

# Review of Customer Complaints Policy



Overview  
& Scrutiny

January  
2011

## COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny Committee:

- Councillor Paul Healey (Chairperson)
- Councillor David Horton (Vice-Chair)
- Councillor Andy D'Agorne
- Councillor Keith Hyman
- Councillor Ceredig Jamieson-Ball
- Councillor Paul Firth (Task Group Chair)
- Councillor Sonia Crisp (Task Group)
- Councillor Julie Gunnell (Task Group)

The Committee established a Task Group to carry out this review on their behalf. The Task Group was made up the three committee members indicated above.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Please contact::

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee would like to thank the following for their contribution to this review:

- Pauline Stuchfield, Assistant Director Customers & People
- Andrew Hewison, CYC Business Analyst

Also, the Committee would like to thank those officers from within CYC Directorates who supported their work on this review.

## CHAIR'S FOREWARD

**Councillor Paul Healey**  
Chairperson

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny Committee proposed the following recommendations:

1. To assist the public, the new corporate policy to include:
  - definitions of a service request and a stage 1 complaint;
  - the adult social services and children's social care services complaints procedures as appendices
2. Wording of policy to be revised as follows:
  - at Stage 1 to be revised as per paragraph 10 of full final report
  - at stage 2 to be revised to reflect that a complainant does not have to set out their complaint again at Stage 2 of the complaints process
  - Removal of wording at Stage 3 – *'or a member of staff independent of the service acting on the Director's behalf'*
3. In regard to training (see paragraphs 13-15 of full final report):
  - Investigate and provide relevant training for the different stages of complaint handling/investigation for key officers within the corporate complaints team
  - provide Councillors with training in a range of formats to suit their individual needs
4. Service requests to be recorded, tracked and monitored by Directorates to allow for early identification of required service improvements, without being fed into the customer complaints data analysis and reports

5. Provide suitable access to the Complaints Team
  - Retain dedicated telephone number for social care clients
  - Provide dedicated email address for team
6. In regard to customer feedback:
  - For stage one complaints, no acknowledgement letter is required
  - All written responses to complaints to be checked and sent out by the central team
7. In regard to Questionnaires:
  - Only be sent out to every 20<sup>th</sup> complainant at stage one
  - For stage two & three complaints, to be sent out with all response letters
8. Following the introduction of the new policy, Effective Organisation O & S Committee to:
  - receive 6-monthly monitoring reports on its implementation
  - be consulted on any future revisions
  - receive annual report on complaints statistics at the beginning of each municipal year

The full final report together with all agendas, reports and minutes relating to the review, can be viewed online at:

[ADD LINK](#)

## BACKGROUND TO REVIEW

In October 2010, the Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny Committee received a presentation on customer services, and ongoing work to develop a new Corporate Customer Feedback Policy.

They recognised that whilst there was a corporate policy, each individual Directorate still maintained their own methods for recording and responding to complaints. Also, that an unknown proportion of complaints were being dealt with as enquiries and therefore falling outside of any formal process.

The Committee questioned whether the new Corporate Customer Feedback Policy and procedures would be fit for purpose and therefore agreed to form a Task Group to carry out a scrutiny review on their behalf to inform its design and priorities., and ensure the new policy's future effectiveness .

## REVIEW OBJECTIVES

### Aim

The Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny Committee agreed the following aim and objectives for the review:

'To inform the design and priorities within the new complaints function in order to ensure its future effectiveness, identifying any revisions required to the Feedback Policy'

### Objectives

- i. Reduce the number of common or repeat complaints.
- ii. Reduce the number of complaints to the Ombudsman.
- iii. Contribute to possible further efficiency savings
- iv. Improve the customer experience (customer satisfaction to be measured and monitored).

## CORPORATE STRATEGY

The review supported the Council's Effective Organisation priority around 'providing what customers want'.

## REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The review took place between November 2010 and January 2011.

The Task Group held a number of formal Meetings:

Meeting 1 - To consider the remit for the review and agree a workplan

Meeting 2 - To receive the most recent annual Ombudsman Report, and information on:

- i) national best practice regarding the handling of complaints etc by local authorities;
  - ii) Directorate information on number and type of complaints received since 1 January 2010 including:
    - Complaints from public
    - Councillor requests/inquiries
    - Complaints to Ombudsman
    - FOIs
- To identify relevant consultees

Meeting 3 - To receive interim report

- Consult with relevant parties
- Based on information gathered, identify:
  - i) any possible further efficiency savings
  - ii) further improvements to customer experience

Meeting 4 - To consider and agree the final report and recommendations.

## FINDINGS

**This section sets out the review's findings.**

### REDUCING THE RISK OF MALADMINISTRATION

The Task Group recognised that any improvements in the management of complaints, and any resulting service improvements would reduce the risk of negative publicity for the Council and opportunities for the Ombudsman to publicly criticise the council for maladministration.

Also, improvements in the processing of Freedom of Information requests would minimise the risk of the Information Commissioner imposing large fines on the organisation relating to its use of information.

### SERVICE REQUESTS

The Task Group considered the evidence provided by officers handling complaints received within Directorates and recognised that many of those 'complaints' were in fact service requests, and therefore could be dealt with before the official 'stage 1' procedure was instigated.

The Task Group also recognised that the public would need to understand the difference between a service request and a stage 1 complaint and therefore agreed the new policy should include a clear definition of a service request.

In recognising that service requests would need recording to track reoccurring issues within service areas and to enable service delivery teams to monitor their own performance and identify service improvements, the Task Group agreed they should not be fed into the customer complaints data analysis, but instead they should be recorded under the National Indicator 14 – 'reducing avoidable contact'.

Finally, that the process for escalating a service request to Stage 1 of the complaints procedure should lie in the hands of

the complainant who should indicate either verbally to an officer, or in writing, that they are not satisfied with the response to / outcome of their service request.

#### TRAINING FOR COUNCILLORS & OFFICERS

For Councillors, the Task Group agreed full training on the use of the new Complaints IT portal and its full capabilities would be required, and that it may be useful for some Councillors to participate in testing the new system before it goes live.

For front line staff, having recognised that they have a crucial role in presenting the face of the authority to the public, and in the early resolution of complaints, the Task Group agreed it was essential they were appropriately trained in how to:

- a) properly identify and handle the type of enquiry being received e.g. the type of issues that can be resolved at first point of contact.
- b) maintain a corporate record of them using the processes and procedures in place
- c) provide appropriate feedback to customers

Finally, the Task Group agreed that key officers within the new corporate complaints team would benefit from receiving the complaints training offered by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). Those key officers could then disseminate the training to others in the complaints team.

#### COMPLAINTS PROCESS

The Task Group identified a number of changes required to the wording of the policy in relation to stages 1-3 of the complaints process.

They also agreed a complainant should not be required to set out their complaint again at Stage 2 as it may be antagonistic to expect them to do so, having previously provided the information at Stage 1 of the complaints process.

#### IDENTIFYING BEST PRACTICE

The Task Group received details on the statutory and legislative requirements connected with Adult & Children's Social Care Services Complaints and recognised that many of the feedback requirements, were suitable for use across the council as best practice. The Task Group were pleased to see that many of those methods were already being utilised within other Directorates, and that they had therefore been written into the draft of the new corporate policy.

However, in the case of other types of complaints they deemed that some of the statutory and legislative requirements were excessive. With this in mind, the Task Group agreed that:

- Sending an acknowledgement letter at every stage of the process was excessive.
- It would benefit the council to find acceptable ways to limit the number of questionnaires sent out at stage 1, as the cost of sending one to every complainant would prove excessive.
- For stage 2 & 3 complaints, the council would benefit from receiving feedback so the questionnaire would need to be sent out with all the response letters.
- The specific statutory and legal requirements associated with adult social services and children's social care services complaints, should be included as appendices to the new Corporate Policy to make it clear to the public that the new policy did not cover them.
- It should be acceptable to receive a complaint over the phone as long as the details were read back to the customer to verify the notes taken.
- Equalities questions should not be asked over the phone as they may antagonize an angry customer.
- It was acceptable for a service manager to compile a written response to a complaint but it should be checked and sent out by the central team, in order to ensure the corporate approach is adhered to.

## REVIEW OUTCOMES

For each completed scrutiny review, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee produces a final report containing their proposed recommendations for the Executive's consideration.

In most cases, the Executive will approve all of the recommendations made and will instruct officers to proceed with the actions required in order to implement them.

## MONITORING APPROVED RECOMMENDATIONS

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is responsible for monitoring the progress of implementing any approved recommendations.

They receive regular update reports from the Scrutiny Officer, and once they are confident that a recommendation has been fully implemented, they will agree to sign it off.

In addition, each year Scrutiny Services produces an Annual Report which includes an assessment of the successful outcomes from each completed scrutiny review.

**Did you know that members of the public can submit topics for possible scrutiny review? - For a full guide to the Overview & Scrutiny function in York, go to:**

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