
**Meeting of Customer Complaints Task Group
- Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny
Committee**

19 November 2010

Customer Complaints Review - Interim Report

Purpose of Report

1. This report presents information gathered to date in support of the Customer Complaints scrutiny review and asks Members to identify relevant consultees and any additional information required in support of this review.

Background

2. At a meeting of the Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny Committee in September 2010, members received a presentation on Customer Services from Assistant Director Customers & People. Having considered an overview of current services, performance and developments, the committee recognised that whilst there is a corporate policy in existence, currently each individual CYC Directorate has its own methods for recording and responding to complaints. And, an unknown proportion of complaints are dealt with as enquiries and therefore fall outside of any formal process.
3. As there is no corporate monitoring or management information of performance in this area, the Committee questioned whether the new Corporate Customer Feedback Policy and procedures are fit for purpose. In order to ensure its future effectiveness and in an effort to inform its design and priorities, the Committee agreed to form a Task Group to carry out a scrutiny review on their behalf, of customer feedback/complaints and resulting actions.
4. The Committee set a timeframe of within 3 months for completion of the review and agreed the following review remit:

Overall Aim

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).

5. At a meeting in early November 2010, the Task Group agreed the following workplan for the review.

Meetings Dates	Workplan
<p><u>Meeting 1</u> 4 November 2010 1:30 - 3pm</p>	<p>Scoping report providing information relating to the Customer Services Blueprint, and an overview of existing processes and the new structure/organisation/process</p>
<p><u>Meeting 2</u> 19 November 2010 2:30pm</p>	<p>Receive interim report presenting:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Information on national best practice regarding the handling of complaints etc by local authorities e.g. centralised or not?, and most recent annual Ombudsman Report. 2. Directorate information on number and type of complaints received since 1 January 2010 including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complaints from public • Councillor requests/inquiries • Complaints to Ombudsman • FOIs <p>Identify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relevant consultees and any issues to be addressed through consultation at the next meeting • any additional information required
<p><u>Meeting 3</u> 8 December 2010 2pm</p>	<p>Receive interim report and consult with relevant parties</p> <p>Based on information gathered, suggest any:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possible further efficiency savings • further improvements to customer experience
<p><u>Meeting 4</u> 5 January 2011 2pm</p>	<p>Consider draft final report containing suggested recommendations</p>
<p>11 January 2011</p>	<p>Presentation of final report to Effective Organisation O & S Committee</p>

Consultation

6. The Assistant Director Customers & People will be present at this meeting to assist the Task Group with their work on this review.

Options

7. Having considered the information provided within this report and its associated Annexes, and to inform the next meeting of the Task Group on 8 December 2010, Members may choose to:
 - Identify additional information required in support of this review
 - Identify any relevant consultees to be invited to attend the December meeting

Findings to Date

8. At the meeting on 4 November, the Task Group considered the procedures within the Corporate Customer Feedback Policy and identified a number of issues relating to the different stages of the complaints process. It was also recognised that many of the 'complaints' received within Directorates are in fact service requests and not complaints, and therefore could be dealt with before the official 'stage 1' procedure is instigated.
9. Service Requests
Members recognised that the public will need to understand the difference between a service request and a stage 1 complaint and that a clear definition of a service request would help.
10. Service requests will still need recording to track reoccurring issues within service areas and to enable service delivery teams to monitor their own performance and identify service improvements. However, they should not be fed into the customer complaints data analysis and reports. The process for escalating a service request to Stage 1 of the complaints procedure is in the hands of the complainant who will indicate that they are not satisfied with the service. This will then automatically go to Stage 1.
11. Stage 1
The Task Group agreed the wording at Stage 1 of the procedure should be amended to read:

'At this stage the line manager of the service will deal with a complaint and the complainant should be advised of the outcome within 10 working days *or advised of any delay* and when they can expect a full response, and what they can do if they remain dissatisfied at the end of Stage 1'
12. Stage 2
It should not be necessary for a complainant to have to set out their complaint again at Stage 2 as it may be antagonistic to expect the complainant to provide information that they had already supplied at Stage 1 of the procedure.

13. Stage 3
A Director might choose to delegate the investigation of a complaint to an Assistant Director, but it was important that the procedure recognised that the responsibility for handling the complaint rested with the Director. With this in mind the Task Group agreed the following wording should be removed '*or a member of staff independent of the service acting on the Director's behalf*'.
14. Training
In regard to Councillors, they will need full training on their use of the new Complaints IT portal and its full capabilities. Some Councillors may also be willing to participate in testing the new system before it goes live.
15. For staff, the Task Group agreed it was essential they were appropriately trained in how to:
 - 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.
 - maintain a corporate record of them using the processes and procedures in place
 - provide appropriate feedback to customers
16. It was suggested that consideration could be given to using the complaints training offered by the Ombudsman (as set out below) and/or sharing training with other authorities.

Information Gathered

Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

17. The Local Government Ombudsman places considerable emphasis on the concept of service improvement, and is well placed to pinpoint opportunities for local authorities to improve not only complaints handling but also systems, procedures and other aspects of service delivery. They produce annual reviews and reports and provide training as their principal means of achieving this.
18. LGO Training
As part of their advice-giving role, they run a range of one-day courses aimed at helping local authorities to improve their responses to complaints. All their courses are presented by experienced investigators so participants can be confident that the presenter has genuine practical expertise in complaint handling and can draw on a fund of real knowledge from our experience over more than three decades of investigating complaints. They also give participants the opportunity to practise the skills needed to deal with complaints positively and efficiently. These courses include:
 - Good Complaint Handling – Identifying and Processing Complaints
A one-day course developed for local authority staff who have direct contact with members of the public and who receive complaints as part of their day-to-day work. Front line staff have a crucial role to play in presenting the face of the authority to the public, particularly when dealing with service users when they have problems. They can also play an important part in the early

resolution of complaints, to the benefit of service users and the authority. This course has been devised to help staff make the most of this.

- Effective Complaint Handling – Investigating and Resolving Complaints
A one-day course devised for local authority staff involved in handling complaints in the higher stages of the authority's complaints procedures, after the informal stage and up to the point of deciding the complaint, including dealing with remedies. It is a course for managers, team leaders, departmental and corporate complaints officers. The course is designed to help those dealing with complaints to develop their skills in complaint investigation and resolution and to avoid the pitfalls that can result in dissatisfaction and referral to the Ombudsman.
19. In addition, they provide Social Care Staff Courses specifically designed to meet the needs of those who deal with the statutory social care complaints procedures for children and adults. The Good Complaint Handling in Social Care course focuses on local resolution and the Effective Complaint Handling in Social Care course focuses on investigating and resolving complaints (the later stages).
 20. They also provide open courses for groups of staff from different authorities, to assist those authorities who wish to train small numbers of staff and to give staff an opportunity to share ideas and experience. And, they can provide training for authorities where they have identified particular problems or where they are in the process of reviewing or improving their complaints procedures. For this type of training the LGO charges for developing a course designed around a particular local authority's needs.
 21. The cost of the other LGO courses depends on the number of delegates i.e. courses for up to 15 people - £1,025, Courses for up to 30 - £1,735. The cost per delegate for an open course is £130.
 22. Annual Ombudsman Review
Each year the Local Government Ombudsman produces an annual review (previous called annual letters) for each local authority about their performance in dealing with complaints made about them to the Ombudsman. The aim is to provide councils with information to help them improve their complaint handling, and improve their services more generally, for the benefit of the public. The table at Annex A shows the number of complaints received by the LGO about City of York Council in 2009/10, in comparison to other local authorities, and the LGO annual report detailing those complaints is shown at Annex B.

Number & Type of Complaints Received By CYC Since 1 January 2010

23. Statistics in regard to Freedom of Information Requests (FOIs), complaints from the public, Councillor requests/enquiries and LGO referrals for 2010 are shown at Annex C.
24. In regard to complaints received by the Chief Executive's office, these most often relate to services elsewhere in the council. Accordingly, these complaints are not recorded as stage 1, 2 or 3 complaints within the Chief Exec's own service and may well represent double counts with complaint handling elsewhere in the

organisation where these stages are recorded. Similarly, all Ombudsman letters received in the Chief Executive's office relate to other services - these are passed to the relevant department and are also likely to be accounted for elsewhere in the data. There is also significant contact with Members in the Chief Executive's office, including for instance, direct communication between Councillors and the Chief Executive, but no data is kept to show this activity.

25. Explanation of variance in volume post April 2010 - the structural changes associated with the Organisation Review transferred Legal, Civic and Elections, which accounted for significant customer contact, from the Office of the Chief Executive to CBSS.
26. Leaflets – The complaints leaflet currently in use within directorates is shown at Annex D. Work on a new leaflet is ongoing and a copy of the draft will be made available at the meeting.

Ongoing Changes to New Corporate Customer Feedback Policy

27. At the meeting on 4 November the Task Group were informed that as a result of the work to date, a number of changes to the policy had already been identified. The Assistant Director Customers & People will provide a verbal update on these at the meeting.

Way Forward

28. Members now need to identify what further information they require in order to develop some recommendations aimed at achieving the objectives of this review, including reducing the number of complaints and contributing to any further efficiency savings beyond those identified by the More for York review.

Implications

29. **Financial & HR** - More for York savings are associated with the centralisation of complaints teams.
30. **Equalities** All proposals contained in the Customer Strategy have been fully consulted upon and the work is covered by an Equalities Impact Assessment.
31. **Legal** Improvement of complaints handling may contribute to less cases reaching the Ombudsman. Centralisation of Freedom of Information requests will aid compliance with legislation on this matter.
32. **Information Technology (IT)** Resources are committed to providing the technology necessary for the newly centralised team.
33. There are no Crime and Disorder, Property or other implications.

Corporate Strategy

34. This review supports to the Council's Effective Organisation priority around 'providing what customers want'.

Risk Management

35. Improvement in the management of complaints and resulting service improvement will reduce the risk of negative publicity and the Ombudsman publicly criticising the council for maladministration. Improvement in the processing of Freedom of Information requests will minimise risks of the Information Commissioner imposing large fines on the organisation relating to its use of information.

Recommendations

36. Members are recommended to:
- i. Agree what if any additional information is required in support of this review
 - ii. Identify any relevant consultees to be invited to the next Task Group meeting on 8 December 2010
 - iii. Identify further changes required to the Corporate Customer Feedback Policy and how these will reduce the number of complaints.

Reason: To progress this review in line with scrutiny procedures, protocols and workplans.

Contact Details

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Report Approved

Date

1 November 2010

Specialist Implications Officer(s)

Wards Affected:

All



For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Customer Strategy
Customer Services Blueprint
Corporate Customer Feedback Policy

Annexes

Annex A – Table of Complaints Received By LGO In 2009/10

Annex B – LGO annual report detailing CYC Complaints

Annex C – CYC Statistics since January 2010

Annex D – Current CYC Complaints Leaflet