



Complaints and Compliments Policy

Policy Number:

043-2016

Academic Year:

2023/2024 Onwards

Target Audience:

All Staff, Students, Governors, Members of the Public

Summary of Contents

This Policy advises customers and staff on the College's commitment to providing a high-quality service by ensuring that questions and problems are resolved quickly, as close to the source as possible and to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Enquiries

Any enquiries about the contents of this document should be addressed to:

Title: Senior Customer Services Officer

Address: Lisburn Campus, 25 Castle Street, Lisburn, BT27 4SU

Telephone: 0345 600 7555

Review Information:

First Created: August 2016

Last Reviewed: February 2023

Next Review: March 2024

Approval By:

CMT: February 2023

Governing Body: February 2023

Related Documents:

Complaints and Compliments SOP

Superseded Documents (if applicable):

Customer Feedback Policy 11-2008

Customer Feedback Policy 4-2010

Customer Feedback Policy 6-2013

Customer Feedback Policy 038-2015

Date of Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations Screening (Section 75):

6 June 2016

Date of Last Accessibility Screening:

16 January 2024



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1.0 Change History

Changes to this SOP are documented in Appendix 1 of this document. When reading electronic copies of this document, [you can click here to view the change history](#).

2.0 Policy Statement

- 2.1 SERC (“the College”) is committed to providing the highest quality of service to all our customers. If a customer is not satisfied with the quality of service provided by the College or College staff, they have the right to complain.
- 2.2 A complaint may be defined as something that is unsatisfactory or unacceptable.
- 2.3 The raising of complaints and the provision of feedback provides the College with an opportunity to improve its services. The College monitors complaints and the outcomes in order to improve the quality of our provision. This policy advises customers of the College's commitment to ensuring that any issues or problems are resolved quickly and as close to the source as possible, to the satisfaction of all concerned.

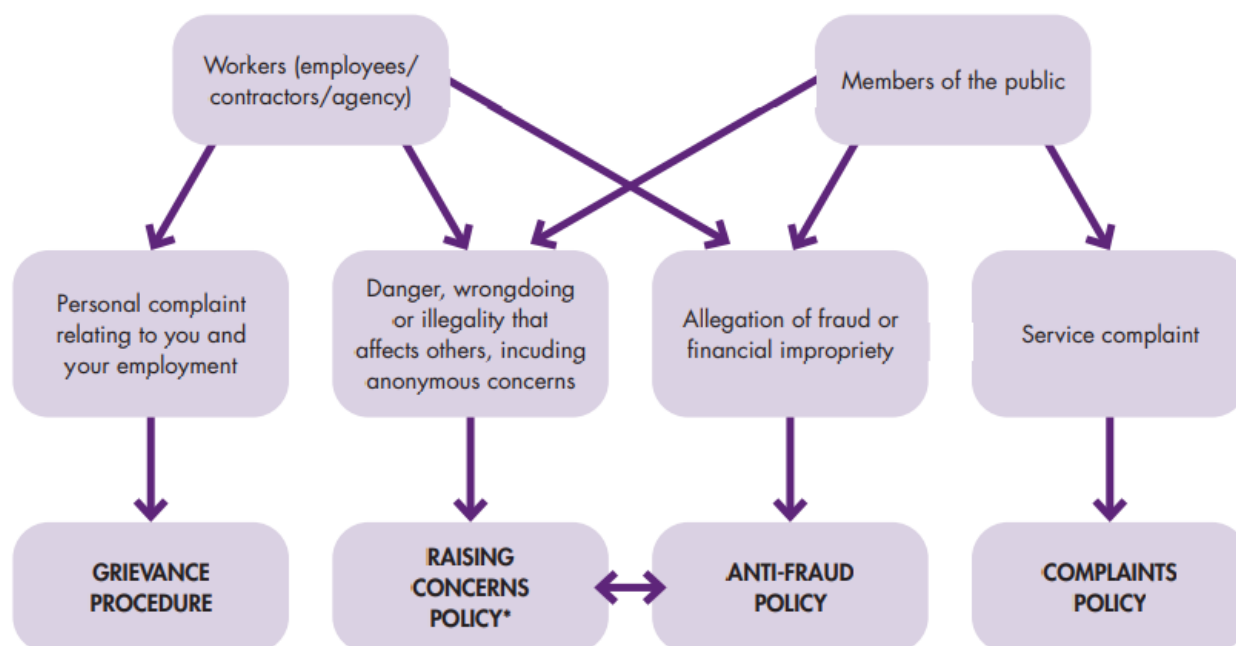
3.0 Data Protection

- 3.1 Information gathered in the management of complaint and compliments will be processed within the provisions of current Data Protection legislation. The College is permitted to process personal data where there is a ‘lawful basis’ to do so. This processing is necessary for the performance of a public task or in the exercise of official authority vested in the College as a Data Controller, e.g., Public Authorities are accountable to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).
- 3.2 The customer’s information may be shared with relevant College staff for the purpose of investigating the complaint (this may include the member of staff who is the subject of the complaint or compliment). The customer’s information may also be shared with authorised third parties such as NIPSO, legal professionals where there is a lawful basis to do so. Further information on data protection and the individual’s rights are available on our website.

4.0 Scope

- 4.1 For the purposes of this policy, a customer may be a student, external customer, member of the public or third-party stakeholder.
- 4.2 This policy should be read in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Audit Office Guide ‘*Raising Concerns - A good practice guide for the Northern Ireland public sector*’. See diagram below and link to full document - [NIAO Good Practice Guide \(niauditoffice.gov.uk\)](http://niauditoffice.gov.uk)

Diagram 1 - The types of issues that may be raised and the relevant policies which should apply



4.3 The College will comply with the Standards for Complaint Handling in the Public Service agreed by the Permanent Secretaries Group, ensuring that:

- There are clear lines of accountability for the handling and consideration of complaints within the College
- Complainants have open and easy access to the College's complaints policy and information required to enable them to complain about any aspect of service
- Complaints are dealt with through an efficient and effective process
- All investigations are conducted promptly, thoroughly, openly, honestly and objectively
- Complaints are responded to as promptly as possible and all issues raised are addressed
- The College promotes a culture of learning from complaints so that, where necessary, service, processes and practices can be improved
- The organisation monitors the effectiveness of its complaint handling and responsiveness

4.4 In addition, the College will:

- Ensure that all compliments are passed on to the relevant staff members
- Process all complaints in a fair, consistent and unbiased manner
- Endeavour to communicate with the customer within agreed timeframes throughout the process
- Ensure no customer is disadvantaged as a result of making a complaint
- Promote equality of opportunity and good relations in line with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998)
- Respect confidentiality and protect customers' data in line with legislation
- Monitor and review complaints and compliments for quality assurance and equality monitoring purposes

4.5 Exemptions to this policy include:

- Anonymous complaints, will not usually be investigated, but will be recorded

- Matters where another College policy or procedure applies; for example, academic appeals¹
- The right of the College not to investigate unreasonable or vexatious complaints
- Staff complaints which fall under separate employment policies and procedures

5.0 Procedure

5.1 Compliment

5.1.1 If a customer feels that the College has exceeded the expected standard of service and wishes to leave a compliment or positive comment, they can either:

- Complete an online compliments form here - [Compliment - SERC](#)
- Complete a hard copy compliments form (Appendix 2). Forms are downloadable from the College website or are available at reception.
- Email the compliment to compliments@serc.ac.uk
- Advise a member of staff in person of the positive experience

5.2 Informal Complaint

5.2.1 If there is an occasion where a customer is not satisfied with the service we provide, they have a right to complain.

5.2.2 We would encourage customers to seek to resolve any issues informally with the relevant member of staff in the first instance, e.g. face-to-face discussion; as soon as possible and no later than three months from the date of the issue arising. In exceptional circumstances, the College may exercise discretion with this timescale.

5.3 Formal Complaint

5.3.1 Where a resolution cannot be found or it is not appropriate to raise the issue/s informally, the customer may submit a formal complaint in writing.

5.3.2 There are various ways a customer can make a formal complaint:

- Complete an online complaints form here: [Complaint - SERC](#)
- Complete a hard copy complaints form (Appendix 1). Forms are downloadable from the College website or available at reception.
- Email the complaint to complaints@serc.ac.uk

5.3.3 If the complaint relates to an academic matter, students have the right to contact and engage with the relevant Awarding Organisation directly, however Awarding Organisations will normally only consider a complaint after it has been managed in accordance with the College's Complaints Policy.

5.3.4 Higher Education (HE) students may also have the right, in certain circumstances, to raise a complaint with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). Contact details for the CMA are

Competition and Markets Authority
Victoria House
Southampton Row
London
WC1B 4AD

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/competition-and-markets-authority>

¹ Please refer to [Appeals Process - SERC](#) for information on academic appeals

- 5.3.5 If assistance is required with the submission of a formal complaint, customers can contact the Senior Customer Services Officer for support
- 5.3.6 Complaints should be submitted to the College no later than three months from the date of the issue arising. In exceptional circumstances, the College may exercise discretion with this timescale.
- 5.3.7 Complaints may be submitted on behalf of someone else, for example, a vulnerable adult. If you are making a complaint on behalf of someone over the age of 13 consent from the individual or proof of power of authority may be required.
- 5.3.8 All formal complaints will be forwarded to the relevant Responsible Owner² for an open and objective investigation.
- 5.3.9 The investigation will be based on the information provided by the complainant at the time of making their initial complaint, together with any supplementary evidence obtained through the investigation.
- 5.3.10 Upon completion of the investigation, a written response will be issued to the complainant.
- 5.3.11 The College will endeavour to adhere to the timeframes detailed below (Table 1).

Complaint Timeframes

Table 1

Communication	Response Time
Complaint acknowledgement letter/email to customer	Within 5 working days* from receipt of complaint
Letter/email to customer if clarification/further information is required to progress the complaint	Clarification information to be returned within 10 working days of receipt of complaint. <i>Please note this may affect the complaint response timeframe.</i>
Complaint response letter/email to customer	Within 20 working days** from date acknowledgement letter/email is issued, or from date clarification information is received from customer (if applicable)

**Working days are those days on which the College is open. Weekends, statutory days, Bank Holidays and other College closures are classed as 'non-working' days. Complaints specific to course admissions will be acknowledged within 2 working days from receipt of complaint.*

***Complaints specific to course admissions will be responded to within 5 working days from date acknowledgement letter/email is issued.*

- 5.3.12 If, for reasons beyond the College's control, the investigation and outcome exceeds, or is likely to exceed, the timeframes set out in Table 1, the customer will be notified in writing as soon as practicably possible.

² Responsible owners are defined in the separate Standard Operating Procedure

6.0 Appeals

- 6.1 If a customer is dissatisfied with the College response to their complaint, they have the right to appeal. Appeals should be submitted in writing, with full details of the grounds for appeal, to the Principal and Chief Executive³.
- 6.2 The individual(s) appointed by the College to consider the appeal will only review the information contained within the scope of the original complaint and investigation and will not consider any additional or new information which may be introduced by the appellant at this stage of the process.
- 6.3 Following receipt of an appeal the College will endeavour to adhere to the timeframes detailed below (Table 2).

Appeal Timeframes

Table 2

Communication	Response Time
Customer submits letter/email of appeal to the College	Within 10 working days from date customer receives complaint response
Appeal acknowledgement letter/email to customer	Within 5 working days from receipt of appeal from customer
Appeal response letter/email to customer	Within 20 working days from date acknowledgement letter/email issued

³ In the event a complaint made is about the Principal and Chief Executive, the Chair of the Audit Committee will appoint a suitable person to investigate and report. Any subsequent appeal will be addressed by the Governing Body.

- 6.4 Appeals will be considered by an individual(s) with no previous connection to the original complaint. The individual(s) appointed to consider the appeal request will depend on the nature of the complaint and appeal lodged.
- 6.5 If, for reasons beyond the Colleges control the investigation and outcome exceeds the timeframe or is likely to exceed the timeframe, the customer will be notified in writing as soon as practicably possible.

7.0 Record of Communications

- 7.1 Complaint meetings and phone calls are confidential. If a meeting is required to resolve the issue, minutes will be taken and made available upon request to those in attendance. If the complainant identifies any inaccuracies the minute will be reviewed, and where an amendment is agreed a revised minute will be issued.
- 7.2 College employees have a reasonable expectation of privacy in the workplace and to protect their privacy the College does not consent to conversations being recorded unless express consent has been obtained in advance.

8.0 If a Customer Remains Dissatisfied

- 8.1 It is hoped that the College will be able to resolve any complaint through the complaints procedure. If a customer remains dissatisfied with the outcome, they have the right to raise the matter with the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), in their role as Commissioner for Complaints⁴.
- 8.2 The customer can complain to NIPSO however NIPSO will normally only consider a complaint after it has been managed in accordance with the College's Complaints Policy, and where it is received within six months of completing the College's complaints process. Contact details for NIPSO are:

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Progressive House
33 Wellington Place
Belfast BT1 6HN
www.nipso.org.uk

⁴ Open University validated programme students can escalate complaints to The Open University as the Awarding Body prior to being referred to NIPSO. See link for further details - [Complaints and appeals | Validation Partnerships \(open.ac.uk\)](#)

9.0 Monitoring Complaints and Compliments

- 9.1 The College welcomes and values all feedback from customers. The College analyses feedback and areas of complaint for the purpose of improving services. All complaints will be dealt with sensitively, and in all cases the documentary evidence gathered and stored remains confidential to those involved. Statistical information will be made available for Quality and Equality monitoring purposes.

10.0 Responsible Owner

- 10.1 It is the responsibility of Senior Customer Services Officer to ensure that this policy is implemented, adhered to and reviewed.

11.0 Communication Plan

- 11.1 This Policy is available at www.serc.ac.uk under 'public information' and is accessible in house on the College intranet. It will be referred to during staff induction and training.

12.0 Review

- 12.1 This Policy will be reviewed annually, or when the need for change has been identified.

Appendix 1: Document Change History

Version	Date	Change Detail
1.1	November 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to online complaint and compliment submission forms added at 3.3 and 3.5
1.2	May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link to academic appeals process updated at 2.4 (footnote 1) • Timeframe for submission of informal complaints added at 3.2 • Link to OU complaints process added at 6.2 (footnote 4)
1.3	February 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section on Data Protection added (2.0) • Information about NIAO 'Raising Concerns' added (3.2) • CMA contact information added (4.3.4) <p>Detail re information/evidence used to investigate complaints and appeals added (4.3.9 and 5.2)</p>
1.4	January 2024	Format updated to ensure accessibility

Appendix 2: Complaints Form

If you require assistance with this form, please contact complaints@serc.ac.uk or speak to staff at reception.

Please provide details in Section 1A of the contact method you would prefer to be contacted on in respect of your complaint. If you provide both an email address and postal address, we may contact you via either method.

If you are submitting a complaint on behalf of someone else, please provide their details in Section 1B. We may need to contact the individual for permission to discuss the issue with you.

This form should be returned to: Senior Customer Services Officer, SERC, 25 Castle Street, Lisburn, BT27 4SU or emailed to complaints@serc.ac.uk

Section 1A – Complainant details						
Name:						
Address:						
Email:						
Course (if applicable):						
Student ID (if applicable):						
Status (please tick relevant box):	Student (Level 3 or below)	Student (Level 4 or above)	Parent or Guardian	Member of the Public	Employer	Organisation

Section 1B – If you are submitting a complaint on behalf of someone, please include their details below						
Name:						
Address:						
Email:						
Course (if applicable):						
Student ID (if applicable):						
Status (please tick relevant box):	Student (Level 3 or below)	Student (Level 4 or above)	Parent or Guardian	Member of the Public	Employer	Organisation

Section 2 – Details of complaint

Please include full details of your complaint below, including (if relevant) date, time, location of event, details of those involved. You may attach additional information if necessary.

If you have attempted to resolve this issue informally, please summarise action taken below.

Section 3 – What do you see as a suitable remedy to address the issue/s raised?

PRIVACY NOTICE: Information gathered on this form will be processed within the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and used for the purpose of investigating your complaint. The College is permitted to process personal data where there is a 'lawful basis' to do so. This processing is necessary for the performance of a **public task** or in the exercise of official authority vested in the College as a Data Controller e.g., Public Authorities are subject to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO). Your information may be shared with relevant College staff for the purpose of investigating your complaint. It may also be shared with authorised third parties such as NIPSO, legal professionals where there is a lawful basis to do so. Further information on data protection and your rights are available on our website <https://www.serc.ac.uk/customer-privacy>

I agree to be contacted by any contact method provided on this form, in respect of my complaint.
I realise that if I choose not to agree to these terms, the College will be unable to investigate my complaint.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

OFFICE USE ONLY

Date Received:
Received By:

Date Acknowledged:
Responsible Owner:

Appendix 3: Compliments Form

If you require assistance with this form, please email compliments@serc.ac.uk or speak to staff at reception. If we have done something well, we value and appreciate your positive feedback. If you would like us to acknowledge your compliment, please provide either an email or postal address. If you provide both an email and postal address, we may contact you via either method.

This form should be returned to: Senior Customer Services Officer, SERC, 25 Castle Street, Lisburn, BT27 4SU or emailed to compliments@serc.ac.uk

Section 1 – Customer details						
Name:						
Address:						
Email:						
Course (if applicable):						
Student ID (if applicable):						
Status (please tick relevant box):	Student (Level 3 or below)	Student (Level 4 or above)	Parent or Guardian	Member of the Public	Employer	Organisation

Section 2 – Details of compliment
Please include full details of your compliment below, including (if relevant) date, time, location of event, details of those involved. You may attach additional information if necessary.

PRIVACY NOTICE: Information gathered on this form will be processed within the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and used for the purpose of investigating your complaint. The College is permitted to process personal data where there is a 'lawful basis' to do so. This processing is necessary for the performance of a **public task** or in the exercise of official authority vested in the College as a Data Controller e.g., Public Authorities are subject to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO). Your information may be shared with relevant College staff for the purpose of investigating your complaint. It may also be shared with authorised third parties such as NIPSO, legal professionals where there is a lawful basis to do so. Further information on data protection and your rights are available on our website <https://www.serc.ac.uk/customer-privacy>

I agree to be contacted by any contact method provided on this form, in respect of my compliment.
I realise that if I choose not to agree to these terms, the College will be unable to record my compliment.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

OFFICE USE ONLY

Date Received:
Received By:

Date Acknowledged:
Responsible Owner:

Appendix 4: Complaints Process

