
MEETING	CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS SCRUTINY REVIEW TASK GROUP
DATE	8 DECEMBER 2010
PRESENT	COUNCILLORS FIRTH (CHAIR), CRISP AND GUNNELL

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were invited to declare any personal or prejudicial interests they might have in the business on the agenda. None were declared.

10. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes from the last meeting, held on 19 November 2010, be approved as a correct record.

11. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

It was reported that there had been no registrations to speak under the council's Public Participation Scheme.

12. CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS REVIEW - INTERIM REPORT

Members considered a report that presented information gathered to date in support of the Customer Complaints scrutiny review and asked Members to identify relevant consultees and any additional information required in support of the review.

Representatives from the following directorates were in attendance:

- Adults, Children & Education
- Communities & Neighbourhoods
- Customer & Business Support Services
- City Strategy

Officers questioned the representatives on the following issues:

- The statistics provided in Annex C of the report
- 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

The following issues were discussed:

(i) Customer & Business Support Services

- It was noted that the statistics in Annex C of the report would have included a number of complaints that had been double-counted. This was as a result of some of the complaints initially being sent to the Chief Executive and then forwarded to the appropriate team for a response.
- Letters responding to complaints included information on the action that was being taken in response to the complaint (eg staff training, implementation of change to work procedures etc). The letters also thanked the customer for their feedback.
- In complex cases, the investigator would sometimes telephone the customer regarding the complaint. Members suggested that telephone calls should be followed up by a letter or email to ensure that an audit trail was in place.
- Customer care training had been delivered to staff.

(ii) Adults, Children & Education

- More detailed information was provided in respect of the number of complaints that had been handled, including a breakdown for particular service areas.
- It was noted that the corporate complaints policy excluded the procedures for handling complaints about social care. Details were given of the statutory procedures that were in place in respect of complaints about social care. The team sought to use the best practice from the statutory procedures when they were investigating housing complaints.
- The deadlines set in the statutory procedures were noted. Officers acknowledged Members' suggestions that, although there were statutory timescales, consideration could be given to completing the process earlier than this and within corporate deadlines. It was, however, noted that the complexity of some of the cases and the need to negotiate with clients regarding convenient dates for meetings, meant that a shorter timescale may not always be achievable.
- A named contact was included in any correspondence.
- Details were given of the support that was offered to people with learning difficulties who had submitted a complaint. An advocate was appointed for vulnerable clients.
- Support was also offered in terms of ensuring that information was accessible, eg available in different languages or formats.
- At each stage of the complaints procedure, officers checked with the customer that they were satisfied with the way the complaint was being dealt with.
- An "Action Plan of Service Improvements" form was completed following each stage of a complaint. As well as detailing the action that had been taken to resolve the complaint, the service manager was required to detail any changes/improvements that would be made to the service to prevent a similar complaint.

- On completion of the investigation, a “Monitoring the Complaints Procedure” form was issued to the client. This survey enabled officers to look at further ways of improving the service it provided.
- In the case of a serious complaint, the complaint was immediately escalated without progressing through the early stages of the complaints procedure.
- The team was independent of the service areas whose complaints it investigated.
- It was hoped that the IT complaints system used by the team could be integrated into the new corporate system.

(iii) Communities & Neighbourhoods

- Details were given of the type of complaints which the team handled. These included issues relating to services such as waste, street scene, parking, and parks and open spaces.
- Some Members made direct contact with officers to seek to resolve complaints and hence these were not always recorded on the IT system.
- A high percentage were service requests and could be dealt with very quickly. Only a small number of complaints were progressed beyond Stage 1.
- Officers expressed concern at the possibility that there could be a reduction in staffing at directorate level in order to resource a central complaints team. This could be detrimental if there was no resulting reduction in the work that the directorate team was carrying out.

(iv) City Strategy

- Details were provided as to how complaints submitted by Members were investigated and recorded. It was noted that Members sometimes made direct contact with senior officers.
- There were currently too many contact enquiry mailboxes and the directorate was looking to ensure that there would only be one in future.
- Some of the complaints that were dealt with by the directorate were very complex and involved working with other agencies and organisations. This needed to be taken into account when consideration was given to determining appropriate deadlines in respect of the complaints procedures.
- Details were given of the correspondence monitoring system that was in place and of the arrangements for reporting to managers.
- Service managers were encouraged to identify common problems and these were used to make service improvements.

(v) Cross Directorate Complaints

Officers were asked about the arrangements that were in place to deal with cross-directorate complaints. They stated that there was good communication in place. It was acknowledged that a central IT complaints system should eliminate any duplication in the

recording of complaints and enable more accurate data to be provided.

(vi) Corporate Feedback Team

Members sought further information regarding the role of the proposed corporate feedback team. Officers explained that the call-centre would log the complaints. The complaints would be forwarded to the relevant directorate for action. The central team would monitor, chase-up and report on complaints. Members requested that the business case be presented to them at the next meeting.

(vii) Confidentiality

It was noted that some complaints were of a very sensitive nature and therefore it was important that call-centre staff were trained to recognise when a complaint needed to be referred to another officer, for example when it needed to be escalated without going through the earlier stages of the complaints procedure. The IT system also had to have appropriate checks in place to prevent unauthorised access to sensitive information.

Officers were thanked for their attendance at the meeting and for the useful information that they had provided.

Members were asked to identify any further changes required to the Corporate Customer Feedback Policy. They stated that it was important that the policy recognised that there were significant differences in the types of complaints handled by directorates, including those for which there were statutory procedures in place or which involved liaising with other agencies.

Further consideration should be given to examples of best practice identified in the discussions with directorate representatives including:

- Ensuring information on complaints was accessible
- Use of the “Action Plan of Service Improvement” form
- Ensuring that the customer was made aware of the action that was to be taken to improve services as a result of their complaint.
- Use of the “Monitoring the Complaints Procedure” questionnaire. It was noted that there would be cost implications if this was issued after all complaints were investigated and hence it may be more appropriate to send out the form to a sample number of cases.
- Ensuring that arrangements were in place to escalate a complaint through the early stages if appropriate.

RESOLVED: (i) That the suggested recommendations, listed at paragraph 26 of the report be agreed.

(ii) That the following information be provided at the next meeting:

- Draft of the new Corporate Customer Feedback Policy and procedures.
- The business case for setting up of a central feedback team (to include proposed structure and associated costs)

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.

Councillor Firth, Chair

[The meeting started at 2.00 pm and finished at 3.50 pm].