COMPLAINTS & COMPLIMENTS

YORKSHIRE DALES NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

YORKSHIRE DALES
National Park

INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

	Critical	Significant	Moderate	Opportunity
Findings	0	0	1	1
Overall audit opinion	**Substantial assurance**			

Status: Final

Date Issued: 23 January 2026

Responsible Officer: Director of Corporate Services

Veritau

INTRODUCTION

The Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority (the Authority) deal with compliments and complaints either informally or formally. An informal complaint will be handled at the point of initial contact or service delivery.

Formal complaints follow the complaints process which consists of two stages. A stage one complaint comes to the Complaints Officer who acknowledges the complaint and records the details of the complainant's dissatisfaction into the Authority's complaints database, which stores summary details about the complaint. The complaints officer then passes the complaint to the senior officer most relevant to the complaint to investigate and respond.

The complainant will receive a response within 15 working days and if they are not satisfied with the response, they can request to escalate it to stage two. This involves the Authority's Chief Executive or Deputy Chief Executive reviewing the stage one response and then responding back to the complainant within 25 working days. If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they can escalate the complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, which may further investigate the complaint.

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The purpose of this audit was to provide assurance to management that procedures and controls within the system ensure that:

- Complaints and compliments are handled in line with Authority policy.
- Processes support the effective handling of complaints received from the public.
- The investigation of complaints is conducted in a timely yet robust manner and is concluded by providing good quality responses to complainants.

The Authority has separate arrangements for processing code of conduct complaints against Members of the Authority and we did not include complaints of this nature in our audit work.

KEY FINDINGS

The Authority has a published Complaints Policy[1] which clearly sets out the definition of a complaint and how to recognise the difference between a service request and a complaint, whether formal or informal. They have a webpage for compliments and complaints[2] that provides information as to how to submit either type of correspondence and a webpage for how to access information[3]. The Authority has a corporate services officer (CSO) who is responsible for the administration of complaints and compliments. This officer's contact details are published for complaints and compliments on the Authority's website.

Complaints and compliments are recorded on a database, logging details of the correspondence with the individual, including both formal and informal complaints. We found that for a sample of complaints (five formal and two informal) the Authority process had been followed appropriately in recording and responding to them, and compliments had been reported to the Senior Management Team as stated on the authority website.

For the period February 2024 to November 2025 there were 27 complaints recorded in the database supplied, 66% informal and 33% formal. The complaints process includes that informal consideration is given to complaints that can be handled at the point of original contact or service delivery. For formal complaints where complainants remain dissatisfied following the initial response, they should contact the complaints officer within 28 days of the response to request formal investigation under stage one of the Complaints Policy.

For the sample of complaints, we confirmed that they were acknowledged within one day of being received and appropriate officers were allocated to investigation work. We also confirmed responses were supplied by senior officers within the required timescales, and where there was a delay in providing a response to the complainant, correspondence was sent explaining that there would be a delay in doing so. Responses were reviewed to Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman recommended standards for decision letters and reports[4]. We confirmed that they included areas set out in the guidance, including summarising the complaint, steps taken to investigate, where evidence was obtained from and relevant legislation, guidance, policy and procedure, details of remedy offered where appropriate and available options should they be dissatisfied with the response.

[1] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority – Complaints Policy
[2] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority – Compliments and complaints
[3] Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority – Access to information
[4] LGO Guide for complaint handlers: A proportionate approach to considering complaints. Part 15.

Six monthly reports of all complaints and compliments received are presented to the Senior Management Team, and an annual report of formal complaints and compliments are presented to the Audit and Review Committee. The committee report is publicly available on the Authority website and includes appendices detailing numbers received, date received and summary of the complaint/compliment, the complaints appendix also includes the department, issue, outcome of the complaint and time taken to complete. The number of compliments and formal complaints reported matched the database for the period reported (March 2024 to February 2025).

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

A sound system of governance, risk management and control exists, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited. Our overall opinion of the controls within the system at the time of the audit was that they provided Substantial Assurance.

1 Complaints Policy and guidance — Moderate

Control weakness

While the Complaints Policy includes contact details for the corporate services officer, the Authority does not have a central complaints mailbox. The Policy does not include guidance on managing complaints or providing well-structured and suitable responses.

What is the risk?

Complaints are not received by appropriate officer(s) and not managed in line with the Complaints Policy.

Complainants are unnecessarily dissatisfied with the quality of acknowledgement and responses to complaints.

Findings

The Authority does not have a central point of contact for compliments and complaints. Both the Complaints Policy and Authority webpage include contact details for the corporate services officer who is due to leave the Authority at the end of March 2026. Due to the length of time that this officer has managed complaints at the Authority, and their contact details being published, there is a risk that once they leave the Authority the quality of complaints recording, acknowledgement and administration will reduce.

With regard to this, the Authority may take the opportunity to review the Complaints Policy and Authority website and implement a central point of contact address and implement guidance for officers fulfilling this role in the future.

The Complaints Policy does not set out how to administer and manage complaints or how to provide well-structured, accessible and appropriate responses to complaints in line with good practice guidance from the Local Government Ombudsman.[5]

Agreed action

A generic email address will be put in place, providing additional oversight, and the Complaints Policy and Authority website pages will be updated with the new contact details. The new contact details will be communicated to officers.

Responsible officer: Corporate Services Officer **Timescale:** Implemented

[5] LGO Guide for complaint handlers: A proportionate approach to considering complaints. Part 15.

Agreed action
An internal procedure, complaints officer guide, will be written setting out how complaints are to be administered and managed, including how to acknowledge complaints and what should be included in responses.

Responsible officer: Corporate Services Officer **Timescale:** 31 March 2026

2 Complaints database

Opportunity

Area for potential improvement

The database does not include the date that responses have been supplied to complainants.

What is the opportunity?

Time-sensitive response dates can be accurately recorded.

Findings

The Complaints Policy includes that there is a target framework of 25 working days to respond to a formal complaint at stage two.

We calculated the number of days between the acknowledgement and stage two response and found that both of the stage two complaint responses were made within the 25-day timescale. However, one timescale was quoted in the database as 27 days.

The complaints log has a column where the 'time taken to complete' is manually calculated and recorded. Where the complaint has progressed to stage two the number of days taken to respond to both stages is recorded.

The complaints log does not contain a column for recording the date that a stage one complaint response was issued, or the date where the complainant indicated dissatisfaction with the stage one response and requested that the complaint be progressed to stage two of the process. It also does not contain a column for the date that progression to stage two of the process was acknowledged, and it does not contain a column for the date that the stage two response was sent.

Agreed action

The database will be updated with column(s) to record the date of response to a complainant. We will explore implementing a formula to calculate the number of days taken to respond.

Responsible officer: Corporate Services Officer **Timescale:** 31 March 2026

AUDIT OPINIONS AND RATINGS 8

Audit opinions

Audit work is based on sampling transactions to test the operation of systems. It cannot guarantee the elimination of fraud or error. Our opinion is based on the risks we identify at the time of the audit. Our overall audit opinion is based on four grades of opinion, as set out below.

Opinion	Assessment of internal control
Substantial assurance	A sound system of governance, risk management and control exists, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited.
Reasonable assurance	There is a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control in place. Some issues, non-compliance or scope for improvement were identified which may put at risk the achievement of objectives in the area audited.
Limited assurance	Significant gaps, weaknesses or non-compliance were identified. Improvement is required to the system of governance, risk management and control to effectively manage risks to the achievement of objectives in the area audited.
No assurance	Immediate action is required to address fundamental gaps, weaknesses or non-compliance identified. The system of governance, risk management and control is inadequate to effectively manage risks to the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

Finding ratings

Critical	A fundamental system weakness, which presents unacceptable risk to the system objectives and requires urgent attention by management.
Significant	A significant system weakness, whose impact or frequency presents risks to the system objectives, which needs to be addressed by management.
Moderate	The system objectives are not exposed to significant risk, but the issue merits attention by management.
Opportunity	There is an opportunity for improvement in efficiency or outcomes but the system objectives are not exposed to risk.

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