

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Scrutiny and Overview Committee 02 April 2009

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COMPLAINTS HANDLING

Purpose

1. To provide an update regarding the current complaint handling process, enabling the Committee to comment on the way it currently operates, and to consider whether it wishes to further review the process during 2009/10.
2. To set out a potential reporting style for complaints data, enabling the Committee to decide how it would like to be informed about complaints in future.
3. To provide and analyse information regarding the complaints received during 2008/09 YTD (April 08 – Feb 09), enabling the Committee to identify any services areas which might benefit from scrutiny in 2009/10.

Options

4. The Committee may choose any or none of the following regarding the complaints handling process:
 - a) endorse the current process
 - b) make recommendations for improving the current process
 - c) ask for an update later in 2009/10
 - d) agree to add the complaints process to the list of potential scrutiny topics for 2009/10
5. The Committee can choose any or none of the following regarding the reporting of complaints to the Committee in 2009/10:
 - a) agree to the reporting style set out in the report
 - b) make recommendations for improving the reporting style
 - c) agree a frequency for future reports
 - d) agree that, rather than reports to the Committee, the Chairman will maintain a watching brief and ask for reports only when a role for scrutiny is evident
6. The Committee can choose either of the following regarding the content of the complaints listed in this report:
 - a) agree that there is insufficient evidence at this stage to identify any particular area of service or policy for future scrutiny

- b) agree to add one or more service or policy issue to the list of potential scrutiny topics for 2009/10

Background

- 7. This Committee has considered the current complaints handling process on two occasions: on 15 March 2007, describing the new three-stage process; and on 19 June 2008, evaluating the first year.
- 8. At the 2008 meeting, Members expressed concern regarding complaints received by Councillors not being logged onto the system, perhaps meaning that the Council's decision makers were being influenced by an incomplete picture of the complaints made overall about the authority's services.
- 9. The Committee also examined residents' satisfaction with the complaints handling process. The Council was in the bottom quartile nationally, with a 32% satisfaction rate in the process, although the top quartile was only 38%.
- 10. The Committee suggested that the Council could benefit from examining the complaints system used by Addenbrookes Hospital. However, this was not pursued as the lead officer left the Council later in 2008.
- 11. A new Customer Services Officer joined the Council in February 2009 and his role includes responsibility for running and improving the complaints handling process.

Customer Service Standards

- 12. The Council's complaints handling process promises complainants that:
 - (a) We will acknowledge receipt of a complaint within 3 working days.
 - (b) The complaint will be passed to the appropriate Corporate Manager, who will send a reply within 10 working days.
 - (c) If the investigation into a complaint will not be completed with 10 working days, then we send a letter informing the complainant of the progress and expected timescale.
 - (d) If we have made a mistake, we apologise and explain what measures are being taken to put things right.
- 13. There are three stages to the Council's complaints handling process:
 - a) **Stage 1 Complaints**
All new complaints are logged as stage 1. The complaint is passed to the relevant Corporate Manager to respond or nominate an appropriate service manager to respond on their behalf. Stage 1 complaints require a response within 10 working days.
 - b) **Stage 2 Complaints**
Complainants who are dissatisfied with outcome of stage 1 can request that the complaint be passed to the Chief Executive or Executive Director. Stage 2 complaints require a response within 20 working days.
 - c) **Stage 3 Complaints**
Complainants who remain dissatisfied with outcome of stage 2 are entitled to complain directly to the Local Government Ombudsman.

14. There is concern that complaints are becoming less likely to be entered into the process. Rather, they may be settled by the officer receiving the complaint. A programme of awareness raising and training is planned for early in 2009/10.
15. There is some scope for the scrutiny committee to carry out a more in-depth review of the process, for example comparing it with best practice elsewhere, and enabling residents to suggest improvements.

Reporting Complaints to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee

16. The complaints handling process provides a rich source of feedback regarding customer satisfaction with our services. The scrutiny and overview may wish to tap into this when planning its annual work programme or adding to it during the year.
17. The data for the past 2 years is set out below. Members may consider that annual reporting will be sufficient in order to inform programme planning. However, when the process is more widely understood by officers, it is possible that the number and quality of complaints entered in the process will rise significantly. Therefore, during the coming year the Chairman might wish to receive informal updates so that timely reports can be brought to the Committee.
18. The following paragraphs aim to set out the data in a way that will be useful to the Committee.

Complaints Analysis

19. The following tables set out the number of complaints received and our performance in meeting acknowledgement and response targets.

a) **Table 1 – Complaint breakdown by stage**

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Total
08/09YTD	106	8	TBC	TBC
07/08	123	4	21	148

20. Between 1 April 2008 and 28 February 2009, 106 complaints were received at stage 1 of the complaints procedure. Of these complaints, 8 were escalated to stage 2 and the number to stage 3 (Local Government Ombudsman) is to be confirmed.

b) **Table 2 – Complaint breakdown by acknowledgement (excluding stage 3)**

	Total Complaints	Acknowledgement Deadline Met	Acknowledgement Deadline Failed	Acknowledgment Outstanding
08/09YTD	114	107 94%	7 6%	0 0%

21. The 7 acknowledgments failing to meet the deadline occurred because the Customer Service Coordinator was not informed of the complaint until the deadline had lapsed.

c) **Table 3 – Complaint breakdown by response time (excluding Stage 3)**

	Total Complaints	Response Deadline Met	Response Deadline Failed	Response Outstanding
08/09YTD	114	88 77%	17 15%	9 8%
07/08	127	71 56%	55 43%	1 1%

22. Significant improvements have been made this year with a 21% increase in complaint responses meeting deadline. Please note the 9 outstanding responses are due to the timing of this report. The complaints outstanding are due for response within the deadline. 17 responses failed to meet the deadline for reply. No particular service is highlighted, rather the incidents are spread across all of our services.
23. The following table details the number of complaints which progressed to the Ombudsman last year, 2007/2008. The number for the current year, 2008/2009 is to be confirmed by the Ombudsman in mid April 2009. The breakdown of Huntingdon District Council's Ombudsman complaints is also detailed for comparison.

d) **Table 4 – Local Government Ombudsman determinations**

Determination	08/09	07/08	HDC 07/08
Investigation concluded no maladministration	TBC	0	3
Investigation concluded maladministration but no injustice	TBC	0	0
Investigation concluded maladministration causing injustice	TBC	0	0
Insufficient evidence of maladministration	TBC	7	0
Investigation discontinued at Ombudsman's discretion	TBC	4	1
Outside Ombudsman's discretion	TBC	0	4
Premature complaints	TBC	7	9
Local settlement agreed	TBC	1	1
Total Complaints Determined	TBC	19	18

24. The Ombudsman conclusions are to be confirmed.
25. The following table categorises the complaints according to broad themes.

e) **Table 5 – 2008/2009 YTD complaint breakdown by theme**

Theme	% Complaints
Failure to communicate	23%
Failure to act	3%
Misinformation	4%
Council Charges	3%
Service Delivery	32%
Staff Conduct	5%
Processes and/or procedures	30%

26. The predominant theme of complaint was service delivery, with a 32% share of the total complaints. The secondary theme of complaint was processes and procedures, with a 30% share of the total complaints.

f) **Table 6 – 2008/2009 Complaint satisfaction rate**

Satisfaction	08/09	07/08
The way the complaint was handled	24%	44%
The way in which we kept you informed about the complaint	38%	27%
The complaint process	24%	32%
The length of time taken to respond to the complaint	29%	44%

27. Whilst our response time has significantly improved, customer satisfaction has fallen with the exception of the way in which we keep customers informed about the complaint. 13 surveys were completed in 2007/2008 and 10 surveys were completed in 2008/2009.

28.	Financial	None
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Legal	None
Staffing	None
Risk Management	Failure to maintain high standards of complaint handling exposes the Council to the risk of more recourse to the Ombudsman. This brings a reputational risk.
Equal Opportunity	An Equality Impact Assessment of the Complaints Handling Process is planned for 2009.

Consultation

29. The current complaints handling process was developed following consultation through the Service First programme.

Options

30. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee are invited to consider the information regarding complaints outlined in this report to assess whether a review should be included in their work programme for 2009/10.

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