

LABOUR RELATIONS AGENCY

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS POLICY AND PROCEDURE

Revised October 2011

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS POLICY & PROCEDURE

Statement of Intent

Introduction

We are committed to providing a high standard of service to every customer, every time, however you contact us. We do recognise however, that occasionally we will not live up to your expectations or our promises.

Your comments are important. Not only do they allow us to improve our individual service to you, they also help us to enhance our products and services in general, making life easier for everyone who uses them. So if you have reason to suggest how we could have served you better, please do let us know.

If you have a complaint about any aspect of our service then we would like to hear from you.

Contacting the Agency

You can contact us by phone (028 90321442), or by post by writing to the Customer Complaints Officer at 2-16 Gordon Street, Belfast, BT1 2LG or e-mail to CustomerComplaints@lra.org.uk. Alternatively you can download (in Microsoft word format) our Customer Complaints Form from the Agency's website at www.lra.org.uk

Information you need to provide

To help us investigate and resolve the problem as quickly as possible, please provide the following information:

- Your name and address.
- Clear description of your concern or complaint
- Details of what you would like us to do to put it right
- Copies of any relevant documents, such as letters or policies
- A daytime telephone number where we can contact you.

How we will handle it

We will try to resolve your complaint immediately, and with the minimum of inconvenience to you. The first step is for us to be really clear on what the problem is, and to identify with you what we can do to put it right. The more information you can give us the better.

Sometimes we will not be able to solve the problem with you “on the spot”. If we are unable to resolve your complaint by the following business day, and if we have not already contacted you to agree our proposal for resolving it, we will:

- Send an acknowledgement of your complaint in writing within 3 working days
- Confirm who will handle your complaint, and how you can contact them. On occasions, to ensure that your complaint is reviewed by the most appropriate person, this may not be the person to whom you complained initially.

If circumstances arise when the person you are complaining about is not readily available, we will advise you of the difficulties and agree a revised response time with you.

If your complaint is particularly complex in nature, we will seek to keep you informed of the progress we are making as our investigations continue. We will aim to resolve your complaint within 5 working days initially but if this is not possible, we will agree a timeframe with you which is no greater than 20 working days.

We aim to resolve your complaint at the earliest opportunity and at least within a specified time frame. Our complaints procedure involves two Stages with Stage 2 involving an investigation by the Chief Executive of the Agency (CEO).

If you are dissatisfied with the Chief Executive’s response you may refer your complaint to the Commissioner for Complaints, also known as the Northern Ireland Ombudsman Office (the ‘Ombudsman’ see Annex 1) whose contact details are as follows:

Commissioner for Complaints
Progressive House
33 Wellington Place
BELFAST
BT1 6HN
Freephone: (0800) 343424
Tel: 028 9023 3821
Fax: 028 9023 4912
e-mail: ombudsman@ni-ombudsman.org.uk
web: www.ni-ombudsman.org.uk

The Agency has an internal Customer Complaints Policy and Procedure which is included as Appendix 1 to this document.

Appendix 1: Customer Complaints Policy & Procedure¹

1. POLICY

The Agency recognises the right of its customers to complain and indeed welcomes complaints as a valuable form of feedback about its services. The Agency is committed to using information gained from complaints to help drive forward improvements to services and to better meet the needs of customers.

This policy outlines in broad terms the Agency's core aims and intended approach to the management of complaints. Fundamentally this policy is designed to provide a framework for handling complaints that:

- Sets out a definition of a complaint that can be clearly communicated to both customers and staff.
- Establishes clear minimum service standards that are capable of being monitored and reported.
- Is responsive to the needs of our customers.
- Is transparent and easy to understand.
- Reflects best practice.
- Helps the Agency to learn from complaints and to inform service improvements.
- Enables our staff to deal with complaints effectively at the earliest stage in the process.

The sections below expand on these objectives, together with an outline of the procedures required to support the policy.

2. COMPLAINT DEFINITION

Any expression of dissatisfaction with the Agency, whether justified or not.

The purpose of this definition is to be comprehensive, brief and to be easily understood by both customers and staff. It is designed to be simple and to allow complaints to be defined from the customer's perspective rather than from the Agency's.

¹ As applied by the Agency on receipt of a complaint.

3. WHO CAN COMPLAIN?

This Agency's approach is designed to be as inclusive as possible and encompasses:

- Any person or organisation (i.e. business) receiving or seeking to receive a service from the Agency;
- Any person acting on behalf of an individual or group of individuals (this includes MPs, Advice Agencies and other advocacy groups).
- Staff or any other persons or organisations providing a service(s) to the Labour Relations Agency

4. ISSUES/SUBJECT AREAS FALLING OUTSIDE OF THIS POLICY

Though designed to be as comprehensive as possible, it is recognised that certain types of complaints are not intended to be dealt with by the complaints policy and are more appropriately dealt with through other channels. These include:

- Issues for which statutory appeal bodies or tribunals have been established.
- Matters that concern the commencement or conduct of civil court action or other tribunal proceedings.
- Matters which have already been adjudicated by a court or tribunal.
- Matters where the customer is already in the process of seeking compensation.
- Complaints by Agency employees about matters relating to their employment that would be more appropriate to be dealt with under the Agency's Personnel Policies and Procedures.
- Matters more appropriate for processing in compliance with the Public Interest Disclosure Act².
- Matters more appropriate for processing in compliance with the Data Protection Act
- Matters more appropriate for processing in compliance with the Electronic Communications Act
- Complaints about services that fall outside of the control of the Agency.
- Complaints about politically determined policy, as opposed to the way in which the policy has been implemented.

² "Whistleblowing"

5. HOW CAN COMPLAINTS BE MADE

Customers contact us by phone (028 90321442), or by post by writing to the Customer Complaints Officer at 2-16 Gordon Street, Belfast, BT1 2LG or e-mail to CustomerComplaints@lra.org.uk. Alternatively you can download (in Microsoft word format) our Customer Complaints Form from the Agency's website at www.lra.org.uk

The complaint will be initially dealt with through the Customer Complaints Officer³. In these circumstances, their immediate response will be to channel a complaint to the most relevant (or available) Director. All staff will be trained in the receipt of complaints and will be available to receive a complaint. If staff are in a position to progress a complaint, they must advise the relevant director of this and of their ongoing progress.

6. KEY POLICY STANDARDS

i. Complaint service standards

Minimum service standards in the handling of complaints have been developed to ensure customers receive the same standard of service regardless of the service area to which they make a complaint. These standards are based on existing practice within the Agency.

The following represent the minimum complaint standards:

- The complaint will be recorded (manually and electronically⁴) by the Customer Complaints Officer this will assist in subsequent complaint analysis.
- The Customer Complaints Officer will be responsible for directing the complaint to the relevant operational Director for processing the complaint and maintaining contact with the customer.
- Specific response targets will be set for every stage of the complaints process.
- The Customer Complaints Officer will formally acknowledge the complaint in writing and confirm to the complainant that their complaint has been forwarded to the appropriate/relevant Director.
- Customers will be provided with a written acknowledgement that provides them with the name of the Customer Complaints Officer, phone number, e-mail address and date by which they can expect to receive a full response.

³ The "Customer Complaints Officer" function is run through the Director (Corporate Services) with administrative responsibilities, particularly with compliance and record keeping being delegated to the Compliance Officer.

⁴ For format, see Annex 1

- Customers will be kept informed - where a full response cannot be provided for whatever reason, the Customer Complaints Officer will send to the customer an interim response informing them of current progress.
- Responses will avoid the use of jargon and technical language wherever possible.
- The right to further review - customers are to be informed of their right to request that the matter be escalated to the next stage of the complaints process if they were dissatisfied with the previous response.
- On the resolution of the complaint(s), all complaint documentation will be copied to the Director (Corporate Services) who will direct the Customer Complaints Officer to monitor trends and identify input to the Agency's processes to encourage continuous improvement.
- The progress of outstanding complaints will be monitored by the Customer Complaints Officer
- For these purposes, a Customer Complaints Register (electronic and manual) will be maintained using the format set out in Annex 1.

ii. Promoting equality of access

The Labour Relations Agency is committed to having regard to promoting good relations across the categories outlined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Therefore, upon request, the Agency will ensure that sound advice and assistance will be given. The Agency will discuss with the complainant; interpreters' support, specialist transport facilities, assistance with making information available in Braille, large print, audio and minority languages.

7. THE COMPLAINT PROCESS

The Agency follows a 2-stage complaint process, with clear opportunities for complaints to be escalated from one stage to the next. The process seeks to resolve complaints as quickly as possible.

At Stage 1 complaints will be directed to the service area which initially gave rise to the complaint. Stage 2 complaints will be addressed by the Chief Executive.

Stage 1

At the first stage of the complaint process, the customer should direct their complaint to the Customer Complaints Officer. At this stage the customer should set out how they feel the service has been deficient and what they would like the Agency to do as a result of the complaint.

At this stage the Customer Complaints Officer will

- Record the complaint on the Customer Complaints Register
- Refer the complaint for investigation to the appropriate Directorate
- Within 3 working days, send an acknowledgement to the customer outlining the details of how the Customer Complaints Officer can be contacted
- Provide a response to the customer which establishes the outcome of the initial investigation by the appropriate/relevant Director and detailing the proposal(s) for a resolution of the difficulty.

Normally, Stage 1 should be completed in 5 days.

Stage 2

If the customer is dissatisfied with the response to their complaint at Stage 1, they may request that the matter be escalated to Stage 2. In requesting escalation, the customer should identify which elements of their complaint they feel have not been adequately addressed.

Complaints will be escalated to Stage 2 where the response at Stage 1 is considered to be incomplete, unclear or unhelpful.

When a complaint is escalated to Stage 2 it will be investigated by the Chief Executive who will:

- Summarise the main issues to be resolved, and agree these with the customer
- Investigate the complaint
- Record the outcome(s) of the complaint
- Provide a detailed response to the customer setting out the findings and the reasons for the findings.

Normally Stage 2 will be completed in 7 working days.

External Appeal

If, following a Stage 2 investigation the customer remains dissatisfied with the response to the complaint, they may escalate the complaint by complaining to the Ombudsman.

8. CUSTOMERS MAKING MULTIPLE COMPLAINTS AT ONE TIME

At times a customer may choose to complain about a number of aspects of Agency services in one letter/form. Where the complaints relate to a single service or a single experience, they will be managed to enable a consolidated response to be prepared. Where the complaints made relate to different services or events, the customer will be informed about who will respond to each complaint made.

9. CLOSURE OF COMPLEX OR ONEROUS COMPLAINTS

It is possible for a small number of customers to generate a level of complaint workload which risks compromising either service delivery in the service being complained about or the Agency's ability to respond to complaints received. These instances may involve:

- High volume of complaints submitted, often with a reluctance to accept resolution being offered
- High volume of complaints, with complaints submitted simultaneously to various Officers
- Extensive correspondence on individual complaints, with complaints being re-interpreted or extended

Such complaints need to be managed appropriately to:

- Avoid genuine, well founded complaints made by frequent complainants becoming 'lost' within the overall volume of that customer's correspondence
- Avoid such complaints from having a negative impact on service delivery or general complaint management

The 2-stage complaint process will minimise the negative impact of such complainants through avoiding engagement in lengthy exchanges of communications. When the Customer Complaints Officer becomes concerned that an individual complainant is generating a workload which risks compromising other areas of work, he / she will review the volume of work being generated, the customer's expectations of the Agency, and the nature of complaints made and responses received. Where the Customer Complaints Officer judges that the complainant is generating excessive workload, the complainant will be invited to meet him/her to discuss the complaint/correspondence volume and the impact this is having with a view to agreeing a more manageable approach to addressing the customer's concerns.

The Agency will not engage in communication on a specific complaint once it is deemed to have been effectively dealt with through the complaints process.

Annex 1:

CRN (Complaint Reference Number):

Nature/Outline of Complaint:

Date of Receipt of Complaint:

Timer Limit under the CCP:

Summary of Feedback & Outcomes Supplied & Date:

Appeal to the CEO & Date Received

Time Limit of CEO Response:

Summary of Feedback & Outcomes Supplied and Date

Referral to Ombudsman & Date

Completed & Signed by:Date