

## **The Corporate Complaints Procedure For One Council**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to outline proposed changes to the handling of corporate complaints to bring them in line with good practice recommendations, to achieve an improvement in customer focus and to provide opportunities for service process improvements.

### **Introduction**

Wiltshire County Council and the 4 district councils currently operate very different complaints procedures. One of the projects in the One Council for Wiltshire Resources workstream is the production of a new complaints procedure for Wiltshire Council. This is an opportunity to incorporate existing good practice from the 5 authorities as well as to examine our procedures in the light of good practice nationally.

This report recommends some changes to the existing structures and procedures for handling customer complaints. Statutory complaints procedures (e.g. planning appeals, complaints about social services provision, SENDIST appeals) are not within the scope of this report.

The existing structure for handling corporate complaints in the County Council is a small central team (essentially, 1.25 FTE) and a dedicated complaints officer in each service department. This structure does not allow for any appreciable central oversight of complaints, and therefore limits our ability to take a strategic view of complaints. Under the existing corporate complaints procedure, a complaint is only referred to the central team when it has become extremely serious, usually at Local Government Ombudsman stage. At this point, positions may have become entrenched, and complaints are difficult to resolve.

A number of high profile complaints have been made over the last few months. Discussions between the Chief Executive, the directors of the departments most involved with those complaints, and the Corporate Standards Manager, have resulted in the view that a greater degree of transparency and visibility of complaints is needed. In addition, we need to refocus our approach to emphasise early resolution and organisational learning.

In order to inform thinking about our approach to complaints handling, the Chief Executive, the Director of the Department for Children and Education and the Corporate Standards Manager attended a meeting with the Local Government Ombudsman in July 2008. The Ombudsman gave advice on what he has found to represent good practice in complaints handling and the organisational structures to support that practice most effectively. A copy of the notes of that meeting are attached.

### **The recommended approach**

The recommended approach takes into account the following factors:

- Ombudsman's recommendations regarding good practice
- Organisational commitment to customer focussed services
- The need to achieve strategic oversight of complaints and use them to inform service improvements, on a cross-cutting basis where that is appropriate
- Good practice examples from other unitary authorities
- Workshops conducted with district and county complaints staff

It is recommended that we reduce the corporate complaints procedure from 3 stages to 2, eliminating the review panel stage. Oversight and response to complaints at the second stage of the new procedure to be conducted by the central team, in order to achieve an element of independent challenge and to facilitate a more effective strategic overview of complaints.

### **Recommendation**

CLT are asked to endorse the approach outlined above.

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