

REPORT TO: Corporate Services Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 3rd June 2008

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director Corporate and Policy

SUBJECT: Corporate Service PPB Compliments and Complaints Review

WARDS: Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To inform the Corporate Services Policy and Performance Board of the findings of the scrutiny review undertaken in relation to compliments and complaints, and to provide an opportunity to consider the proposed recommendations.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- (1) the Corporate Services Policy and Performance Board consider the contents of the report and in particular the recommendations that have been formulated to take into account of the findings identified by the scrutiny review;**
- (2) subject to any amendments the Board wishes to make, the report and recommendations be forwarded to Executive Board for approval; and**
- (3) the Operational Director Policy and Performance prepare an action plan and analysis of financial implications for inclusion in the report to Executive Board.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The Corporate Services Policy and Performance Board agreed for the review topic to be included in its programme at its meeting on 5 June 2007. Since then there have been two meetings of the topic group, and work has proceeded in accordance with the original project plan. Details of the key findings and proposed recommendations are attached at Appendix 1 for consideration.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are no policy implications arising directly from this report at this stage. However compliments and complaints impacts on the service provision of all council directorates and therefore the recommendations contained in the report should have a positive effect on the way the Council interacts with its customers.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

None.

6.0 RISK ANALYSIS

The proposed recommendations are designed to bring about improvements to the way the Council deals with compliments and complaints. Therefore for each recommendation a responsible officer will be identified to ensure its implementation by a set date.

7.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None.

CORPORATE SERVICES PPB COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS REVIEW

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Corporate Services Policy and Performance Board agreed for the compliments and complaints review to be included in its programme at its meeting on 5 June 2007. This report informs the PPB of the findings of the scrutiny review undertaken, together with the recommendations that will bring about improvements to the way the Council handles compliments and complaints.

1.2 There were two strands to the scrutiny topic:-

- To explore how to improve outcomes for complainants and as part of this, how to improve their satisfaction with the way the Council's deals with and responds to complaints.
- To explore how the information gained from compliments and complaints can be used to continuously improve service delivery. This has involved reviewing the current systems in place throughout the organisation, benchmarking current practice with other local authorities and researching examples of best practice.

1.3 It is essential that our complaint systems allow us to learn from complaints and improve our services. We must ensure that we learn the lessons by:

- Having a clear picture of customers' views of the services we provide and the improvements they want
- Recording complaints consistently in sufficient detail and analysing the results
- Reporting information to those who can take action to prevent problems happening again
- Giving feedback to customers who complain, other service users and employees on what action has been taken

2.0 FINDINGS

The scrutiny review has identified a number of issues that need to be addressed in order to secure improvements to the way that the Council deals with compliments and complaints. These are discussed below.

2.1 A benchmarking exercise was undertaken with those Local Authorities which demonstrated the greatest improvement (up to +17%) between 2003 and 2006 in relation to BVPI4 (the percentage of complainants satisfied with the handling of their complaint).

Authorities Demonstrating Significant Improvement In BVPI 4 Performance			
	2003/04 (%)	2006/07 (%)	Increase
Cambridgeshire County Council	20	32	12.00
Devon County Council	27	39	12.00
Oxfordshire County Council	20	37	17.00
Staffordshire County Council	29	40	11.00
Suffolk County Council	28	43	15.00
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council	22	32	10.00
Nottingham City Council	25	37	12.00
Coventry City Council	30	43	13.00
Bexley	27	38	11.00
Wandsworth Borough Council	32	49	17.00

The information received identified:

- Similar practice to Halton in trying to resolve complaints informally before treating them as a formal complaint.
- Numbers of formal complaints received are significantly higher than Halton's.
- The other Councils provide training for officers responsible for investigating complaints.
- The other Councils actively publicise their Complaints Procedures and report on how well they perform.
- The majority of benchmarked Councils conduct annual surveys of complainants to measure satisfaction levels with their approach.
- Two Local Authorities use their Contact Centre and One Stop Shops to record all complaints, before electronically sending them on to the relevant service department for investigation and response. This reduces response times and also the chance of documents going astray.
- All of the other Council's see their Complaints Procedures as just one part of an overall Customer Care Policy or Customer Strategy.

In relation to this final point Halton does not have an overarching Customer Care Strategy. The government has recently developed a Customer Service Excellence model to offer public services a tool for driving customer-focused change within their organisation. This would appear to offer Halton an opportunity to improve its performance in this area and therefore it is proposed that the Council uses the Customer Excellence Model to help drive improvement. The findings of this scrutiny topic will be fed into the process.

- 2.2 A survey was undertaken of all complainants who had made a corporate complaint during 2006/07 to gather their views and opinions of the Council's current complaint handling procedure. There were a total of 55 corporate complaints received during the year, and in order to improve the survey response rate, half of the complainants were surveyed by telephone and half by postal questionnaire. The survey questions took into account best practice in

complaint handling. Whilst this survey only considered the views of people that had made a corporate complaint during 2006/7, it nevertheless provides a useful picture of their views on how the Council responds to complaints.

The survey indicated relatively low satisfaction levels with the quality of response from relevant service departments under stage one, which corroborated the results of the Best Value General Survey 2006/07 relating to BVPI 4. Therefore if the current arrangements are to remain for replying under stage one, there is a need for training of key staff in order to ensure a greater consistency when investigating and replying to complaints. The other alternative would be to have a similar arrangement to that currently in place for replying to Ombudsman complaints whereby replies are made by one single officer using information provided from relevant departments. However at this moment in time the first option is the preferred choice, and this conforms to the approach adopted by the majority of the benchmarked Local Authorities.

With almost three quarters of complainants satisfied with response times to their complaint, it would appear that the Council's target time of 14 days is sufficient, yet there is room for improvement by some directorates in consistently meeting the target. The Members Working Group thought it would be helpful if the Council offered complainants an opportunity to discuss their complaint with a Council officer as part of the investigation into their complaint. Whilst this may not be necessary with all complaints, it would help with more complex complaints and also it would demonstrate the Council's commitment to resolving complaints. Therefore the investigating officer should contact the complainant to establish if they would like an opportunity to discuss the complaint.

Two thirds of complainants either had their complaint resolved satisfactorily or at least accepted the Council's decision. However with a third remaining dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint, it is important that directorates remember to offer complainants a right of appeal, which at the moment only happens in half of complaints according to the survey.

A final area of concern was the low level of confidence complainants had in the Council's ability to improve services as a result of their complaint. It is felt that this issue will be addressed by training of investigating officers together with the proposed work using the Customer Excellence Model.

- 2.3 The current definition of a corporate complaint means that the first complaint from a customer is treated as an informal complaint or service request to give the relevant department an opportunity to resolve the issue. Similarly, HDL/Contact Centre CRM systems classify the majority of customer contacts as service requests rather than complaints. However this means that there is no clear picture of the level of service failure across the organisation. Therefore the potential to learn from such instances is reduced which makes it more difficult to improve service provision, and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction. Whether a customer contact is classed as complaint or service request, the important point is that all instances involving service failure are recorded and where necessary learnt from, so that measures are put in place to try and prevent similar occurrences from happening again. Whilst HDL/Contact Centre staff try to take ownership of service requests, in some instances their systems are unable to communicate with back-office systems to verify resolution / completion in a number of service areas. Therefore HDL/Contact Centre staff are sometimes reliant on relevant service departments when progressing complaints and this can lead to a degree of inconsistency that can have a

detrimental effect on customer perceptions. Consequently this reinforces the need for an overarching Customer Care Strategy across all directorates.

- 2.4 Monitoring and analysing complaints and evaluating outcomes is vital if the Council wants to learn from its mistakes and close the loop of service failure. At the moment there is no system in place to ensure this happens with all complaints. Whilst this is clearly the responsibility of each directorate it would seem sensible to introduce a requirement for quarterly reporting to directorate senior management teams. The Member Working Group suggested that information about complaints received and the action taken to avoid such complaints being repeated in future, should also be provided to relevant Policy and Performance Boards. Policy and Performance Boards may wish to set up a sub-group to review policy where they feel that lessons from complaints have not been fully absorbed. (Note that Children and Young People and Health and Community already report annually on compliments and complaints to the relevant Policy and Performance Board).
- 2.5 There are three separate complaint systems currently in operation; Corporate Complaints, Children and Young People, and Health and Community. This can be explained by the fact that Children and Young People, and Health and Community are statutorily required to have a complaints procedure in place following strict procedural guidelines. Nevertheless ITC services have started to undertake a business process review to consider the feasibility of using existing CRM systems to support the three separate processes.
- 2.6 It is important that customers know how to complain and that the Council welcomes complaints and takes them seriously. Whilst complaint forms are available at all Council establishments and online, customers need to be aware of the Council's service standards in the first place so that they know whether they have grounds for making a complaint. This should be addressed by the Council working towards the adoption of a Customer Care Strategy as discussed earlier in the report. The Council should also publish information about the complaints that it receives so as to demonstrate performance against standards. It is envisaged this would include the number and category of complaints received, performance against response target times and customer satisfaction with complaint handling. This would also provide an opportunity to publicise the improvements the Council has introduced as a direct result of listening to its customers. An annual survey of complainants should be undertaken so as ensure that improvements which are put in place are achieving the desired outcomes.

3.0 CONCLUSION

The scrutiny review has highlighted a number of areas where improvements need to be made to improve the way the Council responds to compliments and complaints. It is anticipated that the proposed recommendations will lead to increased customer satisfaction and enable the Council to close the loop of service failure.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 The Council should use the Customer Excellence Model to develop an overarching Customer Care Strategy to help drive improvement in consistency across the organisation and the findings of this scrutiny review will be fed into the process.

- 4.2 All staff involved in investigating and replying to complaints should be provided with relevant training in order to ensure a greater consistency with the quality of investigation and ensuing response to complainants. As part of their role in dealing with complaints, investigating officers should contact complainants to see if they would like an opportunity to discuss their complaint. They should also ensure that all complainants are notified of their right of appeal so that they are aware of their options should they remain dissatisfied.
- 4.3 Each Directorate should ensure they have in place a system to monitor, analyse and evaluate instances of service failure, whether they occur through a formal complaint or other form of customer contact. These details should be reported to Directorate Senior Management Teams and the relevant Policy and Performance Board on a quarterly basis. Policy and Performance Boards may decide to set up a sub-group where they feel that lessons involving instances of service failure have not been fully absorbed.
- 4.4 Once the business process review of existing complaints procedures has been completed by ITC, the outcome should be reported to the Corporate Services Policy and Performance Board.
- 4.5 The Council should publish information annually about the complaints that it receives so as to demonstrate performance against standards. The information should include the number and category of complaints received, performance against response target times and customer satisfaction with complaint handling. This would also provide an opportunity to publicise the improvements the Council has introduced as a direct result of listening to its customers.
- 4.6 A survey of complainants should be undertaken on an annual basis so as to ensure that the improvements which are put in place are helping to achieve the desired outcomes of improving customer satisfaction and reducing instances of service failure.