

CORPORATE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE - PROGRESS REPORT

Background

1. Wiltshire County Council has been operating a corporate complaints procedure since December 2001. The procedure has undergone a number of amendments since then – the amendments were made in the light of the council's experience in operating the new procedure. The amendments formed part of the review of the Council's constitution, and were approved by full Council at their meeting in July 2003.
2. The Standards Committee is responsible for oversight of complaints made to the council. At their meeting in February 2003, they asked officers to bring a progress report on the implementation of the complaints procedure to the committee's September meeting. This report details developments made in the procedure since February 2003.

Issues brought forward from February 2003-08-20

3. In the report prepared for the February 2003 meeting, Standards Committee members were advised that arrangements for the consideration of complaints made to the new Department for Children, Education and Libraries had yet to be finalised. At that point, there was no designated complaints officer in that department. A designated complaints officer for the Department for Children, Education and Libraries had now been appointed, and has been in post since June 2003. This means that there is now a designated complaints officer in post in every department in the County Council.
4. Training on the complaints procedure has continued to take place. The Corporate Management Team recognises that the effective handling of customer complaints forms an essential part of the Council's commitment to improving customer care. For this reason, a series of complaints management training sessions focussing on senior managers has been devised as part of the customer care programme training package. The first pilot sessions will run in October 2003. All managers will be required to attend, since this training forms part of the new management competencies requirements.
5. Training for other staff continues. It is adapted to meet the needs of the audience, so has been delivered in the form of team briefings, formal training sessions and newsletters. The need for training is a continuing one which will form a permanent element of the complaints unit's work.

6. The software programme designed to support and track complaints made to the council is now in use in all the departments. However, not all complaints officers have received training in using the system, so this will be arranged. Use of the system has increased significantly, to the extent that it is anticipated that within the next 6 months the data entered on it will provide meaningful management information. The cultural resistance to acknowledging complaints is decreasing, resulting in more willingness on the part of officers to log complaints on the system.

Audit Commission's review of the complaints procedure

7. The Audit Commission has undertaken and completed its review of the complaints procedure, and a copy of their report will be circulated.
8. The Audit Commission concludes that "Significant progress has been made since the decision was made to introduce a corporate complaints procedure:
 - the Council now has an operating corporate complaints system
 - significant training has been provided
 - procedures and guidance provided to staff compare well with good practice."
9. The Audit Commission also noted a number of areas in which improvements can be made, and has made 13 recommendations to address these issues. The council has accepted 12 of the 13 recommendations, and has established a timetable for their implementation. The timetable has been incorporated into the action plan drawn up in conjunction with the Audit Commission, and is attached as an appendix.

Financial implications of the recommendations made in this report

10. There will be costs incurred for the printing and distribution of the complaints reference cards in recommendation 4. These have to be assessed.
11. There may be an increase in staffing costs if the review of the role of the Environmental Services Complaints Officer finds that there is insufficient capacity within one full-time post to carry out all of the work required.
12. There will be costs associated with providing further training on RESPOND. Officers need 2 days' training, which will cost a total of £2,400 plus VAT.

Assessment of risks associated with the recommendations made in this report

13. There are no risks associated with implementing the recommendations made in this report.

Recommendations

14. That the Standards Committee approves recommendations 1-8 and 9-13 of the Audit Commission's report.
15. That the Standards Committee receives a further report on progress towards these recommendations in May 2004.

STEPHEN GERRARD
Monitoring Officer

Report author: Nina Wilton, Corporate Standards Manager

Unpublished documents relied upon in the production of this report: NONE

Environmental impact of the recommendations contained in this report: NONE