SERVICE INFORMATION SYSTEM	
Title	**Customer Interaction**
Category	**Administration**
Number	**A18**
Status	**v5.0**
Action	**All Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) personnel**
Accountability	**Service Information Manager**
Security classification	**Official**
Executive summary	This policy outlines how NFRS utilise customer feedback. All personnel are advised to adhere to this policy with regard to compliments, suggestions, comments or complaints.

Contents

Job title	**Service Information Manager**
Date	**21 May 2019**
Review due	**21 May 2021**

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this policy is to outline procedures to enable customer feedback. All personnel are advised to follow this process with regard to compliments, suggestions, comments or complaints.

NFRS aims to provide the highest standards of service in all aspects of service delivery as set out in the following:

- NFRS Customer Charter
- Departmental Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

All feedback will be welcome regardless of how it is presented, and the Service will ensure that clear and relevant information about how the customer may make their views known and our standards of service delivery are widely available in a variety of formats.

In meeting these aims, the Service will treat the public with courtesy and respect, ensuring that all complaints are treated confidentially until the outcome is known. After this, appropriate levels of confidentiality will be maintained in each case.

NFRS is committed to giving an equal service to all. This means that we will not discriminate against anyone because of age, disability, sex, gender reassignment, race, political or religious belief or sexual orientation. Staff must be aware and respond to individual's specific needs.

Our aim is to ensure that all our customers can express their views on the services that we provide.

All employees will be given sufficient information, instruction, training and supervision to enable them to perform their work activities safely and competently.

Our policies, procedures and standards will be reviewed as a minimum every two years to ensure that:

- Information is current and relevant
- Our procedures are effective
- Customers' views have been considered
- Improvements are fed into business plans
- Performance is published

2 ORGANISATION

The Chief Fire Officer has delegated the responsibility for this policy to the Service Information Manager, who will be supported by the Service Information Team (SIT).

The SIT will be responsible for:

- Collation and formal recording of Customer Interaction (CI)

- Inputting data and attaching relevant documentation
- Quality assurance of correspondence
- Customer surveys and CI reports

It is the duty of all employees to ensure that all feedback is recorded onto the Workflow database under CI at first point of contact.

It is the responsibility of the assigned Investigating Officer to ensure that Workflow is kept up to date and all correspondence is forwarded to the SIT for quality assurance and input onto the CI database.

At times, when dealing with complaints from customers, staff may experience stressful situations.

Managers and supervisors must assess risks and enforce compliance with safe systems of working and effective procedures. They will do this by ensuring adequate supervision, selecting suitable work practices and equipment for all activities and by identifying individual training needs and ensuring that these are addressed.

All employees are responsible for taking care of their own health and safety and not being careless or negligent towards other people when at work. They must co-operate with safe working systems and procedures and report any dangerous situation or shortfalls in these procedures to the management team.

3 PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES

In order for the Service to improve we must seek feedback from our customers.

This may be in the form of:
- Compliments
- Comments or suggestions
- Complaints

Comments, suggestions and compliments are feedback which can be a useful source of information about how others see us and how we are serving our customers.

The aim of this policy is therefore to ensure:

a) Complaints are dealt with effectively and the recurrence of any problems are prevented
b) Suggestions are checked for means of service improvement
c) Performance information on complaints and compliments is collated and published in our CI report and on the NFRS website

3.1 Comments

This is advice from a customer that we could do something better. The Service will check each suggestion to identify ideas that can be used to improve service delivery.

All comments or suggestions received must be passed to the SIT for further evaluation and analysis; they will be recorded appropriately i.e. NFRS employee suggestion scheme which is on our intranet (FirePlace).

3.2 Compliments

This is praise from a customer because we have done something well. The Service will use this information to identify and publish best practice.

All compliments, in whatever way that they are presented, should be recorded onto Workflow. The SIT will ensure that, where applicable, compliments received will be published in the NFRS weekly bulletin, so that teams and individuals can receive recognition.

3.3 Complaints

The Service is justifiably proud of its reputation for service delivery, quality and value for money. However, on occasions things can go wrong, which results in customers expressing their dissatisfaction.

The Service defines a complaint as a representation from a member of the public or from an organisation that alleges that Service has failed to do something, has done something wrong or acted unfairly or discourteously.

Whether the complaint is justified or not, the person making the complaint feels aggrieved with the Service. Dealing with complaints courteously and effectively can do much to restore the person's confidence in the Service for the future.

When a complaint is made, the Service will take action to ensure that it is considered quickly, fairly and confidentially using the formal complaints procedure and will offer redress in appropriate circumstances.

Stages of complaints

There are various stages in the complaints process.

Formal

Stage 1 The SIM, the Officer Of the Day (OOD) or the Assistant Officer of the Day (AOD) can advise on the assignment of complaints. Usually the department manager of the Service area to which the complaint relates to handles stage 1. Investigating Officer undertakes investigation and provides a conclusion to the complainant.

Stage 2 If the complainant is not satisfied at stage 1, the SIT will refer the complaint to the SIM, or in their absence the Duty Gold Cover Officer, who will appoint an approved complaints investigator to undertake a level 2 investigation.

Stage 3 If the complainant is not satisfied at stage 2, it will be then be escalated to the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC).

Finally, if the complainant is not satisfied at stage 3, they may take it to the Local Government Ombudsman for further consideration. www.lgo.org.uk.

General advice

The SIM/Duty Gold Cover Officer must be informed if:

- The complaint is one that could have legal, political or policy implications
- The complaint is made by Members of Parliament, County/Local Councillors
- The complaint is made by the CFO of other fire and rescue services

When a complaint alleging that private property has been damaged and the complainant is seeking financial compensation only (once investigated by an assigned NFRS investigating officer), the matter is a claim against the Service. This therefore must be forwarded to the corporate insurance team and the customer must be informed of this action in writing with a copy sent to the corporate insurance team. This will be recorded as a stage 1 complaint.

Where a complaint relates to personnel behaviour, the employee's name(s) should not be recorded on Workflow. Basic detail should be outlined and the SIM will notify the Assistant Chief Fire Officer (ACFO) to ensure it is captured on the Service investigation log where necessary.

Disciplinary procedures

If anyone handling a complaint thinks that an employee has committed actions normally investigated through the Service disciplinary process, this must be reported to the employee's line manager.

Responding to complaints

This section of the policy should be read in conjunction with the attached appendices.

Normally complaints will be received via publicised contact points, primarily Moulton Logistics Centre (MLC), the Northern Accommodation Building (NAB), Fire Control and other Service delivery areas, such as the Prevention team.

Regardless of where the first point of contact is, the person receiving the initial contact will be responsible for ensuring that the following customer details are entered onto the Workflow database under the customer interaction section:

1) Name
2) Address
3) Preferred contact details
4) Full details of complaint
5) Monitoring data

The Workflow database will automatically enter:

- Unique reference number

- Date and time of receipt

If the customer wishes to keep the process informal and no further action is required, the person dealing with the initial contact will enter the following details into the Workflow database under the customer interaction section as a comment, with no further action required:

- Nature of the comment
- Actions taken
- Outcome

All feedback must be recorded.

If the customer wishes to make the complaint formal, the complaint will initially be registered at stage 1 and follow the complaints procedure.

Complaints received will be formally recorded through the Workflow database under the CI section and, as far as possible, dealt with immediately. Where this is not possible the Investigating Officer assigned will inform the SIT, who will then issue the standard acknowledgement letter (SL038).

The Investigating Officer must make every effort to:

- Conclude the investigation within 10 working days
- Review and keep the complainant informed of progress or reason(s) causing delay (as a minimum, every 10 working days)
- Ensure that all reports, contact with the customer, or any other relevant issues are recorded and forwarded to the SIT for quality assurance and inclusion into the customer interaction Workflow database
- Draft a conclusion letter detailing the findings and outcome of the complaint using SL039 and forward to the SIT to format and issue to complainant

Should the matter not be resolved under stage 1, the process will move on to stage 2. The SIT, on behalf of the SIM, will assign an Investigating Officer and a full investigation will be undertaken and a formal response produced.

All correspondence sent should clearly indicate a time frame by which the customer should respond, in whatever format desired. If no such response is forthcoming within 20 working days then the matter will be deemed as closed with no further action recommended.

Should the complaint remain unresolved, all paperwork and correspondence will be forwarded to the OPFCC for further investigation.

If the complaint is still unresolved, the customer has the right to take their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman. This decision is final.

In trying to resolve the complaint the Service will:

- Provide a full explanation of the circumstances involved
- Apologise for mistakes made
- If possible, try to resolve the situation

- Take appropriate internal remedial action
- Give feedback to the customer

4 MEASURING PERFORMANCE

The SIM will monitor the level of feedback on a monthly basis to identify any adverse variances.

In addition, a formal analysis and quarterly report will be produced for the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT).

The SIT will contact all persons who have made a complaint within four weeks of its completion, to determine:

- Customer satisfaction
- Personal data monitoring
- Any areas for improvement

All feedback is anonymous and will be used to inform the business planning process.

In addition the Service will periodically review its service delivery in consultation with its customers to ensure that we are providing a service in line with customer needs and expectations.

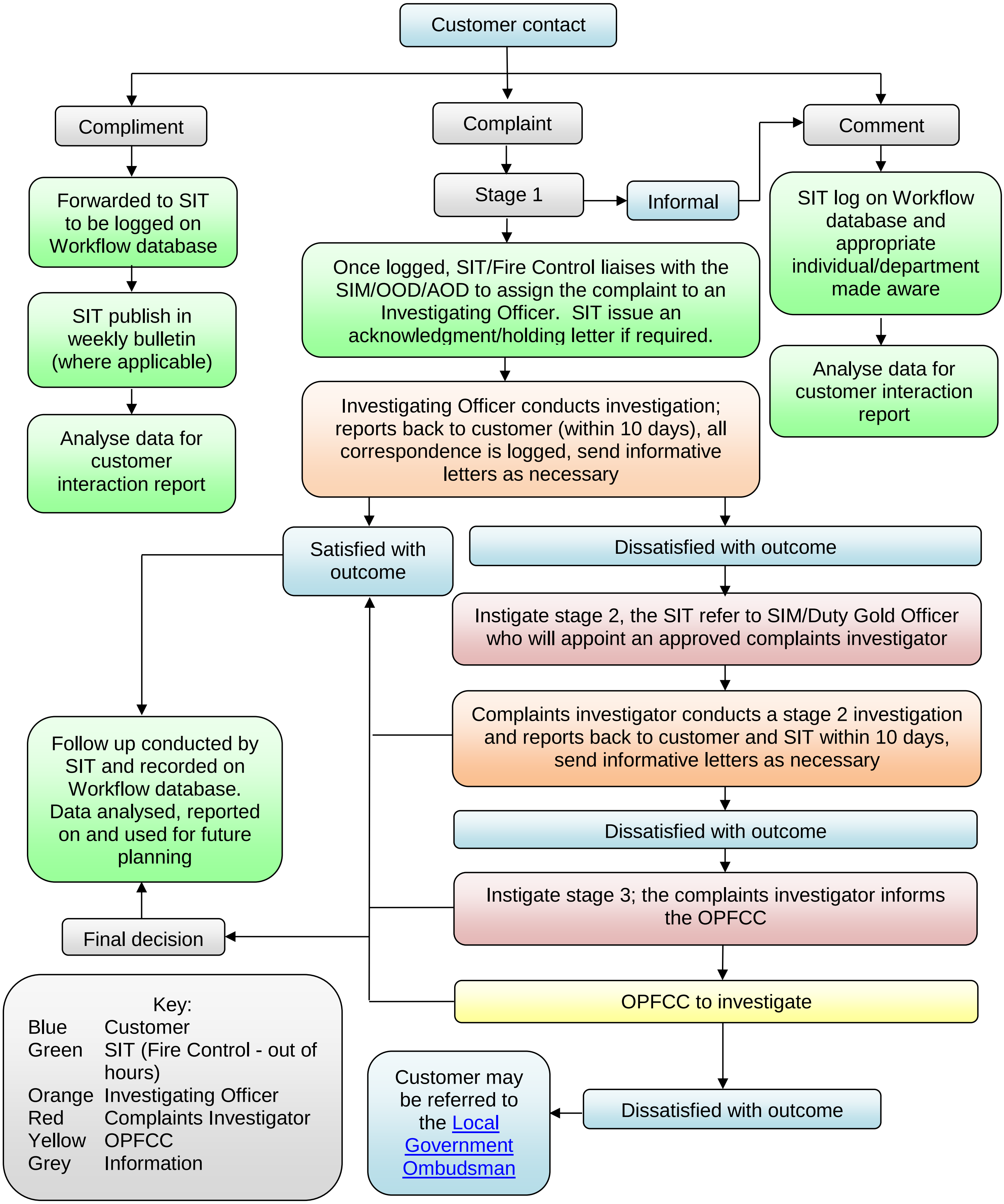
See appendix A for current feedback process.

5 BIBLIOGRAPHY

- How to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman: www.lgo.org.uk.

APPENDIX A

FLOWCHART FOR HANDLING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK



CUSTOMER INTERACTION GUIDANCE

1. Listen – to find out the point they wish to make

- Treat the customer the way you would like to be treated
- The customer could well have been practising their speech – even if you are sure you understand the point, do not interrupt, listen until they have finished explaining

2. Probe – for understanding and confirmation

- Take notes – check these over with the customer and make sure there has been no misunderstanding
- Summarise the issues – it often helps to list the key points with the customer
- Decide if you can deal with the matter yourself or need to refer to a colleague

3. Acknowledge – Thank them for taking trouble to give us their feedback

- Thank the customer for bringing the matter to our attention and make it clear that you want to help
- After investigation, if you find we have made a mistake, admit it and say sorry – an honest and graceful apology is all that most complainants want in the first place
- If saying the words, "I'm sorry", feels like taking on too much of the blame, consider saying, "I'm sorry you are unhappy with our service" instead

4. Ownership and Action

- Tell the customer exactly what you plan to do or provide an explanation as to why there is no need for action
- If it is a complaint, deal with it quickly and, if appropriate, contact the customer with the result of any action you undertake
- If you are unable to deal with a complaint yourself, tell the customer and pass the details to your manager, who will seek to resolve it or arrange an investigation following the procedure outlined in appendix A.

5. Log the Feedback

- Finally, you should log all customer feedback and actions taken – (see appendix A) analyse the situation and think about how we can improve the way we do things and take action where you can

No matter what we say or do some customers will not be satisfied and will want to take a complaint further. This is their right and we should help them to do this.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

Difficult individuals or persons in difficulty?

A difficult person is a person whose behaviour causes difficulties for you and others. Dealing with difficult people means dealing with difficult behaviour, and recognising that your actions or behaviour can contribute to another person's difficult behaviour.

Interaction between you and others is a two way street, you react to the person, they react to you. Learning how to deal with difficult people involves learning how to manage our side of the two-way transaction. When we encounter a difficult person many of us react in ways that make the problem worse. For example; by taking the person's anger personally, by becoming defensive rather than attempting to deal with the real issue or by responding with a short retort. These natural but counterproductive responses reduce our chances of successfully transforming the transaction into a positive one.

Responding positively - some essential skills

- Deal with the customer's feelings then deal with their problem
- Use the person's name as soon as possible and use your own whenever appropriate
- Listen without interruption, hear them out, keep them talking and let them explain their problem
- Avoid getting defensive and resist arguing
- Summarise and seek confirmation
- Ask questions to understand the problem, do a full 'diagnosis' before proposing a solution
- Share information - communicate the reason for: e.g. the policy, procedures
- Explain what you can and cannot do, be clear, honest and realistic about what you can and cannot do, stress what you **can** do
- Solve simpler issues first, and then move to more complex

Some words and phrases can irritate the customer and provoke further anger. Listed below are some of the more common ones.

'Problem' - try to avoid using the word 'problem'. If the customer is angry and you say, “what's the problem" they are likely to reply, "I haven't got a problem, it’s you who's got the problem".

"I'll try" - implies that you won't or that you think it's useless to begin with. If you have to use this phrase then "I will try" is better.

"You must appreciate" - is very much like the phrase above. They may say, "I don't have to appreciate anything".

"There's nothing I can do" - the word 'nothing' can hook the customer's anger. Always tell people what you can do. Tell people what you cannot do rather than use the word 'nothing'.

GUIDANCE FOR COMPLETING AN INVESTIGATION

Suggested methods of complaints investigation

1. **Define complaint –** Ensure the complainant agrees with your understanding of the complaint. For the complex complaints this may mean submitting a draft definition to the complainant for approval.

2. **When appropriate, meet complainant –** The complainant may wish to meet to show the investigator documents, physical conditions or environmental features and the investigator may need to see things for themselves. It will be useful to make notes of this meeting and take any relevant photographs. Be aware that under the Freedom of Information Act the complainant may already be in possession of relevant documentation.

3. **Meet relevant employees –** It will be necessary to ask the employees whose service is the subject of the complaint for their account of events. This could be done by telephone or correspondence, but a meeting may be more effective.

4. **Interview witnesses –** The complainant or the employees may identify people they think will be able to give evidence. These should, as far as possible, be interviewed in person or by telephone and asked to sign a statement of relevant evidence.

5. **Compile a chronology –** Compile a chronology of events, which lists reported events and the dates on which they were reported as happening. The complainant and relevant employees can be asked to check it.

6. **Check evidence –** Check to see whether the Service area is required to comply with relevant laws; has procedures for the work in question; or has made promises to the complainant. If so, check to see whether they have acted in accordance with these.

7. **Write a report –** The report must examine the complaint, present evidence and give conclusions. It can be part of a letter or a separate document. It is important to ‘own up’ to faults.

8. **If appropriate, apologise and advise what action will be taken –** If you find the Service has not acted as it should have, it is important to apologise and state what action will now be taken. This could be action to put things right and must include action to stop the fault happening again. These actions must be agreed with the employees providing the service.

9. **Check actions are completed –** Check whether promised actions have been carried out.

Complaint responses may include, as appropriate:

a) A definition of the complaint, as agreed in writing with the complainant
b) A description of what the complainant is seeking as a resolution
c) A general description of how the investigation was conducted
d) The historical background to the complaint
e) The sequence of significant events
f) The investigation findings
g) A response to all of the points raised in the complaint
h) Conclusions
i) An apology
j) A list of actions to be taken

Suggested wording for use in final conclusion response

At end of stage 1:
Use the Service's conclusion template (SL039).

At end of stage 2:
"Should you wish to take your complaint further, you may write to the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and ask for it to be investigated at stage 3 of the Service's Customer Interaction policy. They may be contacted by email: commissioner@northantspcc.pnn.police.uk, by telephone: (01604) 888113 or by mail: Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, East House, Force Headquarters, Wootton Hall, Northampton, NN4 0JQ.

At end of stage 3:
"If you continue to feel aggrieved, you may wish to pursue your complaint through the Local Government Ombudsman, details of how to instigate this are available via the following website: www.lgo.org.uk"

APPENDIX E

METHODS OF RECEIVING FEEDBACK

There are a number of different methods feedback can be received, examples are as follows:

- Telephone
- Letter
- Email
- Online
- In person
- Fax
- Customer comment card
- Proactive surveys
- Social media pages/accounts

It is the responsibility of the department managers to ensure that customer surveys are issued at regular intervals as detailed below:

Survey issued	Frequency	Responsibility
Strategic Plan consultation	Annually	IRMP Manager
Home Safety Visit	Available online	SIM
Fire safety inspection	Available online	SIM
After the incident	Monthly	SIM
Community safety schools' visit programme	Continuous assessment Quarterly review Annual report	Prevention, Safeguarding and Partnerships Manager
Post complaint	Issued four weeks after the completion of each complaint	SIM
Post training courses	Following completion of training course	Training and Development Team