

To receive and Cabinet

15 February 2024

Customer Complaints Policy

Recommendation

That Cabinet approves the revised Customer Complaints Policy (incorporating the updated Childrens and Adults Social Care Statutory Procedures) as set out in Appendix 1.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Customer Complaints Policy was last reviewed in 2020. Since that time there have been changes in how the Council operates its Customer Complaints and Contact functions including the introduction of a new customer contact centre system from January 2024.
- 1.2 As part of the design of that system the process through which customers can contact the Council (including compliments, complaints, requests for service and general comments) was reviewed. This has included a review of the Customer Complaints Policy and surrounding guidance.
- 1.3 The review concluded that greater clarity would be beneficial for both the public and officers and that the policies relating to complaints required some adjustment to reflect changes in how customers engage with the Council and to ensure that our procedures remain fit for the future. Officers have reviewed the general Customer Complaints Policy, the Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints procedure (the Childrens Procedure), and the Adults Social Care Statutory Complaints procedure (the Adults Procedure).
- 1.4 Several recommendations arise from the review:
 - 1.4.1 The overarching Customer Complaints Policy should deal with the elements common to all complaints processes and set out the general corporate complaints process.
 - 1.4.2 The Childrens Procedure and Adults Procedure should become standalone documents appended to the Customer Complaints Policy with greater clarity as to when they apply to improve efficiency of response and ensure resources are targeted where they need to be.
 - 1.4.3 All three documents should focus on providing clarity and transparency to complainants as to the process, the timescales and how they will be dealt with.
 - 1.4.4 The Council's approach to resolving matters fairly and efficiently, putting the customer at the centre of the process should be

emphasised with the approach at Stage 1 (responses from the relevant services) to be better defined within the documents.

- 1.4.5 It should be clearer on the face of the documents what does or does not fall to be considered under each procedure.
- 1.5 The revised policy and procedures are appended at Appendix 1 to this Report. They are not shown as mark ups against the earlier version given the significant differences in formatting and reorganisation from one document into three. However, officers confirm that there are no significant policy changes. The approach remains as it has always been to (a) ensure customers are able to contact the Council and express their views (positive and negative), (b) that they should be treated with respect and (c) that their complaints should be dealt with efficiently and transparently. The changes that have been made are intended to facilitate that continued approach whilst making the documents more user friendly for those contacting the Council.
- 1.6 Whilst it is important that complaints are dealt with efficiently and transparently and that people can raise concerns with the Council, it is not acceptable when communication with staff becomes inappropriate or unreasonable. Further, if a complainant does not engage with the complaints process and instead continues to direct correspondence to the Council outside of the policy and procedures (often to multiple recipients) the resources expended by the Council can be significant. In those instances, the Council requires an approach to vexatious or unreasonable behaviour. The Customer Complaints Policy has always contained such an approach. In the updated Policy, steps have been taken to clarify what constitutes unreasonable or unacceptable behaviour and how that will be dealt with. The definition and process is set out at page 11 of the Customer Complaints Policy at Appendix 1.
- 1.7 The Childrens Procedure and Adults Procedure are subject to statutory requirements and have different stages and thresholds to general customer complaints. These procedures have been reviewed for compliance with the legislation and to ensure they remain up to date and fit for purpose.
- 1.8 The Policies have also been reviewed against the architecture of the new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system introduced from January 2024 to ensure that the processes are consistent, and that the system reflects the actions that officers need to take.
- 1.9 Guidance documents for staff involved in complaints are being finalised to sit alongside the public facing documents in addition to advice being available from the Customer Relations Team and Warwickshire Legal Services.
- 1.10 Since commencement of the review, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has commenced a consultation on the introduction of a Complaints Handling Code (in collaboration with the Housing Ombudsman). This has yet to be completed and there may be a need in due course to revisit aspects of the Policy once the final position on the code is known.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report. However, it is anticipated that the renewed focus on clarity and process will drive efficiencies that improve the customer experience.

3. Environmental Implications

- 3.1 There are no environmental implications arising directly from this report.

4. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

- 4.1 If approved the Policy will be implemented following the meeting and appropriate training and communications with staff will be undertaken.

Appendices

1. Corporate Complaints Policy incorporating Childrens Social Care and Adults Social Care Statutory Procedures

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

The Chair and Party Spokes of the Resources and Fire & Rescue Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Local Member(s): N/a – county wide matter

Other members: N/a