

Title: **Complaints Procedure**

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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide details of the Council's complaints procedure and the monitoring that has taken place since November 2005.

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.

In November 2005 the complaints procedure was updated and streamlined. A number of problems had been identified with the existing procedure, one of which being that there existed no systematic co-ordination or monitoring of complaints, other than at the final stage of the complaints process. There was no assurance that processes were being followed or that lessons were being learnt across the organisation.

A 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.

The aim of the review in November 2005 was to produce a complaints process which could be applied universally across the organisation and integrated into the new customer relationship management system when available. To facilitate tracking and monitoring of complaints the following key issues were addressed:

- The definition of a complaint
- Setting out clearly the key stages of the complaints process
- Monitoring and learning from complaints

The complaints leaflet has been updated, as has the information on the Council's website.

Key issues

Complaints defined

A complaint is defined as an expression of dissatisfaction about the Council, its services or staff. A complaint requires action by the Council to put something right. A complaint could be about any of the following:

- Staff attitude or behaviour including bullying or harassment
- Discrimination including racist incidents
- Failure to provide a service to an expected standard
- Failure to provide a service within an expected timescale
- Incorrect or inadequate advice provided

There are many things which should not be treated as complaints and the complaints process does not deal with any of the following:

- A request for information or explanation about a service or procedure
- A request for service (for example, reporting an abandoned vehicle)
- Disagreement with a member decision (for example, car parking policy or level of council tax set for the year)
- Disagreement with a decision where a legal remedy or appeal is available (for example, refusal of a planning application or council tax benefit application)
- A complaint about the conduct of a member. Such complaints are passed directly to the Standards Board for England
- An insurance claim for damages
- An issue about fraud or corruption. This is dealt with under a separate procedure in Finance and Accountancy
- An issue raised by a member of staff about personnel matters. These are dealt with by Human Resources

The key stages

The corporate complaints process has three main stages and externally there is the local government ombudsman. The process is sequential and escalates complaints as required to more senior officers.

Stage 1: complaints are dealt with by the appropriate case officer or nominated officer within the service area

Stage 2: the complaint becomes formal and is dealt with by the relevant service manager

Stage 3: the complaint is investigated by the chief executive.

The target timescale for a response to complaints is 5 working days at stage 1 and 10 working days at stage 2.

A complainant who remains dissatisfied after stage 3 can refer the matter to the local government ombudsman. All complaints dealt with by the ombudsman must have gone through the Council's complaints procedure first.

Complaints monitoring

At present only stage 2 and 3 complaints are monitored. Comprehensive monitoring information from stage 1 complaints will only be available when the Customer Relationship Management system is fully operational.

Each service area has a complaints co-ordinator who is responsible for logging, acknowledging and tracking all stage 2 and 3 complaints. Each complaint is

categorised according to its subject matter and a decision is taken as to whether the complaint is justified or not justified.

The monitoring of complaints is included in the Council's quarterly corporate performance monitoring process. Key data is included in performance monitoring reports to Corporate Management Team, Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. The following information is used to monitor complaints:

- Number of stage 2 and stage 3 complaints
- Breakdown of the type of complaints received
- Number of justified complaints, and the number resolved, not resolved and still outstanding
- Percentage of stage 2 and stage 3 complaints responded to within the target time of 10 days
- Any common lessons to learn for the organisation

The following information relates to complaints received during the period November 2005, when the new procedure was introduced, to March 2006.

Stage 2 complaints	
Total Number of complaints	18
Number responded to within 10 days	13
Category	
Advice and information	5
Customer care	1
Policies	1
Service standards	10
Other	1
Outcome	
Not justified	7
Justified – resolved	7
Justified – not resolved	3
Vexatious/repeat	1
Lessons to learn	7
To stage 3	1

Stage 3 complaints	
Total Number of complaints	2
Number responded to within 10 days	0
Category	
Customer care	1
Service standards	1
Outcome	
Justified – resolved	1
Justified – not resolved	1
Lessons to learn	2
To Ombudsman	0

To summarise, over half of the 18 stage two complaints received were complaints about service standards. Of the total number of complaints received, 72% were responded to within the 10 day timescale and only one went on to become a stage three complaint. Of the two stage three complaints received, one was of a very sensitive nature and, exceptionally, was not considered at the earlier stages of the complaints procedure. Neither complaint was responded to within the 10 day timescale, demonstrating the complexity of complaints once they reach this stage in the procedure.

Taking both stage 2 and stage 3 complaints together, lessons to be learnt were identified in almost half. These will be followed up during 2006-07.

Effect on strategies and codes

Complaints monitoring and identifying lessons to be learnt is part of the Council's performance management framework. It is an important element of the customers first spotlight area.

Risk management implications

There are no significant risks associated with the complaints procedure.

Finance and performance implications

There are no financial implications. The performance implications are highlighted above.

Legal and human rights implications

There are no legal and human rights implications arising from this report.

Next Steps

Complaints data for the period up to 31 March 2006 will be included in the Council's Performance Plan 2006-07. Complaints received during 2006-07 will continue to be monitored quarterly.

Regular meetings of the complaints co-ordinators are being held to share information as the complaints process develops. The lessons learnt from complaints will be followed up through these meetings.

The complaints leaflet is being revised to include a monitoring form and additional information about the Standards Board.

Recommendations

Standards Committee is asked to review the information contained within this report.

Background papers

Working papers held in Policy and Communications.