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Edinburgh College Complaints Handling Procedure

Part 1: Overview and Structure

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Version Control

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3	Complaints Handling Co- ordinator	21/06/2024	Narrative updated.

Foreword from Vice Principal Jon Buglass

Our Complaints Handling Procedure reflects Edinburgh College's commitment to valuing complaints. It seeks to resolve customer dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of service delivery and to conduct, where appropriate, thorough, impartial and fair investigations of customer complaints, so that we can make evidence-based decisions.

The complaints procedure was developed by College staff who are experienced complaints handlers, working closely with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). The Model Complaints Handling Procedures (MCHPs) were revised in 2019 by the SPSO, in consultation with all sectors. The MCHP includes a core text, which is consistent across all public services in Scotland, with some additional text and examples specific to this sector. This procedure aims to help us 'get it right first time'. The College is committed to a quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with local, early responses by capable, well-trained staff.

All Edinburgh College staff must engage with the complaint's procedure as part of their professional role and will be supported in doing so. Staff will be provided with appropriate training to ensure they are confident in identifying complaints, empowered to resolve simple Stage 1 complaints on the spot, and familiar with how to apply this procedure (including how to record complaints).

Complaints give us valuable information we can use to improve service provision and customer satisfaction. Our Complaints Handling Procedure will enable us to address a customer's dissatisfaction and may help us prevent the same problem from happening again. For our staff, complaints provide a first-hand account of the customers' views and experience, and can highlight problems we may otherwise miss. Handled well, complaints can give our customers a form of redress when things go wrong, and can also help us continuously improve our services.

Handling complaints early creates better customer relations. Handling complaints close to the point of service delivery means we can deal with them locally and quickly, so they are less likely to escalate to the next stage of the procedure. The Complaints Handling Procedure will help us do our job better, improve relationships with our customers and enhance public perception of Edinburgh College. It will help us keep the user at the heart of the process, while enabling us to better understand how to improve our services by learning from complaints.

Structure of the Complaints Handling Procedure

1. This Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) explains to staff how to handle complaints. The CHP consists of:
 - Overview and structure (Part 1) – this document
 - When to use the procedure ([Part 2](#)) – guidance on identifying what is and what is not a complaint, handling complex or unusual complaint circumstances, the interaction of complaints and other processes, and what to do if the CHP does not apply
 - The complaints handling process ([Part 3](#)) – guidance on handling a complaint through stages 1 and 2, and dealing with post-closure contact
 - Governance of the procedure ([Part 4](#)) – staff roles and responsibilities and guidance on recording, reporting, publicising and learning from complaints
 - The customer-facing CHP ([Part 5](#)) – information for customers on how we handle complaints
2. When using the CHP, please also refer to the 'SPSO Statement of Complaints Handling Principles' and good practice guidance on complaints handling from the SPSO www.spsso.org.uk

Overview of the CHP

3. Anyone can make a complaint either verbally, in writing, face-to-face, by phone, letter or email, directly to the service involved or to the Complaints Handling Team complaints@Edinburghcollege.ac.uk or call 0131 297 8662. To ensure all complaints are formally logged, the CHC must receive a completed Frontline Resolution Form from the person dealing with the complaint within 2 working days after closure. The Complaints Handling team will contact the complainant to make sure they are happy with the service they have received and are satisfied with the outcome. The Complaints Handling team must deal with all stage 2 complaints.
4. We will try to resolve complaints to the satisfaction of the customer wherever possible. Where this isn't possible, we will give the customer a clear response to each of their points of complaint. We will always try to respond as quickly as we can (and on the spot where possible).
5. Our complaints procedure has two stages. We expect the majority of complaints will be handled at stage 1. If the customer remains dissatisfied after stage 1, they can request that we look at it again, at stage 2. If the complaint is complex enough to require an investigation, we will escalate the complaint to stage 2 straight away and omit stage 1 accordingly.

Stage 1: Frontline response	Stage 2: Investigation	Independent external review (SPSO or other)
<p>For issues that are straightforward and simple, requiring little or no investigation</p> <p>'On-the-spot' apology, explanation, or other action to put the matter right</p> <p>Complaint resolved or a response provided in five working days or less (unless there are exceptional circumstances)</p> <p>Complaints addressed by any member of staff, or alternatively referred to the appropriate point for frontline response</p> <p>Response normally face-to-face or by telephone (although sometimes we will need to put the decision in writing)</p> <p>We will let the customer know how to escalate their complaint to stage 2</p>	<p>Where the customer is not satisfied with the frontline response, or refuses to engage at the frontline, or where the complaint is complex, serious or 'high-risk'</p> <p>Complaint acknowledged within three working days</p> <p>We will contact the customer to clarify the points of complaint and outcome sought (where these are already clear, we will confirm them in the acknowledgement)</p> <p>Complaint resolved or a definitive response provided within 20 working days following a thorough investigation of the points raised</p>	<p>Where the customer is not satisfied with the stage 2 response from the service provider</p> <p>The SPSO will assess whether there is evidence of service failure or maladministration not identified by the service provider</p> <p>Some complaints may also have an alternative route for independent external review</p>

For more detailed guidance, please refer to **Edinburgh College Complaints Procedure Part 3: The Complaints Handling Process**.

Expected Behaviours

6. We expect all staff to behave in a professional manner and treat customers with courtesy, respect and dignity.
7. We also ask customers to engage actively with the complaint handling process by:
 - telling us their key issues of concern and organising any supporting information they want to give us (we understand that some people will require support to do this)
 - working with us to agree the key points of complaint when an investigation is required; and
 - responding to reasonable requests for information.
8. We have a policy in place for when these standards are not met which is our Unacceptable Actions Procedure (UAP).
9. We recognise that people may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. Sometimes a health condition or a disability can affect how a person expresses themselves. The circumstances leading to a complaint may also result in the customer acting in an unacceptable way.
10. Customers who have a history of challenging or inappropriate actions, or have difficulty expressing themselves, may still have a legitimate grievance, and we will treat all complaints seriously. However, we also recognise that the actions of some customers may result in unreasonable demands on time and resources or unacceptable behaviour towards our staff. We will, therefore, apply our policies and procedures to protect staff from unacceptable actions such as unreasonable persistence, threats or offensive behaviour from customers. Where we decide to restrict access to a customer under our Unacceptable Actions Procedure we have a process in place to communicate that decision, notify the customer of their right of appeal, and review any decision to restrict contact with us.
11. If we decide to restrict a customer's contact, we will be careful to follow the process set out in our policy and to minimise any restrictions on the customer's access to the complaints process. We will normally continue investigating a complaint even where contact restrictions are in place (for example, limiting communication to letter or to a named staff member). In some cases, it may be possible to continue investigating the complaint without contact from the customer. Our policy allows us in limited circumstances to restrict access to the complaint process entirely. This would be as a last resort, should be as limited as possible (for a limited time, or about a limited set of subjects) and requires manager approval. Where access to the complaint process is restricted, we must signpost the customer to the SPSO.
(see [Signposting to the SPSO](#)).
12. The SPSO has guidance on [Dealing with Problem Behaviour](#)

Maintaining Confidentiality and Data Protection

13. Confidentiality is important in complaints handling. This includes maintaining the customer's confidentiality and confidentiality in relation to information about staff members, contractors, or any third parties involved in the complaint.
14. This should not prevent us from being open and transparent, as far as possible, in how we handle complaints. This includes sharing as much information with the complainant (and where appropriate, any affected staff members) as we can. When sharing information, we should be clear about why the information is being shared and our expectations regarding how the recipient will use the information.
15. We must always bear in mind legal requirements, for example data protection legislation, as well as internal policies concerning confidentiality and the use of customer information.
16. Some examples of situations where a response to a complaint may be limited by confidentiality, include:
 - where a complaint has been raised against a staff member and has been upheld, we will advise the customer that their complaint is upheld, but would not share any further detail. Where rarely, it is necessary for an investigation to take place under another College employment policy and procedure such as Disciplinary, Capability or Grievance, full details of the complaint and relevant information relating to the complaint will be shared with the relevant HR Business Partner to support.
 - where someone has raised a concern about a child or an adult's safety and is unhappy about how that has been dealt with – we would look into this to check whether the safety concern had been properly dealt with, but we would not share any details of our findings in relation to the safety concern.
17. We must always bear in mind legal requirements, for example data protection legislation, as well as internal policies on confidentiality and the use of customer information. The College's Complaints Handling Team should be contacted in the first instance in relation to data protection queries relating to the complaints process. Where necessary, the College's Complaints Handling Team shall seek guidance in relation to data protection queries from the College's independent Data Protection Officer. Further information and guidance on Data Protection, including contact details for the College's Data Protection Officer, is available at <https://www.edinburghcollege.ac.uk/data-protection-and-cookies>.

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Part 2: When to use this procedure

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What is a complaint?

1. The Edinburgh College definition of a complaint is: an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about Edinburgh College's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of Edinburgh College.
2. For clarity, where an employee also receives a service from Edinburgh College as a member of the public, they may complain about that service.
3. A complaint may relate to the following, but is not restricted to this list:
 - the admissions process
 - the disciplinary process
 - a request for a service or for information which has not been actioned or answered
 - incorrect information about academic programmes or College services
 - the quality and availability of facilities and learning resources
 - accessibility of our buildings or services
 - failure or refusal to provide a service
 - inadequate quality or standard of service, or an unreasonable delay in providing a service
 - dissatisfaction with one of our policies or its impact on the individual
 - failure to properly apply law, procedure or guidance when delivering services
 - failure to follow the appropriate administrative process
 - conduct, treatment by or attitude of a member of staff or contractor (**except** where there are arrangements in place for the contractor to handle the complaint themselves: see **Complaints about contracted services**); or
 - disagreement with a decision, (**except** where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision, or an established appeals process followed throughout the sector).
4. **See Appendix 1 for examples** of complaints we may receive and how these may be handled at the Frontline Resolution Stage.

5. A complaint **is not**:

- a request for information or an explanation of policy or practice
- a disagreement with academic judgment
- a concern from a student about another student's conduct
- a routine first-time request for a service
- a request for compensation only
- issues that are in court or have already been heard by a court or a tribunal
- disagreement with a decision where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision (such as for freedom of information and subject access requests), or an established appeals process followed throughout the sector
- a request for information under the Data Protection or Freedom of Information (Scotland) Acts
- a grievance by a staff member or a grievance relating to employment or staff recruitment
- a concern raised internally by a member of staff (which was not about a service they received, such as a whistleblowing concern)
- a concern about a child or an adult's safety
- an attempt to reopen a previously concluded complaint or to have a complaint reconsidered where we have already given our final decision
- abuse or unsubstantiated allegations about our organisation or staff where such actions would be covered by our Unacceptable Actions Procedure.
- a concern about the actions or service of a different organisation, where we have no involvement in the issue (except where the other organisation is delivering services on our behalf).

6. **See Appendix 2** for examples of 'what is not a complaint' and how to direct customers appropriately.

7. We will not treat these issues as complaints and will instead direct customers to use the appropriate procedures. Some situations can involve a combination of issues, where some are complaints and others are not; each situation should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

8. If a matter is not a complaint, or not suitable to be handled under the CHP, we will explain this to the customer, and advise them about what (if any) action we will take, and why. See **What if the CHP does not apply**.

Who can make a complaint?

9. Anyone who receives, requests, or is affected by our services can make a complaint. In this procedure these people are termed 'customers', regardless of whether they are or were using a service.
10. We also accept complaints from the representative of a person who is dissatisfied with our service. See **Complaints by (or about) a third party**.

Supporting the customer

11. All members of the community have the right to equal access to our complaints procedure. It is important to recognise the barriers that some customers may face complaining. These may be physical, sensory, communication or language barriers, but can also include their anxieties and concerns. Customers may need support to overcome these barriers.
12. We have legal duties to make our complaints service accessible under equalities and mental health legislation:
 - Under the Equality Act (2010), the college has a duty to make reasonable adjustments to remove barriers to access to our services for disabled persons, for example, by providing information in alternative formats such as large print, electronic, or audio formats.
 - The Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 – this gives anyone with a 'mental disorder' (including mental health issues, learning difficulties, dementia and autism) a right to access independent advocacy. This must be delivered by independent organisations that only provide advocacy. They help people to know and understand their rights, make informed decisions and have a voice.
13. Examples of how we will meet our legal duties are:
 - proactively checking whether members of the public who contact us require additional support to access our services
 - providing interpretation and/or translation services for British Sign Language users; and
 - helping customers access independent advocacy (the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance website has information about local advocacy organisations throughout Scotland)
14. In addition to our legal duties, we will seek to ensure that we support vulnerable groups in accessing our complaints procedure. Actions that we may take include:
 - helping vulnerable customers or guardians (for those that don't have capacity) identify when they might wish to make a complaint (for example, by training frontline staff who provide services to vulnerable groups)

- helping customers access independent support or advocacy to help them understand their rights and communicate their complaints (for example, through the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance or Citizen's Advice Scotland) and
 - providing a neutral point of contact for complaints (where the relationship between customers and frontline staff is significant and ongoing).
15. These lists are not exhaustive, and we must always take into account our commitment and responsibilities to equality and accessibility.

How complaints may be made

16. Verbally, in writing, face-to-face, by phone, letter or email, directly to the service involved or to the Complaints Handling Team complaints@edinburghcollege.ac.uk or call 0131 297 8662. To ensure all complaints are formally logged, the Complaints Handling Team must receive a completed Frontline Resolution Form from the person dealing with the complaint within 2 working days after closure. The Complaints Handling Team will contact the complainant to make sure they are happy with the service they have received and are satisfied with the outcome. The Complaints Handling Team must deal with all stage 2 complaints.
17. Where a complaint is made verbally, we will make a record of the key points of complaint raised. Where it is clear that it is a complex complaint, it will be immediately categorised as stage 2 (investigation). It may be helpful to complete a complaint form with the customer's input, to ensure full details of the complaint are documented. It is important to note however, that there is no requirement for the person to complete a complaint form; the completion of a complaint form is optional and should not present a barrier to people complaining.
18. Complaint issues may also be raised on **digital platforms** (including **social media**).
19. Where a complaint issue is raised via a digital channel managed and controlled by Edinburgh College (for example an official Twitter address or Facebook page), we will respond by explaining that we do not normally take complaints on social media and telling the person how they can complain. In exceptional circumstances, we may respond to very simple complaints on social media. This will normally only be appropriate where an issue is likely to affect a large number of people, and we can provide a very simple response (for example, an apology for a cancelled bus service or late cancellation of a class).
20. We may also become aware that an issue has been raised via a digital channel not controlled or managed by us (for example a YouTube video or post on a private Facebook group). In such cases we **may** respond, where we consider it appropriate, by telling the person how they can complain.
21. We must always be mindful of our data protection obligations when responding to issues online or in a public forum. See SPSO [Maintaining confidentiality and data protection](#).

Time limit for making complaints

22. The customer must raise their complaint within six months of identifying the problem, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time (for example, where a person was not able to complain due to serious illness or recent bereavement).
23. Where a customer has received a stage 1 response and wishes to escalate to stage 2, unless there are special circumstances, they must request this either:
 - within six months of when they first knew of the problem; or
 - within two months of receiving their stage 1 response (if this is later).
24. We will apply these time limits with discretion, taking into account the seriousness of the issue, the availability of relevant records and staff involved, how long ago the events occurred, and the likelihood that an investigation will lead to a practical benefit for the customer, or useful learning for the organisation.
25. We will also take account of the time limit within which a member of the public can ask the SPSO to consider complaints (normally one year). The SPSO have discretion to waive this time limit in special circumstances (and may consider doing so in cases where we have waived our own time limit).

Particular circumstances

Complaints by (or about) a third party

26. Sometimes a customer may be unable or reluctant to make a complaint on their own. We will accept complaints from third parties, which may include relatives, friends, advocates and advisers. Where a complaint is made on behalf of a customer, we must ensure that the customer has authorised the person to act on their behalf. It is good practice to ensure the customer understands their personal information will be shared as part of the complaints handling process (particularly where this includes sensitive personal information). This can include complaints brought by parents or guardians on behalf of their child, if the child is considered to have capacity to make decisions for themselves.
27. The provision of completed and signed Complaints Authorisation Form from the customer who you are making the complaint on behalf of will normally be sufficient for us to investigate a complaint. If we consider it appropriate, we can take verbal consent directly from the customer to deal with a third party and would normally follow up in writing to confirm this.
28. In certain circumstances, a person may raise a complaint involving another person's personal data, without receiving consent. The complaint should still be investigated where possible, but the investigation and response may be limited by considerations of confidentiality. The person submitting the complaint should be made aware of these limitations and the effect this will have on the scope of the response.
29. See also SPSO [Maintaining confidentiality and data protection](#).
30. Edinburgh College's [Data Protection Handbook](#) provides general staff guidance on consent, mental capacity and secure information sharing under data protection law. However the College's Complaints Handling Team shall be responsible for obtaining and storing consent in relation to complaints (where this is required) on behalf of the College. The Complaint Handling Team shall seek guidance in relation to complaints by (or about) a third party from the College's independent Data Protection Officer where the Complaints Coordinator deems this necessary. Further information on Data Protection is available via <https://www.edinburghcollege.ac.uk/data-protection-and-cookies> or by contacting DataProtection@EdinburghCollege.ac.uk

Serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints

31. We will take particular care to identify complaints that might be considered serious, high-risk or high-profile, as these may require particular action or raise critical issues that need senior management's direct input. Serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints should normally be handled immediately at stage 2 (see **Stage 2: Investigation**).
32. We define potential high-risk or high-profile complaints as those that may involve:
 - an allegation of corruption against a College employee
 - a claim of dereliction of duty by a College employee

- a claim of personal injury that has incapacitated the customer
- a potentially significant risk to the College's operations
- a claim of discrimination, with due regard to protected characteristics as set out in section 149(7) of the Equality Act 2010
- an allegation of significant harm or abuse or where there is a suspicion that someone may suffer significant harm
- serious service failure, for example major delays in providing, or repeated failures to provide, a service; or
- significant and ongoing press interest.

Anonymous complaints

33. We value all complaints, including anonymous complaints, and will take action to consider them further wherever this is appropriate. Generally, we will consider anonymous complaints if there is enough information in the complaint to enable us to make further enquiries. Any decision not to pursue an anonymous complaint must be authorised by an appropriate manager.
34. If we pursue an anonymous complaint, we will record it as an anonymous complaint, together with any learning from the complaint and action taken.
35. If an anonymous complainant makes serious allegations, these should be dealt with in a timely manner under relevant procedures. This may not be the complaints procedure and could instead be relevant child protection, adult protection, or disciplinary procedures.

What if the customer does not want to complain?

36. If a customer has expressed dissatisfaction in line with our definition of a complaint but does not want to complain, we will explain that complaints offer us the opportunity to improve services where things have gone wrong. We will encourage the customer to submit their complaint and allow us to handle it through the CHP. This will ensure that the customer is updated about the action taken and receives a response to their complaint.
37. If the customer insists they do not wish to complain, we are not required to progress the complaint under this procedure. However, we should record the complaint as an anonymous complaint (including minimal information about the complaint, without any identifying information), to enable us to track trends and themes in complaints. Where the complaint is serious, or there is evidence of a problem with our services, we should also look into the matter to remedy this (and record any outcome).
38. Please refer to the example in Appendix 1 for further guidance.

Complaints involving more than one area or organisation

39. If a complaint relates to the actions of two or more areas within our organisation, we will let the customer know who will be taking the lead in dealing with the complaint, and explain that they will receive a single response, covering all issues raised.

40. If a customer complains to us about the service of another organisation or public service provider, but we have no involvement in the issue, the customer should be advised to contact the appropriate organisation directly.
41. If a complaint relates to our service and the service of another organisation or public service provider, and we have a direct interest in the issue, we will handle the complaint about Edinburgh College through the CHP. If we need to contact an outside body about the complaint, we will be mindful of data protection. See SPSO [Maintaining confidentiality and data protection](#).
42. These 'joint-service' complaints may be about such things as:
 - property maintenance, where the customer's dissatisfaction relates to our service and that of an external facilities body
 - accommodation not directly under our ownership
 - third-party services, for example IT systems; or
 - a student loan, where the customer is dissatisfied with our service and that of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland.

Complaints about contracted services

43. Where we use a contractor to deliver a service on our behalf we recognise that we remain responsible and accountable for ensuring that the services provided meet Edinburgh College's standard (including in relation to complaints). We will either do so by:
 - ensuring the contractor complies with this procedure; or
 - ensuring the contractor has their own procedure in place, which fully meet the standards in this procedure. At the end of the investigation stage of any such complaints, the contractor must ensure that the customer is signposted to the SPSO.
44. We will confirm that service users are clearly informed of the process and understand how to complain. We will also ensure that there is appropriate provision for information sharing and governance oversight where required.
45. Edinburgh College *has* discretion to investigate complaints about organisations contracted to deliver services on its behalf even where the procedure has normally been delegated.

Complaints about staff

Complaints about staff can be difficult to handle, as there may be conflict of interest for the staff investigating the complaint. When serious complaints are raised against senior staff, it is particularly important that the investigation is conducted by an individual who is independent of the situation. We must ensure we have strong governance arrangements in place that set out clear procedures for handling such complaints.

Complaints and other processes

46. Complaints can sometimes be confused (or overlap) with other processes, such as disciplinary or whistleblowing processes. Specific examples and guidance on how to handle these are below.

Complaints and appeals

47. In some cases, an issue may be raised as a complaint which should be considered under alternative arrangements (for example, an academic appeal or fitness to practise appeal), or vice versa. Complaints and appeals are handled under separate processes. It is not appropriate for the same issue to be considered under both procedures.
48. Where complaint and appeal issues can be clearly distinguished, we will identify the points to be investigated as a complaint and progress those in line with this procedure. This will include confirming the points of complaint and outcomes sought. We will also identify and set out the issues of appeal.
49. In determining which process applies, we may need to clarify our approach with the customer (for example, where the customer is focussed solely on the appeal outcome they may not wish to also pursue a complaint). However, we will not normally ask the customer to resubmit issues they have already raised (for example, to reframe part of their appeal as a complaint).
50. We may also decide to complete consideration under one procedure, before considering residual issues under another procedure, (for example, we may delay consideration of any complaint until an academic appeal has been concluded, or vice versa). This would normally only be appropriate where it is problematic to distinguish which issues should be dealt with under which procedure.
51. In all cases, we will explain to the customer which issues have been considered under which process, and signpost them to the appropriate independent review accordingly.

Complaints and student conduct procedures

52. A concern about the conduct of another student is not a complaint and should be handled under the Procedures for Students. However, the customer may wish to complain about how Edinburgh College has handled the situation (for example, where a teacher allowed a student's behaviour to disrupt a class or exam). Where the complaint is about our service, we will consider it under the CHP.

Complaints and service requests

53. If a customer asks Edinburgh College to do something (for example, provide a service or deal with a problem), and this is the first time the customer has contacted us, this would normally be a routine service request and not a complaint.
54. Service requests can lead to complaints if the request is not handled promptly, or the customer is dissatisfied with how we provide the service.

Complaints and disciplinary or whistleblowing processes

55. If the issues raised in a complaint overlap with issues raised under a disciplinary or whistleblowing process, we still need to respond to the complaint.
56. Our response must not contain confidential information (such as anything about the whistleblowing or disciplinary procedures, or outcomes for individual staff members). It should focus on whether Edinburgh College failed to meet our [service standards, where relevant, or expected standards] and what we have done to improve things, in general terms.
57. Staff investigating such complaints will need to take extra care to ensure that:
- we comply with all requirements of the CHP in relation to the complaint (as well as meeting the requirements of the other processes)
 - all complaint issues are addressed (sometimes issues can get missed if they are not also relevant to the overlapping process); and
- we keep records of the investigation that can be made available to the SPSO if required. This can be problematic when the other process is confidential, because SPSO will normally require documentation of any correspondence and interviews to show how conclusions were reached. We will need to consider this when planning any elements of the investigation that might overlap (for example, if staff are interviewed for the purposes of both the complaint and a disciplinary procedure, they should not be assured that any evidence given will be confidential, as it may need to be made available to the SPSO).
58. The SPSO's report [Making complaints work for everyone](#) has more information on supporting staff who are the subject of complaints. We are committed to providing support and advice to staff about the College's complaint handling procedure and, particularly, in relation to complaints which may be about the alleged actions or behaviours of a staff member. In support of this, we have developed enhanced Complaints Handling Guidance and Support for Staff.

Complaints and compensation claims

59. Where a customer is seeking financial compensation only, this is not a complaint. However, in some cases the customer may want to complain about the matter leading to their financial claim and they may seek additional outcomes, such as an apology or an explanation. Where appropriate, we may consider that matter as a complaint, but deal with the financial claim separately. It may be appropriate to extend the timeframes for responding to the complaint, to consider the financial claim first.

Complaints and legal action

60. Where a customer says that legal action is being actively pursued, this is not a complaint.
61. Where a customer indicates that they are thinking about legal action, but have not yet initiated this, they should be informed that if they take such action, they should notify

the complaints handler and that the complaints process, in relation to the matters that will be considered through the legal process, will be closed. Any outstanding complaints must still be addressed through the CHP.

62. If an issue has been, or is being, considered by a court, we must not consider the same issue under the CHP.

What to do if the CHP does not apply

63. If the issue does not meet the definition of a complaint, or it is not appropriate to handle it under this procedure (for example, due to time limits), we will explain the reason for this decision to the customer. We will also let them know what action (if any) we will take (for example, if another procedure applies), and advise them of their right to contact the SPSO, should they disagree with our decision not to respond to the issue as a complaint.
64. Where a customer continues to contact us about the same issue, we will explain that we have already given them our final response on the matter and signpost them to the SPSO. We may also consider whether we need to take action under our Unacceptable Actions Procedure or Procedures for Students.
65. The SPSO has issued a [template letter for explaining when the CHP does not apply](#).

Appendix 1 – Complaints that may be handled at the frontline stage

The following table gives examples of complaints that may be considered at the frontline stage, and suggests possible actions.

Complaint	Possible actions
<p>Two related lectures have been cancelled due to bad weather. A student complains to the course leader that this will disadvantage her and her classmates in the forthcoming exam.</p>	<p>The course leader contacts all affected students and apologises for the cancellation.</p> <p>The course leader tells the students that two extra lectures have been scheduled and gives details of times and locations.</p> <p>This actions and the complaint outcome are logged with the Complaints Handling Co-ordinator who will issues a complaint reference to the investigator and student to confirm that the complaint has been logged formally.</p>
<p>A woman complains to college reception that students in the hall of residence threw food out of a window as she was passing. She said this had been very unpleasant and it had damaged her clothes.</p>	<p>The receptionist apologises on the college's behalf and takes a note of her contact details.</p> <p>The receptionist passes them to the Complaints Handling Coordinator who opens up a Stage1 complaint.</p> <p>The outcome from the complaint investigator is an apology and offers to pay the cost of any dry-cleaning, and explains that the college will seek to identify the students to ensure that their behaviour does not recur.</p>
<p>A student complains directly to the library that she has received fine for the late return of library books when she had, in fact, returned the books on time.</p>	<p>A member of the library staff checks and confirms that the books had been returned on time, but the librarian had failed to update the computer system to reflect this. The student receives an explanation and an apology from the member of staff.</p> <p>This action and the complaint outcome are logged with the Complaints Handling Co-ordinator who will issues a complaint reference to the complaints investigator and the student to confirm that the complaint has been logged formally.</p>

Appendix 2 – What is not a complaint?

1. A concern may not necessarily be a complaint. For example, a customer might make a routine first-time request for a service. This is not a complaint, but the issue may escalate into a complaint if it is not handled effectively and the customer has to keep on asking for the service.
2. A customer may also be concerned about College decisions, which may have their own specific review or appeal procedures. Where appropriate, the College must direct customers to the relevant procedure. The following examples give details of the type of issues or concerns for which you should not use the CHP. This is not a full list, and you should decide the best route for each individual case.
3. It is important to note, that although the customer may have another form of redress as detailed above, you must consider carefully whether or not you should manage a customer's comments within the CHP. Dissatisfaction with certain College decisions may simply require an explanation and direction to the correct route. If, however, a customer says they are dissatisfied with the administrative process we have followed in reaching a decision, you may consider that dissatisfaction through the CHP. An example may be a complaint from a customer who is dissatisfied with a decision and alleges that we failed to follow or apply the appropriate guidance in arriving at that decision.

Below are some examples of issues that we cannot handle through the Complaints Handling Process and information on who to contact:

Issue 1: Appeal against an academic decision.

View: [Assessment and Appeals Procedure](#)

Issue 2: Appeal against a student funding award/non-award.

Contact: funding@edinburghcollege.ac.uk

Issue 3: Appeal against outcome of disciplinary hearing.

You must appeal in writing to your Head of Faculty within five working days of receiving your tracked email. The decision of the appeals panel is final.

Issue 4: Request under the Data Protection

Contact: dataprotection@edinburghcollege.ac.uk

Issue 5: Request under Freedom of Information Act

Contact: FOI@Edinburghcollege.ac.uk

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Edinburgh College Complaints Handling Procedure

Part 3: The Complaints Handling Process

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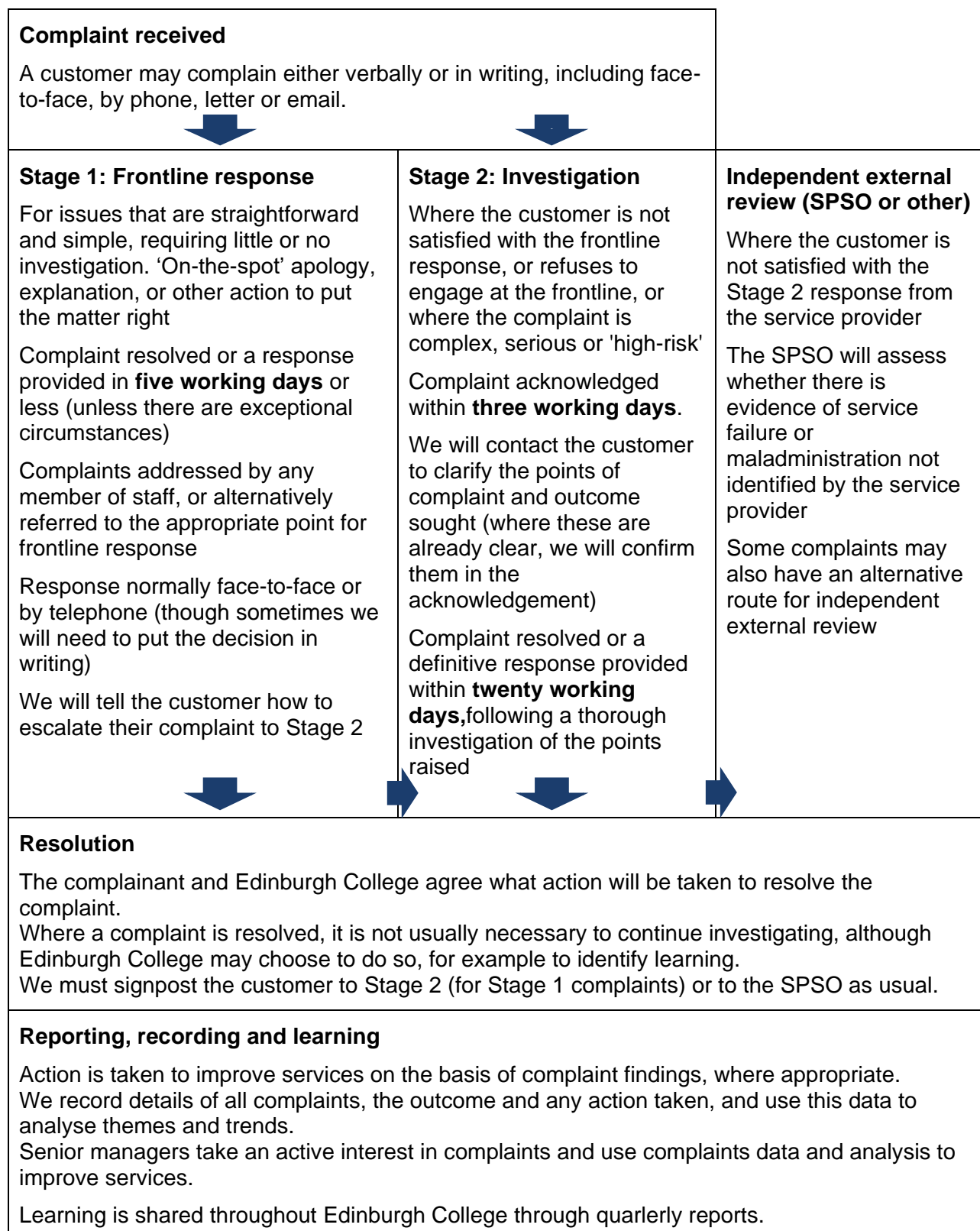
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Version Control

Version	Author	Date	Changes
3	Complaints Handling Co-ordinator	21/06/2024	Narrative updated.

The Complaints Handling Process

1. Our Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) aims to provide a quick, simple and streamlined process for responding to complaints early and locally by capable, well-trained staff. Where possible, we will **resolve** the complaint to the customer's satisfaction. Where this is not possible, we will give the customer a clear and reasoned response to their complaint.



Resolving the complaint

2. A complaint is resolved when both Edinburgh College and the customer agree what action (if any) will be taken to provide full and final resolution for the customer, without making a decision about whether the complaint is upheld or not upheld.
3. We will try to resolve complaints wherever possible, although we accept this will not be possible in all cases.
4. A complaint may be resolved at any point in the complaint handling process, including during the investigation stage. It is particularly important to try to resolve complaints where there is an ongoing relationship with the customer or where the complaint relates to an ongoing issue that may give rise to future complaints if the matter is not fully resolved.
5. It may be helpful to use alternative complaint resolution approaches when trying to resolve a complaint. See **Alternative complaint resolution approaches Point 54** or [SPSO's Good Practice Guidance: Alternative Complaint Resolution Approaches](#).
6. Where a complaint is resolved, we do not normally need to continue looking into it or provide a response on all points of complaint. There must be a clear record of how the complaint was resolved, what action was agreed, and the customer's agreement to this as a final outcome. In some cases it may still be appropriate to continue looking into the issue, for example where there is evidence of a wider problem or potential for useful learning. We will use our professional judgment in deciding whether it is appropriate to continue looking into a complaint that is resolved.
7. In all cases, we must record the complaint outcome (resolved) and any action taken, and signpost the customer to stage 2 (for stage 1 complaints) or to independent external review as usual (see **Independent external review Point 72**).
8. If the customer and Edinburgh College are not able to agree a resolution, we must follow this CHP to provide a clear and reasoned response to each of the issues raised.

What to do when you receive a complaint

9. Members of staff receiving a complaint should consider four key questions. This will help them to either respond to the complaint quickly at Stage 1 or determine whether the complaint is more suitable for Stage 2 and should be passed to the Complaints Handling Team

Key Question 1: What exactly is the customer's complaint (or complaints)?

10. It is important to be clear about exactly what the customer is complaining about. We may need to ask the customer for more information and probe further to get a full understanding.
11. We will need to decide whether the issue can be defined as a complaint and whether there are circumstances that may limit our ability to respond to the complaint (such as the time limit for making complaints, confidentiality, anonymity or the need for consent). We should also consider whether the complaint is serious, high-risk or high-profile.
12. If the matter is not suitable for handling as a complaint, we will explain this to the customer (and signpost them to SPSO). There is detailed guidance on this step in **EC Part 1: When to use this procedure**.
13. In most cases, this step will be straightforward. If it is not, the complaint may need to be handled immediately at Stage 2 (see **Stage 2: Investigation**).

Key Question 2: What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?

14. At the outset, we will clarify the outcome the customer wants. Of course, the customer may not be clear about this, and we may need to probe further to find out what they expect, and whether they can be satisfied.

Key Question 3: Can I achieve this, or explain why not?

15. If a staff member handling a complaint can achieve the expected outcome, for example by providing an on-the-spot apology, or explaining why they cannot achieve it, they should do so.
16. The customer may expect more than we can provide. If so, we will let them know as soon as possible.
17. Complaints that can be resolved or responded to quickly, should be managed at Stage 1 (see **Stage 1: Frontline response**).

Key Question 4: If I cannot respond, who can help?

18. If the complaint is simple and straightforward, but the staff member receiving the complaint cannot deal with it because for example, they are unfamiliar with the issues or area of service involved, they should pass the complaint to the Complaints Handling Team.
19. If it is not a simple and straightforward complaint that can realistically be closed within five working days (or ten, if an extension is appropriate), it should be handled immediately at Stage 2. If the customer refuses to engage at Stage 1,

insisting that they want their complaint investigated, it should be handled immediately at Stage 2. See **Stage 2: Investigation Point 36**.

If you deal with a complaint at Stage 1, it is important that you complete a Frontline Resolution form and send this to the Complaints Handling Team within 2 working days of the closure of the complaint. The Complaints Handling Team will contact the complainant to make sure they are happy with the service they have received and are satisfied with the outcome.

All Stage 2 complaints must be handled by the Complaints Handling Team

You can contact the Complaints Handling Team: complaints@edinburghcollege.ac.uk

Stage 1: Frontline response

20. Frontline response aims to respond quickly (within five working days) to straightforward complaints that require little or no investigation.
21. Any member of staff may deal with complaints at this stage (including the staff member complained about, for example with an explanation or apology). The main principle is to respond to complaints at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery as possible.
22. We may respond to the complaint by providing an on-the-spot apology where appropriate, or explaining why the issue occurred and, where possible, what will be done to stop this happening again, as appropriate. We may also explain that, as a college that values complaints, we may use the information given when we review service standards in the future. If we consider an apology is appropriate, we may wish to follow the [SPSO guidance on apology](#).
23. Complaints which are not suitable for frontline response should be identified early, and handled immediately at Stage 2: Investigation.
24. See **EC Part 2 When to use the procedure** gives examples of the types of complaint we may consider at this stage, with suggestions on how to handle them.

Notifying staff members involved

25. Where the complaint relates to the actions of a staff member, a summary of the complaint will be shared with them and their line manager at an early stage in the process. Exceptionally, it may be appropriate to respond quickly to the complainant, for example where it is clear that an apology is warranted. The College's approach is detailed in Complaints Handling Guidance and Support for Staff.

Timelines

26. Frontline response must be completed within **five working days**, although in practice we would often expect to respond to the complaint much sooner. 'Day one' is always the date of receipt of the complaint (or the next working day if the complaint is received on a weekend or public holiday). Teaching holidays should be counted as normal working days (except for weekends or public holidays).

When a complaint is received on a college working day after 3 pm it will be recorded as day one from the next college working day.

Extension to the timeline

27. In exceptional circumstances, a short extension of time may be necessary due to unforeseen circumstances (such as the availability of a key staff member). Extensions must be agreed with the Complaints Handling Team. We will tell the customer about the reasons for the extension, and when they can expect a response. The maximum extension that can be granted is five working days (that is, no more than **ten working days** in total from the date of receipt).

28. If a complaint will take more than five working days to look into, it should be handled at Stage 2 immediately. The only exception to this is where the complaint is simple and could normally be handled within five working days, but it is not possible to begin immediately (for example, due to the absence of a key staff member). In such cases, the complaint may still be handled at stage 1 if it is clear that it can be handled within the extended timeframe of up to ten working days.
29. If a complaint has not been closed within ten working days, it should be escalated to Stage 2 for a final response.
30. **Appendix 1** provides further information regarding timelines.

Closing the complaint at the frontline response stage

31. If we convey the decision face-to-face or on the telephone, we are not required to write to the customer (although we may choose to do so). We must:
 - tell the customer the outcome of the complaint (whether it is resolved, upheld, partially upheld or not upheld)
 - explain the reasons for our decision (or the agreed action taken to resolve the complaint; see Resolving the complaint); and
 - explain that the customer can escalate the complaint to Stage 2 if they remain dissatisfied and how to do so (we should not signpost to the SPSO until the customer has completed Stage 2).
32. We will keep a full and accurate record of the decision given to the customer. If we are not able to contact the customer by phone, or speak to them in person, we will provide a written response to the complaint where an email or postal address is provided, covering the points above.
33. If the complaint is about the actions of particular staff member/s, the Complaints Handling Team will share with them and their line manager a summary of the complaint response which relates to them, (unless there are compelling reasons not to).
34. If the complaint was investigated and closed by anyone else other than the Complaints Handling Team the complaint should be logged with the Complaints Handling Team by completing a Frontline Resolution form. The Complaints Handling Team will then contact the complainant to ensure that they are satisfied with the outcome and how their complaint has been handled.
35. At the earliest opportunity after the closure of the complaint, the Complaints Handling Team should consider whether any learning has been identified and issue the relevant staff with a Learning From Complaints form to complete and return.

Stage 2: Investigation

36. Not all complaints are suitable for frontline response and not all complaints will be satisfactorily addressed at that stage. All Stage 2 complaints must be handled through the Complaints Handling Team. Stage 2 is appropriate where:
- the customer is dissatisfied with the frontline response or refuses to engage at the frontline stage, insisting they wish their complaint to be investigated. Unless exceptional circumstances apply, the customer must escalate the complaint within six months of when they first knew of the problem or within two months of the stage 1 response, whichever is later (see **EC Part 2: When to use the procedure - Time limits for making a response**)
 - the complaint is not simple and straightforward (for example where the customer has raised a number of issues, or where information from several sources is needed before we can establish what happened and/or what should have happened); or
 - the complaint relates to serious, high-risk or high-profile issues (see **Part 2: When to use the procedure - serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints**)
37. An investigation aims to explore the complaint in more depth and establish all the relevant facts. The aim is to resolve the complaint where possible, or to give the customer a full, objective and proportionate response that represents our final position. Wherever possible, complaints should be investigated by someone not involved in the complaint.
38. Details of the complaint must be recorded on the complaints system. Where appropriate, this will be done as a continuation of frontline response. If the investigation stage follows a frontline response, the officer responsible for the investigation should have access to all case notes and associated information.
39. The beginning of Stage 2 is a good time to consider whether complaint resolution approaches other than investigation may be helpful (see **Alternative complaint resolution approaches**).

Acknowledging the complaint

40. Complaints must be acknowledged within three working days of receipt at Stage 2.
41. We must issue the acknowledgement in a format which is accessible to the customer, taking into account their preferred method of contact.
42. Where the points of complaint and expected outcomes are clear from the complaint, we must set these out in the acknowledgement and ask the customer to get in touch with us immediately if they disagree. See **Agreeing the points of complaint and outcome sought**.
43. Where the points of complaint and expected outcomes are not clear, we must tell the customer we will contact them to discuss this.

Agreeing the points of complaint and outcome sought

44. It is important to be clear from the start of Stage 2 about the points of complaint to be investigated and what outcome the customer is seeking. We may also need to manage the customer's expectations about the scope of our investigation.
45. Where the points of complaint and outcome sought are clear, we can confirm our understanding of these with the customer when acknowledging the complaint (see **Acknowledging the complaint**).
46. Where the points of complaint and outcome sought are not clear, we must contact the customer to confirm these. We will normally need to speak to the customer (by phone or face-to-face) to do this effectively. In some cases it may be possible to clarify complaints in writing. The key point is that we need to be sure we and the customer have a shared understanding of the complaint. When contacting the customer we will be respectful of their stated preferred method of contact. We should keep a clear record of any discussion with the customer.

47. In all cases, we must have a clear shared understanding of:

- What are the points of complaint to be investigated?

While the complaint may appear to be clear, agreeing the points of complaint at the outset ensures there is a shared understanding and avoids the complaint changing or confusion arising at a later stage. Points of a complaint should be specific enough to direct the investigation, but broad enough to include multiple specific points of concern about the same issue.

We will make every effort to agree the points of complaint with the customer (alternative complaint resolution approaches may be helpful at this stage). In very rare cases, it may not be possible to agree the points of complaint (for example, if the customer insists on an unreasonably large number of complaints being separately investigated, or on framing their complaint in an abusive way). We will manage any such cases in accordance with our Unacceptable Actions Procedure, bearing in mind that we should continue to investigate the complaint (as we understand it) wherever possible.

- **Is there anything we can't consider under the CHP?**

We must explain if there are any points that are not suitable for handling under the CHP to see **EC Part 2: When to use the procedure - What to do if the CHP does not apply**)

- What outcome does the customer want to achieve by complaining?

Asking what outcome the customer is seeking helps direct the investigation and enables us to focus on resolving the complaint where possible.

- **Are the customer's expectations realistic and achievable?**

It may be that the customer expects more than we can provide, or has unrealistic expectations about the scope of the investigation. If so, we should make this clear to the customer as soon as possible.

Notifying staff members involved

48. If the complaint is received by the Complaints Handling Team and is about the actions of a particular staff member/s, the Complaints Handling Team will notify the staff member/s involved and their line manager (including where the staff member is not named, but can be identified from the complaint). The Complaints Handling Team will:
- share a summary of the complaint information with the staff member/s and their line manager (unless there are compelling reasons not to)
 - advise them how the complaint will be handled, how they will be kept updated, and how they will share the complaint response with them
 - signpost the staff member/s to a contact person who can provide support and information on what to expect from the complaint process (this must not be the person investigating or signing off the complaint response).

Investigating the complaint

49. It is important to plan the investigation before initiating it. The staff member investigating the complaint should consider the information they have and what they need to establish:
- what happened? (this could include, for example, records of phone calls or meetings, work requests, recollections of staff members or internal emails)
 - what should have happened? (this should include any relevant policies or procedures that apply); and
 - is there a difference between what happened and what should have happened, and is Edinburgh College responsible?
50. In some cases, information may not be readily available. We will balance the need for the information against the resources required to obtain it, taking into account the seriousness of the issue (for example, it may be appropriate to contact a former employee, if possible, where they hold key information about a serious complaint).
51. If we need to share information within or outwith the college, we will be mindful of our obligations under data protection legislation. See **EC Part 1: Overview and Structure – Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.
52. The SPSO has resources for conducting investigations, including:
- [Investigation plan template](#)
 - [Decision-making tool for complaint investigators](#)

Alternative complaint resolution approaches

53. Some complex complaints, or complaints where customers and other interested parties have become entrenched in their position, may require a different approach to

resolving the matter. Where we think it is appropriate, we may use alternative complaint resolution approaches such as complaint resolution discussions, mediation or conciliation to try to resolve the matter and to reduce the risk of the complaint escalating further. If mediation is attempted, a suitably trained and qualified mediator should be used. Alternative complaint resolution approaches may help both parties to understand what has caused the complaint, and so are more likely to lead to mutually satisfactory solutions.

54. Alternative complaint resolution approaches may be used to resolve the complaint entirely, or to support one part of the process, such as understanding the complaint, or exploring the customer's desired outcome.
55. The SPSO has guidance on [alternative complaint resolution approaches](#).
56. If Edinburgh College and the customer (and any staff members involved) agree to using alternative complaint resolution approaches, it is likely that an extension to the timeline will need to be agreed. This should not discourage the use of these approaches.

Meeting with the customer during the Stage 2 investigation

57. To effectively investigate the complaint, it may be necessary to arrange a meeting with the customer. Where a meeting takes place, we will always be mindful of the requirement to investigate complaints (including holding any meetings) within twenty working days wherever possible. Where there are difficulties arranging a meeting, this may provide grounds for extending the timeframe.
58. As a matter of good practice, a brief summary of key points discussed may be provided in a follow up email.

Timelines

59. The following deadlines are appropriate to cases at the investigation stage (counting day one as the day of receipt, or the next working day if the complaint was received on a weekend or public holiday). Academic holidays should be counted as normal working days (except for weekends or public holidays).
 - Complaints must be acknowledged within **three working days**
 - a full response to the complaint should be provided as soon as possible but not later than **twenty working days** from the time the complaint was received for investigation.

When a complaint is received on a college working day after 3 pm it will be recorded as day one from the next college working day.

Extension to the timeline

60. Not all investigations will be able to meet this deadline. For example, some complaints are so complex that they require careful consideration and detailed investigation beyond the twenty working day timeline. It is important to be realistic and clear with the customer about timeframes, and to advise them early if we think it will not be possible to meet the twenty-day timeframe, and why. We should bear in mind that extended delays may have a detrimental effect on the customer.
61. Any extension must be approved by an appropriate manager. We will keep the customer and any member/s of staff complained about updated on the reason for the delay and give them a revised timescale for completion. We will contact the customer and any member/s of staff complained about at least once every twenty working days to update them on the progress of the investigation.
62. Some reasons for an extension might include the following:
- essential accounts or statements, crucial to establishing the circumstances of the case, are needed from staff, customers or others but the person is not available because of long-term sickness or leave
 - we cannot obtain further essential information within normal timescales; or
 - the customer has agreed to alternative complaint resolution approaches as a potential route for resolution.

These are only a few examples, and we will judge the matter in relation to each complaint. However, an extension would be the exception.

63. **Appendix 1** provides further information on timelines.

Closing the complaint at the investigation stage 2

64. The response to the complaint should be in writing (or by the customer's preferred method of contact) and must be signed off by the Vice Principal.
65. We will tell the customer the outcome of the complaint (whether it is resolved, upheld, partially upheld or not upheld). The quality of the complaint response is very important and in terms of good practice should:
- be clear and easy to understand, written in a way that is person-centred and non-confrontational
 - avoid technical terms, but where these must be used, an explanation of the term should be provided
 - address all the issues raised and demonstrate that each element has been fully and fairly investigated
 - include an apology where things have gone wrong. Please refer to SPSO Guidance on How to Make a Good Apology – <https://www.spsso.org.uk/sites/spsso/files/csa/ApologyGuide.pdf>
 - highlight any area of disagreement and explain why no further action can be taken

- indicate that a named member of staff is available to clarify any aspect of the letter; and
 - indicate that if they are not satisfied with the outcome of the local process, they may seek a review (see **Independent external review**).
66. Where a complaint has been resolved, the response does not need to provide a decision on all points of complaint, but should instead confirm the resolution agreed. See **Resolving the complaint**.
67. If the complaint is about the actions of a particular staff member/s, the Complaints Handling Team will share with them a summary of the complaint outcomes which relate to them, (unless there are compelling reasons not to).
68. We will record the decision, and details of how it was communicated to the customer, on the complaints system.
69. The SPSO has guidance on responding to a complaint:
- [Template decision letter](#)
 - [Apology guidance](#)
70. At the earliest opportunity after the closure of the complaint, the staff member handling the complaint should consider whether any learning has been identified. See **EC Part 4: Governance: Learning from complaints**.

Independent external review

71. Once the investigation stage has been completed, if the customer is still dissatisfied with the decision or the way we dealt with the complaint, they can ask the SPSO and/or, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (or other awarding body) to look at it. For qualifications that are regulated, if the customer remains dissatisfied with the way the awarding body has handled a complaint they may complain to the qualifications regulator, SQA Accreditation.
72. It is important for students to be given full and clear information about the types of independent external review available, to ensure that they can progress their complaint to the organisation best-placed to achieve the outcome they are seeking:
- The SPSO considers complaints about the quality of service and maladministration, which may include issues surrounding course delivery (for example, poor quality of photocopying on course materials, or failure to properly communicate changes to class times and locations). The SPSO may also look at the way we have handled complaints raised by a student (for example, concerns about plagiarism or abusive communication from other students), or the way we have handled a complaint.

There are some subject areas that are outwith the SPSO's jurisdiction. Importantly, the SPSO are not able to look at academic judgment, and they do not have the power to revise course awards.

It is the SPSO's role to determine whether an individual complaint is one that they can consider (and to what extent), and all investigation responses must signpost to the SPSO, as well as to the SQA (or other awarding body) where relevant.

- **SQA (or other awarding body)** is responsible for safeguarding quality in assessment and certification of the qualifications that it awards through colleges and other approved centres. SQA (or other awarding body) stipulates how further education centres must operate and fulfil their functions in terms of qualifications assessment and certification, via a set of standard terms. Examples of complaints that the SQA (or other awarding body) may consider include situations where a candidate believes that there has been perceived unfairness in assessment arrangements, assessment feedback or re-assessment opportunities.

Students seeking a change to academic judgement can only do this through an academic appeals process.

If a customer is dissatisfied with the response from the awarding body, they may ask SQA Accreditation to consider their complaint further.

- **SQA Accreditation** accredits a wide range of qualifications other than degrees and regulates those awarding bodies that submit qualifications for accreditation. SQA Accreditation may investigate complaints about the accredited qualification or the awarding body. SQA Accreditation may also investigate complaints of malpractice and/or maladministration in relation to the qualification delivery, assessment and certification (once these have been considered by the awarding body).

73. In all cases, the complaint must first have been considered by the College.

Signposting to the SPSO

74. Once the investigation stage has been completed, the customer has the right to approach the SPSO if they remain dissatisfied. We must make clear to the customer:

- their right to ask the SPSO to consider the complaint
- the time limit for doing so; and
- how to contact the SPSO.

75. The SPSO considers complaints from people who remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of our complaints procedure. The SPSO looks at issues such as service failure and maladministration (administrative fault), and the way we have handled the complaint. There are some subject areas that are outwith the SPSO's jurisdiction, but it is the SPSO's role to determine whether an individual complaint is one that they can consider (and to what extent). All investigation responses must signpost to the SPSO.

76. The SPSO recommends that we use the wording below to inform customers of their right to ask the SPSO to consider the complaint. This information should only be included on Edinburgh College's final response to the complaint.

Information about the SPSO

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) is the final stage for complaints about public services in Scotland. This includes complaints about the Educational Services sector. The SPSO is an independent organisation that investigates complaints. It is not an advocacy or support service (but there are other organisations who can help you with advocacy or support).

If you remain dissatisfied when you have had a final response from the college, you can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint. You can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint if:

- you have gone all the way through Edinburgh College's Complaints Handling Procedure
- it is less than 12 months after you became aware of the matter you want to complain about, and
- the matter has not been (and is not being) considered in court.

The SPSO will ask you to complete a complaint form and provide a copy of this letter (our final response to your complaint). You can do this online at www.spsso.org.uk/complain or call them on Freephone 0800 377 7330.

You may wish to get independent support or advocacy to help you progress your complaint. Organisations who may be able to assist you are:

- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance

The SPSO's contact details are:

SPSO
Bridgeside House
99 McDonald Road
Edinburgh
EH7 4NS
(if you would like to visit in person, you must make an appointment first)

Freephone: 0800 377 7330
Online contact www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us
Website: www.spsso.org.uk

Post-closure contact

77. If a customer contacts us for clarification when they have received our final response, we may have further discussion with the customer to clarify our response and answer their questions. However, if the customer is dissatisfied with our response or does not accept our findings, we will explain that we have already given them our final response on the matter and signpost them to the SPSO.

Appendix 1 - Timelines

General

1. References to timelines throughout the CHP relate to working days. We do not count non-working days, for example weekends, public holidays and days of industrial action where our service has been interrupted.
2. We do not count academic holidays as non-working days. Complaints received during academic holidays should follow the same timelines as set out for frontline response and investigation, unless there are special circumstances which would extend these timelines.

When a complaint is received on a college working day after 3 pm it will be recorded as day one from the next college working day.

Timelines at frontline response (Stage 1)

3. We will aim to achieve frontline response within five working days. The date of receipt is **day one**, and the response should be provided (or the complaint escalated) on **day five**, at the latest.
4. If we have extended the timeline at the frontline response stage in line with the CHP, the response should be provided (or the complaint escalated) on **day ten**, at the latest.

Transferring cases from frontline response to investigation

5. If the customer wants to escalate the complaint to the investigation stage, the case must be passed for investigation without delay. In practice this will mean on the same day that the customer is told this will happen.

Timelines at investigation (Stage 2)

6. For complaints at the investigation stage, **day one** is:
 - the day the case is transferred from the frontline stage to the investigation stage
 - the day the customer asks for an investigation or expresses dissatisfaction after a decision at the frontline response stage; or
 - the date we receive the complaint, if it is handled immediately at Stage 2.
7. We must acknowledge the complaint within three working days of receipt at Stage 2 i.e. by **day three**.
8. We should respond in full to the complaint by **day twenty**, at the latest. We have twenty working days to investigate the complaint, regardless of any time taken to consider it at the frontline response stage.

9. Exceptionally, we may need longer than the twenty working day limit for a full response. If so, we will explain the reasons to the customer, and update them (and any staff involved) at least once every twenty working days.

Frequently asked questions

What happens if an extension is granted at Stage 1, but then the complaint is escalated?

10. The extension at Stage 1 does not affect the timeframes at Stage 2. The Stage 2 timeframes apply from the day the complaint was escalated (we have twenty working days from this date, unless an extension is granted).

What happens if we cannot meet an extended timeframe?

11. If we cannot meet the extended timeframe at Stage 1, the complaint should be escalated to Stage 2. The maximum timeframe allowed for a Stage 1 response is ten working days.
12. If we cannot meet the extended timeframe at Stage 2, a further extension may be approved by an appropriate manager if there are clear reasons for this. This should only occur in exceptional circumstances (the original extension should allow sufficient time to realistically investigate and respond to the complaint). Where a further extension is agreed, we should explain the situation to the customer and give them a revised timeframe for completion. We must update the customer and any staff involved in the investigation at least once every twenty working days.

What happens when a customer asks for Stage 2 consideration a long time after receiving a frontline response?

13. Unless exceptional circumstances exist, customers should bring a Stage 2 complaint within six months of learning about the problem, or within two months of receiving the Stage 1 response (whichever is latest). See **link to EC Part 2: When to use the procedure - Time Limits for making a complaint**

Appendix 2 – The complaint handling process (flowchart for staff)

<p>A customer may complain verbally or in writing, including face-to-face, by phone, letter or email.</p> <p>Your first consideration is whether the complaint should be dealt with at Stage 1 (frontline response) or Stage 2 (investigation).</p>		
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div> </div>		
<p>Stage 1: Frontline response</p> <p>Always try to respond quickly, wherever we can</p>		<p>Stage 2: Investigation</p> <p>Investigate where:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The customer is dissatisfied with the frontline response or refuses to engage with attempts to handle the complaint at stage 1 It is clear that the complaint requires investigation from the outset
<div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>		↓
<p>Record the complaint and notify any staff complained about</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	<p>Record the complaint and notify any staff complained about</p> <p>Acknowledge the complaint within three working days</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	
	<p>Contact the complainant to agree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Points of complaint Outcome sought Manage expectations (where required) <p><i>(these can be confirmed in the acknowledgement where the complaint is straightforward)</i></p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	
<p>Respond to the complaint within five working days unless there are exceptional circumstances</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	<p>Respond to the complaint as soon as possible, but within twenty working days unless there is a clear reason for extending the timescale</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	
<p>Is the customer satisfied?</p> <p>You must always tell the customer how to escalate to Stage 2</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	<p>Communicate the decision, normally in writing</p> <p>Signpost the customer to SPSO and advise of time limits</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	
<p>(Yes) Record outcome and learning, and close complaint.</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	<p>(No) -> to Stage 2</p>	<p>Record outcome and learning, and close complaint</p> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>
<p>Follow up on agreed actions flowing from the complaint</p> <p>Share any learning points</p>		

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Edinburgh College Complaints Handling Procedure

Part 4: Governance

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Version Control

Version	Author	Date	Changes
3	Complaints Handling Co- ordinator	21/06/2024	Narrative updated.

Roles and responsibilities

1. **All staff will be aware of:**

- the Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP)
- Guidance and Support for Staff (including where staff are complained about)
- how to handle and record complaints at the frontline response stage (Stage 1).
- who they can refer a complaint to, in case they are not able to handle the matter
- the need to try and resolve complaints early and as close to the point of service delivery as possible; and
- their clear authority to attempt to resolve any complaints they may be called upon to deal with
- Stage 2 Complaints must be handled by the Complaints Handling Team.

2. All Edinburgh College staff must engage with the complaint's procedure as part of their professional role and will be supported in doing so. Staff will be provided with appropriate training to ensure they are confident in identifying complaints, empowered to resolve simple Stage 1 complaints on the spot, and familiar with how to apply this procedure (including how to record complaints).

3. **The Senior Management Team will ensure that:**

- Edinburgh College's response to all Stage 2 complaints will be signed off by the Vice Principal.
- it maintains overall responsibility and accountability for the management and governance of complaints handling (including complaints about contracted services)
- it has an active role in, and understanding of, the CHP (although not necessarily involved in the decision-making process of complaint handling)
- mechanisms are in place to ensure a consistent approach to the way complaints handling information is managed, monitored, reviewed and reported at all levels in Edinburgh College; and
- complaints information is used to improve services, and this is evident from regular publications.

4. **Principal/Chief Executive:** The Principal/Chief Executive supports leadership and direction in ways that guide and enable us to perform effectively across all services. This includes ensuring that there is an effective Complaints Handling Procedure, with a robust investigation process that demonstrates how we learn from the complaints we receive.

5. The Principal/Chief Executive is ultimately responsible for ensuring that there are governance and accountability arrangements in place in relation to complaints about contractors. This includes:
 - ensuring performance monitoring for complaints is a feature of the service/management agreements between Edinburgh College and contractors
 - setting clear objectives in relation to this complaints procedure and putting appropriate monitoring systems in place to provide Edinburgh College with an overview of how the contractor is meeting its objectives
6. **Vice Principals, Assistant Principals Heads of School and all other managers:**
 - managing complaints and the way we learn from them
 - overseeing the implementation of actions required as a result of a complaint
 - investigating complaints; and making recommendations on the outcome
 - deputising for the Principal/Chief Executive, as required.
 - ensuring that all complaints received in their department are logged officially with the Complaints Handling Team.
7. **Complaints Handling Team** is responsible for:
 - Leading the complaints process to ensure that the full process is followed correctly, fairly and sensitively.
 - Ensuring all complaints received are designated, investigated and responded to in accordance with the colleges CHP.
 - Recording and reporting complaint data and statistics
 - Action Learning from Complaints and raise awareness of trends
 - Update policies and procedures
 - Provide advice, guidance and training to staff on the complaints handling process
 - Responding to SPSO requests for further information within requested timescales.

8. **Complaint investigator** is responsible for:

- Notifying the Complaints Handling Team of the Stage 1 complaint if the complaint was made directly to the service by completing and returning a **Frontline Resolution form within 2 working days** of closure of the complaint.
- Establishing the facts around what has happened to reach a decision on the complaint.
- Completing a Complaint Investigation Plan for Stage 2 complaints as a record of the investigation and to inform a complaint response.
- Completing a Learning from Complaints form if requested by the Complaints Handling Team to ensure that any actions/training or recommendations have been implemented and if there has been any improvement since implementation.

Recording, reporting, learning from and publicising complaints

9. Complaints provide valuable customer feedback. One of the aims of the CHP is to identify opportunities to improve services across Edinburgh College. By recording and analysing complaints data, we can identify and address the causes of complaints and, where appropriate, identify opportunities to introduce service improvements.
10. We also have arrangements in place to ensure complaints about contractors are recorded, reported on and publicised in line with this CHP.

Recording complaints

11. It is important to record suitable data to enable us to fully investigate and respond to the complaint, as well as using our complaint information to track themes and trends. As a minimum, we should record:
 - the customer's name and contact details
 - the date the complaint was received
 - the nature of the complaint
 - the service the complaint refers to
 - staff member responsible for handling the complaint
 - action taken and outcome at frontline response stage
 - date the complaint was closed at the frontline response stage
 - date the investigation stage was initiated (if applicable)
 - action taken and outcome at investigation stage (if applicable)
 - date the complaint was closed at the investigation stage (if applicable); and
 - the underlying cause of the complaint and any remedial action taken.
 - the outcome of the SPSO's investigation (where applicable).
12. If the customer does not want to provide any of this information, we will reassure them that it will be managed appropriately, and record what we can.
13. Individual complaint files will be stored in line with our document retention policy. Information is held for six years after closure of the complaint or three years from the date of a compliment. After that, information will be destroyed securely and in line with College procedures.

Learning from complaints

14. We must have clear systems in place to act on issues identified in complaints.
As a minimum, we must:
 - seek to identify the root cause of complaints
 - take action to reduce the risk of recurrence; and
 - systematically review complaints performance reports to improve service delivery.
15. Learning may be identified from individual complaints (regardless of whether the complaint is upheld or not) and from analysis of complaints data.
16. Where we have identified the need for service improvement in response to an individual complaint, we will take appropriate action.
 - Complaints Handling Team issue a Learning from Complaint form to the appropriate staff member on completion of the investigation if there have been recommendations for improvement.
 - Actions/training/recommendations must be implemented within six weeks of the outcome to the complaint.
17. SPSO has guidance on [Learning from Complaints](#).
18. Senior management will review the information reported on complaints regularly to ensure that any trends or wider issues which may not be obvious from individual complaints are quickly identified and addressed. Where we identify the need for service improvement, we will take appropriate action (as set out above). Where appropriate, performance in the service area should be monitored to ensure that the issue has been resolved.

Reporting of complaints

19. We have a process for the internal reporting of complaints information, including analysis of complaints trends. Regularly reporting the analysis of complaints information helps to inform management of where services need to improve.
20. We will report at least quarterly to senior managers on:
 - performance statistics, in line with the complaint's performance indicators published by SPSO
 - analysis of the trends and outcomes of complaints (this should include highlighting where there are areas where few or no complaints are received, which may indicate either good practice or that there are barriers to complaining in that area).

Publicising complaints information

21. We publish on a quarterly basis information on our website on complaints outcomes and actions taken to improve services.
22. This demonstrates the improvements resulting from complaints and shows that complaints can help to improve our services. It also helps ensure transparency in our complaints handling service and will help to show our customers that we value their complaints.
23. We will publish an **annual** complaints performance report on our website in line with SPSO requirements, and provide this to the SPSO on request. This summarises and builds on the quarterly reports we have produced about our services. It includes:
 - performance statistics, in line with the complaint's performance indicators published by the SPSO; and
 - complaint trends and the actions that have been or will be taken to improve services as a result.
24. These reports must be easily accessible to members of the public and available in alternative formats as requested.

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Edinburgh College Complaints Handling Procedure

Part 5: A Guide For Complainants

Version Control

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3	Complaints Handling Co-ordinator	21/06/2024	Narrative updated.

Edinburgh College is committed to providing an excellent education and high-quality services to our students from enrolment to graduation.

We value complaints and use information from them to help us improve our services.

1. If something goes wrong or you are dissatisfied with our services, please tell us. This leaflet describes our complaints procedure and how to make a complaint. It also tells you about how we will handle your complaint and what you can expect from us.

What is a complaint?

2. We regard a complaint as any expression of dissatisfaction about our action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by us or on our behalf.

What can I complain about?

3. You can complain about things like:
 - the admissions process
 - the disciplinary process
 - a request for a service or for information which has not been actioned or answered
 - wrong information about academic programmes or college services
 - the quality and availability of facilities and learning resources
 - accessibility of our buildings or services
 - failure or refusal to provide a service
 - inadequate quality or standard of service, or an unreasonable delay in providing a service
 - dissatisfaction with one of our policies or its impact on the individual
 - failure to properly apply law, procedure or guidance when delivering services

- failure to follow the appropriate administrative process
- conduct, treatment by or attitude of a member of staff or contractor (except where there are arrangements in place for the contractor to handle the complaint themselves); or
- disagreement with a decision, (except where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision, or an established appeals process followed throughout the sector).

4. Your complaint may involve more than one college service or be about someone working on our behalf.

What can't I complain about?

5. There are some things we can't deal with through our complaints handling procedure. These include:

- a request for information or an explanation of policy or practice
- a disagreement with academic judgment
- a concern about student conduct
- a routine first-time request for a service
- a request for compensation only
- issues that are in court or have already been heard by a court or a tribunal (if you decide to take legal action, you should let us know as the complaint cannot then be considered under this process)
- disagreement with a decision where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision (such as for freedom of information and subject access requests), or an established appeals process followed throughout the sector
- a request for information under the Data Protection or Freedom of Information (Scotland) Acts
- a grievance by a staff member or a grievance relating to employment or staff recruitment
- a concern raised internally by a member of staff (which was not about a service they received, such as a whistleblowing concern)
- a concern about a child or an adult's safety
- an attempt to reopen a previously concluded complaint or to have a complaint reconsidered where we have already given our final decision
- abuse or unsubstantiated allegations about our college or staff where such actions would be covered by our Unacceptable Actions Procedure and/ or Positive Behaviour and Anti-Bullying & Harassment Guidance for Students.
- a concern about the actions or service of a different organisation, where we have no involvement in the issue (except where the other organisation is delivering services on our behalf).

6. If other procedures or rights of appeal can help you resolve your concerns, we will give information and advice to help you.

Who can complain?

7. Anyone who receives, requests or is directly affected by our services can make a complaint to us. This includes the representative of someone who is dissatisfied with our service (for example, a relative, friend, advocate or adviser). If you are making a complaint on someone else's behalf, you will normally need their written consent by asking them to complete a Complaint Authorisation Form. Please also read the section on **Getting help to make your complaint**.

How do I complain?

8. Complaints may be made verbally, in writing, face-to-face, by phone, letter or email (See our contact details).
9. Complaints can be made directly to the Complaints Handling Team, or directly to the service involved. If you complain directly to the service, you can expect to be contacted by the Complaints Handling Team shortly after your complaint has been closed to ensure that you are satisfied with the outcome and how your complaint was handled.
10. When complaining, please tell us:
- your full name and contact details
 - as much as you can about the complaint
 - what has gone wrong; and
 - what outcome you are seeking.

Our contact details

Edinburgh College
24 Milton Road East
Room 2-18
Edinburgh
EH15 2PP

E-mail: complaints@edinburghcollege.ac.uk
Telephone: 0131 297 8662

How long do I have to make a complaint?

11. Normally, you must make your complaint within six months of:
- the event you want to complain about; or
 - finding out that you have a reason to complain.

Where you have received a stage 1 response and wish to escalate to stage 2 you must request this either:

- within six months of when you first knew of the problem; or
- within two months of receiving your stage 1 response (if this is later).

12. In exceptional circumstances, we may be able to accept a complaint after the time limit. If you feel that the time limit should not apply to your complaint, please tell us why.

What happens when I have complained?

13. If your complaint relates to the actions of a staff member, a summary of the complaint will be shared with them and their line manager. Exceptionally, it may be appropriate to respond quickly to you, for example where it is clear that an apology is warranted.

Stage 1: Frontline response

14. We aim to respond to complaints quickly (where possible, when you first tell us about the issue). This could mean an on-the-spot apology and explanation if something has clearly gone wrong, or immediate action to resolve the problem.

15. We will give you our decision at Stage 1 in five working days or less, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

16. If you are not satisfied with the response we give at this stage, we will tell you what you can do next. If you choose to, you can take your complaint to Stage 2. You must normally ask us to consider your complaint at Stage 2 either:

- within six months of the event you want to complain about or finding out that you have a reason to complain; or
- within two months of receiving your stage 1 response (if this is later).

17. In exceptional circumstances, we may be able to accept a Stage 2 complaint after the time limit. If you feel that the time limit should not apply to your complaint, please tell us why.

Stage 2: Investigation

18. Stage 2 deals with two types of complaint: where the customer remains dissatisfied after Stage 1 and those that clearly require investigation, and so are handled directly at this stage. If you do not wish your complaint to be handled at stage 1, you can ask us to handle it at Stage 2 instead.

19. When using Stage 2:

- we will acknowledge receipt of your complaint within three working days
- we will confirm our understanding of the complaint we will investigate and what outcome you are looking for
- we will try to resolve your complaint where we can (in some cases we may suggest using an alternative complaint resolution approach, such as mediation); and

- where we cannot resolve your complaint, we will give you a full response as soon as possible, normally within twenty working days.

20. If our investigation will take longer than twenty working days, we will tell you. We will tell you our revised time limits and keep you updated on progress.

What if I'm still dissatisfied?

21. After we have given you our final decision, if you are still dissatisfied with our decision or the way we dealt with your complaint, you can ask the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) or the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) (or other awarding body) to look at it. For qualifications that are regulated, if you remain dissatisfied with the way the awarding body has handled your complaint then you may complain to the qualification's regulator, SQA Accreditation. The SPSO are not able to look at academic judgement and do not have the power to revise course awards. This can only be achieved through an academic appeals process. The SPSO consider complaints about the quality of service and maladministration, which may include issues surrounding course delivery.

22. In all cases, the complaint must first have been considered by Edinburgh College.

The SPSO are an independent organisation that investigates complaints. They are not an advocacy or support service (but there are other organisations who can help you with advocacy or support).

You can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint if:

- you have gone all the way through Edinburgh College's complaints handling procedure
- it is less than 12 months after you became aware of the matter you want to complain about; and
- the matter has not been (and is not being) considered in court.

The SPSO will ask you to complete a complaint form and provide a copy of our final response to your complaint. You can do this online at www.spso.org.uk/complain/form or call them on Freephone 0800 377 7330.

You may wish to get independent support or advocacy to help you progress your complaint. See the section on **Getting help to make your complaint** below.

The SPSO's contact details are:

SPSO
Bridgeside House
99 McDonald Road
Edinburgh
EH7 4NS
(if you would like to visit in person, you must make an appointment first)

Freephone: 0800 377 7330

Online contact	www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us
Website:	www.spsso.org.uk

Getting help to make your complaint

23. We understand that you may be unable or reluctant to make a complaint yourself. We accept complaints from the representative of a person who is dissatisfied with our service. We can take complaints from a friend, relative, or an advocate, if you have given them your consent by completing a Complaint Authorisation Form and sending this to: complaints@edinburghcollege.ac.uk

We are committed to making our service easy to use for all members of the community. In line with our statutory equalities duties, we will always ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to help you access and use our services. If you have trouble putting your complaint in writing, or want this information in another language or format, such as large font, or Braille, please tell us in person, by e-mail: complaints@edinburghcollege.ac.uk or call 0131 297 8662.

You may wish to get independent support or advocacy to help you progress your complaint, organisations who may be able to assist you are:

- The Citizens Advice Bureau www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland or
- The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance www.siaa.org.uk/

Quick guide to our complaints procedure

Complaints procedure

You can make your complaint in person, by phone, by email or in writing.

We have a **two-stage complaints procedure**. We will always try to deal with your complaint quickly. But if it is clear that the matter will need investigation, we will tell you and keep you updated on our progress.



Stage 1: Frontline response

We will always try to respond to your complaint quickly, within **five working days** if we can.

If you are dissatisfied with our response, you can ask us to consider your complaint at Stage 2.



Stage 2: Investigation

We will look at your complaint at this stage if you are dissatisfied with our response at stage 1. We also look at some complaints immediately at this stage, if it is clear that they need investigation.

We will acknowledge your complaint within **three working days**.

We will confirm the points of complaint to be investigated and what you want to achieve.

We will investigate the complaint and give you our decision as soon as possible. This will be after no more than **twenty working days** *unless* there is clearly a good reason for needing more time.



Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

If, after receiving our final decision on your complaint, you remain dissatisfied with our decision or the way we have handled your complaint, you can ask the SPSO to consider it.

There are some complaints that have an alternative route for independent review. We will tell you how to seek independent review when we give you our final response on your complaint.

Unacceptable actions by a complainant

24. People may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. There may have been upsetting circumstances leading up to a complaint. Edinburgh College does not view behaviour as unacceptable just because a complainant is forceful or determined. In fact, we accept that being persistent may sometimes be a positive advantage when pursuing a complaint.

However, we do consider actions that result in unreasonable demands or unreasonable behaviour towards staff to be unacceptable. It is these actions that we aim to manage through our Unacceptable Actions Procedure.