



**YORKSHIRE DALES**  
National Park Authority

# Compliments, Complaints and Comments

## **A GUIDE TO THE AUTHORITY'S PROCEDURES**

# **COMPLIMENTS COMPLAINTS AND COMMENTS: POLICY STATEMENT**

The Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority has a system for registering and responding to compliments, complaints and comments, as part of our commitment to continuous improvement.

## **What the policy covers**

Compliments, complaints or comments from the public about any action or policy of the National Park Authority.

## **What is not covered**

- complaints about Members, which will be referred to the Monitoring Officer for consideration under a separate procedure;
- complaints about the conduct of individual Officers, which will be referred to the Chief Executive and handled under the Authority's disciplinary procedure;
- objections to planning applications, and appeals or challenges to planning decisions, which should be referred to the Planning Inspectorate;
- internal concerns about process or probity, which are dealt with under the Authority's Confidential Reporting Policy.

## **About our policy**

Our policy provides a mechanism for:-

- receiving, investigating and resolving complaints;
- recording positive comment and experiences.;
- collecting and responding to comments and suggestions.

The key principles are that our policy is:-

- easily accessible and well-publicised;
- comprehensive;
- simple to understand and use with clear responsibilities;
- speedy, with established time limits for action and for keeping people informed.

and that it:-

- endorses full and fair investigation;
- respects the desire for confidentiality;
- addresses all points, provides an effective response and appropriate redress;
- provides management information and Member reports to improve services and prevent recurrence;
- works towards a positive outcome by the complaint being rejected or upheld.

## **COMPLIMENTS**

### **Definition of a compliment**

A simple and straightforward definition of a 'compliment' is:-

***“recognition of an action which was over and above the expected standards of service.”***

Positive comments and experiences, passed on by members of the public, help us to recognise, record and learn good practice lessons. Good feedback helps guide future decisions, boosts staff morale, and ensures that the public are aware of how much we value their opinions.

Compliments may be made directly to the officer concerned, or may be passed to the Secretariat Administrative Officer who will record the compliment and pass on as appropriate.

## **COMPLAINTS**

### **Definition of a complaint**

A simple and straightforward definition of a 'complaint' is:-

***“an actual or perceived grievance against, or dissatisfaction with, the actions or policies of the National Park Authority.”***

**Minor complaints** can often be dealt with on the spot by discussing the issue with the officer concerned, or with a senior manager within their department who will help resolve the matter. If the complaint cannot be dealt with there and then, or the complainant is dissatisfied with the response given, he or she should contact the Complaints Officer:

The Authority has an effective procedure for dealing with **immediate comments**, for example disagreement with car park charges, or facilities in National Park toilets. These may be passed on to the Complaints Officer either verbally, using the FREEPOST address, or by using the Comments forms available at National Park Centres and our offices. The comments will be directed to the appropriate Directorate for immediate action.

We also have a separate procedure for dealing with **complaints against Members**, which are handled by the Standards Committee and referred to the Monitoring Officer in the first instance. Complainants will be given a copy of our Explanatory Leaflet for guidance.

If a member of the public wishes to make a **formal complaint against the Authority**, we ask that this is made in writing and sent to the Complaints Officer.

Complaints Officer  
Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority  
FREEPOST RLZG-JARG-TXAK  
Yoredale, Bainbridge  
North Yorkshire DL8 3EL

Telephone: 01969 652326 (direct line)  
0300 456 0030 (switchboard)

Email: [lesley.knevitt@yorkshiredales.org.uk](mailto:lesley.knevitt@yorkshiredales.org.uk)

## **INVESTIGATING FORMAL COMPLAINTS**

In brief, the Authority's Complaints Officer is the Chief Executive, assisted on a day to day basis by the PA to the Director of Corporate Services.

When a written complaint is received by the Complaints Officer, it will be acknowledged immediately and the investigation process will start. There are three **possible** stages to the complaints process:-

### ***Stage One***

The first stage of a complaint is, in most instances, for the relevant Directorate to handle. The Director investigates and responds within a target framework of ten working days. If a delay is likely, the complainant will be kept informed.

### ***Stage Two***

If not satisfied the complainant can, within 28 days of receipt of a written response from the Authority, ask for review of the complaint by the Chief Executive. This might need a little more time but we will try to provide a full response within twenty working days, with the same provision for keeping the complainant informed of progress and any unavoidable delays.

### ***Stage Three***

If there is still dissatisfaction the complainant can, within 28 days of receipt of a written response from the Authority at the previous stage, ask for the complaint, and the response of the Authority, to be heard by a small panel of Members of the Authority. Such a request will be considered by the Chief Executive in consultation with the chairman of the Audit & Review Committee. In some instances, such an investigation may be inappropriate, in which event the complainant will be encouraged to take their complaint directly to the Local Government Ombudsman.

An investigation by a Member panel will take longer to resolve, because of the need to bring the panel together, but targets for keeping the complainant informed are still set. The panel consists of three Members, drawn at random and on a rotating basis. At the panel hearing, the complainant will have the opportunity to present his or her case, covering the grounds for the complaint and reasons for challenging the outcome of the previous stages of the procedure. Witnesses may be called as appropriate. Likewise, the Authority will have the opportunity to present its case, including details of the previous stages of the complaints process. Witnesses may be called as appropriate.

In concluding the final stage of the Authority's complaints process, the complainant will be made aware of further avenues for pursuing any remaining dissatisfaction. This would normally be the Local Government Ombudsman:

Telephone: 0300 061 0614 Mon-Fri 8.30am to 5pm  
Address: PO Box 4771  
Coventry CV4 0EH  
Email: [advice@lgo.org.uk](mailto:advice@lgo.org.uk)  
Website: [www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk).

## **PLEASE NOTE:**

There are some exceptions to this general approach. These cover:

- complaints about Members of the Authority, which will be referred to the Monitoring Officer in the first instance and handled through the Standards Committee under a separate procedure (please ask the Complaints Officer for an explanatory leaflet).
- Complaints about the conduct of individual Officers, which will be referred in the first instance to the Chief Executive and handled under the Authority's disciplinary procedure (please ask the Complaints Officer for details),
- complaints about the Chief Executive personally, which will be passed to the Chairman as part of a separate procedure;
- complaints from MPs or other senior public figures, which will be dealt with immediately at Chief Executive level);

If a complaint is about a planning decision, rather than about how an application was handled, there is a national process by which *an applicant* may appeal. The applicant will find information about his or her rights of appeal on the reverse side of the decision notice that will have been sent to them. They should write to:

The Planning Inspectorate  
Temple Quay House  
2 The Square  
Temple Quay  
Bristol BS1 6PN

## **Response and redress**

Responses to formal complaints should be in writing. Occasionally a response might be given in person, but that should also be followed up by a letter to complete the formal record.

The options for redress will normally be any, or a combination, of the following:

- an explanation of the events or policy concerned;
- an apology where appropriate;
- agreeing to change a decision or action;
- agreeing to put right a mistake or the consequences of a mistake;
- a review of a policy or project, or its implementation, to take into account the complaint;
- improving communication to staff or the public to avoid the same grounds for complaint as previously;
- improving staff training to eliminate the root cause of the complaint.

## **Complaints about third parties**

Occasionally, someone may complain to the Authority about something that is the responsibility of a third party, for example another local authority or public body.

In these cases, the Complaints Officer will forward the complaint to the appropriate body and will explain to the person complaining what has happened

## **Persistent or vexatious complaints**

There should be no discrimination between complainants on any grounds, including their 'history' of complaints or perceived view of the National Park Authority. However, any complaints system is open to abuse, and sometimes it needs to be recognised that as much as can be done has been done to try to resolve a complaint.

Persistent or vexatious complainants may make a number of separate complaints over a period of time, or they may have made many contacts with the Authority about one complaint. Difficulties may arise from the fact that the complainant is intent on pursuing a complaint that has already been addressed or, in the Authority's opinion, has no merit; or it may be the manner and frequency of the complainant's contacts with the Authority which causes problems.

The process therefore draws a clear line after the third stage, unless the complainant has something new to add to his original case. If, having exhausted our system, the complainant will not, or cannot, pursue one of the external avenues of complaint (for example the Local Government Ombudsman), there is no further means of address and the matter will be closed.

## **Confidentiality**

In the vast majority of cases, a complainant would be perfectly entitled to confidentiality in the handling of their complaint. However, anonymity makes it more difficult properly to investigate and understand a complaint, and to provide appropriate responses or redress, and we would normally prefer complainants to avoid anonymity for these reasons. Members can support a member of the public who feels uncertain about pursuing a complaint openly.

## **Records, audit and reporting**

To maximise the benefits of this complaints process we record complaints, their handling and the outcome. In summary, the Audit and Review Committee will monitor the complaints process – and note the level of comments and compliments - on a half-yearly basis. Annually, the Committee will consider whether a report to the Authority is required.

The Committee will also review the operation of the complaints system and consider any potential improvements.

The system includes a process for staff feedback.

## **Training and support**

All staff will be made aware of the Complaints Policy and Procedure as part of their induction. The Policy will be available at all times, for reference, on the staff intranet.

The Chief Executive, Directors and, of course, Members are there to offer guidance and support. The whole ethos of the system is to improve our performance and perceptions of our performance; to learn from any mistakes; and to build trust by being open and honest in handling complaints.

*Policy due for Review December 2012*

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