



Report subject	BCP Council Complaints Policy
Meeting date	13 May 2025
Status	Public
Executive summary	<p>An effective complaints process demonstrates commitment to accountability, fosters trust amongst customers and stakeholders, and provides a structured way to address concerns appropriately and promptly.</p> <p>Recent revisions to the Local Government Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code have introduced changes designed to enhance the efficiency, transparency and responsiveness of local authorities in handling complaints. These modifications affect the operations and policies of all UK local authorities.</p> <p>The BCP Council Complaints Policy has been updated and additionally, a separate new policy has also been prepared regarding Unreasonable Actions, as also recommended by the Local Government Ombudsman.</p>
Recommendations	<p>It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approves the updated BCP Complaints policy 2. Approves the Unreasonable Actions policy.
Reason for recommendations	These policies now reflect the changes at a national level that are being introduced by the Local Government Ombudsman.

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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For approval

Background

- The council provides a wide range of services to local residents, customers and stakeholders, and it is inevitable that from time to time some customers may not feel satisfied with the outcome of their interaction, or the way in which their concerns were handled. An effective complaints process contributes to developing and maintaining public confidence in the council, as well as supporting learning through which services can continuously improve.
- Recent revisions to the Local Government Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code aim to enhance efficiency, transparency and responsiveness in handling corporate complaints. These changes necessitate an update to BCP Council's complaints policy. The changes required do not affect the statutory complaints processes for Adult and Children's Social Care which are stand-alone procedures. The following is a list of key changes that are now reflected in the revised Complaint's Policy (see Appendix 1):

4. Simplified Complaint Process

The new code mandates a streamlined complaint process, reducing the steps required for a complaint to be filed and resolved. This aims to make the process more accessible to the public and reduce administrative burdens on local authorities. The simplified process means that individuals can file complaints more easily without navigating complex procedures, thereby promoting quicker resolutions.

5. Time Frames for Resolution

The code introduces stricter time frames for the resolution of complaints. Local authorities must acknowledge receipt of a complaint within five working days (currently 3 working days) and provide a substantive response within 10 working days (currently 20 working days) for stage 1 complaints, and 20 working days for a Stage 2 complaint (currently 15 days). Extensions are allowed only under exceptional circumstances and complainants must be informed of any delays promptly.

6. Training and Development

BCP Council will implement regular training programs for staff involved in complaint handling. These programs are designed to ensure that staff are well-equipped to manage complaints effectively and sensitively. A targeted training programme is already under development within the Council.

7. Standardised Response Formats

To ensure consistency and clarity in communications with complainants, BCP Council will adopt standardised response formats. This includes templates for acknowledgement letters, substantive responses and follow-up communications. Standardising response formats helps to maintain a professional and uniform approach in all communications, making it easier for complainants to understand the outcomes and processes involved in their complaints.

8. Support for Vulnerable Complainants

BCP Council will provide additional support for vulnerable individuals. This involves ensuring clear guidance and access to support services for those who require assistance navigating the complaint process. The Council's commitment to supporting vulnerable complainants ensures that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, has access to the necessary resources to submit and resolve complaints effectively.

9. Enhanced Transparency

BCP Council will now be required to publish more detailed information about its complaint handling procedures and outcomes. This includes annual reports on the number of complaints received, the nature of these complaints and the resolutions achieved. This level of transparency is expected to build public trust and ensure accountability.

10. Regular Audits and Monitoring

BCP Council will be subject to regular audits and monitoring by the Ombudsman to ensure compliance with the new code. The first audit on KPI's would be in April 2027. These audits will assess the effectiveness and efficiency of complaint handling procedures and identify areas for improvement. This new monitoring arrangement will be facilitated by a reporting tool within the new complaints database. These changes are potentially time intensive for officers, but it is intended that the new case management system will automate the procedures by April 2027.

11. Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Local authorities are encouraged to actively seek feedback from complainants to improve their services. This includes conducting satisfaction surveys and implementing changes based on the feedback received. Within BCP this is a standard element within the correspondence with complainants, however we will be working on ensuring all feedback is comprehensively captured across the whole local authority with the launch of the new central complaints database. These changes are potentially time intensive for officers, but it is intended that the new case management system will automate the procedures by April 2027.

12. Collaboration and Best Practices

Local authorities are encouraged to collaborate and share best practices in complaint handling. The code promotes the establishment of networks and forums where local authorities can exchange experiences and strategies for improving their complaint handling processes.

13. Use of Technology

The new code advocates for the use of technology to enhance complaint handling. This includes online complaint submission forms, automated tracking systems and digital communication channels to facilitate quicker and more efficient resolutions. All of these initiatives are being built into the new complaints management database.

14. Accountability for Unresolved Complaints

Local authorities are required to provide clear explanations for any complaints that remain unresolved and outline the steps taken to address the issues. This ensures that complainants understand the reasons for any delays or failures in resolution.

15. Impact Assessment

The code requires local authorities to conduct regular impact assessments of their complaint handling processes. These assessments measure effectiveness and identify resolution barriers. BCP Central Complaints ensures that insights from these assessments are used for service improvements or procedural changes.

16. Unreasonable actions (formerly UPC)

The new policy on unreasonable actions, formerly known as Unreasonably Persistent Complainants (UPC), aims to provide clarity and fairness in handling complaints from individuals whose actions may be deemed unreasonable. This includes setting clear guidelines on what constitutes unreasonable behaviour, such as excessive demands or harassment and establishing procedures to manage and respond to such complaints effectively. The policy ensures that complainants are treated respectfully while safeguarding the wellbeing of staff and maintaining the integrity of the complaint handling process. The revised policy is attached at Appendix 2.

17. Clarity around Service Requests

The Ombudsman guidance provides clear distinctions between complaints and service requests to ensure appropriate handling and resolution. This distinction is now reflected in our reviewed policy.

A complaint typically involves dissatisfaction with the service provided, the behaviour of staff, or an administrative process, where the complainant feels that the authority has failed in its duties. Examples of complaints include instances where a service was not delivered as promised, improper conduct by a staff member, or perceived injustices in the application of procedures or policies.

Conversely, a service request is an appeal for assistance or service provision that has not yet been performed. Examples of service requests include requesting a repair for a public facility, reporting issues like potholes or broken streetlights, or seeking specific information about services offered by the local authority.

The distinction allows the Council to direct complaints to the appropriate resolution channels while ensuring that service requests are addressed through the relevant departments.

18. The single complaints policy links with the statutory complaints policies for Children's Services, Adult Social Care and Housing. These policies remain independent, with the single corporate policy serving as an overarching reference for adherence to Ombudsman guidance and the primary source of guidance for all corporate non-statutory complaints.
19. Since adopting a centralised model of complaints, most of the recommendations within the Ombudsman code have been implemented as best practice or are a work in progress, such as the single case management system, which will go live by 1 April 2026. By adopting a revised complaints policy which fully adheres to the new code, we can ensure we are complying with the Ombudsman's objectives of fostering greater public trust and accountability in our complaints management and operations.
20. The new code requires a lead member to act as champion for the organisation's complaints process, and this role will be performed by the Portfolio Holder for Customer, Communications & Culture.

Summary of financial implications

21. There are no financial implications associated with this policy change.

Summary of legal implications

22. Legal Services have been consulted in the preparation of the new policy.

Summary of human resources implications

23. There are no HR implications associated with the adoption of this complaints policy.

Summary of sustainability impact

24. There are no sustainability impact issues associated with the adoption of this revised policy.

Summary of public health implications

25. The adoption of this revised policy does not entail any public health implications.

Summary of equality implications

26. There are no equality implications associated with the adoption of this policy.

Summary of risk assessment

27. The risk assessment highlights the dependency on the new single case management system to effectively monitor and comply with the Ombudsman recommendations and produce the required KPI's from 2027 onwards. Without this automated system, adherence to compliance would demand significant manual effort, making the process labour-intensive.

Background papers

None

Appendices

Appendix 1: Revised Complaints Policy

Appendix 2: Unreasonable actions (formerly UPC) Policy

Appendix 3: Ombudsman code