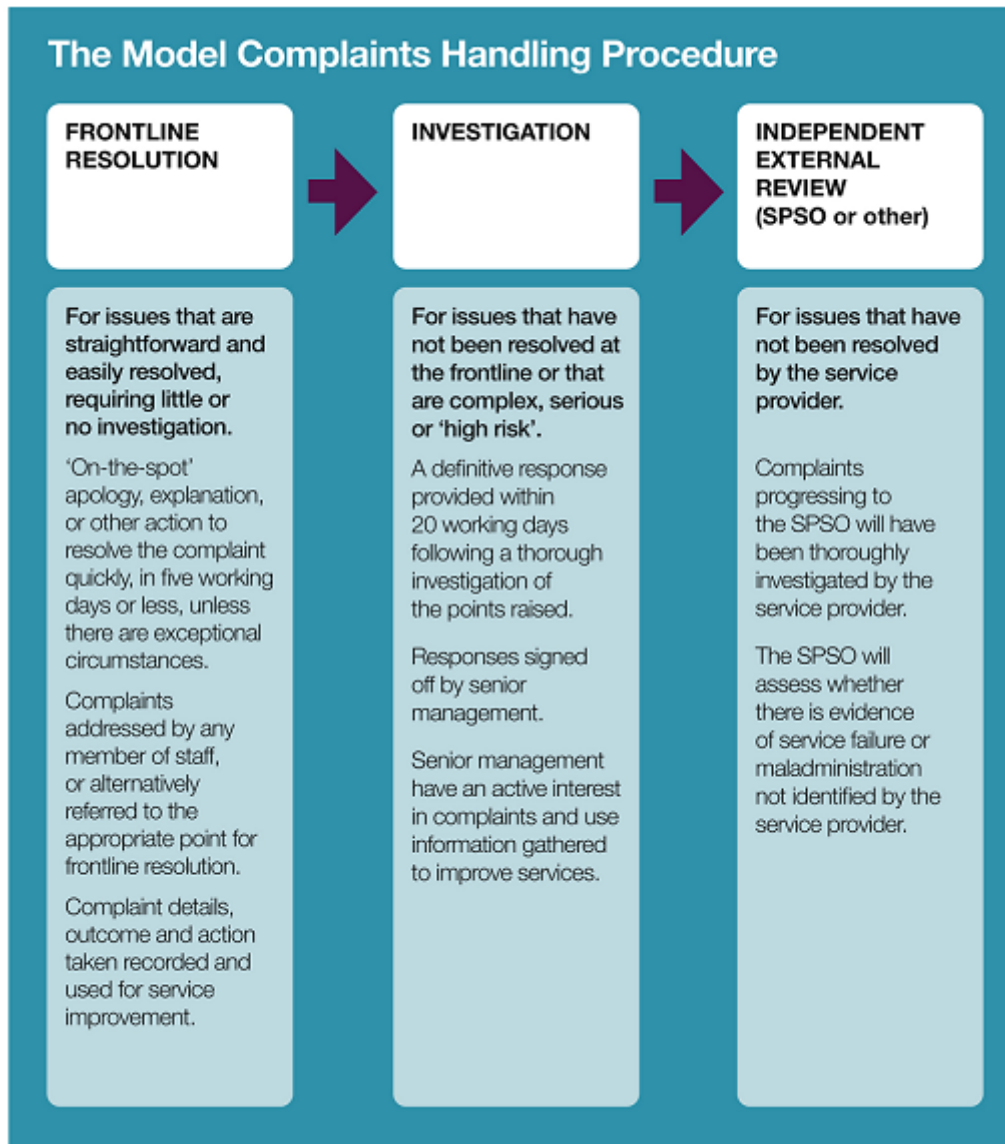
- a complaint made to us about a delay in issuing a Council Tax Notice where the customer's dissatisfaction relates to the service we have provided and the service the billing authority has provided

The complaints handling process

Our complaints handling procedure aims to provide a quick, simple and streamlined process for resolving complaints early and locally by capable, well-trained staff.

Our complaints process provides two opportunities to resolve complaints internally:

- **frontline resolution**, and
- **investigation**.



For clarity, the term 'frontline resolution' refers to the first stage of the complaints process. It does not reflect any job description within the Joint Board but means seeking to resolve complaints upon initial contact where possible.

Stage one: frontline resolution

Frontline resolution aims to quickly resolve straightforward customer complaints that require little or no investigation. All complaints are to be dealt with by the designated complaints handling employees and recorded appropriately. An enquiry by a customer should not be treated as a complaint.

The main principle is to seek early resolution, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery as possible. This may mean asking a designated complaints handling employee to deal with the complaint.

Appendix 1 gives examples of the types of complaint we may consider at this stage, with suggestions on how to resolve them.

In practice, frontline resolution means resolving the complaint upon initial contact with the complainant by a designated complaints handling employee

The designated complaints handling employee may settle the complaint by providing an on-the-spot apology or explaining why the issue occurred and, where possible, what will be done to stop this happening again. The designated complaints handling employee may also explain that, as an organisation that values complaints, we may use the information given when we review service standards in the future.

A customer can make a complaint in writing, in person, by telephone, or by email, or by having someone complain on their behalf. The designated complaints handling employee must always consider frontline resolution, regardless of how you have received the customer's complaint.

What to do when you receive a complaint

- 1 On receiving a complaint, you must first bring it to the attention of the designated complaints handling employee. They must first decide whether the issue can indeed be defined as a complaint. The customer may express dissatisfaction about more than one issue. This may mean that the designated complaints handling employee treats one element as a complaint, while directing the customer to pursue another element through an alternative route (see **Appendix 2**).
- 2 If you have received and identified a complaint, pass the customer to a designated complaints handling employee who will ensure the details are recorded on our complaints system (see **Appendix 5**).
- 3 The designated complaints handling employee will decide whether or not the complaint is suitable for frontline resolution. Some complaints will need to be fully investigated before the customer can be given a suitable response. The designated complaints handling employee must escalate these complaints as detailed in Stage 2 of this procedure immediately to the investigation stage.

- 4 Where the designated complaints handling employee thinks frontline resolution is appropriate they must consider four key questions:
- What exactly is the customer's complaint (or complaints)?
 - What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?
 - Can I achieve this, or explain why not?
 - If I cannot resolve this, who can help with frontline resolution?

What exactly is the customer's complaint (or complaints)?

It is important to be clear about exactly what the customer is complaining of. The designated complaints handling employee may need to ask the customer for more information and probe further to get a full picture.

What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?

At the outset, clarify the outcome the customer wants to achieve. Of course, the customer may not be clear about this, and the designated complaints handling employee may need to probe further to find out what they expect, and whether they can be satisfied.

Can I achieve this, or explain why not?

If it is deemed appropriate by the designated complaints handling employee then an on-the-spot apology should be given. If it is considered that an apology is appropriate, the designated complaints handling employee may wish to follow the SPSO's guidance on the subject

Where it is deemed that an on-the-spot apology is not appropriate.

The customer may expect more than we can provide. If so, the designated complaints employee must tell them as soon as possible. They may need to explain that the service they seek from us is unreasonable. An example would be where the customer is requesting a review of their council tax banding immediately.

The designated complaints handling employee is likely to have to convey the decision face to face or on the telephone. If they do so face to face, by telephone or by email, they are not required to write to the customer as well, although they may choose to do so. It is important, however, to keep a full and accurate record of the decision reached and passed to the customer.

If the designated complaints handling employee can't resolve this, who can help with frontline resolution?

If the designated complaints handling employee cannot deal with the complaint because, for example, they are unfamiliar with the issues or area of service involved, the details of the complaint are to be passed to another designated complaints handling employee who is familiar with the issues or areas of service involved.

Timelines

Frontline resolution must be completed within **five working days**, although in practice we would often expect to resolve the complaint much sooner.

The designated complaints handling employee may need to get more information from other service areas to resolve the complaint at this stage. However, it is important to respond to the customer within five working days, either resolving the matter or explaining that their complaint is to be investigated.

Extension to the timeline

In exceptional circumstances, where there are clear and justifiable reasons for doing so, the designated complaints handling employee may agree an extension of no more than five working days with the customer. This must only happen when an extension will make it more likely that the complaint will be resolved at the frontline resolution stage.

When the designated complaints handling employee asks for an extension, they must get authorisation from a member of the Management Team, who will decide whether they need an extension to effectively resolve the complaint. Examples of when this may be appropriate include relevant staff being temporarily unavailable. If, however, the issues are so complex that they cannot be resolved in five days, it may be more appropriate to escalate the complaint straight to the investigation stage. You must tell the customer about the reasons for the delay, and when they can expect your response.

If the customer does not agree to an extension but it is unavoidable and reasonable, a member of the Management Team must decide on the extension. The designated complaints handling employee must then tell the customer about the delay and explain the reason for the decision to grant the extension.

It is important that such extensions do not become the norm. Rather, the timeline at the frontline resolution stage should be extended only rarely. All attempts to resolve the complaint at this stage must take no longer than **ten working days** from the date the designated complaints handling employee received the complaint.

The proportion of complaints that exceed the five-day limit will be evident from reported statistics. These statistics will go to our Management Team on a regular basis.

Appendix 3 provides further information on timelines.

Closing the complaint at the frontline resolution stage

When the designated complaints handling employee has informed the customer of the outcome they are not obliged to write to the customer, although they may choose to do so. They must ensure that the response to the complaint addresses all areas that we are responsible for and explains the reasons for our decision. It is also important to keep a full and accurate record of the decision reached and given to the customer. The complaint should then be closed and the complaints system updated accordingly.

When to escalate to the investigation stage

A complaint must be escalated to the investigation stage when:

- frontline resolution was tried but the customer remains dissatisfied and requests an investigation into the complaint. This may be immediately on communicating the decision at the frontline stage or could be some time later
- the customer refuses to take part in the frontline resolution process.
- the issues raised are complex and require detailed investigation
- the complaint relates to serious, high-risk or high-profile issues.

Take particular care to identify complaints that might be considered serious, high risk or high profile, as these may require particular action or raise critical issues that need senior management's direct input. The SPSO defines potential high-risk or high-profile complaints as those that may:

- involve a death or terminal illness
- involve serious service failure, for example major delays in providing, or repeated failures to provide, a service
- generate significant and ongoing press interest
- pose a serious risk to the Joint Board's operations
- present issues of a highly sensitive nature, for example concerning:
 - homelessness
 - a particularly vulnerable person
 - child protection
 - personal data

Stage two: Investigation

Not all complaints are suitable for frontline resolution and not all complaints will be satisfactorily resolved at that stage. Complaints handled at the investigation stage of the complaints handling procedure are typically complex or require a detailed examination before we can state our position. These complaints may already have been considered at the frontline resolution stage, or they may have been identified from the start as needing immediate investigation.

An investigation aims to establish all the facts relevant to the points made in the complaint and to give the customer a full, objective and proportionate response that represents our final position.

Investigations should be completed by a member of staff, normally a member of the Management Team, who was NOT involved in any Frontline Resolution stage.

What to do when you receive a complaint for investigation

It is important to be clear from the start of the investigation stage exactly what the investigating officer is investigating, and to ensure that both the customer and the service understand the investigation's scope.

It may be helpful to discuss and confirm these points with the customer at the outset, to establish why they are dissatisfied and whether the outcome they are looking for sounds realistic. In discussing the complaint with the customer, consider three key questions:

1. What specifically is the customer's complaint or complaints?
2. What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?
3. Are the customer's expectations realistic and achievable?

It may be that the customer expects more than we can provide. If so, the investigating officer must make this clear to the customer as soon as possible.

Where possible the investigating officer should also clarify what additional information they will need to investigate the complaint. The customer may need to provide more evidence to help us reach a decision.

Details of the complaint must be recorded on the system for recording complaints. Where appropriate, this will be done as a continuation of frontline resolution. The details must be updated when the investigation ends.

If the investigation stage follows attempted frontline resolution, the designated complaints handling employee must hand over all case notes and associated information to the officer responsible for the investigation, and record that they have done so.

Timelines

The following deadlines are appropriate to cases at the investigation stage:

- complaints must be acknowledged within **three working days**
- the investigating officer should provide a full response to the complaint as soon as possible but not later than **20 working days** from the time you received the complaint for investigation.

Extension to the timeline

Not all investigations will be able to meet this deadline. For example, some complaints are so complex that they require careful consideration and detailed investigation beyond the 20-day limit. However, these would be the exception and the investigating officer must always try to deliver a final response to a complaint within 20 working days.

If there are clear and justifiable reasons for extending the timescale, a member of the Management Team will set time limits on any extended investigation, as long as the customer agrees. The investigating officer must keep the customer updated on the reason for the delay and give them a revised timescale for completion. If the customer does not agree to an extension but it is unavoidable and reasonable, then senior management must consider and confirm the extension. The reasons for an extension might include the following:

- Essential accounts or statements, crucial to establishing the circumstances of the case, are needed from staff, customers or others but they cannot help because of long-term sickness or leave.
- You cannot obtain further essential information within normal timescales.

- Operations are disrupted by unforeseen or unavoidable operational circumstances, for example industrial action or severe weather conditions.

These are only a few examples, and the investigating officer must judge the matter in relation to each complaint. However, an extension would be the exception and they must always try to deliver a final response to the complaint within 20 working days.

As with complaints considered at the frontline stage, the proportion of complaints that exceed the 20-day limit will be evident from reported statistics. These statistics will go to our Management Team on a quarterly basis. An annual report on all complaints received will be provided to the Joint Board.

Appendix 3 provides further information on timelines.

Closing the complaint at the investigation stage

The investigating officer must let the customer know the outcome of the investigation in writing or by their preferred method of contact. Our response to the complaint must address all areas that we are responsible for and explain the reasons for our decision. The investigating officer must record the decision, and details of how it was communicated to the customer, on the system for recording complaints. They must also make clear to the customer:

- their right to ask SPSO to consider the complaint (see below)
- the time limit for doing so, and
- how to contact the SPSO.

Independent external review

Once the investigation stage has been completed, the customer has the right to approach the SPSO if they remain dissatisfied.

The SPSO considers complaints from people who remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of our complaints procedure. The SPSO looks at issues such as service failures and maladministration (administrative fault), as well as the way we have handled the complaint.

The SPSO recommends that we use the wording below to inform customers of their right to ask SPSO to consider the complaint. The SPSO also provides a leaflet, "[The Ombudsman and your organisation](#)", which you may find helpful in deciding how and when to refer someone to the SPSO.

Information about the SPSO

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) is the final stage for complaints about public services in Scotland. This includes complaints about Scottish local authorities. If you remain dissatisfied with the Valuation Joint Board after its complaints process, you can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint. The SPSO cannot normally look at complaints:

- where you have not gone all the way through the Joint Board's complaints handling procedure
- more than 12 months after you became aware of the matter you want to complain about, or
- that have been or are being considered in court.

The SPSO's contact details are:

SPSO
Bridgeside House
99 McDonald Road
EDINBURGH
EH7 4NS

Freepost Address

Freepost SPSO

Freephone: **0800 377 7330**

Online contact www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us

Website: www.spsso.org.uk

Mobile site: <http://m.spsso.org.uk>

Governance of the Complaints Handling Procedure

Roles and responsibilities

Overall responsibility and accountability for the management of complaints lies with the Assessor and ERO and the Management Team.

Our final position on the complaint must be signed off by a member of the Management Team and we will confirm that this is our final response. This ensures that our Management Team own and are accountable for the decision. It also reassures the customer that their concerns have been taken seriously.

The following paragraphs identify the roles and responsibilities of staff in relation to the Procedure.

Assessor & ERO: The Assessor & ERO provides leadership and direction in ways that guide and enable us to perform effectively across all services. This includes ensuring that there is an effective complaints handling procedure, with a robust investigation process that demonstrates how we learn from the complaints we receive.

The Assessor & ERO, will take a personal interest in all complaints, though he may delegate responsibility for the complaint handling procedure to senior staff. Regular management reports assure the Assessor & ERO of the quality of complaints performance.

Management Team: On the Assessor & ERO's behalf, the Management Team will be responsible for:

- managing complaints and the way we learn from them
- overseeing the implementation of actions required as a result of a complaint
- investigating complaints
- deputising for the Assessor & ERO on occasion.

The Management Team may, however, decide to delegate some elements of complaints handling (such as investigations and the drafting of response letters) to other members of staff. Where this happens, the Management Team member should retain ownership and accountability for the management and reporting of complaints. He/She will also be responsible for signing decision letters to customers, so he/she should be satisfied that the investigation is complete and the response addresses all aspects of the complaint.

Complaints investigator: The complaints investigator is responsible and accountable for the management of the investigation. He/She will be involved in the investigation and in co-ordinating all aspects of the response to the customer. This may include preparing a comprehensive written report, including details of any procedural changes in service delivery that could result in opportunities for learning.

Personal Assistant: The Personal Assistant will be responsible for maintaining a record of all complaints received and for reporting to the nominated senior officer on the outcome of all complaints. The nominated senior officer will then be responsible for reporting the outcome of all complaints to the Management Team.

All staff: A complaint may be made to any member of staff in the Joint Board so all staff must be aware of the complaints handling procedure (see separate Guidance) and how to handle and record complaints at the frontline stage. They should also be aware of who to refer a complaint to, in case they are not able to personally handle the matter. We encourage all staff to try to resolve complaints early, as close to the point of service delivery as possible, and quickly to prevent escalation.

Complaints about senior staff

Complaints about senior staff can be difficult to handle, as there may be a conflict of interest for the staff investigating the complaint. When serious complaints are raised against senior staff, it is particularly important that the investigation is conducted by an individual who is independent of the situation.

If the complaint is an internal one it may be more appropriate to refer to the Joint Board's 'Concerns at Work Policy' and/or 'Grievance Procedures'.

Recording, reporting, learning and publicising

Complaints provide valuable customer feedback. One of the aims of the complaints handling procedure is to identify opportunities to improve services within Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board. We must record all complaints in a systematic way so that we can use the complaints data for analysis and management reporting. By recording and using complaints information in this way, we can identify and address the causes of complaints and, where appropriate, identify training opportunities and introduce service improvements.

Recording complaints

To collect suitable data it is essential to record all complaints in line with SPSO minimum requirements, as follows:

- the customer's name, address and contact details
- the date the complaint was received
- the nature of the complaint
- how the complaint was received
- who the complaint was received by
- the service the complaint refers to
- the date the complaint was closed at the frontline resolution stage (where appropriate)
- the date the complaint was escalated to the investigation stage (where appropriate)
- action taken at the investigation stage (where appropriate)
- the date the complaint was closed at the investigation stage (where appropriate)
- the outcome of the complaint at each stage
- the underlying cause of the complaint and any remedial action taken.

We have structured systems for recording complaints, their outcomes and any resulting action (See **Appendix 5**). These provide a detailed record of services that have failed to satisfy customers. **Appendix 5** contains guidance to employees on the logging and recording of complaints.

Reporting of complaints

Complaints details are analysed for trend information to ensure we identify service failures and take appropriate action. Reporting the analysis of complaints information on a quarterly basis at Management Team meetings helps to inform management of where services need to improve. We will report to the Joint Board annually details of complaints received, highlighting outcomes, trends and actions taken.

We will publish the outcome of complaints and the actions we have taken in response on a quarterly basis. This demonstrates the improvements resulting from complaints and shows that complaints can influence our services. It also helps ensure transparency in our complaints handling service and will help to show our stakeholders that we value their complaints.

We will:

- publicise complaints outcomes, trends and actions taken on a quarterly basis
- use case studies and examples to demonstrate how complaints have helped improve services.

This information should be reported on a quarterly basis to our Management Team and annually to the Joint Board.

Learning from complaints

At the earliest opportunity after the closure of the complaint, the complaint handler should always make sure that the customer and staff involved understand the findings of the investigation and any recommendations made.

The Management Team will review the information gathered from complaints regularly and consider whether our services could be improved or internal policies and procedures updated.

As a minimum, we will:

- use complaints data to identify the root cause of complaints
- take action to reduce the risk of recurrence
- record the details of corrective action in the complaints system, and
- systematically review complaints performance reports to improve service delivery.

Where we have identified the need for service improvement:

- the action needed to improve services must be authorised
- an officer (or team) should be designated the 'owner' of the issue, with responsibility for ensuring the action is taken
- a target date must be set for the action to be taken

- the designated 'owner(s)' must follow up to ensure that the action is taken within the agreed timescale
- where appropriate, performance in the service area should be monitored to ensure that the issue has been resolved
- we must ensure that staff learn from complaints.

Publicising complaints performance information

We also report on our performance in handling complaints annually in line with SPSO requirements. This includes performance statistics showing the volumes and types of complaints and key performance details, for example on the time taken and the stage at which complaints were resolved.

Maintaining confidentiality

Confidentiality is important in complaints handling. This requirement includes maintaining the customer's confidentiality and explaining to them the importance of confidentiality generally. We must always bear in mind legal requirements, for example, data protection legislation, as well as internal policies on confidentiality and the use of customers' information.

Managing unacceptable behaviour

People may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. The circumstances leading to a complaint may result in the customer acting in an unacceptable way. Customers who have a history of challenging or inappropriate behaviour, or have difficulty expressing themselves, may still have a legitimate grievance.

A customer's reasons for complaining may contribute to the way in which they present their complaint. Regardless of this, we must treat all complaints seriously and properly assess them. However, we also recognise that the actions of customers who are angry, demanding or persistent may result in unreasonable demands on time and resources or unacceptable behaviour towards our staff. We will, therefore, apply our policies and procedures to protect staff from unacceptable behaviour such as unreasonable persistence, threats or offensive behaviour from customers.

Supporting the customer

All members of the community have the right to equal access to our complaints handling procedure. Customers who do not have English as a first language may need help with interpretation and translation services, and other customers may have specific needs that we will seek to address to ensure easy access to the complaints handling procedure.

We must always take into account our commitment and responsibilities to equality. This includes making reasonable adjustments to our service to help the customer where appropriate. All staff should bear in mind the language translation service to which the Joint Board subscribes.

Several support and advocacy groups are available to support customers in pursuing a complaint and customers should be signposted to these as appropriate.

Time limit for making complaints

This complaints handling procedure sets a time limit of six months from when the customer first knew of the problem, within which time they may ask us to consider the complaint, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time.

We will apply this time limit with discretion. In decision making we will take account of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 (Section 10(1)), which sets out the time limit within which a member of the public can normally ask the SPSO to consider complaints. The limit is one year from when the person first knew of the problem they are complaining about, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time.

If it is clear that a decision not to investigate a customer's complaint will lead to a request for external review of the matter, we may decide that this satisfies the special circumstances criteria. This will enable us to consider the complaint and try to resolve it.

Appendix 1 - Complaints

The following tables give examples of complaints that may be considered at the frontline stage, and suggest possible actions to achieve resolution.

Complaint	Possible actions to achieve resolution
The customer complains that her application to be included in the Electoral Register has not been dealt with timeously.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologise to the customer • Provide a response as a matter of priority
The customer has queried their Rateable Value but no response has been provided	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologise to the customer. • Provide a response as a matter of priority and advise of the relevant appeal procedures.
The customer complains that a member of staff did not attend a pre-arranged meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak to the member of staff, or the line manager to explain the customer's complaint and to agree how to resolve the issue, for example by arranging a new time and date for the meeting. • Explain the reasons for the failed appointment and apologise to the customer. • Feedback the lessons learned from the complaint into a service improvement plan.
The customer complains that the quality of advice provided is not satisfactory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the relevant staff involved to review the guidance provided to assess whether or not it is acceptable. • If appropriate, agree that more/better information should be provided • Explain and apologise to the customer. • Obtain a report from the member(s) of staff involved to confirm that further information has been provided to the satisfaction of the customer.
The customer expresses dissatisfaction in line with the definition of a complaint, but says she does not want to complain – just wants to tell us about the matter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the customer that we value complaints because they help to improve services. Encourage them to submit the complaint. • In terms of improving service delivery and learning from mistakes, it is important that customer feedback, such as this, is recorded, evaluated and acted upon. Therefore, if the customer still insists that they do not want to complain, record the matter as an anonymous

Complaint	Possible actions to achieve resolution
	complaint. This will avoid breaching the complaints handling procedure. Reassure the customer that they will not be contacted again about the matter.

Appendix 2 - What is not a complaint

A concern may not necessarily be a complaint. For example, a customer might make a routine first-time request for a service. This is not a complaint, but the issue may escalate into a complaint if it is not handled effectively and the customer has to keep on asking for service.

A customer may also be concerned about matters which have their own specific review or appeal procedures, and, where appropriate, customers must be directed to the relevant procedure. This procedure should not, therefore, be used for dealing with customer complaints that are covered by the statutory appeal systems, listed below:

Non-Domestic Rating Valuation	Formal Appeal/Complaint to Assessor, Local Valuation Appeal Committee, Lands Tribunal, Lands Valuation Appeal Court
Council Tax	Formal Proposal to Assessor, Local Valuation Appeal Committee, Court of Session
Electoral Registration	Appeal or objections to ERO, Sheriff Court
Freedom of Information	Seek redress via FOI 'Review' process or Appeal to Information Commissioner.

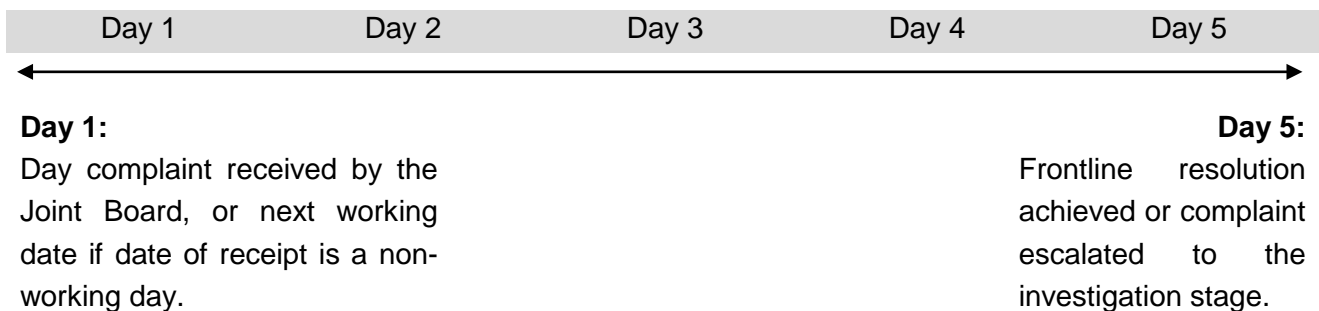
Appendix 3 - Timelines

General

References to timelines throughout the complaints handling procedure relate to working days. When measuring performance against the required timelines, we do not count non-working days, for example weekends, public holidays and days of industrial action where our service has been interrupted.

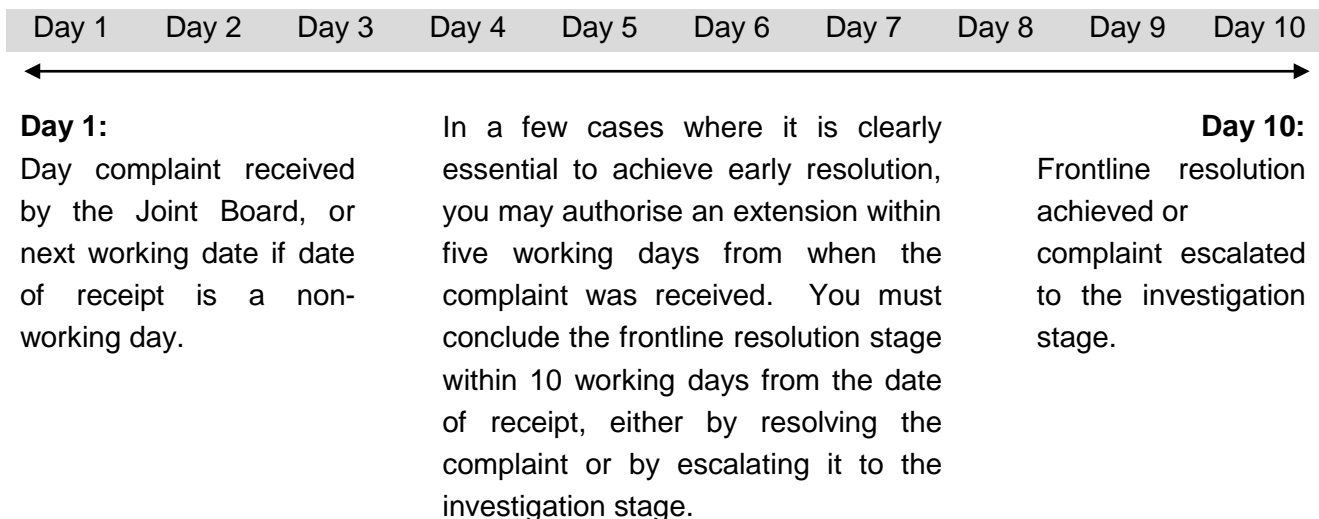
Timelines at frontline resolution

The designated complaints handling employee must aim to achieve frontline resolution within five working days. The day they receive the complaint is day 1. Where they receive it on a non-working day, for example at the weekend or on a public holiday, day 1 will be the next working day.



Extension to the five-day timeline

If the designated complaints handling employee has extended the timeline at the frontline resolution stage in line with the procedure, the revised timetable for the response must take no longer than 10 working days from the date of receiving the complaint.



Transferring cases from frontline resolution to investigation

If it is clear that frontline resolution has not resolved the matter, and the customer wants to escalate the complaint to the investigation stage, the case must be passed for investigation without delay. In practice this will mean on the same day that the customer is told this will happen.

Timelines at investigation

A complaint may be considered at the investigation stage either:

- after attempted frontline resolution, or
- immediately on receipt if it is believed the matter to be sufficiently complex, serious or appropriate to merit a full investigation from the outset.

Acknowledgement

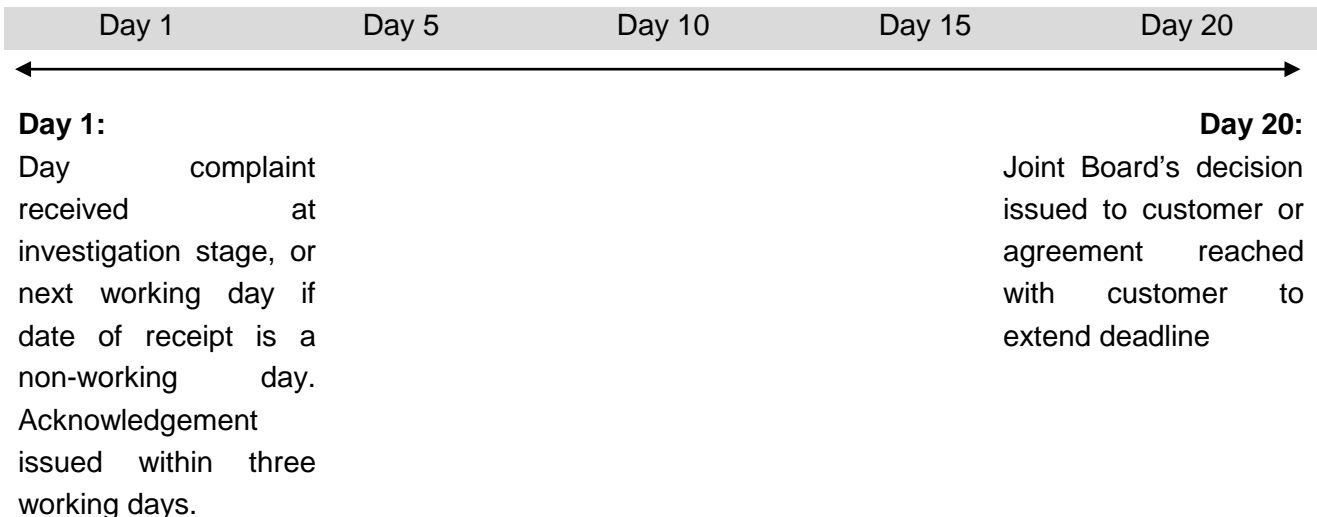
All complaints considered at the investigation stage must be acknowledged within **three working days** of receipt. The date of receipt is:

- the day the case is transferred from the frontline stage to the investigation stage, where it is clear that the case requires investigation, or
- the day the customer asks for an investigation after a decision at the frontline resolution stage. You should note that a customer may not ask for an investigation immediately after attempts at frontline resolution, or
- the date you receive the complaint, if you think it sufficiently complex, serious or appropriate to merit a full investigation from the outset.

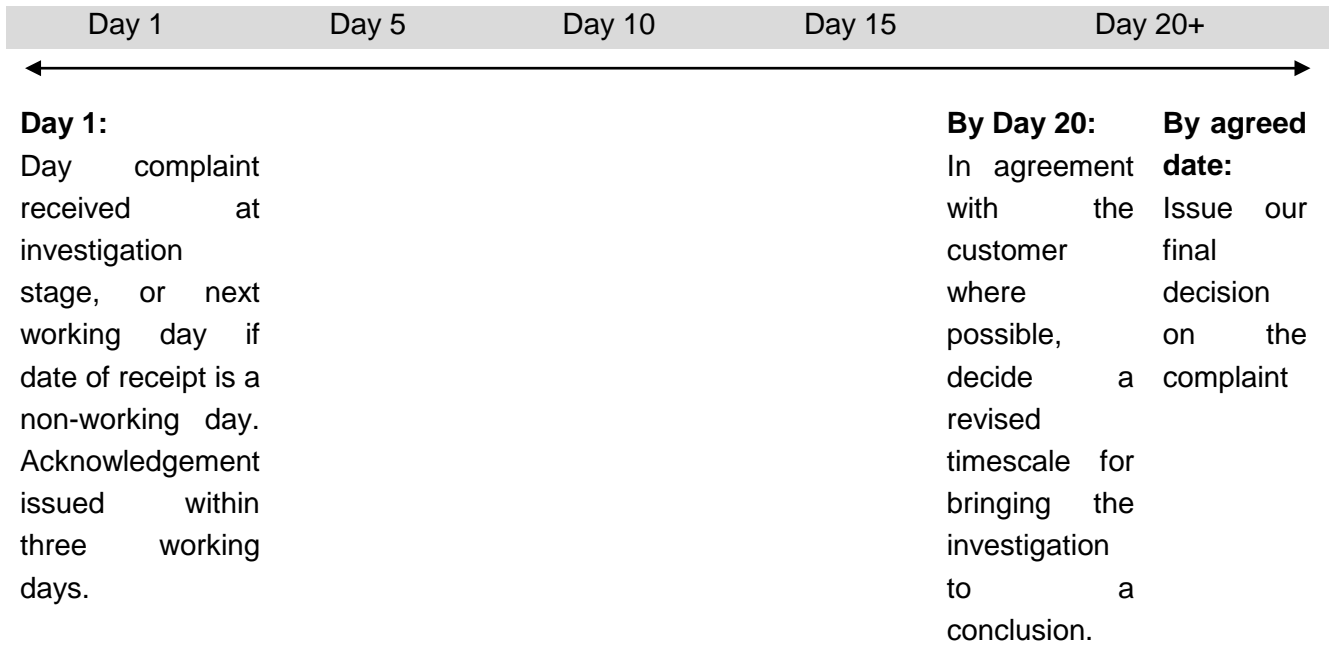
Investigation

The investigating officer should respond in full to the complaint within **20 working days** of receiving it at the investigation stage.

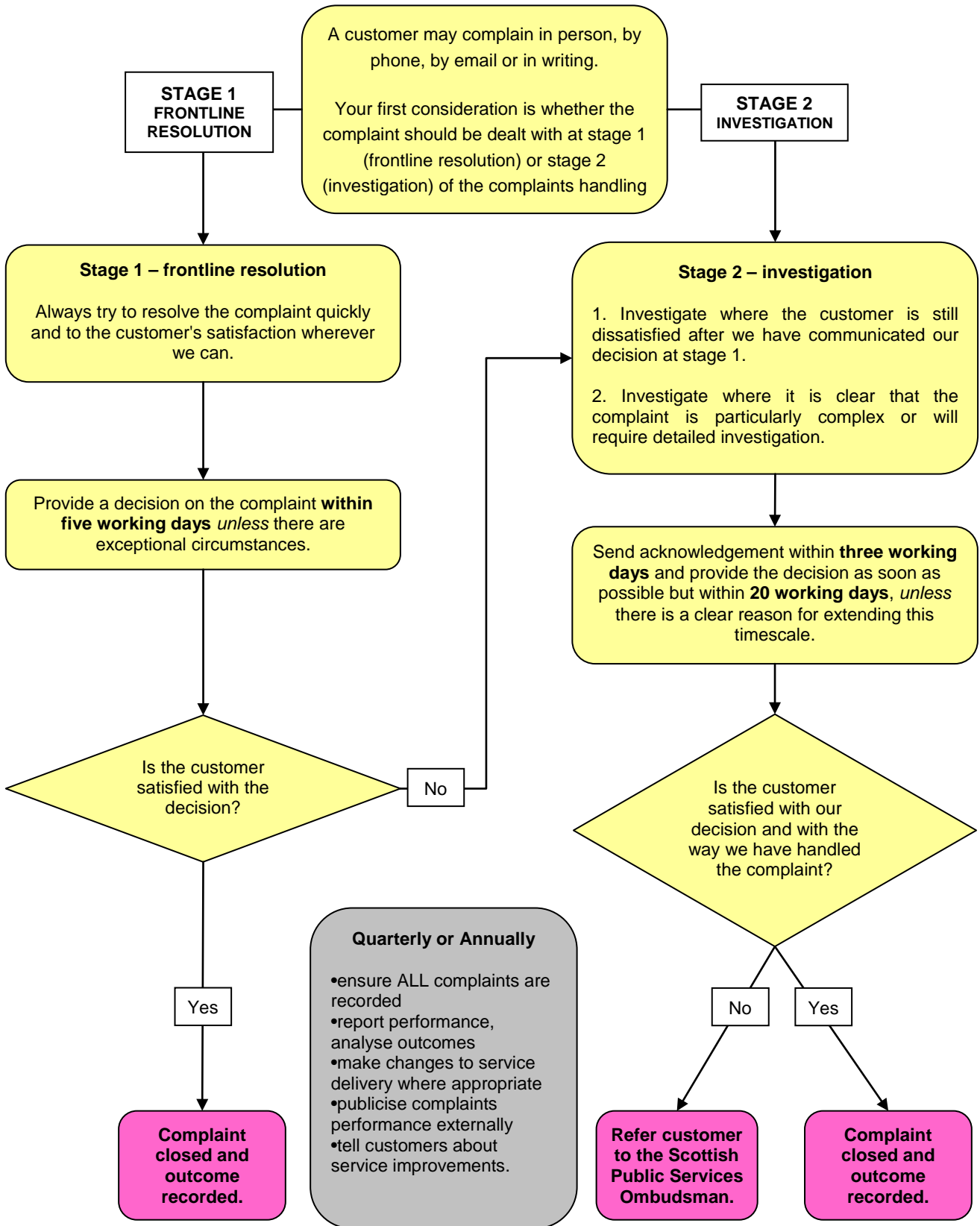
The 20-working day limit allows time for a thorough, proportionate and consistent investigation to arrive at a decision that is objective, evidence-based and fair. This means the investigating officer has 20 working days to investigate the complaint, regardless of any time taken to consider it at the frontline resolution stage.



Exceptionally the investigating officer may need longer than the 20-day limit for a full response. If so, they must explain the reasons to the customer, and agree with them a revised timescale.



Appendix 4 - The complaints handling procedure Appendix 4



Appendix 5 - The complaints handling procedure in AVJB

COMPLAINTS LOGGING & RECORDING GUIDANCE

1. The designated complaints handling employee should make out a Logging Sheet to include the following:-
 - Complainant's Name
 - Complainant's Address
 - Complainant's Telephone No(s) and/or E-mail Address
 - Subject/Relevant Address (if different)
 - Date Received
 - How received (i.e. By mail, e-mail etc)
 - Received by (Name of member of staff)
 - Nature of Complaint
 - Complaint Number

The complaint number should be a simple, consecutive number within each year, which will be obtained by contacting the Personal Assistant.

2. A copy of the Logging & Recording sheet containing the above details should be passed to the Personal Assistant and the relevant Line Manager should be informed.

3. The designated complaints handling employee should maintain the Logging & Recording Sheet through the Frontline Resolution Stage of the process and pass to the investigating officer if the complaint proceeds to that Stage.

4. Likewise, the Investigating Officer should maintain the Logging & Recording Sheet through the Investigation Stage.

5. At each significant step forward in the process, the sheet should be updated and a copy passed to the Personal Assistant for the Recording Sheet to be updated.

6. Any Complaint which is referred to the SPSO should be dealt with by the Assessor & ERO and notified to the Personal Assistant on receipt.

7. The Personal Assistant will provide the Management Team with regular reports on Complaints received and resolved. (See relevant spreadsheet).

8. The Management Team will publish a summary Complaints Report on the Joint Board's web site (www.ayrshire-vjb.gov.uk) on an annual basis.