



*Dunbartonshire and Argyll & Bute
Valuation Joint Board*

Customer Comments and Complaints Procedure

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Dunbartonshire and Argyll & Bute Valuation Joint Board's Mission is to provide customer focussed, best value, high quality, professional valuation and electoral services for all its stakeholders.

1.2 Our Vision is to provide a range of services at levels of excellence which exceed stakeholders' expectations.

1.3 Our Aims and Objectives include commitments to:

- Deliver services in accordance with the principles of Best Value and continuous improvement
- Consult stakeholders about their needs and expectations
- Monitor performance levels
- Integrate Equalities into all aspects of our service

1.4 The Scottish Executive has stated formally that it is important that a high level of independence is afforded to Assessors in order that they can carry out, and be seen to carry out, their duties in a fair and impartial manner. It is also important to distinguish between the Assessor's statutory independence in matters of Valuation, Council Tax and Electoral Registration and his accountability for his conduct in the operation of his duties. The Scottish Executive has acknowledged the independence of the Assessor in matters of Valuation, Council Tax and Electoral Registration where there are effective appeals systems. The Executive is of the view, however, that the Assessor is accountable to the Valuation Joint Board, and possibly the Public Services Ombudsman, for his conduct in carrying out his duties.

1.5 This 'Customer Comments and Complaints' procedure:-

- Confirms our commitments to customer focus and stakeholder consultation, allowing service users to inform us when we fail to meet acceptable standards of practice, procedure or their expectation of service provision.
- Will allow stakeholders to feed back on occasions when we exceed their expectations.
- Will provide information to help improve service provision and identify training needs.
- Will highlight any instances of bias, discrimination or unhelpfulness.
- Satisfies the requirements of the Scottish Executive and the Public Services Ombudsman in Scotland to ensure accountability in matters of practice and procedure.
- Recognises the Ombudsman's view that "good complaint handling should be integral to high quality delivery of public service".

1.6 This procedure should not, however, be used for dealing with customer complaints that are covered by the statutory appeal systems, listed below, that exist for the three services currently dealt with by the Assessor and ERO:

Non-Domestic Rating Valuation	Formal Appeal 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 to ERO, Sheriff Court

1.7 This Policy Statement covers:

- The definition of a 'Complaint'
- The stages of the 'Customer Comments and Complaints' Procedure
- Putting the procedure into practice
- Handling and resolving any complaints
- Co-ordination, monitoring and reporting arrangements

2.0 Definition of a Complaint

2.1 The Public Services Ombudsman's definition of a complaint is:

"A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, which alleges failure on the part of the organisation to perform a function or provide a service."

2.2 This broad definition of a complaint, as it relates to the Joint Board, would include for example:

- Failure to achieve standards or quality of service promised by the Joint Board
- Dissatisfaction with the way Joint Board policies are being applied or administered
- Failure, negligence or delays in responding to customers' inquiries or requests
- Unhelpful or insensitive treatment by, or attitude of, a member of staff
- Malice, bias or unfair discrimination
- Inadequate or incomplete provision of information and/or advice
- Failure to take account of relevant matters in coming to a decision

2.3 It should be noted, however, that the following should not generally be included within the scope of the procedure:

- 'Complaints' that are actually being directed towards third parties but which have been raised with the Joint Board.
- Observations, appeals or proposals about an entry in the Valuation Roll, Council Tax List or an Electoral Register matter where a right of objection already exists.
- Disagreement with or refusal to accept a matter that the Joint Board is legally bound to apply.

2.4 Where there is any doubt as to whether a complaint is being made the simplest approach will be to ask the customer if he/she wishes the matter to be treated as a complaint.

3.0 The Stages of the Procedure

3.1 The procedure encourages customers to submit their comments and complaints direct to the section involved. The procedure also emphasises that **comments and complaints should be handled/resolved as swiftly and close to the source as possible**. Only in those instances where they cannot be dealt with at the initial point of contact, or where they remain unresolved, should there be recourse to the *formal* stages (stages 2-3 below) of the "customer comments and complaints" procedure.

Stage 1 – General Comments/Complaints

3.2 The vast majority of comments and complaints can be dealt with/resolved at the stage they are first brought to the Joint Board's attention through normal operational channels. The existence of *formal* stages within the 'customer comments and complaints' procedure is not intended to change this.

- 3.3 Wherever possible, customer comments and complaints should be handled speedily and with the minimum of fuss. If it is not possible to handle the matter 'on the spot', then the customer should be advised:
- (a) that there is a complaints procedure
 - (b) who will deal with the matter
 - (c) how it will be taken forward and
 - (d) when they are likely to receive a reply
- All written or verbal responses should be made within **five working days** of the issue being raised.

Where staff handle 'comments and complaints' themselves – and provided the customer is satisfied with the outcome – then there is no need to take the matter further.

How to deal with a complaint at Stage 1.

- Treat the complaint seriously.
- Give your own name. Use the title and surname of the person making the complaint.
- If the person who will deal with the complaint is not available, tell the customer when contact will be made. Information about the complaint must be passed on as quickly as possible.
- In dealing with sensitive matters, be aware of issues of confidentiality.
- Listen carefully, without interruption, to the customer.
- If you need more information, ask some relevant questions.
- Repeat a summary of the problem to make sure that you have fully understood what the customer has said.
- Do not simply offer "That's another department" as a response without providing advice on how to contact the relevant people.

Having obtained all the information you need to try and resolve the problem, you should then:

- Explain to the customer how you are dealing with the problem and if you can, agree what the solution will be
- Do not make promises you/we cannot keep
- If the service cannot be provided, try to explain why
- Go on to suggest what other options might be available
- Explain what can be done and agree a solution

If you are getting a lot of complaints about a decision that the Joint Board has taken, the Assessor or nominated officer will give you information on why that decision was taken, which you can pass on to the customer.

Stage 2 – Formal Complaint to a Line Manager

- 3.4 Where customers remain dissatisfied by the response given to them by the member of staff then they should be made aware that they have the opportunity to take up their comment or complaint more formally with the manager of the section concerned.
- 3.5 At this point, the person should be asked to put his/her concerns in writing if this has not already been done. For this purpose a 'Customer Comment/Complaint Form' should be provided to the person for completion together with a reply paid envelope, where appropriate. If this might cause any difficulties, for whatever reason, then it might be possible to arrange a face to face interview with the customer to make a more detailed written note of the points at issue.
- 3.6 All comments or complaints which reach this formal stage should be acknowledged within **ten working days** of being received. The manager of the section concerned should deal

with this stage personally. If the manager is on holiday or is unavailable during the ten-day period the duty of response will be assigned to another manager. The reply should indicate that the customer has recourse to the Assessor/Depute Assessor if he/she remains dissatisfied with the manager's formal answer.

3.7 If you are responding to a complaint in writing, remember the following important points:

- Before you start, decide what message you are trying to get across
- Make sure you do not ignore any of the points in the original comment or complaint
- Use clear and straightforward language
- Make sure that the person receiving the letter can tell whom it is from

Stage 3 – Formal Complaint to the Assessor/Depute Assessor

3.8 At this point, the customer will normally have responded to the letter issued by the line manager indicating continued dissatisfaction. It is in relation to this further contact that the Assessor/Depute will be carrying out his investigation and formulating his response to the complaint.

3.9 The investigation will provide an opportunity to:

- Review the facts of the case and whether there is a need to collect any further information
- Consider any policy issues which have a bearing
- Identify any areas where the Joint Board might be considered to be at fault.
In this event, action should be taken to correct the fault and/or avoid any recurrence.

3.10 The aim should be to give a substantive response in writing within **ten working days**. If the subject matter is complex and requires lengthy consideration, then an interim reply should be sent giving a clear explanation of what is being done and the estimated timescale for the completion of any investigation.

3.11 All comments or complaints which reach this third stage should be acknowledged within **ten working days** of being received by the Assessor/Depute. The Assessor/Depute concerned should deal with this stage personally. If the Assessor is unavailable during the ten-day period the duty of response will be assigned to the Depute. The reply should outline any action that the Assessor/Depute proposes to take. Where appropriate, the letter will also indicate that the Joint Board's own procedure for dealing with comments and complaints has been exhausted internally but there is the option to write to the Convenor of Dunbartonshire and Argyll & Bute Valuation Joint Board for their consideration.

Comments and Complaints in Perspective

3.12 It must be acknowledged that progression through the system may not be straightforward on every occasion and the approach must be flexible enough to adapt to events as they actually are.

3.13 Extreme cases that may involve breaches of the law or involve allegations of serious misconduct, maladministration, injustice or corruption should be reported to the Assessor or the Depute IMMEDIATELY.

4 Putting the Procedure into Practice

Making a Comment or Complaint

4.1 The public need to know how to go about making a comment or complaint. The Joint Board's leaflet "Customer Comments and Complaints" gives practical advice on how they should proceed and how their comments or complaints will be handled.

- 4.2 The Joint Board's leaflet will be made available at both of our reception areas. Managers should ensure that all staff make every effort to inform the public about the procedure and staff should also be instructed to provide their customers with a copy of the leaflet on all occasions when this may prove to be useful.
- 4.3 Customers can comment or complain in person, by telephone, letter, e-mail, fax, or via a Councillor, Member of Parliament or other agent. Customers are encouraged to submit their comments and complaints in writing, especially if the subject matter is complicated.

Monitoring and Recording of Formal Comments and Complaints

- 4.4 There is no requirement to formally log and monitor any complaint which is resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant at Stage 1.
- 4.5 Where a complaint is made at Stage 2, a "Comment/Complaint Record Sheet" should be completed to record the following :
- Customer name and address
 - Date submitted
 - Date of incident
 - Nature/details of comment or complaint
 - Dates and brief notes of progress at stages 1,2 and 3
- 4.6 For monitoring purposes, a copy of any formal Comment or Complaint should be sent to the Administration Manager on receipt (Stage 2) and on completion of the process.
- 4.7 The person assigned to respond to the comment or complaint at each stage should write brief details of the response on the 'Record Sheet' and attach the copy response letter to the 'Record Sheet'. The Secretary in each office will hold the 'Record Sheet' with attachments in an appropriate file.
- 4.8 When the matter reaches each new stage, the 'Record Sheet' with attachments will be passed to the next appropriate person to assist in any investigation. Having reached a decision, a note should be added on how the matter should be taken forward.
- 4.9 All suggestions, complaints and compliments will be monitored in line with the VJB Race Equality Scheme. This will include monitoring of those making the suggestion, complaint or compliment and, where appropriate, any person(s) towards whom the suggestion, complaint or compliment is directed.

Training and Guidance

- 4.10 Initial training and guidance on the comments and complaints procedure will be provided to coincide with the implementation of the Joint Board's procedure. Managers should demonstrate visible commitment to the principles underlying the scheme as well as giving practical support/assistance to staff in dealing with comments and complaints on a day-to-day basis.

5 Handling and Resolving Comments and Complaints

- 5.1 Complainants may be looking for any of a number of different things when they approach the office, including:
- Information
 - An apology
 - A reprimand for staff
 - Compensation

- An assurance that an event will not be repeated
 - An official investigation
 - A meeting with staff
- 5.2 While the emphasis must be on dealing with customers on their own terms, the Joint Board's procedure for handling comments and complaints is based on four steps:
- 1) Establish what the issue is and what the customer wants.
 - 2) Identify what initial action is needed – on the spot if possible.
 - 3) Advise the customer how and by whom their comment or complaint will be dealt with and the timescale for a full response if one cannot be given immediately.
 - 4) Take responsibility for ensuring that the matter is followed through – this might involve dealing with it directly or referring it to a first-line manager or other appropriate person.

6 Co-ordination, Monitoring and Reporting Arrangements

- 6.1 The Assessor and ERO will be responsible for ensuring that adequate systems are established to support the Customer Comments and Complaints procedure in each location. The Management Team will be required to assist in the implementation and their responsibilities will extend to:
- Raising awareness of the introduction of the procedure and its basic principle
 - Issuing the Customer Comments and Complaints Policy
 - Making such administrative arrangements as are necessary
 - Training all staff on the implementation of the procedures
 - Identification of occasions when there is a need to review policies, procedures or practice, or where other remedial action is required
- 6.2 The Administration Manager will have responsibility for recording and monitoring the process, including:
- The statistical analysis of formal comments and complaints, and
 - Reports to the Management Team and provision of feedback to line managers for inclusion in Team Briefings.
- 6.3 Analysis of formal Comments and Complaints received should be reported to the Management Team quarterly. Reports to the Joint Board and stakeholders will be annual.
- 6.4 The approach to using information from comments and complaints will evolve in line with the ongoing implementation of the Best Value Regime.

Analysis of Comments and Complaints

- 6.5 The analysis to be carried out and the format of reports to be prepared will be agreed between the Assessor and the Administration Manager and will be detailed in the Joint Board's Reporting Framework. They are likely to contain the following:-
- The number of formal comments and complaints received
 - The Service
 - The complaint type/subject matter
 - Whether the customer's point was found to be substantiated/justified
 - The outcome and any action taken in response to the matter in question

Overall Coordination

- 6.6 The Assessor will, through the Management Team, be responsible for the overall coordination of the procedure. This will include:

- Production of written documentation referred to in this policy
- Preparation of suitable materials to publicise the procedure
- Arranging for the training of staff
- Advice on the implementation to ensure consistency across the statutory services
- Reports to the Joint Board on the general operation of the procedure following its introduction