

Title: **Customer First - Complaints Process**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr Hames – Policy Co-ordination**

Reporting Officer: **Paul Mountford, Policy and Communications Services Manager**

Key Decision: **No**

Purpose

This report outlines a review of complaints and the revised complaints process that has now been put in place.

Background

Complaints handling is central to good customer care. Putting customers first is one of the Council's spotlight areas and, as such, a robust procedure to deal with corporate complaints across the Council is essential.

The Council's previous complaints procedure was approved by full Council in June 2004. Unfortunately it has not been working as intended and a number of problems were evident, including:

- Inconsistencies in the way complaints were being dealt with some being mislaid or not dealt with properly
- Undue emphasis was being placed on legal and democratic services to monitor and respond to customer complaints
- No systematic co-ordination or monitoring of complaints. This meant there was no assurance that processes were being followed, that people were satisfied with the way their complaint had been handled, or that common lessons were being learnt across the organisation

The results from a recent People's Voice questionnaire show a high level of dissatisfaction with the handling of complaints.

The issue of complaints has also been raised a number of times in recent years through external audits and inspections.

The Council's CPA report in May 2004 highlighted the fact that complaints monitoring was not being used systematically as part of the performance monitoring system. A separate review of complaints was also carried out by the Audit Commission in April 2004. This listed areas where good practice was not achieved, such as including the complaints procedure within the constitution, and recommended areas where scope for improvement existed.

More recently, the Customer Focus Inspection report in July 2005 found that there remained 'an inconsistent understanding in services about what constitutes a complaint.' The report went on to state that this may be resulting in both missed opportunities to learn from complaints and inconsistent service to customers.

New complaints process

The previous procedure has been updated and streamlined to make it work more effective for both the public and the Council. The objectives are:

- To provide the public with a simple way of making and resolving complaints
- To learn lessons from complaints to improve services and prevent reoccurring problems

A copy of the full guidance is available in the Members room. A new leaflet has also been produced and this is available in all reception areas.

The key stages of the process

The revised complaints process continues to be based on three key stages. They are:

Stage 1 case officers: These complaints are dealt with by the appropriate case officer or nominated officer within the service area. At present they do not have to be logged. They are dealt with by the service on a day to day basis often being resolved quickly on the telephone. The target timescale to deal with stage 1 complaints is five working days. If the complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant, the opportunity should be given to make it a more formal stage 2 complaint.

Stage 2 service manager: A complaints form is completed or a letter/email is sent to the Council. It is important that the complaint is put in writing to the service. These complaints are logged and passed to the service manager for investigation and response. The complaint co-ordinator tracks the complaint and ensures responses are made within the target timescale of 10 working days. Again if the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome it can be referred to stage 3.

Stage 3 chief executive: The chief executive or a nominated director will undertake further investigations into the complaint and reply in a target timescale of 10 working days. They may also involve the legal and democratic service manager if required. Any complaints sent direct to the chief executive in the first instance will normally be redirected to the relevant complaint co-ordinator and will be treated as a stage 1 complaint.

It is anticipated that most complaints will be dealt with and resolved at stage 1 and only a small number will go on to become stage 2 or stage 3 complaints. If a complaint has been through these three stages and it has still not been resolved, people are then referred to the Local Government Ombudsman.

Monitoring

Complaint co-ordinators have been appointed to act as a service contact point for complaints and they will be responsible for tracking and monitoring complaints in their service areas.

At present this monitoring will only be done at stages 2 and 3. Complaint co-ordinators will maintain a complaints file, complete a standard complaint monitoring form, and update a simple monitoring spreadsheet.

Key complaints information will then be reported through the established quarterly corporate performance monitoring process. The following information will be used to monitor complaints:

- The number of stage 2 and 3 complaints made for the whole Council and broken down by service areas
- The number of Local Government Ombudsman complaints received
- The number of justified complaints, the number resolved or not resolved, and still outstanding
- A breakdown of the type of complaints received
- The number of complaints responded to in the target time of 10 days
- Any common lessons to learn

Exclusions from the process

It is important to recognise that some complaints will not go through this process. Complaints about the conduct of Members will be referred directly to the Standards Board for England. Complaints about decisions where a legal remedy or appeal is available will be referred to that procedure. This occurs for example, in respect of planning decisions or benefit assessments.

A full list of what is excluded from the complaints process is provided in the guidance.

Communications

It is important that the public, members and all staff are aware of the Council's complaint process.

Publicising the complaints process to the public

The complaints process is detailed in a leaflet available in receptions and on the Councils website. Both include a form that can be used to make a complaint. Reference to the complaints process will also be included in West Wilts Matters that is distributed to all households.

Information for Members and officers

To launch the revised process a number of briefings have been held for complaint co-ordinators, service managers and all staff. The detailed guidance will be distributed to key staff. In addition, the new induction process for new staff will include a short presentation on complaints.

For Members, summary information will be put into the Members Information Sheet and copies of the guidance and leaflets will be available in the Members room.

Complaints monitoring information will be included in quarterly corporate performance monitoring reports to the Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet and lessons learnt will be shared through the regular service manager meetings.

Financial implications

There are no direct financial implications.

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising from this report. The complaints process will be referred to in the Councils new constitution.

Options

There are a range of options available that can be used for the handling of complaints. The approach taken has been to update and strengthen the previous complaints procedure. However, it is recognised that some further changes will be needed in future to fully integrate complaints into the customer relationship management system being introduced. This work has already started and it is likely all complaints will be handled through the new system by the end of 2006-07.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to note and support the revised corporate complaints process for the Council.

Human Rights

The Human Rights implications of the actions recommended in this report have been considered.

Background papers

Report to Corporate Management Team 12 October 2005
Complaints guidance manual November 2005
New complaints leaflet