

CORPORATE SERVICES & PARTNERSHIPS POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE: REVIEW OF THE CORPORATE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Cabinet Member	Councillor Ray Puddifoot MBE
Cabinet Portfolio	Leader of the Council
Officer Contact	Khalid Ahmed, Administration Directorate
Papers with report	Corporate Services & Partnerships Policy Overview Committee review of Hillingdon's Corporate Complaints Procedure

HEADLINE INFORMATION

Purpose of report	To receive the Corporate Services & Partnerships Policy Overview Committee's review into Hillingdon's Corporate Complaints Procedure and give consideration to the recommendations of the review. .
Contribution to our plans and strategies	Putting Our Residents first; <i>Our People</i>
Financial Cost	There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
Relevant Policy Overview Committee	Corporate Services & Partnerships
Ward(s) affected	All

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet:

1. Welcomes the Committee's findings from their review of the Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure and agree the following recommendations from the Committee:

Policy Overview Committee Recommendations

- (i) Notes the positive way in which complaints are handled by the Council and that officers are actively encouraged to prevent complaints from escalating by resolving service issues to prevent complaints and where complaints do arise, resolving these at the earliest opportunity.
- (ii) That to ensure consistency, minor service requests across all service areas should not be logged as complaints where the issue is simply corrected within 24 hours.
- (iii) Notes that officers will continue to target specific service areas to reduce complaints in order to put the Council's residents first.

- (iv) That the current arrangements for a three-stage complaints procedure continue, with additional discretion to be applied by officers to expedite complaints through stages 2 and / or stage 3 of the procedure in particular where the complaint is against Council policy and therefore, the outcome of the complaint investigation will be unchanged.
- (v) That to implement the above recommendations, an updated three-stage Corporate Complaints Procedure be presented to Cabinet in the Autumn 2015 for consideration and subject to the approval of the Leader of the Council, take account of the suggested changes set out in the Committee's review report to streamline the three stage process.
- (vi) Looking ahead, that Cabinet notes from the evidence the Committee received during the review, some local authorities are operating a two stage complaint procedure with success; and that a future report is presented in 2016/17 to both the Cabinet and the Committee on the operation and effectiveness of the Corporate Complaints Procedure, to ensure arrangements for preventing and resolving complaints continue to put the Council's residents first.

Reasons for recommendations

The recommendations of the review will enable officers to assess whether the current three stage complaints procedure requires modification to ensure that the procedure continues to put residents first.

Alternative options considered / risk management

The Cabinet could decide to reject some or all of the Committee's recommendations.

Supporting Information

The Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure

1. The aim of the Committee's review was to examine the effectiveness of the Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure and to propose improvements and enhancements which could be made to the procedure to improve this important aspect of customer service to the Borough's residents. The priority for the review was to look at finding a procedure which produced a faster and effective resolution to complaints for residents.
 2. Dealing with complaints is a key part of effective customer service delivery. This Council aims to make it as easy as possible for people to provide feedback and the Council aim to resolve all complaints at the earliest opportunity. This Council's complaints procedure is, therefore, designed to ensure that complaints are dealt with openly, flexibly and in a timely way.
 3. The Council currently has a three stage complaints procedure which comprises of a Stage 1 which receives a full response from the Head of Service or Deputy Director. If the complainant remains dissatisfied with the response given, he/she could ask for their complaint to be reviewed at Stage 2 stating the reason for their dissatisfaction with the response. The Stage 2 is responded to by the Director / Deputy Director.
 4. If a complainant was dissatisfied with the response given at Stage 2, he/she could ask for their complaint to be reviewed at Stage 3 by the Chief Executive. The complainant has to state the reason why they were dissatisfied with the response given at Stage 2.
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5. The Terms of Reference of the review were as follows:-

- (i) To review the current definition of what constitutes a complaint.
- (ii) To consider what makes an effective complaints system.
- (iii) To review the effectiveness of the current three stage complaints structure.
- (iv) To assess the Council's current performance in dealing with complaints.
- (v) To examine the handling of complaints across the Council to ensure that there is a consistent and standard approach.
- (vi) To review the current timelines and service standards for responses to complaints within each stage of the complaints process.
- (vii) To identify what staff do to try and resolve complaints and consider whether this is effective in stopping complaints from escalating.
- (viii) How has the organisation learnt from complaints received and what evidence is there of service improvement.

Officer Comments on Recommendations

Following the Committee's review, officers advise Cabinet that the Committee has made some positive recommendations to take forward and would support their implementation as set out below.

Recommendation 1:

The Committee found that there was strong evidence that officers are resolving complaints at the earliest stage possible when a matter is raised by a resident. This intervention is made to assist residents to resolve any issue or complaint when initial contact is made with the Council. This course of action can limit those issues and complaints having to be progressed through the complaints system and bring about quick solutions for residents.

This approach from officers has led to a relatively lower number of complaints being registered in comparison to the high number of residents who receive services in the Borough. A statistic which the Committee noted was in 2013/14 the Local Government Ombudsman received 93 enquiries / complaints about Hillingdon, which had been less than the average for other London Boroughs (151 enquiries / complaints on average - nearly 40% less in Hillingdon than average).

The Committee was greatly encouraged to hear that the statistics indicated that Hillingdon was doing more than many other London boroughs to resolve complaints at an early stage.

Recommendations 2 and 3:

The Committee during the review was made aware of the large number of service requests which came into the Council and the need for officers to actively resolve some of the minor issues which were sometimes incorrectly registered as complaints. The Committee noted the types of complaints which the Council received and it was agreed that there was a need for officers to differentiate between simple service requests, such as for example, the collection of refuse which had not been collected and more complex issues. Training would take place to help greater intervention from officers and improve further the handling of complaints.

Recommendations 4, 5 and 6:

Officers acknowledged the review had provided the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the present procedure and to look at ways of improving and enhancing the process. The evidence which the Committee received pointed to some local authorities moving to a two stage process.

The Committee noted the great deal of work which was already taking place to improve aspects of the current three stage process and to improve the process for residents; however, it was acknowledged that modifications were needed to the present procedure.

The Committee noted that there were around 10% of complaints which were about Council policy such as policies relating to the Housing Allocation Policy, Housing Benefit and decisions on Council Tax decisions. It was the view of the Committee and of the Local Government Ombudsman witness that complaints on actual policies should not be processed through every stage of the Corporate Complaints Procedure when the outcome was unlikely to change at each stage. Of course, the importance was stressed of officers ensuring they correctly applied policies.

It was the view of the Committee and of officers that further work was needed to investigate the opportunities and risks that a move to a two-stage complaints procedure could present. In the immediate future, the Committee agreed that consideration should be given to the modifications to the present three stage process as discussed during the review, but that the effectiveness of the present procedure be monitored to ensure that complaints were being prevented and resolved, to put the Borough's residents first.

Officers would be asked to provide Cabinet with a report on modifying the current Stage 3 process in the Autumn of 2015 and then in 2016/17, report back on the operation and effectiveness of the Corporate Complaints Procedure, to ensure arrangements for preventing and resolving complaints continue to put the Council's residents first.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications associated with the recommendation that Cabinet welcome and adopt the proposals of the Policy Overview Committee in respect of the Corporate Complaints Procedure.

EFFECT ON RESIDENTS, SERVICE USERS & COMMUNITIES

What will be the effect of the recommendations?

To improve the complaints procedure for residents of the Borough.

Consultation Carried Out or Required

The review of the Corporate Complaints Procedure involved the consideration of witness feedback, including the Ombudsman and officers of the Council.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance has reviewed this report and recommendations outlined above, confirming that there are no direct financial implications arising at this stage.

Legal

The Borough Solicitor confirms that there are no specific legal implications arising from this report. Legal advice is, of course, provided whenever necessary to ensure that the Council meets its statutory obligations.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil