

Managing complaints - an update

Audit & Scrutiny Committee Thursday, 8 July 2021

Report of: Head of Communications and Customer Experience

Purpose: For information

Publication status: Open

Wards affected: All

Executive summary:

The Council aims to provide an excellent experience every time a customer uses its services, but occasionally things do go wrong. When that happens, the Council would like the opportunity to put things right.

This report provides an update about the Council's approach to managing complaints and the Complaints Policy. Complaints should be reported quarterly to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee and details about what has changed as a result of a complaint are published on the website.

This report supports the Council's priority of: Building a better Council

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Recommendation to Committee:

The committee is asked to note the report.

Reason for recommendation:

The Complaints Policy stipulates complaints should be reported quarterly to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee.

A robust complaints policy ensures customer service standards are sustained and improved. It also helps maintain the Council's reputation. An approach of continuous improvement, gained by learning from complaints, supports the priority of Building a better Council.

Introduction and background

- 1 The Council aims to provide an excellent experience every time a customer uses its services, but occasionally things do go wrong. When that happens, the Council would like the opportunity to put things right.
- 2 If a service falls below the expected standard, officers work with customers to resolve any issues as quickly as possible. Where this still does not resolve the issue, customers may want to make a formal complaint.
- 3 Complaints, comments and compliments from customers help the Council identify what has worked well and what could be better.
- 4 Comments and complaints are used to see where processes should be reviewed and improvements made. In addition, compliments are passed on to staff and shared internally.
- 5 The Complaints Policy was reviewed and updated in 2020 and changes were made to make it simpler and more effective. The changes included:
 - Reducing the number of stages from four to three.
 - Making ownership of the two stages more specific.
 - Providing clearer details about what is and isn't a complaint for customers and officers.
 - Providing training and more detailed guidance to the officers responsible for responding to complaints.

Stage 1 - Resolution

- 6 If customers are not satisfied with the service they receive, they can make a Stage 1 complaint. The aim is to resolve any complaint received at this stage as quickly as possible.
- 7 Team Leaders or Specialists for the service area investigate complaints and respond.
- 8 At Stage 1 the response may be given verbally, as this often gets to the heart of the problem more quickly and can lead to a faster resolution with no need for a Stage 2 complaint. Notes of these conversations are recorded, so it is clear what has been agreed or what action will be taken as a result. If a written response is also requested this is provided.

- 9 Where the customer is not happy with the response to their Stage 1 complaint, they can escalate it to Stage 2 to be reviewed.

Stage 2 - Review

- 10 At Stage 2 the customer must clearly explain why they are dissatisfied with the Stage 1 investigation and what they think the Council needs to do to put matters right.
- 11 Stage 2 complaints are reviewed by a member of the Senior Leadership Team from a different service area. They focus on understanding the continuing concerns, whether the Stage 1 Resolution process was undertaken fairly and the conclusions reached reasonable.

Timescales

- 12 At both stages complaints:
- Are acknowledged within 2 working days.
 - Are fully investigated and responded to within 10 working days. Where this is not possible the customer is contacted to let them know when they can expect a reply.

Stage 3 - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)

- 13 If customers are still not happy with the response they receive at Stage 2, they are referred to the LGSCO. The LGSCO investigates complaints about councils with the aim of putting things right if they have gone wrong.

Learning from complaints

- 14 All staff are encouraged to feedback information they receive which could lead to potential complaints, to help prevent complaints at an earlier stage.
- 15 Councillors are encouraged to flag up any issues and work with officers to resolve problems.
- 16 As part of the Stage 1 investigations, team leaders review the process or practice used, to highlight where improvements could be made. Any changes are recorded in the system with a record of the action taken as a result, for example staff training, changes to a system or process etc.
- 17 At Stage 2 a member of the Senior Leadership Team reviews the response to Stage 1, to see if it could have been prevented from escalating to Stage 2.
- 18 Teams are encouraged to take ownership of complaints, do their utmost to resolve them and use them to improve the service.

Recording complaints

- 19 The complaints process has recently been moved onto a new software platform which should make it easier to provide more detailed reporting information about complaints in future, for example number of complaints for Stage 1 and Stage 2, percentage answered within timescales etc.
- 20 The previous system had limited functionality and it was not possible to extract data automatically. Extracting the data was a very time consuming and manual process.

Lessons learned

- 21 The new system should also help capture what lessons have been learned from complaints more easily, with the aim of improving customer service. For example, the acknowledgement e-mail sent to successful applications for a Test and Trace Support Payment was revised to provide more clarity and help manage expectations in relation to payment dates.
- 22 In several cases, the way an issue was dealt with has been discussed by officers, with an emphasis on how it might have been handled differently to prevent a complaint being raised.
- 23 More complaints training will be made available to a broader range of officers to improve responses to customers across the organisation.

Number of complaints

- 24 Compared to the previous year, there were fewer complaints between April 2020 and March 2021 as detailed in table A below.
- 25 Table A

Timescale	2019-2020	2020-2021
April to June	57	38
July to September	54	47
October to December	74	47
January to March	129	108
Total	314	240

- 26 Appendix A details complaints by service area for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.

Complaints to the LGSCO

- 27 In 2020-2021, 10 complaints were referred to the LGSCO, mainly in relation to housing and planning issues. Of these 1 was upheld, 1 was not upheld and 8 were closed after initial enquiries.

- 28 The complaint which was upheld related to a planning enforcement issue. As a result, a payment was made to the complainant by the Council and planning procedures were reviewed.
- 29 In 2019-2020, 9 complaints were referred to the Ombudsman. Of these 2 were upheld, 2 were not upheld and 5 were closed after initial enquiries.
- 30 The complaints which were upheld related to a parking ticket and failing to inform a planning agent of the likely outcome of an application. In both cases the Council responded to the complainants and improved processes.

Key implications

Comments of the Chief Finance Officer

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

It is acknowledged that dealing with complaints puts an additional resource burden on the Council in terms of staff time and correctly dealing with complaints in the early stages will reduce this.

Learning from our mistakes and improving processes will reduce the chances of reoccurrence and free up officer time to focus on delivering services. Where compensation payments are necessary these will need to be met by services from existing budgetary provision.

Comments of the Head of Legal Services

This report provides a review of complaints received and an update on the Council's complaint handling. If any complaint raises issues that may have legal implications or consequences, Legal Services should be consulted.

There is no statutory duty to report regularly to any of the committees about the Council's performance. Under Section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 (as amended) a best value authority has a statutory duty to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Regular reports about the Council's performance in responding to complaints assist in demonstrating best value and compliance with the statutory duty.

Equality

To ensure anyone is able to make a complaint, customers can submit a complaint in a number of ways. They can:

- Complete a form.
- E-mail the Council.
- Write to the Council.
- Visit the Council Offices and a complaint can be recorded by an officer.
- Call 01883 722000 and a Customer Services Advisor can complete a form for a customer over the phone.

Complaints on social media cannot be accepted, as it is too difficult to capture information and not practical if it is sensitive or confidential. When a complaint is received via social media, the complainant is asked to contact the Council in one of the above ways.

While all complaints are dealt with confidentially, anonymous complaints cannot be responded to.

Climate change

There are no significant environmental / sustainability implications associated with this report.

Appendices

Appendix A - Details of complaints by service for 2020-2021.

Background papers

None.

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