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

8 December 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 attended all the meetings of the Task Group to assist them in their work on this review.
7. Also, at a meeting on 19 November 2010, the Task Group agreed to meet with representatives from Directorates to discuss the complaint statistics shown at Annex A.

Options

8. 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
 - agree some recommendations relevant to the findings

Findings to Date

9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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 either verbally to an officer, or in writing, that they are not satisfied with the response to/outcome of their service request. This will then become a Stage 1 complaint.
12. 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'

13. 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.
14. 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*'.
15. Training
In regard to Councillors, the Task Group agreed they would all need full training on the 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.
16. For staff, the Task Group recognised that 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 also play an important part in the early resolution of complaints, to the benefit of service users and the authority and Members agreed it was therefore 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
17. It was agreed that for key officers within the new corporate complaints team consideration should be given to the complaints training offered by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). It was noted that 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 who have genuine practical expertise in complaint handling, giving participants the opportunity to practise the skills needed to deal with complaints positively and efficiently. Those key officers could then disseminate the training to other in the complaints team.
18. Annual Ombudsman Review
Each year the LGO 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 (CYC) in 2009/10, in comparison to other local authorities, and the LGO annual report detailing those complaints is shown at Annex B.

19. Members agreed that although the annual review showed there were not an excessive number of complaints made about CYC, there was room for improvement. In addition, they were concerned to note that the council's average response time had worsened and was significantly outside the target time of 28 days. Officers stated that the new corporate tracking system should ensure that complaints were dealt with in a timely basis and could be more effectively controlled. Members suggested that, as part of the flag system, the Chief Executive should be notified of any complaints that reached the red stage.
20. Number & Type of Complaints Received By CYC Since 1 January 2010
At a meeting on 19 November 2010, the Task Group considered statistical data from each Directorate showing the number and type of complaints received since 1 January 2010 – see Annex C.
21. In regard to the complaints received by the Chief Executive's office, it was noted that they most often relate to services elsewhere in the council. Accordingly, they 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 statistics data that the Task Group considered (as provided by each Directorate). 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.
22. Members queried the figures provided by each Directorate, having taken account of the variance in volume post April 2010 resulting from the Organisation Review i.e. a reduction in the number of Directorates and the transfer of Legal, Civic, Democratic Services and Elections (which account for significant customer contact) from the Office of the Chief Executive to Customer & Business Support Services.
23. In acknowledging that each Directorate has its own methods for handling complaints, the Task Group were keen to meet with representatives from the Directorates to discuss:
 - the statistics provided in Annex C,
 - best practice in regard to timescales for responding to complaints
 - whether or not (and how) information derived from complaints was being used to identify service improvements.
24. The relevant officers representing the following Directorates have therefore been invited to attend this meeting:
 - 2:10pm - Adults, Children & Education
 - 2:30pm - Communities & Neighbourhoods
 - 2:50pm - Customer & Business Support Services
 - 3:10pm - City Strategy

25. Ongoing Changes to New Corporate Customer Feedback Policy

As a result of the work to date, a number of changes to the policy have already been identified as required. The Assistant Director Customers & People will provide a revised version which incorporates these changes at the next meeting on 5 January 2010. Consideration will also be given to ongoing scrutiny by the Effective Organisation Overview & Scrutiny Committee, of complaints and other customer feedback and relevant performance indicators, for regular monitoring purposes.

Suggested Recommendations To Date

26. As a result of the findings to date from this review the following recommendations are suggested for members' consideration:

- To produce a revised 'Customer Complaints & Feedback Policy':
 - To assist the public, policy to include a definition of a service request and a stage 1 complaint (see paragraph 10)
 - 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 (see paragraph 11)
 - Wording of policy at Stage 1 to be revised as per paragraph 12
 - Wording of policy at stage 2 to be revised to reflect that a complainant does not have to set out their complaint again at Stage 2, as per paragraph 13.
 - Removal of wording at Stage 3 – '*or a member of staff independent of the service acting on the Director's behalf*' as per paragraph 14
 - To include a flagging system for senior officers at each stage to include Chief Executive notification at the 'Red' stage, as per paragraph 19
- CYC to investigate and provide relevant training for the different stages of complaint handling/investigation for key officers within the corporate complaints team and Councillors (see paragraphs 15-17).
- To agree a mechanism for ongoing scrutiny by members of customer complaints and associated performance indicators (see paragraph 25).

27. The information gathered from the consultation carried out at this meeting will be included in the draft final report for the meeting on 5 January 2011, in order that Members may agree what if any further recommendations they wish to make.

Implications

28. **Financial & HR** - More for York savings are associated with the centralisation of complaints teams. The cost of the LGO courses referred to in paragraph 17 depends on the number of delegates i.e. courses for up to 15 people - £1,025, Courses for up to 30 - £1,735. If a course was to be shared with other local authorities, the cost per delegate would be £130.

29. **Equalities** All proposals contained in the Customer Strategy have been fully consulted upon and the work is covered by an Equalities Impact Assessment.

30. **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.
31. **Information Technology (IT)** Resources are committed to providing the technology necessary for the newly centralised team.
32. There are no Crime and Disorder, Property or other implications.

Corporate Strategy

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

Risk Management

34. 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

35. Members are recommended to:
 - i. Identify any further changes required to the Corporate Customer Feedback Policy
 - ii. Amend and/or agree the suggested recommendations listed at paragraph 26.

Reason: To achieve 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.

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Report Approved



Date

30 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