

Appendix 1

Complaints Handling April – September 2016

The purpose of this report is to explain briefly how the customer complaints process is implemented within the organisation and how we use customer feedback to continually improve our services. The report covers the following:

- What is the framework for complaints handling?
- How do customers share their feedback?
- What do customers tell us?
- How do the Council respond?
- What do we learn, and how do we use customer feedback?
- How do we monitor and continue to raise the standards of complaints handling?

What is the framework for complaints handling?

The Council has a well-established and comprehensive customer feedback handling process, which was reviewed and revised in 2014, and re-endorsed by Corporate Board in September 2015. The systems in place reinforce that we want to hear from people when we get things right, and when we could do things better. This helps us to:

- Understand what services people value and why;
- Share best practice;
- Make sure we learn and continually improve how we provide a good service to our customers;
- Recognise when our staff “go the extra mile”.

We encourage all staff to respond quickly and clearly to any concerns that are raised by individuals or groups. We want all our customers to feel confident that their views will be taken seriously, and that there will be no adverse “repercussions” if they need to raise genuine concerns.

Our procedures are designed to:

- Protect vulnerable people from abuse and lack of care
- Confirm the right of customers to make a complaint and to disagree
- Enable those denied a service to challenge that decision
- Allow customers or their representatives to complain about the quality of service
- Ensure that complaints or suggestions are acted upon
- Provide additional feedback from our customers on the quality and appropriateness of our services

- Inform planning, resource allocation and quality assurance processes.

How do customers share their feedback?

43% (196) of all complaints handled in the period April – September 2016 (454) have come via the digital web channel i.e. the Contact Us recording system. Currently, the uptake of this new way of contacting us by customers differs across the different Groups:

GROUP	% OF WEB CHANNEL USERS	% VIA CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE TELEPHONY	% VIA ONE STOP FACE TO FACE OUTLETS	% DIRECT TO SERVICE TEAMS
Communities	62%	30%	0	8%
Fire & Rescue	33%	0	0	67%
Resources	52%	10%	1%	38%
People	11%	11%	0	78%

Communities Group services are now engaging frequently through the digital channel directly with customers through their Council Self Accounts. Conversely, People Group services are still largely engaging through traditional channels directly with the operational service teams.

What do Customers they tell us?

Overall we have handled 454 complaints in the period April – September 2016. The breakdown is across the Groups is shown below:

GROUP	NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS
Communities	222
People	148
Resources	81
Fire & Rescue	3

Whilst the volume of complaint handling activity has remained fairly static for People Group and Fire and Rescue Group, there has been a significant upswing in complaint registration activity in Resources Group and Communities Group. This is likely to link to the growth in Council Self Account activity, and is currently under review to ensure that customers and staff are registering appropriately. It should be viewed as a very positive development that our customers are taking advantage of this new channel to provide us with their feedback.

Reasons for complaints across the Groups are shown below:

GROUP	REASON FOR COMPLAINT							
	Service Issues	Staff Conduct Issues	Communication Issues	Financial Issues	Discrimination Issues	Physical Environment Issues	Policy Disagreement	Other
Communities	29	18	4	0	0	11	29	130
People	79	15	6	15	0	1	2	29
Resources	19	9	4	2	2	9	3	33
Fire&Rescue	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0

It is noticeable that the primary focus of complaints for People Group is around services issues, whereas in Communities Group there are high levels of disagreement with policy. It is also within People Group that financial challenges are most often made. Communities and Resources both include services which are about physical property or holdings, and so receive a commensurate number of complaints about these. Fire and Rescue Group continue to show a very low level of complaint handling activity, which is consistent with their track record historically.

Outcomes of the complaints across the Groups are listed below:

GROUP	OUTCOME					
	UPHELD	PARTLY UPHELD	NOT UPHELD	WITHDRAWN	TRANSFERRED	OTHER
Communities	11	15	44	4	5	135
People	27	27	34	5	5	50
Resources	18	2	16	2	3	40
Fire & Rescue	1	1	0	0	0	1

NB: A piece of quality assurance evaluation is now underway to understand the "Other" outcome frequency, as this appears unduly high.

What do we learn, and how do we use customer feedback?

- We report to key decision-making and endorsement bodies, such as Committees, Corporate Board, Group Leadership Teams.
- We log and share feedback with staff about changes that have been made
 - as a consequence of customer feedback.
- We have expanded the types of customer feedback we collect. There are now systems in place across the Council to enable the collation of data on customer compliments and comments, and a new Ask a Question option. This helps to provide a more balanced and reflective view of customer feedback and satisfaction.
- Corporate Board have focused on two key performance measures on customer feedback:
- Timescale compliance

- Adverse decisions from the Local Government Ombudsman
- We also track how negative customer feedback influences service improvement. There are systems in place in different parts of the Council to encourage the collation of “learning from complaints” data, on a team, service and unit basis, and this data is used in annual reports and feedback to regulators such as OFSTED.

Opportunities to improve this are also available. There is opportunity for the Contact Us system to enable far more consistent and clear recording about organisational learning across the whole of the Council and we are progressing this.

How do we monitor and raise the standards of complaints handling?

A key element of any quality assurance process is customer feedback on the service they have received. Telephone surveys were conducted for us by Customer Service Network between February and May 2015, based on the good practice guidance in “*My expectations for raising concerns and complaints*” produced jointly by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) Healthwatch England (HWE) and the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). This presented research on what good outcomes for patients and service users look like if complaints are handled well.

The survey has helped to identify and improve important gaps between customer expectations and Council performance. It helpfully focuses attention on the following key basic satisfaction drivers for customers:

- Ease of contact
- Effective communication during the process
- Confidence in the fairness and openness of the process
- Timeliness of response
- Confidence in the quality of the review and those undertaking it

Timeliness of response has been a key focus of performance management activity over the last 18 months. This is a key performance indicator, and is reported in quarterly performance reports across the Council. Corporate Board and the Resources & Fire and Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee have received regular reports on progress with improving performance with respect to this indicator.

Our April – September 2016 data shows that overall 68% of complaints were dealt with within the agreed service timescales.

GROUP	% Within the Timescale	Performance Target For % Within Timescale
Communities	85%	60%
People	34%	40%
Resources	83%	60%
Fire & Rescue	100%	60%

For local resolution (95% of all cases), there is a 10 working day timescale (whichever complaints procedure is used – ie, General, Adult Social Care, or Children’s Social Care). Timescales for subsequent stages differ, depending on the complaints procedure being used. For more formal investigation there is a 25 working day target, and for Final Review there is a 30 working day target. The ability of different services to meet these challenging targets varies. Corporate Board and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee have been monitoring the timescale compliance issue closely, and in particular the challenges and efforts being made in People Group to improve the timeliness of complaints handling. As a consequence there has been a significant improvement over the last 12 months, and there is a continuing action plan to keep bearing down to improve this result further. This is the area where there is likely to be most complexity and sensitivity, so we would expect to see this as a more challenging area to achieve high levels of timescale compliance, especially given the current economic climate and the increased pressures within social care services.

This data has been produced using the new Contact Us system, which relies on the real time recording of complaint handling activity across the Council. As this is a new process, we are carefully auditing how well the real time recording process is being embraced across the Council, so that we can be assured we are getting an accurate reflection in this data.