

# South Downs National Park Authority

## Complaints, Compliments and Comments Policy

### Implementation from 1 April 2025

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Responsibility	Support Services and Data Protection Manager
Last updated	January 2025
Date approved	27 January 2025
Approved by	SDNPA Senior Leadership Team

This document is available in alternative formats and in different languages on request. If you need support or assistance to help you read and/or understand this document, please contact the Authority on 01730 814810

## 1. INTRODUCTION

South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) aim to deliver high quality and efficient services. We are always trying to do better, and we welcome feedback. It is important because it helps us to build on strengths and learn from mistakes. If things go wrong, we want to put them right as fairly and as quickly as possible. When things go well, we appreciate compliments and suggestions. Comments and suggestions let us know how we can improve our services. We record complaints, compliments and comments so that we can manage them efficiently and effectively and monitor them.

To demonstrate our commitment to listen to feedback and learn from our mistakes, we have adopted, whilst not obliged to, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGO) complaint code. This policy, therefore, reflects this code. [Complaint Handling Code - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)

Information collected from complaints, compliments and comments will be analysed and used to inform business decisions and drive improvement in service provision. We will produce and publicise an annual report detailing our performance in relation to complaints, compliments and comments. This will include a self-assessment against the LGO complaint code, analysis of the organisation's complaint handling performance and a summary of the types of complaints the organisation has refused to accept. It will also include any findings of non-compliance with the LGO complaint code, details of service improvements made as a result of the learning from complaints, the annual letter about the organisations performance from the LGO and any other relevant reports or publications produced by the LGO in relation to the work of the SDNPA.

We will publicise our complaints policy, including information about the Ombudsman and this code on our website.

## 2. WHAT IS A COMPLAINT?

We use the LGO definitions of a service request and complaint.

We define a service request as ***“a request that the organisation provides or improves a service, fixes a problem or reconsiders a decision”***.

Before making a complaint, we encourage customers to contact us to let us know about their concerns. It may be a problem that can be resolved quickly without progressing through the complaints process. The LGO indicate within the complaint code, that organisations should have the opportunity to deal with a service request before a complaint is raised.

We define a complaint as ***“an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual or group of individuals.”***

We may determine that your complaint is better dealt with as a service request and will inform you if we decide to use this approach to respond to your complaint. This approach encourages our staff to work with customers to resolve the issue.

It assists us to deal with complaints efficiently if you contact us as quickly as possible after the incident. We will not treat something as a complaint if it happened more than 12 months ago.

### **3. OUR COMMITMENT**

If you do want to make a complaint, we will:

- make it easy for you to contact us;
- deal with your complaint quickly;
- give you a full answer;
- be polite and professional in how we deal with you;
- aim to acknowledge your complaint within 5 working days and reply to stage one complaints in 10 working days from the date we acknowledge your complaint;
- acknowledge stage two complaints within 5 working days and respond within 20 working days from the date we acknowledge your complaint;
- tell you if we need longer to deal with your complaint and provide an explanation for why we need longer;
- apologise if we have made a mistake and do our best to put things right as quickly as possible.

We also welcome compliments about things we have done right, and comments and suggestions to help us improve our services.

If you require any assistance in making your complaint or need help to understand this policy, explain your complaint or comment, or understand our response, please contact us or ask someone to speak to us and we will try to help you. If you need assistance to make your complaint, please contact us, using the details set out at section 15, to discuss this so that we can make any reasonable adjustments necessary to support you.

We will only use the information you provide to us for the purposes of processing your complaint. Your information, including any personal information you provide to us (such as name and contact details) may be shared with officers within the Authority or with other relevant authorities as required, only for the purposes of processing your complaint. A summary of complaints will be published as part of the Authority's annual reporting process. This report will not contain personal information about complainants. Details of your rights under the Data Protection Act are available on the Authority website [Privacy Statement - South Downs National Park Authority](#)

### **4. WHAT IS NOT COVERED BY THIS POLICY?**

We intend, wherever possible, to allow a complaint to be dealt with under this complaints policy. There are however some exceptions:

- an appeal against a planning decision or attempt to overturn a decision we have taken;
- where a complaint is not about the services provided by the SDNPA or someone acting on our behalf but relates to a planning enforcement matter. Planning enforcement matters will be passed to the relevant enforcement team to address and will not be dealt with under this policy unless it relates to the way we have managed an enforcement issue;
- a complaint where legal proceedings or an insurance claim has already been commenced ;
- a complaint that has already been heard by a court or tribunal;
- a complaint that a Member has breached the Member Code of Conduct (see section 11).

The reason why these matters are not dealt with under this complaints procedure is because there are alternative mechanisms to deal with these complaints.

If for any reason we cannot deal with a complaint under this procedure, we will give an explanation with the acknowledgement of the complaint. If on receipt of this explanation you are not satisfied, you have the right to take that decision to the LGO.

We will not take a blanket approach to excluding complaints; the individual circumstances of each complaint will be considered.

## **5. HOW DO I MAKE A COMPLAINT?**

The SDNPA has a two stage complaints procedure. We know how important it is for complaints to be taken seriously and dealt with quickly and fully in an impartial way. The contact information you need is on our website. It is also at the end of this policy document.

### **Stage one**

You can contact us via telephone, email, letter, in person or by using the form on our website. You can complete the form online or print it off and post it to us at the South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst GU29 9DH. You can also ask someone else to contact us on your behalf.

Completing the form means we have an accurate and complete record of your complaint in your own words and helps to make sure there is no confusion or misunderstanding about your complaint. Please set out your complaint as fully and clearly as possible, including when the incident happened and the name of the person you are complaining about, if you know it.

If you are not able to use the form, or have difficulty making your complaint in writing, please contact us to discuss how we can support you in making your complaint. Many complaints are straightforward and can be dealt with by the team providing the service. We aim to deal with as many complaints as possible at this stage and you can expect us to acknowledge complaints within 5 working days and respond to stage one complaints within 10 working days of our acknowledgement. If we are unable to respond within these timescales, we will inform you of this, provide you information of when the response will be provided and the reason for the delay. We will provide information on what action you need to take should you wish to progress your complaint to stage two of our process following receipt of our stage one response.

If we do not hear anything from you for 3 months after our response to your complaint has been sent, we will assume you are satisfied with our response and will close the complaint.

### **Stage two**

If you remain dissatisfied following our response to your stage one complaint, you can request that your complaint be considered by us at stage two.

Stage two complaints will be recorded and referred to a member of our Senior Leadership team to investigate and respond to. If the complaint is about a member of our Senior Leadership team it will be investigated by the Chief Executive. Complaints about the Chief Executive will be sent to the SDNPA Monitoring Officer for investigation. In some cases, we may deem it necessary to appoint an external independent investigator to undertake an assessment of the complaint.

We will acknowledge your stage two complaint within 5 working days and provide a response to you within 20 working days of this acknowledgement. If we are unable to respond within these timescales, we will inform you of this, provide you information of when the response will be provided and the reason for the delay.

Our stage two response will include information on what action you need to take should you wish to progress the matter with the LGO.

If your complaint is upheld by the SDNPA, you will receive a written apology and an explanation of any redress, and any steps being taken to prevent a similar problem recurring.

## **6. COMPLAINTS ABOUT PLANNING MATTERS**

The SDNPA has put in place arrangements with a number of councils to handle most (but not all) planning applications and other planning matters. We refer to these councils as Host Authorities. The first step in making a complaint concerning the planning function is to find out if the matter is being dealt with by a Host Authority or the SDNPA. If you want to complain about something that is being dealt with by one of the Host Authorities, you should complain directly to them. You can find a list of the Host Authorities who deal with planning at [Who deals with my planning application? - South Downs National Park Authority](#)

The Host Authority will deal with your complaint using its own complaints procedure. Even though your complaint involves the SDNPA, it will be dealt with by the Host Authority. If your complaint isn't resolved by the Host Authority after stage one, the SDNPA will then deal with the complaint as a SDNPA stage two complaint.

If you want to complain about an application the SDNPA is dealing with you should complain directly to the SDNPA [Our compliments, comments and complaints process - South Downs National Park Authority](#)

## **7. WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM THE PERSON RESPONDING TO MY COMPLAINT?**

Clarification will be sought from you should any aspects of the complaint be unclear.

Your complaint will be dealt with on its merits, independently and with an open mind.

You will be given a fair chance to set out your position.

Measures will be taken to address any actual or perceived conflict of interest; and all relevant information and evidence will be considered carefully.

All complaints, compliments and comments are treated confidentially and will not disadvantage you in any future dealings with the SDNPA. It may not always be possible to keep your details confidential, such as where your complaint is about a third party or where particular legislation applies to your complaint.

## **8. WHAT IF I'M NOT SATISFIED?**

We aim to resolve your complaint to your satisfaction. If that doesn't happen, you can refer your complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman using the details set out below at section 17.

The Ombudsman investigates complaints of service failure and maladministration. This means that we have done something we should not have done, done something the wrong way, or have not done something we should have. The LGO can recommend an organisation takes action to improve services or provide a personal remedy where it finds fault which causes an injustice to an individual or group of individuals.

The Ombudsman will not investigate your complaint just because you disagree with the decision made by the SDNPA. The Ombudsman advises that complaints are taken through the internal complaints procedure before referring it to them.

## **9. HOW DO I GIVE COMPLIMENTS AND MAKE COMMENTS ON THE SDNPA'S WORK?**

There may be times when you think that we have done a really good job or one of the people who works for us has impressed you. If this happens, please let us know. We aim to constantly improve what we do, and examples of things we do well are just as important as understanding how we can do things better after making a mistake.

If you want to pay us a compliment or make a comment or suggestion about our services or our people, please use the form on our website or write to us or telephone us. Details of how to do this are on our website and at the end of this policy document.

## **10. HOW DO I ASK FOR AN EXPLANATION RATHER THAN MAKE A COMPLAINT?**

If you want us to explain why we have or have not done something, please contact us and ask. Details of how to do this are on our website and at the end of this policy document.

## **11. HOW DO I COMPLAIN ABOUT A MEMBER'S CONDUCT?**

If you want to make a complaint that one of the Members of the SDNPA has failed to comply with the SDNPA Members' Code of Conduct, you must make your complaint in writing to the Authority's Monitoring Officer.

Through this process the Authority can only deal with complaints about matters covered by the Members Code of Conduct. If you want to make a complaint you must say why you think the Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct for the SDNPA.

The Authority's procedure for handling these complaints is available [here on the Authority's website](#) along with the complaints handling flowchart and form and a copy of the Members' Code of Conduct.

## **12. UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT BEHAVIOUR**

We aim to deal fairly, honestly and properly with all feedback we receive and make our service as accessible as possible. We also understand that you may be frustrated and upset by what has happened to bring about your complaint. However, we will not tolerate racist, sexist, homophobic or other discriminatory language, or offensive, threatening, violent, aggressive or abusive behaviour towards people who work for us. If you contact us, including via social media, to make a complaint, or to provide other feedback but behave in any of these manners to the people who work for us, either when you provide the feedback or when we are looking into it for you, we will ask you to stop doing so and may take other, proportionate action to protect the wellbeing of our staff and make sure we can keep working effectively.

If your use of inappropriate language is due to a medical condition, we will discuss with you any reasonable adjustments we need to make to how we work with you. However, some language and behaviour is always unacceptable and we will draw your attention to this should it apply, and we will take appropriate action.

We understand that if you take the time to give us feedback or make a complaint, you are concerned about the issue you are raising with us. It is helpful to remember though, that the person dealing with your complaint will be dealing with many other work commitments at any one time and using their time to best effect. Therefore, if you make frequent and lengthy contacts with them and/or keep sending them the same information, their ability to respond to your complaint will be hampered. This also applies to any contact following any decisions made regarding your complaint.

Where necessary we will restrict access to our service if you keep behaving unreasonably. Similarly, if you make it difficult for us to investigate your complaint by persistently contacting lots of people working for us about your complaint, we will restrict access to our services. If we decide to do this, we will tell you what we will do and how we will communicate with you. We may ask you to contact a particular person; ask you to only contact us in writing; or we may refuse to respond to repeated communications about the same matter.

Where your behaviour is so extreme it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of our staff we may report the matter to the police. In such cases, we will not provide you with prior warning.

### **13. EQUALITY**

The Authority will handle all complaints fairly and honestly regardless of who makes a complaint.

The Authority treats all members of the public equitably and will not show bias to any individual or group on the basis of age, race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity.

### **14. ANONYMOUS COMPLAINTS**

We will only investigate complaints made anonymously where the complaint includes allegations of a particularly serious or significant nature or where for other reasons the public interest would be best served by investigating the complaint. The decision regarding whether an anonymous complaint will be investigated will be made by the Authority's Monitoring Officer.

### **15. HOW TO CONTACT US**

If you want to pay us a compliment, or make a comment or complaint, you can call us on 01730 814810 and ask to be put through to the relevant service or write to us at:

Complaints, Compliments and Comments  
South Downs National Park Authority  
South Downs Centre  
North Street  
Midhurst  
West Sussex  
GU29 9DH

Our telephone line opening times:

Monday – 9am to 5pm  
Tuesday – 9am to 5pm  
Wednesday – 9am to 5pm  
Thursday – 9am to 5pm  
Friday – 9am to 4.30pm  
Saturday – closed  
Sunday – closed

You can email us at [info@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:info@southdowns.gov.uk)

You can complete the complaints form online or print it off and post it to us at the South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst GU29 9DH.

If you want to make a complaint that one of the Members of the SDNPA has failed to comply with the Members' Code of Conduct, please use the Member Complaint Form available from the [SDNPA's website](#) and send it to the Monitoring Officer. Alternatively, you can contact the Monitoring Officer directly via email at [committee.officer@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:committee.officer@southdowns.gov.uk) by telephone on 01730 814810, or at the address below.

Monitoring Officer  
South Downs National Park Authority  
South Downs Centre  
North Street  
Midhurst  
West Sussex  
GU29 9DH

## **16. USEFUL INFORMATION**

[Complaint Handling Code - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman  
Not in my backyard - update for July 2023](#)

## **17. OTHER ADDRESSES YOU MAY FIND HELPFUL**

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman  
PO Box 4771  
Coventry  
CV4 0EH

Tel: 0300 061 0614

The telephone line opening times are:

Monday - 10am to 1pm  
Tuesday - 10am till 1pm  
Wednesday - 1pm till 4pm  
Thursday - 10am till 1pm  
Friday - 10am till 1pm

[Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman website.](#)