

CITY OF THOROLD POLICY AND PROCEDURE MANUAL

SECTION OF MANUAL		
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REVISED: Jan 22/19		

COMPLAINTS PROCESS

Policy Statement:

The City of Thorold is committed to a consistent and uniform process to respond to complaints received from members of the public regarding programs, facilities, City services, staff or operational procedures. This policy and the accompanying procedures outline the process to be followed and service standards for the handling of public complaints.

Purpose:

The City of Thorold recognizes the importance of public feedback and welcomes complaints as a valuable form of feedback regarding our services, operations and facilities. The information gained from complaints helps improve the quality of the services provided by the City and the its residents.

Policy Requirements:

The City of Thorold will deal with all complaints promptly, courteously, impartially and professionally. All complaints will be treated with respect and will not receive adverse treatment or any form of reprisal.

What is a Complaint:

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction about the action or lack of action taken regarding operations, facilities or services provided by the City of Thorold or by a person or body acting on behalf of the City of Thorold. All complaints filed will necessitate a response.

COMPLAINTS HANDLING POLICY

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services, staff or operational procedures. This policy and the accompanying procedures outline the process to be followed and service standards for the handling of public complaints.

Purpose

The City of Thorold recognizes the importance of public feedback and welcomes complaints as a valuable form of feedback regarding our services, operations and facilities. The information gained from complaints helps improve the quality of the services provided by the City and the its residents.

Application

This policy applies to:

- City employees, with the following exceptions:

This policy **does not** apply to:

- i) Outside boards or agencies including the Thorold Public Library Board, Thorold BIA which have their own complaints handling process.

This policy applies to complaints that are received online at www.thorold.ca, by phone, email, mail, social media, fax or at a service counter.

This policy **does not** apply to:

- i) Requests for service
- ii) Feedback
- iii) Compliments
- iv) Inquiries
- v) Anonymous complaints
- vi) Request for accommodations

These forms of communications and requests are all handled through other mechanisms and processes.

Policy Requirements

The City of Thorold will deal with all complaints promptly, courteously, impartially and professionally. All complaints will be treated with respect and will not receive adverse treatment or any form of reprisal.

All complaints will be dealt with in accordance with the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and other applicable legislation. The identity of the complainant will be made known only to those who need to know in order to consider the complaint. All participants in the complaints process shall keep the details of the complaint confidential except as may be required by law. If the matter goes through a legal process, it may be necessary to release the complainant's contact information during the resolution process.

Complaints received by one department are to be limited to that specific department unless the complaint involves more than one department. Generally, Department A will not be able to view complaints received by Department B unless operationally required to resolve the complaint.

What is a Complaint?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about the action or lack of action taken regarding operations, facilities or services provided by the City of Thorold or by a person or body acting behalf of the City of Thorold.

All complaints filed will necessitate a response.

Who can Make a Complaint?

Anyone who uses or is affected by City services can make a complaint. This includes:

- Residents
- People who work in or visit the municipality
- Local businesses
- Community Groups

Some individuals may require assistance to make a complaint and complaints can be made on their behalf, provided that the person affected has given their consent. A consent form for this purpose is available from each department.

Complaints can be Submitted

- Online via www.thorold.ca;
- By telephone;

- By email;
- By mail;
- By fax;
- In person at any City of Thorold service counter.

Service Standards

The following service standards will be adhered to in the handling of all complaints received:

- Complaints must receive an acknowledgement of receipt of their complaint and an assigned tracking number within three (3) business days. This acknowledgement must identify who will be following up on the complaint, as well as, their contact information.
- A final response or update must be sent to the complainant within twenty (20) business days, barring exceptional circumstances.
- Complaints that are forwarded between departments more than two (2) times will, at the third (3) forwarding be automatically flagged to the appropriate Director who will intervene to ensure that the complaint is received for action.

Compliance

Senior Management is responsible for implementation and ongoing compliance with the Corporate Complaints Handling Policy.

Reports will be made available indicating the number of complaints received during a specified timeframe, the number of complaints to date, the number of complaints meeting service standards, the number of complaints outstanding and the number of complaints not meeting service standards.

Responsibilities

Employees: All employees are to have knowledge and awareness of the City's requirements to receive complaints, the process through which a complaint can be made and the service standards that apply to complaints.

Supervisors: Supervisors are responsible for facilitating a prompt response to all complaints by their staff to ensure that service standards are achieved.

Managers and Directors: Manager and Directors are responsible for the receipt and response of all complaints according to the service standards set out. Managers and Directors hold responsibility for departmental compliance to the Complaints Policy.

Monitoring/Contravention

The Chief Administrative Officer may monitor compliance with this policy and will follow-up with appropriate departments as required.

Legislative and Administrative Authorities

Bill 8, the Public Sector and MPP Accountability and Transparency Act
Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act

DEFINITIONS:

Complaint – any expression of dissatisfaction about the action or lack of action taken regarding operations, facilities or services provided by the City of Thorold or by a person or body acting on behalf of the City of Thorold. The term “dissatisfaction” is key to the definition of a complaint. Feedback of a positive or general nature, comments on a service or facility that do not require a response, or requests for service, are not complaints. Complaints imply that the complainant is unhappy with the service received and that they require a follow-up response in regards to the issue.

Complainant – the person who is dissatisfied and filing the complaint. Anyone who uses or is affected by the City service can make a complaint including: residents, people who work in or visit the municipality, local businesses or community groups.

Compliment – an expression of appreciation for satisfactory or above-satisfactory service.

Feedback – input that is neither positive, negative but provides input or ideas.

Service Request – a request for a specific service provided by the City of Thorold.

COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCESS PRINCIPLES

What are our values?

Integrity is the foundation of public service and our shared values are the pillars that support it. As City employees, we are proud to perform our work with: transparency, impartiality, respect and accountability.

What Guides the City in its Complaint Handling?

- Customer-focus: we are committed to continuous improvement in service delivery.
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- Accountability: complaints are handled in a fair, respectful and transparent manner, as quickly as possible.
- Responsiveness: complaints are tracked and the complainant is informed of each step.
- Accessibility: information on how to submit a complaint is easily found on our website and through other outreach mechanisms.
- Simplicity: the process must be simple to understand and easy to use. Complaints are guided on what to include in the complaint.
- Confidentiality: complaints will be dealt with in a confidential manner according to MFIPPA. Information will be collected, used and disclosed in accordance with the Act.

The complaint process will not deal with:

- Requests for service
- Feedback and compliments
- Inquiries
- Anonymous complaints

In these cases, the Complainant will be referred to the proper forum (if possible).

Early and informal resolution is encouraged. Staff must have clear delegation and authority to resolve complaints in an informal manner at first contact, without the necessity of engaging this formal process.

Formal complaint process:

Formal complaints should be in writing. A form will be provided and available on the website as well as in an alternative format. Include information as follows:

- Details of what happened
- Where did this happen? Is it within the City's area of responsibility?
- When?
- Who was involved?
- What was said or done?
- What kind of resolution is being sought?
- Contact details of the Complainant.

Complainants should receive an acknowledgement within 3 business days and assigned a tracking number. The Complaint Owner should be identified and the Complainant should be given the Complaint Owner's contact information, as part of this acknowledgement. Acknowledgement within 3 business days and final response or update within 20 business days, barring exceptional circumstances is expected. Complaints may be prioritized, depending on the circumstances. Complainant is to be notified of the timelines.

Actioning Complaint Emails:**a. Complaint for another department**

If a complaint was received by your department in error and it should be handled by another City department, forward the email to the appropriate Manager or Director. Advise the complainant that you have forwarded their complaint, and provide them the name of the forwarded department.

b. Service request not a complaint

If an email received is not a complaint, but rather a request for service, departments should first verify if the requested service is available.

If the service is available, departments can either create the service request on behalf of the complainant or direct the complainant to the correct webpage to log their request.

c. Standard Complaint

Acknowledgement of receipt (3 business days) and a “Complaint Owner” identified. A tracking number is provided to the Complainant, which is automatically generated once the complainant has submitted a complaint on-line.

Complaint assessment – the complainant may be contacted to clarify the complaint. The complaint may be terminated at this point if a resolution is mutually determined, if it’s a duplicate, not a complaint, or is frivolous or vexatious. Complainant will be notified and redirected if possible.

Investigation of complaint – coordinated by the Complaint Owner (Manager or Director). Define the subject matter and develop an investigation plan. Consult with staff, summarize findings and identify action to resolve the complaint. The Complainant should be notified of the approximate length of time the investigation should take.

COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURES**Application**

This document outlines the procedures related to the City of Thorold Corporate Complaints Handling Process and applies to all City employees, with the exception of Public Library Board, Thorold BIA and elected officials.

Procedure Description

The following procedures outline the process governing the reception, confirmation, acknowledgement, investigation and resolution of complaints received via the following channels:

- Online via the City's website www.thorold.com;
- By telephone;
- By email;
- By mail;
- By fax;
- In person at applicable City of Thorold service counter.

What is a Complaint?

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction about the action or lack of action taken regarding operations, facilities or services provided by the City of Thorold or by a person or body acting on behalf of the City of Thorold. All complaints filed necessitate a response.

Who can make a Complaint?

Anyone who uses or is affected by City services can make a complaint. This includes:

- Residents
- People who work in or visit the municipality
- Local businesses
- Community Groups

Some individuals may require assistance to make a complaint and complaints can be made on their behalf, provided that the person affected has given their consent. A consent form for this purpose is available from each department.

Service Standards

The following service standards will be adhered to in the handling of all complaints received:

- Complaints must receive an acknowledgement of receipt of their complaint and an assigned tracking number within three (3) business days. This acknowledgement must identify who will be following up on the complaint, as well as, their contact information.
- A final response or update must be sent to the complainant within twenty (20) business days, barring exceptional circumstances.
- Complaints that are forwarded between departments more than two (2) times will, at the third (3) forwarding be automatically flagged to the appropriate Director who will intervene to ensure that the complaint is received for actioning.
- Complaints that are received by a department in error, or may be more appropriately handled by another department, can be forwarded. When the appropriate department receives the forwarded complaint, the three day response service standard begins.

Reports will be made available indicating the number of complaints received during a specified timeframe, the number of complaints to date, the number of complaints meeting service standards, the number of complaints outstanding and the number of complaints not meeting service standards.

Inputting a Complaint

Complaints made online – when a complainant makes a complaint on www.thorold.ca, they will be directed to a landing page. This page provides an explanation of the complaints process and contains definitions of what constitutes a complaint. It also includes a form to be completed by the complainant.

Complainants must include their contact information in order to submit the complaint and must choose which department their complaint applies to. To assist complainants in identifying the appropriate department a listing of departments will be provided.

If a complainant cannot determine which department the complaint should be directed to, there is a generic default option.

Generic complaint forms will be received by the Clerk's Department, who will review each complaint and direct it to the appropriate department.

Complaints made via telephone/email/mail/fax/service counter – the representative will receive the complaint and input the information related to the complaint into the complaints landing page on www.thorold.ca.

Notification of a Complaint

All complaints that are submitted online by the resident or by a staff member will be filtered and inputted on the arrival of a new complaint. The complaint will be routed to the complaint to the appropriate departmental for action.

Acknowledgment of a Complaint and Tracking Number

1. Complaint made online at www.thorold.ca

The submitter receives the following message:

Your complaint will be sent directly to the appropriate department and you will receive an acknowledgement within 3 business days. Your acknowledgement will include contact information for this person should you wish to follow up directly.

After the submission is received, the submitter will receive a tracking number to assist in any future follow-ups.

2. Complaint received via telephone

If the complaint is made via telephone, the operator will provide the three-day timeline information and the tracking number over the phone to the complainant.

3.3 Complaint received by email, mail, fax or at a service counter

In this case, the staff submitting the complaint on behalf of the complainant will receive the confirmation message and tracking number. It is then the responsibility of the inputting staff to provide the three-day timeline information and the tracking number to the original complainant. This may be provided to the client by email, mail, fax or at the counter.

Assignment of a Complaint to a Department by the System

Once a complaint is input, the online system automatically sends the complaint details to the system. Departments will then receive notification of the complaint from the system. The notification will be directed to the department designated by the system, as well as, their designated staff.

Each department has designated staff identified and trained in the use of the complaint tracking system. It is up to the receiving department to identify the appropriate division or department staff who will be assigned the complaint for follow-up.

Departments are considered the “complaint owner”. They are responsible for ensuring that staffing changes affecting who receives the complaints are promptly communicated.

Within three business days of a complaint being received at the City, the departmental staff responsible for the response must contact the complainant to confirm that the complaint is being investigated. This acknowledgement can be in the form of a verbal conversation, email, phone, fax or letter (depending upon the complainant’s preferred contact method indicated when they submitted a claim).

The acknowledgement must let the complainant know that their complaint is being reviewed and will be responded to within 20 working days. The acknowledgement must also provide the name and contact information for the person in the department who is handing the complaint.

Investigation of a Complaint by a Department

When the department receives a complaint notification from the system, they or their staff designate must log into the complaint tracking system, review the complaint and identify the appropriate departmental staff to develop the response to the complaint.

If the response takes longer than 20 business days, the complainant must again be contacted and assured that the complaint is being addressed and that a response will be provided as soon as possible. Ongoing contact with the complainant will be managed and recorded in the complaint tracking system. For example, the system will generate and record an automated message sent via email; however, all other phone calls, faxes, letters, emails and conversations need to be recorded in the complaint tracking case file.

Final Response and Close-Out of a Complaint

The response to the complaint must be approved by the Director or Manager of the Department and sent to the complainant as quickly as possible. Once this is done, the resolution date and brief summary of action taken must be entered into the online complaint system in order to close out the complaint. This may involve adding attachments to the case file.

Special Cases

a) A department receives a complaint that is meant for a different department

If a complaint is received by a department in error and needs to be handled by another City department, it should be forwarded to the appropriate Manager using the online complaint system.

If there is a delay of more than one day in the forwarding of the complaint from the initial department to the appropriate department, the initial department receiving the complaint should contact the complainant to tell them that their complaint was received and has to be re-directed to another department for response, and that they will hear from that department shortly.

A copy of that interim email to the complainant should be attached to the case file prior to forwarding the complaint to the appropriate department.

When the appropriate department receives the forwarded complaint, the three-day response service standard begins for the department now receiving the complaint.

Complaints that are forwarded a second time between department will be flagged for monitoring and follow-up.

Complaints that are forwarded between departments more than two times will, at the third forwarding, be automatically flagged to the Chief Administrative Officer, who will intervene to ensure that the complaint is completed by the respective department.

A Complaint that is Actually a Request for Service

If a complaint received is not a complaint, but rather a request for service, departments should first verify that the requested service is a service that the City of Thorold offers. If the service is available, departments can either create the service request on behalf of the complainant or can direct the complainant to the correct webpage to log their own request. If it is not available online staff will create the service request on behalf of the complainant and provide the service request number in their response to the complainant.

Hybrid Complaints

Hybrid complaints are communications that contain both a request for service and a complaint. In these instances, the complaint component should be handled directly by the appropriate complaints handling procedures and the service request aspect should be handled in the manner as outlined above.

The response sent to the complainant should clearly identify the distinction between the complaint and the request for service, along with a resolution to the complaint and the tracking number and either a service request number or instructions on how to submit a request for service.

Responsibilities

Employees: All employees are to have knowledge and awareness of the City's requirement to receive complaints, the process through which a complaint can be made and the service standards that apply to complaints.

Supervisors: Supervisors are responsible for facilitating prompt response to all complaints by their staff to ensure that service standards are achieved.

Managers and Directors: Managers and Directors are responsible for the receipt and response of all complaints according to the service standard set out. Managers and Directors hold responsibility for departmental compliance.

Quality Assurance: The Manager of IT is responsible for matters of a technical nature pertaining to the complaints system, acting as a liaison with the departments as required. Ensuring that access and the training of staff and updating contact information as required.

Definitions

Complaint – any expression of dissatisfaction about the action or lack of action taken regarding operations, facilities or services provided by the City of Thorold or by a person or body acting on behalf of the City of Thorold. The term “dissatisfaction” is key to the definition of a complaint. Feedback of a positive or general nature, comments on a service or facility that do not require a response, or requests for service are not complaints. Complaints imply that the complainant is unhappy with the service received and that they require a follow up response in regards to the issue.

Complainant – the person who is dissatisfied and filing the complaint. Anyone who uses or is affected by the City services can make a complaint including: residents, people who work in or visit the city, local businesses or community groups.

Complaint Owner – the Manager or Director of the department to which the complaint applies. The Manager or Director may delegate responsibility for responding to the complaint to another staff member; however, the Manager or Director remains the complaint owner in all instances.

Compliment – an expression of appreciation for satisfactory or above-satisfactory service.

Feedback – input from client that is neither positive, nor negative, but provides input or ideas.

Hybrid Complaint – a complaint that contains both a request for service and a complaint. In this instance, the service request should be handled as a service request and the complaint component handled directly by the appropriate Manager or Director as per Corporate Complaints Handling Procedure.

Service Request - a request for a specific service provided by the City of Thorold.

Complaint response – this needs to include: setting out the complaint, detailing how the investigation was conducted, summarizing the facts, outlining the findings, suggesting appropriate resolution along with the rationale supporting the proposed resolution.

Resolutions may take the form of an explanation, apology, reconsideration, reimbursement, restitution and/or change in policy – all are possible remedies.

Communication of the decision – providing the Complainant the response, identifying next steps/appeal. Review by Director or Chief Administrative Officer.

Complaint closed.

d. Hybrid – Emails which Contain both a Service Request and a Complaint

Some emails received may include both a request for service and a complaint. In these instances, the service request should be handled in the manner described above, and the complaint handled directly by the appropriate Manager or Director. The response sent to the complainant should clearly identify the distinction between the complaint and the request for service, along with a resolution to the complaint and either a service request number or instructions on how to submit a request for service.

Monitoring and reporting out – the complaint needs to be tracked from its initial receipt to its resolution. All complaint records will be kept securely and in accordance with corporate policy requirements and legislative responsibilities. The complaints records will be needed for regular future review and analysis so as to capture recurring issues and improve customer service and satisfaction. Periodically, the number of complaints, type of complaints, number of resolved complaints, etc. should be reported.

Until such time as a permanent online complaint system is implemented, each department must ensure they have a method in place for keeping track of complaints. This can be as simple as an excel spreadsheet or a set of email folders labelled “received” “acknowledged” “actioned” and “resolved”.

If action is taken on a complaint by telephone/voicemail, ensure that a record of this action is saved for your records in case of escalation to your respective Manager or to the Ombudsman.

Sample Responses**i) Service request created on behalf of complainant**

Thank you for contacting the City of Thorold. Upon review, it has been determined that your complaint is in fact a request for service. We have logged your request on your behalf so that the appropriate City staff can see to its resolution. Your reference number is # .

If you have similar requests in the future, we encourage you to submit them online at www.thorold.ca. By using this tool, your request will be sent immediately to the appropriate City staff.

ii) Service request NOT created on behalf of complainant

Thank you for contacting the City of Thorold. Upon review, it has been determined that your complaint is in fact a request for service. We encourage you to visit our website at www.thorold.ca in order to submit your request.

By using this online tool, your request will be sent immediately to the appropriate City staff.

Acknowledgement, Delay and Resolution - Sample

Dear _____:

Thank you for your letter dated _____ concerning (summary of letter). I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your correspondence.

I will review this matter/s you have raised and the information you have provided. If an investigation is required, it will be undertaken. All documentation related to the investigation of your concerns will be treated in a confident manner to protect your privacy; however, you should be aware that confidentiality is different than anonymity. An individual being complained about must be informed of the complaint.

We will attempt to resolve your concerns within 20 business days. If there are any delays, you will be contacted and informed of the progress in 15 day intervals.

We are always striving to improve our services at the City of Thorold, so thank you for bringing this matter to our attention. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the number listed below if you have any further inquiries.

Thank you,

Name

Advising of Delay – Sample

Dear _____:

Thank you for your feedback dated (insert date) concerning (summary of letter). It is important that we get feedback about our service, so I appreciate that you took the time and effort to let me know about your experience.

Complaints should be resolved within 20 days following receipt. I am writing to inform you that due to (reason for delay), there has been a delay resolving this issue. To date we have (progress summary).

I am hoping to come back to you as soon as possible with a complete response. Please do not hesitate to contact me at any time if you have further questions with regard to the complaint process.

Thank you again for bringing your concerns to my attention as we rely on comments such as yours to improve on the services we provide.

Thank you,

Name