POLICY AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY PANEL
Thursday, 13 September 2018

ANNUAL COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS REPORT
Report of the Performance and Governance Team

Recommendations

It is recommended that Policy and Performance Scrutiny Panel considers the findings within the Annual Compliments and Complaints report and agrees to the following recommendations in relation to improvements to the current complaints procedure.

(1) Changing the current procedure from 15 working days full investigation time to 18 working days with set stages.

(2) Setting a maximum of three working days from complainant receipt to acknowledge the customer and 15 working days for service area investigations, including the delivery of a final response.

(3) Implementing a formal complaint extension of 10 working days for more complex investigations, with communication detailing additional time to the complainant made mandatory.

(4) Adoption of a less complex complaints procedure detailed in appendix C.

Summary

A summary report on formal complaints is prepared for both Management Team and the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Panel. The report analyses the number of compliments, complaints and Member of Parliament enquiries received in the period 1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018.

This report also considers the complaints raised and decisions made by the Local Government Ombudsman for the same period.

Recommendations for changes to the current complaints procedure effective from 1 October 2018 are detailed from paragraph 28 onwards.

Statutory Powers

Strategic Implications

1. This report has no direct correlation to the achievement of Corporate Plan objectives. However, the Council continues to strive for service excellence in the way in which it handles and responds to customer complaints. This is an important aspect of the Council’s governance arrangements.

Introduction

2. For the most part issues or concerns received into the Council are resolved informally as part of a service request, rather than a formal complaint.

3. In cases where a complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the informal service request, their concerns can be formally raised to a Level one complaint. The escalation is usually initiated with the complainant writing to the Chief Executive, the service area or the Customer Services Manager. Customer complaints are raised through a range of different channels such as online web self-service forms, by phone and face to face (into the Customer Service Centre), email and written correspondence.

4. Currently complaint cases are logged and managed within the Lagan CRM system by the Customer Services team with migration to the Salesforce case management system expected in October. However, complaints at level one and two relating to Direct Services issues continue to be managed by the Direct Services team and are not administrated by the Customer Services team.

5. Currently Customer Services (or Direct Services) log the initial complaint within the Lagan CRM system and issue a formal acknowledgement to the customer within three working days. The 15 working day service level agreement for complaint resolution starts the day the complaint is received. The complaint is then sent onto the service area for investigation. The service sends the complaint back to the Customer Service Centre for filing and for the response to be issued to the complainant. If the service fails to meet the required timescales a holding letter should be issued to the complainant explaining the delay. The Customer Service Centre currently posts a response back to the complainant on headed paper, but will also use email where an email address is provided.

6. If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the Level one complaint, the Customer Service Manager arranges for the complaint to be investigated under Level two of the complaints procedure. This investigation will be independently conducted by a nominated member of the Senior Leadership Team.

7. After receipt of the Level two response, if the complainant feels the matter has not been resolved to his/her satisfaction, they then may escalate it to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO).

8. The Council’s complaints procedure, in the current form, requires the complainant to be sent a written acknowledgement of complaint receipt
within three working days and a final formal written response within 15 working days. However where the investigation is likely to take longer, the complainant is advised in writing in the form of a holding letter. There is currently no set timescale for extensions to complaint investigations.

9. This report recommends changes to the current management of corporate complaints to improve communication to the customer, improve the speed and accuracy of complaint handling and prevent escalation of complaints to level two or the Local Government Ombudsman. This is particularly important as there has been an increase in complaints at level two in 2017/2018.

10. The Council received 302 compliments in the period of 1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018 (see appendix A). The praise has been received from members of the public who have actively chosen to express their thanks in relation to council services. Ten service areas were recognised within the compliments and 292 directly acknowledged individual staff members. In comparison, a total of 439 compliments were received over the same period in 2016/2017, demonstrating a 31% reduction for this reported period.

11. The reduction in compliments received can be mainly attributed to the Customer Service Centre no longer having the facility to record customer feedback via the Solidus telephone system. The Customer Service Manager will be conducting a review of customer feedback to establish a consistent way for measuring future feedback across all service channels. Customers are still encouraged to feedback by using our online compliment forms.

**Summary of Complaints Received**

12. The Council received 399 complaints in the period 1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018. With 23 Level one complaints escalating to Level two of the procedure (see appendix A). In comparison a total of 465 complaints were received in the same period for 2016/2017. The volume of Level one complaints has reduced by 16% (71), but we have seen an increase in Level two complaints by 28% (5). Overall there was a reduction of complaints by 14% (66 complaints).

13. The reduction can be explained by smarter handling of concerns from residents in customer services and dealing with cases as informal service requests rather than complaints. In particular, Direct Services queries (grass cutting, missed bins) and Traffic & Engineering queries relating to concerns around parking access and traffic regulation orders (TROs) etc.

14. The Council received 69 enquiries directly from our two local Members of Parliament (MP) Mims Davies and Steve Brine (see appendix A). Enquiries from MPs are answered by the Council’s Chief Executive, Nick Tustian, externally to the complaints process.
Local Government Ombudsman

15. The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) received 17 complaints in relation to council services for the period 1 April 2016 – 31 March 2018 (see appendix B). The report shows the complaints and enquiries recorded along with the decisions made. The LGO numbers include enquires made direct to them from people who were then signposted back to the local authority. When referred back, some individuals will choose to go through the formal complaints procedure to resolve their matters.

16. The LGO’s review includes cases received and/or decided within the review period and cases brought for review in the previous year (but not yet decided). The information also includes cases which have been raised in the current year but have not been decided by the 31 March 2018 reporting period.

17. From April 2016 the LGO established a new mechanism for ensuring the recommendations made to councils are implemented, where agreed to. The LGO then follow up with the council concerned and seek evidence of complaints remedied and recommendations implemented. The LGO report outlines one complaint remedied satisfactorily without LGO involvement.

18. Annual data has been published on the LGO website to ensure improved transparency and provide information that aids scrutiny of local services.

Recommendations for Complaints Management

19. The Council’s Performance and Governance Team have completed a review of the current complaints procedure to understand:

- Reasons for increase in Level two complaints.
- Concerns around Level one and Level two complaints not being resolved within the service level agreement timescale of 15 working days (see paragraph 21).
- Concerns relating to poor communication with the complainant and failure to keep them informed including issuing of holding letters and expected timescales for response.
- Transparency, accuracy and consistency across complaint handling.
- Opportunities to improve the complaints process to ensure efficiencies and effective customer care.
- Opportunities to make best use of new technology to ensure improved transparency, logging/tracking of complaints and effective communication with the complainant.

20. The following decisions were made by Corporate Management Team on 23 May 2018 to support the effective management and administration of complaints. Plus the promotion of improved customer relations.
• Ownership of the complaint process by the Performance & Governance Team - Complete.
• Complaints administration to move from the Customer Services Centre to Case Management to ensure improved consistency in service standards and support the case management model. – Outstanding.
• Mapping of compliments and complaints administration into the new Salesforce case management system to improve complaint handling and recording of complaints - Complete.
• Migration of Compliments and Complaints administration to Salesforce – Outstanding.
• Review of website information to improve signposting for issues relating to frequently raised concerns – Outstanding.
• Undertake a full review of the current Corporate Complaints Procedure (detailed in this report) and make recommendations for improvement. – Complete.
• Training to be provided in effective complaint handling and how to write comprehensive responses – Customer Services receiving training on October 8th. Performance and Governance specialist receiving training in November to roll out to the organisation.

21. The analysis of the complaints found that 145 of the 399 complaints received in the 2017/2018 (36%) were not resolved within the service level agreement of 15 working days. The average complaint response exceeded timescales by a further ten working days for resolution.

22. Delays to the service level agreement can be attributed, in some cases, to the Council undertaking a major transformation in November 2017. The introduction of a new corporate working structure, migration to new IT systems and staff moving to new roles saw an impact on business as usual, for a short time. The 2018/2019 repost should see services settle down and a consistent approach to complaints administration.

23. The Local Government Ombudsman recommends that local authorities implement 20 working days for full complaint resolution – giving enough time for investigation and comprehensive response. The Council’s current advertised service level agreement is 15 working days for complaint resolution. However, by the time the complaint is formally acknowledged (within three working days) and then passed onto the relevant service for investigation. Often only 12 working days is left for investigation and a comprehensive response to be written and issued back to the complainant.
24. The consideration of the staged procedure (appendix C), would allow service areas 3 further days for complaint investigation. Based on 2017/2018 complaints information only 96 complaints would have exceeded timescales.

25. The introduction of performance reporting and monitoring of complaints on a monthly basis for 2018/2019 will highlight areas where delays are occurring. This will enable the delivery of additional training and support in meeting timescales and deliver a better standard of service to customers.

26. In many cases, the escalation of complaints could have been avoided if early contact with the complainant occurred and undoubtedly would have encouraged prompt resolution. On occasions complaints are being escalated due to lack of communication and the customer feels they are left with no choice but to formalise their concern.

27. The analysis also recognised that further investigation is needed into how we deal with concerns via social media and implementing a process for this work. The Council regularly receive a growing number of queries and concerns via our Facebook and Twitter accounts. The area of work needs more analysis and consideration as a service channel. Social media interactions are currently managed by the Communications, Engagement and Marketing team.

28. The outcome of the complaints review has concluded that the current complaints procedure requires improvement to ensure effective customer care.

Therefore it is recommended the following changes are implemented to the corporate complaints process and implemented from October 2018:

Simplifying the current complaints service to ensure more effective communication with the customer, better management of expectations and avoidance of escalation by:

(1) Changing the current procedure from 15 working days full investigation time to 18 working days with set stages.

(2) Setting a maximum of three working days from complainant receipt to acknowledge the customer and 15 working days for service area investigations, including the delivery of a final response.

(3) Implementing a formal complaint extension of 10 working days for more complex investigations, with communication detailing additional time to the complainant made mandatory.

(4) Adoption of a less complex complaints procedure detailed in appendix C.
Financial Implications

29. Improvements to the management of complaints and future reporting arrangements will largely arise as a consequence of the Salesforce system being rolled out across the Council. There are therefore no financial implications associated directly to this report.

Risk Assessment

30. No risks identified at time of review.

Equality and Diversity Implications

31. The Equality Act is not relevant to the decision in this report as the decision does not relate to eliminating discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity, or fostering good relations between different people. An Equality Impact Assessment has not been carried out.

Conclusion

32. The Policy and Performance Scrutiny Panel should consider the recommendations stated in this report to ensure all future customer matters, where possible, are resolved before escalation. On the occasion complaints are raised customers will have confidence in the professional and epithubal approach their concerns. Demonstration of a robust complaints handling procedure will help the Council address the improvement of service standards, develop customer relationships and enhance the public perception of the Council’s service values.

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Appendices Attached: Appendix A, Appendix B, Appendix C

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - SECTION 100D

The following is a list of documents which disclose facts or matters on which this report or an important part of it is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. This list does not include any published works or documents which would disclose exempt or confidential information.

No Background Papers.