

RESOURCES SCRUTINY PANEL

10 September 2015

DRAFT COMPLIMENTS, COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS REPORT 2014/2015

Report of the Director for Resources

Strategic Aim:	All	
Exempt Information	No	
Cabinet Member(s) Responsible:	Councillor T King, Portfolio Holder for Places (Environment and Transport) and Resources	
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DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Resources Scrutiny Panel:

1. Endorses the content of the Council's first annual Compliments, Comments and Complaints report
2. Notes the planned enhancements to the process, which are to be introduced during the course of 2015/2016.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1. On 7th October 2014 Cabinet approved the Council's new Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy. Resources Scrutiny Panel played an active role in the development of the Policy and comments made by the Panel were incorporated in the final Policy document.
- 1.2. This annual report provides an overview of the numbers of Compliments, Comments and Complaints received by the Council over a six month period from 1st January 2015, which is the date the new Policy was implemented, to 30th June 2015.
- 1.3. The Council wants to engage with its customers in order to improve its services; it also wants to demonstrate how it has responded to customers and what has been done to rectify issues where service delivery has fallen below our required standard.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Following a comprehensive review of the Council's approach to handling complaints and other contacts, a more streamlined approach was developed in order to address some of the failures of the existing system.
- 2.2. Features of the new process include a greater emphasis on:
 - Compliments and comments;
 - Reduced timescales for dealing with complaints;
 - Introduction of a vexatious complainant protocol; and
 - Better governance around recording, monitoring and reporting outcomes
- 2.3. All officers are required to send details of Compliments, Comments and Complaints through to the Governance Team, where details are recorded and then referred on to the most appropriate department.
- 2.4. Councillor Conduct complaints fall outside the parameters of this report. These issues will be reported to the Council's Conduct Committee as a separate matter.
- 2.5. The statistics contained within this report are based on information registered by the Governance Team.

3. COMPLIMENTS

- 3.1. A compliment can be defined as customer feedback, which tells the Council that it has provided a service well, or how helpful a member of staff has been.
- 3.2. During 1st January to 30th June 2015 the Council registered 44 compliments from customers; **Appendix A** provides an overview of the departments involved. No themes have been identified at this stage in the new process. However, it can be seen from the quarter 1 statistics that Customer Services have shown an increase in the number of compliments received. This is because they are actively engaging their customers in the feedback process; we are intending to expand this across other areas of the Council as part of our improvement plan for this financial year.
- 3.3. All compliments were acknowledged within one working day and immediately forwarded to the relevant Service Head.
- 3.4. We are unable to compare against previous years as this information was not historically recorded. However, the numbers are encouraging. We are engaging with our customers to record their views by piloting a proactive approach on the Customer Service reception. This involves handing customers a feedback form to capture their views at the time of their interaction. This will be extended to other departments in due course (taking into account different methods of contact).

4. COMMENTS

- 4.1. A comment can be defined as an idea, suggestion or opinion on how the Council could improve its services. The LGO recommends recording comments as a way of gathering performance information. Many customers want to make comments that they wish to be taken into account but that are not complaints.
- 4.2. During 1st January to 30th June 2015 the Council registered 7 comments from service users; **Appendix B** provides an overview of the departments involved.

Again, no themes have been identified at this stage but we will continue to record these comments as a method of identifying issues and potential service improvements.

- 4.3 All comments were acknowledged within one working day and immediately forwarded to the relevant Service Head.
- 4.5 As above, we are unable to compare against historical data as this information has not been recorded in the past. The main objective of the inclusion of 'comments' in the Policy is to allow our service users the opportunity to comment on a particular service or issue. The comments are now formally recorded whereas in previous years they were handled in a less formal manner.

5. COMPLAINTS

- 5.1. A complaint can be defined as dissatisfaction with any service provided by the Council.
- 5.2. The corporate Policy requires service heads to respond to a stage 1 initial complaint within 10 working days of acknowledgement of the complaint. If the customer remains dissatisfied with the service received, they have the option of escalating their concerns to stage 2 of the process. This part of the process requires the Director to respond within a further 10 working days from acknowledgement of the request to escalate. If the issue is complex; the timescale can be extended following discussion with the complainant.
- 5.3. The Social Care statutory complaints process is more protracted and involves independent review. However, all complaints are recorded at the initial stage and allocated a unique reference number. Monitoring of the process is then undertaken by team admin assistants.
- 5.4. During 1st January to 30th June 2015 the Council registered 106 complaints from service users; **Appendix C** provides an overview of the departments involved. It can be seen that there is a high percentage of 'upheld' outcomes; these will be discussed at individual departmental management teams where root cause analysis and service improvements can be agreed. As of 1 July, all departments now notify service improvements to the Governance Team where complaints are upheld. This will be reported in future under the 'you said – we did' section of the report. Customers will also be able to see these improvements on the Council's website. (See paragraph 8 below).
- 5.5. The Governance Team will continue to issue reminders to assist officers to comply with the response timescales. If it becomes apparent that a timescale may be compromised, the Governance Team will work with the officers to remedy the problem and ensure the customer is kept up to date.

6. VEXATIOUS ACTIVITY

- 6.1 During the period of this report, the Council progressed one case under the vexatious complainant protocol. The customer was contacted by letter at stage 1 to explain how their behaviour was considered to be unreasonable and how it needed to improve.

7. THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN

- 7.1 The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) looks at complaints about Councils in a fair and independent way. All LGO decision statements are published
- 7.2 An annual review letter and report from the LGO is attached as **Appendix D**
- 7.3 It can be seen that the LGO handled 14 complaints in respect of Rutland County Council services. Unfortunately, data regarding management of the cases through the former complaints system is not held. However, changes to the process have rectified this for future years.
- 7.4 One case was upheld by the LGO, which related to the charges levied for registration services. The Council agreed to award a financial compensation payment to the customer of £100 for 'time and trouble' and undertook a full review of registration fees. The LGO was satisfied that the review had been completed thoroughly and that it addressed the findings of their case. The results of this review were presented to Cabinet on 10th February 2015, report number 48/2015.
- 7.5 In comparison to last year's statistics, the LGO handled the same number of complaints and enquiries and upheld one matter. It is anticipated that the Council's new process should reduce the number of issues referred to the LGO. The current process provides a higher level of overview in a shorter period of time therefore customers should receive a better standard of service and a satisfactory resolution when complaining to the Council.
- 7.6 Cases referred for local resolution relate to issues where the customer has failed to follow the Council's complaint procedure and instead, have prematurely involved the LGO in the dispute.
- 7.7 The Council has fully met its performance target of 28 days when responding to LGO enquiries. This target has become difficult to follow as the LGO now varies the response timescale depending on the issue under investigation. For example, the LGO may be in the process of assessing whether a complainant has followed an internal process before involving the LGO. In these cases, the LGO will require a prompt response. In future, we will register cases where the LGO has commissioned a full investigation.

8. AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN 2015/2016

- 8.1 The current Policy has been in place since January 2015. As with any new process, areas of improvement have been identified and will be addressed during 2015/2016.
- An analysis of trends will be undertaken at mid-year and then at end of year to identify key issues. Findings will be included in the next annual report to Resources Scrutiny Panel, which will be scheduled for September each year.

- A review of how departments are managing learning points from outcomes will be undertaken. We need to identify how we can develop service delivery to reduce the upheld: not upheld ratio for the future, for example regular reporting to Departmental Management Teams (DMT) could address this.
- Establish a link to show our customers how 'you said – we did' translates into clear service improvements. Promote this openly on the Council's website and through social media channels.
- A proactive approach to engage customers in providing feedback will be extended to all departments. We will also work with Departments to encourage them to report compliments.
- An analysis of responses will be undertaken by the Governance Team to ensure our replies to Complaints are consistent and professional. Advice and guidance will be offered where appropriate.
- The Governance Team will continue to monitor compliance with the target response times and provide management statistics where we have failed to achieve this target.

9. CONSULTATION

- 9.1. There is no requirement to consult on this subject; the report focusses on internal arrangements to manage customer contact in respect of compliments, comments and complaints.

10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 10.1. The alternative option is to fail to follow a procedure for managing compliments, comments and complaints. This approach would contradict the Government's transparency agenda and would not allow the Council the opportunity to monitor service delivery and subsequent improvements.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report, but clearly there is a cost associated with managing this process. Dealing with complaints effectively at an early stage prevents them from escalating thereby reducing the overall time spent on handling them.
- 11.2. There is a risk that failure to properly manage the process could result in a complaint being upheld by the LGO and this may result in the award of financial compensation. There is no tariff of financial compensation awards; each case is assessed on its individual circumstances on the basis of quantifiable loss.

12. LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

- 12.1 The Council has an ongoing obligation to manage and act upon customer feedback. The LGO considers a complaints system to be an integral part of a Council's service provision and believes the authority should take responsibility for putting things right.

13. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 13.1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has not been completed as the report concerns internal administrative processes.

14. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1. None.

15. HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1. Good governance arrangements promote the general wellbeing of the local community.

16. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 16.1. Although this process has only been in operation for a few months it can be seen that stronger governance arrangements are in place around acknowledgement of complaints, recording and tracking and overall compliance. Work still needs to be done to improve the system and show how our customer feedback improves service delivery.
- 16.2. The LGO, in its Annual Review of Local Government Complaints report, suggests that many Local Authorities are dealing with increasing numbers of complaints and have less resource available to manage them due to resources being cut in complaint handling teams. The warning is also backed by research showing that on average, people spent nine months trying to resolve their complaint before registering with the LGO.
- 16.3. Despite the rising number of complaints nationally and the obvious pressures this creates, Rutland County Council has managed to implement a better system, which reduces the timeframe for our customers. Further enhancements to the process will serve to increase customer satisfaction and create an open culture around customer feedback.

17. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 17.1. Annual Review of Local Government Complaints 2015 – Local Government Ombudsman

18. APPENDICES

- 18.1. Appendix A – Compliments received during 1st January – 30th June 2015
Appendix B – Comments received during 1st January – 30th June 2015
Appendix C – Complaints received during 1st January – 30th June 2015
Appendix D – LGO annual report in respect of Rutland County Council.

A Large Print or Braille Version of this Report is available upon request – Contact 01572 722577.