

## North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service Complaints Standard Operating Procedure

### INTRODUCTION

This procedure details the steps to be taken to deal with complaints and is a part of the Authority's complaints policy.

### DEFINITIONS

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction by a member of the public, however made, about the standard of service, conduct, or lack of action by the Fire Service. There is a separate policy for dealing with complaints about Fire Safety standards.

There are two forms of resolution to a complaint.

- (i) Informal Resolution  
A complaint which is completed satisfactorily at the point of delivery or after it has been agreed by the complainant that they do not want a formal resolution
- (ii) Formal Resolution  
A complaint where the complainant remains dissatisfied at the informal stage. The investigation of a formal complaint is programmed and monitored by the Complaints Officer, Central Administration Office Manager.

An employee of the Fire Authority must use the grievance procedure where there is any difference arising between themselves and the Fire Authority concerning the interpretation or application of policies, rules or procedures related to salaries, fringe benefits or other conditions of employment.

Grievances are subject to a separate procedure with a shorter time limit and more proscriptive requirements are placed on both parties. It is important that the correct procedure is followed by managers.

### RECEIVING COMPLAINTS

The Authority may receive complaints in writing (including via the website or e-mail) or verbally (over the telephone or in person), at any one of the Authority's sites, including headquarters or anywhere where employees are working and available to the public.

The prompt handling of any such complaint is essential if public confidence is to be maintained. A fair and courteous response is essential in all cases.

The Authority is committed to providing a service to all members of the community based on individual needs, and preventing discrimination on the grounds of age, colour, disability, gender, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion/belief, marital/parental status, sexual orientation, or any other reason which can not be shown to be justified.

The Authority has arrangements in place to help people who have difficulties in communicating or if English is not their first language. A Language Line facility is available within the organisation. This enables people who have difficulties communicating in English to be put directly in contact with an interpreter who will

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oversee the conversation. Letters and reports can also be produced in large print (16pt plain text), in Braille, on tape or in alternative formats.

**First stage - Complaints received at station – handling complaints**

Where a complainant makes contact either in person; by phone; letter; via the website or e-mail, where possible, the first approach will be to try and achieve an informal resolution, directly with the complainant.

Any complaints received at the station, the appropriate manager should try and rectify informally within 10 calendar days of receiving the complaint.

After the 10 day period, if the complaint has not been resolved the complaint should be treated as a formal complaint and the manager should, contact CAO Service Information with the complainants contact details and nature of the complaint.

Service Information should then follow the formal complaints procedure as detailed in Second Stage – Formal Complaints.

Where the complainant is not satisfied with an informal resolution and wishes to make it formal then the Second Stage – Formal Complaints must be followed.

**First stage - Complaints received directly into CAO Service Information**

Any complaints directly received by the Central Administration Office will be sent to the appropriate manager to review and try and rectify informally within 10 calendar days of receiving the complaint. After the 10 day period clarification will be sought from the manager whether they have been able to obtain an informal resolution or whether it needs to be progressed through the Second Stage – Formal Complaints route.

There may be occasions that warrant the complaint to be dealt with immediately as formal.

**Second stage – formal complaints**

If the complaint was received at station and was not resolved informally, the appropriate manager will forward the details of the complaint to CAO Service Information, these should include date received, contact details, nature of complaint and any other relevant details.

CAO Service Information will follow this procedure:

- Written acknowledgement of receipt to complainant (see Appendix A)
- Nominate an Investigating Officer (see Appendix B)

**REFERRALS**

The Complaints Officer will refer complaints for investigation within 2 working days of it being received as a complaint that requires formal resolution. It will not be sent to the manager that has been involved with the informal resolution process.

An Investigating Officer will be appointed to deal with the complaint as follows: (see Appendix B).

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- a) The respective Station/Group Manager/Section Head for where the complaint relates to will be sent the complaint to investigate.
- b) If the complaint covers more than one district or involves a Group Manager / Section Head it will go to the appropriate Function Head to investigate.
- c) Complaints regarding Function Heads will be referred to the appropriate Principal Officer for a decision on the most appropriate Investigating Officer.
- d) Complaints regarding Principal Officers are covered by the Director of Finance and Service Development (Treasurer) or the Chief Fire Officer depending on the nature of the complaint.
- e) Complaints regarding Members of the Authority are dealt with by the Fire Authority's Standards Committee.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The Complaints Officer will send a written acknowledgement within 5 working days of receipt of the complaint being made formal, to inform the complainant that the matter will be investigated and the name of the investigating officer and to expect written details of the investigation (see Appendix A).

### **INVESTIGATIONS**

The nominated investigating officer is responsible for ensuring that a thorough investigation into the circumstances of the complaint is carried out. This may be done either by investigating personally or by appointing an assistant officer/s. In either case the investigating officer will contact the complainant within 5 working days to discuss the content of the complaint. Depending on the circumstances the investigating officer may need to visit the complainant or have dialogue with them.

### **FINAL OR INTERIM RESPONSES**

In all cases investigating officers are to send a final outcome report, or an interim reply advising that the investigation is not yet complete, to Central Administration Office within 28 working days of receipt of the formal complaint.

Under **no circumstances** should the investigating officer(s) send a final response directly to the complainant.

A copy of the outcome report is to be forwarded to the Central Administration Office Manager where a broader response will be considered, if necessary.

In cases where the investigating officer has made recommendations but there is a question over what action is to be taken to resolve the complaint, the investigating officer is to forward the complaint to their respective line manager for advice regarding remedial or further action.

The investigating officer will receive a copy of the final response letter produced by the Complaints Officer for information only.

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This must be kept securely and disposed of in accordance with the Retention Schedule.

### **APPEALS**

Complainants will be informed of their right to appeal and who to appeal to in the correspondence advising them of the outcome(s) of the investigation (see Appendix C).

If complainants are not satisfied with the outcome they can submit an appeal against this decision to the Complaints Officer/ Central Administration Office Manager. The appeal will be given to a nominated senior officer, who will investigate the whole case. Following the investigation a letter will be sent to the complainant detailing their findings (see Appendix D). If still not satisfied with the outcome at the end of the appeal procedure, a complaint can be made to the Local Government Ombudsman.

### **TIMESCALES**

The appropriate manager will be given 10 calendar days to achieve informal resolution.

If informal resolution is not achieved the complaint will be progress through the formal stage. The investigating officer will be given 28 working days from the date the complaint was made formal to send a final / interim report to the Complaints Officer / Central Administration Office Manager.

The Complaints Officer / Central Administration Office will respond to the complainant within 5 working days of receiving the final / interim report.

If the complainant appeals against the outcome, the case will be reviewed within 20 working days from receipt of the appeal.

### **COMPLAINTS REGISTER**

The Central Administration Office will enter all complaints in the Complaints Register along with details of progress and the outcome(s) of each investigation.

Complaints that have been resolved informally will be destroyed after two years; Complaints that have formal resolution will be destroyed date of resolution plus 6 years.

### **ANONYMOUS COMPLAINTS**

Anonymous complaints will be investigated as thoroughly and under the same procedure as other complaints. Reports of the outcome(s) of the investigation will be prepared by the Complaints Officer and may be submitted to the Head of Service Development for consideration of any further steps to be taken by North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service in appropriate circumstances.

### **VARYING THE PROCEDURE**

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The Complaints Officer may, in exceptional circumstances, vary from this procedure; for example where vexatious and repeated complaints are made.

**COMPLAINTS REGARDING FINANCIAL MATTERS**

If the matter falls within the jurisdiction of the Treasurer, the complaint will be investigated by the Treasurer who will provide written details of the outcome direct.

**COMPLAINTS REGARDING FREEDOM OF INFORMATION**

All complaints regarding Freedom of Information requests are dealt with by the Central Administration Office.

Any information the Fire Authority holds which is not already published elsewhere, nor exempt under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 can be requested by letter or email and a response will be provided by the Central Administration Office.

If the requestor is not satisfied with the response given to the complaint, they can appeal to the Complaints Officer (Central Administration Officer Manager) in the first instance. If the issue is not resolved after this appeal, then the requestor can refer the complaint to the Information Commissioners Office (Appendix E).

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**APPENDIX A**

**Letter of Acknowledgement - example**

**NORTH YORKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT LETTER**

Complaints Officer  
Central Administration Office Manager  
Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters  
Thurston Road  
Northallerton  
North Yorkshire  
DL6 2ND  
Tel: 01609 780150  
Mob: 07919 301868  
Fax: 01609 788520

Date:

Dear \*

**Re: Complaint Reference Number .....**

I am writing to you in my capacity as North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue's Complaints Officer to thank you for your letter/phone call dated/received on ..... regarding the above complaint.

North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service aim to provide members of the public with the highest standards of customer service at all times, this includes a commitment to deal with complaints quickly and wherever possible to your satisfaction.

Your complaint will now be treated as formal and be forwarded for further investigation to an Investigating Officer who will contact you within 5 working days, giving you their name and contact number (**insert name of Investigating Officer if known**). The points you have made will be looked into as a matter of urgency and a full response report will be given to the Complaints Officer within 28 working days from the initiation of the investigation. You will then receive a full response to your complaint.

If you need to speak to me in the meantime I can be contacted on the telephone numbers above.

Yours sincerely,

Complaints Officer  
Central Administration Office Manager

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**APPENDIX B**

**Complaints Referral Letter to Investigating Officer - example**

**NORTH YORKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE  
NOMINATION OF INVESTIGATING OFFICER**

Complaints Officer  
Central Administration Office Manager  
Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters  
Thurston Road  
Northallerton  
North Yorkshire  
DL6 2ND  
Tel: 01609 780150  
Mob: 07919 301868  
Fax: 01609 788520

Date:

\*Investigating Officer \*

**Complaint Ref:**

A complaint regarding \* has been made by \* on \* date, and be made formal from \* date.

Please can you carry out the role of Investigating Officer for this complaint, following the course of action as outlined in the Authority's Complaints Procedure:

- Contact \* name of complainant and contact details \* (within 5 working days) as a matter of urgency, giving them your name and contact number.
- Ensure a thorough investigation is carried out and in the strictest confidence.
- Reply to the Complaints Officer/Central Administration Office Manager with-in 28 working days from (**insert date**), the date the complaint was made formal, even if the response is an interim reply advising that the investigation is not yet complete.
- On conclusion, send the Complaints Officer/the final outcome report of the investigation.
- The Complaints Officer will respond to the complainant, including "Right to Appeal" information.

*With the compliments of  
Complaints Officer*

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**APPENDIX C**

**Complaints Outcome Report Letter - example**

**NORTH YORKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE  
COMPLAINT OUTCOME LETTER**

Complaints Officer  
Central Administration Office Manager  
Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters  
Thurston Road  
Northallerton  
North Yorkshire  
DL6 2ND  
Tel: 01609 780150  
Mob: 07919 301868  
Fax: 01609 788520

Date:

Dear \*

**Re: Complaint Reference .....**

I am writing to you in my capacity as North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue's Complaints Officer to inform you that the investigation into your complaint is now concluded. Please find enclosed/attached/below our findings.

If you are not satisfied with the outcome you can appeal against this decision. If you submit your appeal to me in the first instance, I will pass this on to an officer who has not been involved in the complaint who will investigate the whole case. Following the investigation you will be sent a letter detailing their findings. If you are not satisfied with the outcome at the end of the appeal procedure, you can make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.

The Local Government Ombudsman  
PO Box 4771  
Coventry CV4 0EH

Advice Line: 0300 061 0614 or 0845 6021983

Fax: 024 7682 0001

Yours sincerely,



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Complaints Officer  
Central Administration Office Manager

**APPENDIX D**

**Complaints Outcome Report Letter - example**

**NORTH YORKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE  
APPEAL OUTCOME LETTER**

North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service  
Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters  
Thurston Road  
Northallerton  
North Yorkshire  
DL6 2ND  
Tel: 01609 780150  
Fax: 01609 788520

Date:

Dear \*

**Re: Complaint Appeal Reference .....**

I am writing to inform you that the investigation into your appeal is now concluded. Please find enclosed/attached/below my findings.

If you are not satisfied with the appeal outcome, you can make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.

The Local Government Ombudsman  
PO Box 4771  
Coventry CV4 0EH

Advice Line: 0300 061 0614 or 0845 6021983

Fax: 024 7682 0001

Yours sincerely,

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**APPENDIX E**

**Freedom of Information Complaints Letter - example**

**NORTH YORKSHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

Complaints Officer  
Central Administration Office Manager  
Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters  
Thurston Road  
Northallerton  
North Yorkshire  
DL6 2ND  
Tel: 01609 780150  
Fax: 01609 788520

Date:

Dear \*

Re: Complaint Reference Number..... **(Freedom of Information Act (2000))**

I am writing to you in my capacity as North Yorkshire's Fire and Rescue Service's Complaints Officer to inform you that the investigation of your complaint is now concluded. Please find enclosed/attached/below our findings.

If you are not satisfied with the outcome you can appeal against this decision. If you submit your appeal to me in the first instance, it will be given to a nominated officer, who will investigate the whole case. Following the investigation you will be sent a letter detailing their findings. If you still remain dissatisfied with the outcome you may appeal against our decision to:

FOI/EIR Complaints Resolution  
Information Commissioner's Office  
Wycliffe House  
Water Lane  
Wilmslow  
Cheshire  
SK9 5AF

Yours sincerely,

Complaints Officer  
Central Administration Office Manager

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