



COMPLAINTS POLICY



Version Number	Date	Purpose of Change	Classification	Sign Off
V4.1	13/11/2025	Merging of EPA, NOPS and Qualifications Policies and new Formatting	Public	Kerry Ore

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Unit F8A | Holly Farm Business Park | Honiley Road | Kenilworth | CV8 1NP
T: 02476 421125
E: info@smartawards.co.uk
W: www.smartawards.co.uk

Company Number 9079735 | VAT Number 216 7632 0

1. POLICY STATEMENT

1.1 Smart Awards is committed to delivering a high-quality service across all areas of its provision, including Qualifications, Apprenticeship Assessments, End-Point Assessments (EPA) and the Network Operative Passport Scheme (NOPS).

1.2 Complaints are viewed as an opportunity to learn, improve, identify potential risks, and put things right for the individual or organisation raising the concern.

1.3 A complaint is defined as: An expression of dissatisfaction with a product or service delivered by Smart Awards, a Centre, an Employer, a Training Provider or their representatives — whether justified or not.

1.4 Smart Awards ensures that:

- Complaints are handled promptly, fairly, and professionally.
- Complainants are treated with respect and provided with clear information about next steps.
- Complaints are investigated thoroughly and objectively.
- All learning from complaints is captured to inform continuous improvement.

2. SCOPE

This Complaints Policy applies to all Smart Awards activities, including:

- Regulated Qualifications
- Apprenticeship Assessments
- End-Point Assessments (EPA)
- Network Operative Passport Scheme (NOPS)
- All staff, contractors, Centres, Employers, Training Providers, Assessors, IEPAs and NOPS users

This policy covers:

- How complaints are made
- How complaints will be acknowledged, investigated and resolved
- How complaints specific to each department (Qualifications, EPA, NOPS) are handled where processes differ
- How learning from complaints feeds into continuous improvement
- How and when escalation to regulators or external bodies occurs

3. RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 Responsible Officer

- Holds overall accountability for the complaints function.
- Ensures processes comply with regulatory requirements.
- Oversees investigation outcomes where required.
- Ensures appropriate escalations to regulators.

3.2 Quality Manager

- Day-to-day management of complaints.
- Logging, monitoring and reviewing complaints via SAMS.
- Ensuring timeframes are met.
- Ensuring lessons learned are recorded and actioned.
- Ensuring all procedures are implemented consistently.

3.3 Smart Awards Staff / Contractors

- Must respond promptly to all complaints.
- Must handle complainants professionally and respectfully.

- Must record and escalate complaints correctly.

3.4 Centres, Employers & Training Providers

- Must operate their own complaints processes where required.
- Must report complaints to Smart Awards within 3 days where relevant.
- Must cooperate fully with investigations.

3.5 NOPS Users / Organisations

- Must report breaches, misuse or concerns immediately.
- Must cooperate with any investigations.

4. POLICY PRINCIPLES

4.1 Smart Awards will:

- Provide a clear and accessible process for submitting complaints.
- Ensure all staff understand how to handle and escalate complaints.
- Ensure all complaints are investigated fairly, consistently and in a timely manner.
- Maintain confidentiality throughout the process.
- Provide full written outcomes within set timescales.
- Repair working relationships wherever possible.
- Use complaint outcomes to strengthen systems, training and quality assurance.
- Retain all complaint records for 7 years.

5. DEFINING A COMPLAINT

5.1 A complaint may involve dissatisfaction with:

- A service delivered by Smart Awards
- A Centre's administration, delivery or staff behaviour
- EPA delivery or the behaviour of IEPAs
- The NOPS system, access, data handling or misuse
- A decision, action or omission
- Quality assurance, guidance or communication
- Timeliness of Smart Awards services
- A process perceived to be unfair, biased or inconsistent

5.2 Complaints differ from:

- Appeals, which challenge decisions
- Malpractice or maladministration, which follow separate policies
- Whistleblowing, which follows the Whistleblowing Policy

6. HOW COMPLAINTS ARE RECEIVED

6.1 Complaints may be submitted via:

- Email
- Letter
- Telephone (recorded in writing immediately)
- In person (recorded immediately)

6.2 All complaints must include:

- Clear details of the issue
- Person(s) involved
- Relevant dates
- Evidence where appropriate

7. HANDLING VERBAL COMPLAINTS

7.1 Staff receiving verbal complaints must:

- Stay calm and respectful
- Listen without interruption
- Avoid debating facts initially
- Gather details before personal information
- Clarify and confirm understanding
- Explain what will happen next
- Request a written version for accuracy
- Not make promises they cannot deliver

8. UNIVERSAL COMPLAINTS PROCESS (Applies to ALL Departments)

Once Smart Awards receives a complaint:

1. Complaint logged on SAMS
2. Risk logged on Risk Register
3. Acknowledgement sent within 5 working days
4. Investigation assigned
5. Evidence gathered and documented
6. Reviewed by relevant department lead
7. Outcome issued within 28 days (where possible)
8. Learning logged and improvement actions applied
9. Escalation routes provided if complainant is dissatisfied

9. DEPARTMENTAL COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

9A – QUALIFICATIONS

9A.1 Centre Responsibilities

Centres must:

- Operate their own complaints handling procedure (C2.3)
- Escalate qualification complaints to Smart Awards within 3 days
- Maintain local complaints logs
- Cooperate fully during investigations

9A.2 Validity Considerations

Smart Awards must consider:

- Impact on qualification validity
- Impact on fairness and consistency
- Whether assessment method or centre practice failed
- Whether results remain trustworthy

9A.3 External Escalation

Unresolved qualification complaints may escalate to:

- Qualifications Scotland Accreditation
- Ofqual

9B – END-POINT ASSESSMENT (EPA)

9B.1 Independent Investigation Requirement

EPA complaints must be investigated independently of the IEPA or Training Provider.

9B.2 Adverse Effects (EPA3 Conditions)

EPA complaints must be reviewed for potential Adverse Effect, including:

- Failure in EPA delivery
- Inconsistent assessment decisions
- Gateway errors
- Assessment plan deviations
- Breach of assessment integrity
- Incorrect grading

Where applicable, Smart Awards must notify Ofqual in line with EPA3.1–3.5.

9B.3 EPA Board Review

EPA complaints relating to:

- Validity
- Inaccurate grading
- IEPA performance

9B.4 EPA Escalation

Unresolved EPA complaints may be escalated to:

- Ofqual

9C – NOPS (NETWORK OPERATIVE PASSPORT SCHEME)

9C.1 Types of NOPS Complaints

Unique to NOPS:

- Card misuse
- Fraud or attempted fraud
- Incorrect NOPS record
- Data breach / GDPR concerns
- Unauthorised access
- Misconduct
- Safety-related concerns

9C.2 External Notifications

Depending on severity, Smart Awards may notify:

- Police (fraud/criminal activity)
- ICO (data breaches)
- Employer
- Industry partners

9C.3 NOPS Investigation Steps

Includes:

- Review of NOPS audit logs
- Independence of investigator
- Verification of credentials
- Interviews and witness statements
- Full NOPS Investigation Report
- Board Decision

9C.4 NOPS Sanctions

May include:

- Suspension of NOPS access
- Card invalidation
- Termination of access
- Employer suspension
- Mandatory retraining
- Contract termination

9C.5 NOPS Appeals

Appeal must:

- Be submitted within 30 days
- Be based on allowable grounds
- Be reviewed independently
- Receive final decision from Smart Awards Board

10. RESOLUTION & OUTCOMES

10.1 This section applies to Qualifications, Apprenticeship Assessments, EPA, and NOPS.

Smart Awards is committed to resolving complaints in a fair, consistent and timely manner, and in a way that promotes confidence in our processes and outcomes.

10.2 Possible Outcomes of a Complaint. Following an investigation, the outcome will fall into one of the following categories:

a) Complaint Upheld. The evidence supports the complaint. Actions may include:

- Correction of error(s)
- Apology
- Reassessment or review
- Staff training or retraining
- Improved processes or documentation
- Amendments to learner/apprentice records
- Updating NOPS records or access settings
- Contractual action against a Centre or Provider

b) Complaint Partially Upheld. Some but not all elements of the complaint are valid. Actions may include:

- Partial remedy
- Additional monitoring
- Improvements to processes

c) Complaint Not Upheld. Investigation does not support the complaint. However, even if not upheld, Smart Awards may:

- Provide clarification
- Offer guidance
- Identify where improvements could still be made

10.3 Corrective and Preventive Actions

Corrective actions may include (but are not limited to):

- Updating assessment materials, guidance or systems
- Providing targeted staff training
- Adjusting EPA documentation or IEPA guidance
- Updating NOPS system controls or permissions
- Centre or Provider action plans
- Additional IQA/EQA monitoring
- Revisions to Smart Awards processes
- Contractual action or withdrawal of approval where necessary

Preventive actions help ensure similar issues do not occur again and may involve:

- Policy updates
- Changes to communication or guidance
- Enhancements to monitoring processes
- Review of centre performance
- Changes to IT or record-keeping processes

10.4 Communication of Outcomes

All complainants will receive a written response which includes:

- The final decision

- Summary of investigation
- Evidence considered
- Any corrective or preventive actions taken
- (Where relevant) impact on assessment outcomes
- Next steps and appeal routes

EPA-specific outcomes also consider:

- Impact on validity of assessment
- Any affected apprentices
- Review of IEPA practice
- Any required notification to Ofqual (EPA3 conditions)

NOPS-specific outcomes consider:

- Risk to safety, fraud or access controls
- Whether police or ICO involvement is needed
- Impact on NOPS validity and scheme integrity

10.5 Timescales for Resolution

Smart Awards aims to provide a full written outcome within:

- **28 days** of receipt of a complaint
- **60 days** for complex NOPS or EPA cases

Where this is not possible:

- The complainant will be updated
- A revised timescale will be provided
- Reasons for delay will be explained

10.6 Escalation Routes

If a complainant is not satisfied with the final outcome, they may escalate to:

Internal

- Smart Awards Appeals Process

External (depending on region/product)

- Ofqual (England/Northern Ireland)
- SQA Accreditation (Scotland)
- Qualifications Wales (Wales)
- Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (after Centre complaints are exhausted)

11. MONITORING & REVIEW

Smart Awards continuously monitors complaints as part of its quality assurance and risk management framework.

11.1 Management Review

The Smart Awards Board and senior leadership team will:

- Review all complaints quarterly
- Identify trends, patterns and risks
- Agree improvement actions
- Review performance against KPIs
- Review any complaints exceeding KPIs
- Ensure improvement plans are implemented
- Confirm regulatory reporting obligations have been fulfilled

11.2 Monitoring Effectiveness

Smart Awards will:

- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of this policy

- Undertake internal audits to ensure compliance
- Review complaint handling consistency across departments
- Track repeat complaints for early warning signals
- Log all complaints for 7 years
- Consider the policy's suitability, adequacy and effectiveness during annual review

Monitoring is supported by:

- The Smart Awards Risk Register
- The Complaints Log
- Internal audit activity
- EQA/EPAO oversight
- Systemic analysis (e.g., NOPS system alerts)

11.3 Continuous Improvement

Complaint outcomes inform:

- Policy updates
- Assessor/IEPA/IQA training
- Centre support and monitoring
- NOPS process enhancements
- Development and updating of quality assurance frameworks
- Improvements to customer service and guidance

Where themes emerge, Smart Awards will:

- Introduce preventive measures
- Update documentation
- Strengthen controls
- Provide targeted support or intervention

11.4 Annual Policy Review

This policy is reviewed annually or earlier if required due to:

- Changes in regulatory requirements
- Findings from audits or EQAs
- Significant complaints or trends
- Updates to Apprenticeship Assessment Plans
- Changes to NOPS infrastructure
- Legislative changes

12 OFQUAL GENERAL CONDITIONS

12.1 Condition C2.3 – Arrangements with Third Parties -That agreement must in particular include provisions which – (i) require the centre to operate a complaint handling procedure or appeals process for the benefit of learners.

12.2 Condition D3.2 – Reviewing Approach Where Adverse Effect Occurs - An awarding organisation must – (a) have due regard to all information, comments and complaints received from Users of qualifications in relation to the development, delivery and award of qualifications, and (b) take appropriate steps to prevent the recurrence of any Adverse Effect.

13. OFQUAL APPRENTICESHIP CONDITIONS

13.1 EPA1.1 – Compliance with Assessment Plan - An awarding organisation must comply with all requirements, and have regard to any guidance, contained in the relevant Assessment Plan.

13.2 EPA1.2 – Gateway Requirements - An awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to ensure that each apprentice has met the relevant Gateway requirements prior to the End-Point Assessment taking place.

13.3 EPA3.1 – Notification of Adverse Effects – An awarding organisation must promptly notify Ofqual when it has cause to believe that any event has occurred, or is likely to occur, which could have an Adverse Effect.

13.4 EPA3.3 – Information to Regulators - An awarding organisation must provide Ofqual with information relating to any event that may have affected, or may yet affect, its ability to meet the Conditions.

13.5 EPA3.4 – Mitigating Adverse Effects - An awarding organisation must inform Ofqual of the steps it has taken or intends to take to correct or mitigate the Adverse Effect.

14. QUALIFICATIONS SCOTLAND ACCREDITATION PRINCIPLES

14.1 Principle 16 – Complaints Systems - The awarding body and its providers must have open and transparent systems and procedures for dealing with complaints.

14.2 Principle 18 – Malpractice and Maladministration Safeguards - The awarding body and its providers must ensure that they have safeguards to prevent and manage cases of malpractice and maladministration.