

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 20 September 2016

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Annual complaints report including the Local Government Ombudsman's annual letter and summary of formal information requests received in 2015/16.

Purpose: To provide information about the Council's performance when handling complaints and requests for information and to provide an update on measures being taken to further improve customer experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Governance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) note the number and nature of complaints made to the County Council in 2015/16; and**
 - (2) note the contents of the Local Government Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive; and**
 - (3) note the progress of the Customer Board in the development of a series of measures to improve customer experience.**
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1 Complaints and compliments

1.1. The County Council received 995 complaints in 2015/16, which represents a 1.4% increase from 2014/15. Figures and a detailed review by department are attached as Appendix 1. Please note that departmental comparisons of complaints and compliments are not valid, due to the nature of services provided by different departments.

1.2. Analysing trends and reasons for complaints provides the County Council with valuable feedback on how it can provide services that meet customer's needs and manage their expectations. How the authority handles complaints is a crucial element of customer experience, and is an area where the County Council is seeking continuous improvement to ensure it resolves individual customers' problems as effectively as possible, monitors trends in complaints to intervene quickly where it can be seen that things are going wrong, and learns lessons when things have not gone right. Implementing improvements from those lessons can also reduce the number of complaints that are made

1.3 During 2015/16 the Adult Social Care complaints team has reviewed the handling of its complaints to ensure the process was client and carer-focused. The department reviewed its information leaflet and practice guidance. It also reviewed how explanations were handled to ensure they used plain English, applied a One Council approach and were resolution focussed. They incorporated the use of local resolution meetings and agile technology. This has resulted in fewer complaints about operational services within year, and a 22% decrease in the number of complaints referred to the Local Government Ombudsman during 2015/16 compared with the previous year.

1.4 In the Corporate Complaints Team, which deals with all complaints other than those about Adult Social Care and Children's Services, there has been a drive to improve communication across a network of teams and contractors where complaints often require a combined input and agreement to the response. Clearer ownership of the problem and awareness of response times enables staff to resolve a complaint at an early stage, wherever possible, and keep the customer better informed at all stages of the complaint process.

1.5 In the past 12 months the Children's Services complaints team has identified common trends where communications could have been better and have improved what information is provided and how it is provided. Feedback from service users showed that they sometimes felt they were 'lost in a process' and 'had no control over it'. Whilst the County Council does, in many cases, have set procedures to follow, this feedback has enabled staff to provide a more empathetic approach, providing service users with much

clearer explanations about why the department is involved with certain cases, what will be involved, and what customers can expect along the way .

1.6 The Council continues to receive more compliments than complaints. In 2015/16 the Council received 3,614 compliments; further details are provided by department in Appendix 1.

1.7 Ensuring that the County Council provides channels for both positive and negative feedback which are easy for customers to access and which can be analysed and acted upon by teams is a priority for the Customer Board. Further information about the work undertaken by, and the recommendations of, the Customer Board is set out in section 4 below.

2 Local Government Ombudsman Letter

2.1. Annually the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) sends a letter to each local authority summarising the number of complaints and enquiries received and the decisions made about the authority during the period. The LGO informs the County Council of the complaints it has investigated and says how many were either upheld or not upheld. The LGO letter for 2015/16 is attached as Appendix 2.

2.2. Between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016 the LGO received 97 complaints about the County Council. However, it made decisions on 121 complaints about the County Council, an increase from 109 in 2014/15. The difference in the number of complaints received compared with the number of decisions made is due to the time lag between when a complaint is made and when a decision about that complaint is reached by the LGO. Some of the complaints about which decisions were made in the last financial year therefore relate to complaints originally made in 2014/15. This report focuses on those complaints where decisions were made in 2015/16.

2.3. Of the 121 complaints received, 50 were investigated and 28 were upheld. This represents 23% of all complaints received and 56% of those investigated. 22 complaints were investigated and not upheld. The split between upheld and not upheld complaints is comparable to previous years. Of the 71 complaints not investigated, 32 were referred back for local resolution, 30 were closed after initial enquiries and 9 were considered invalid or incomplete.

2.4. The outcomes of the upheld complaints cover three main areas of resolution, further details of which are provided in Appendix 1:

- 6 recommended an apology was given
- 13 involved financial redress or writing off debt
- 6 recommended a procedural change, which could also include a new appeal and review, reassessment, or training

2.5. The LGO carried out a survey of all councils in order to measure their “progress against the objective to improve local services”. It found that 98% of respondents believed that the LGO’s investigations have had an impact on improving local public services. Appendix 1 provides further detail on how the Council has responded to the upheld complaints and the lessons learned from them.

3 Formal requests for information (Environmental Information Regulations, Freedom of Information Act, and Data Protection Act)

3.1. There were 1,570 information requests in total, compared to 1,637 in 2014/15. Further details are attached as Appendix 3.

3.2 During 2015/16 the County Council maintained a high standard in meeting information requests on time, with 93% of requests responded to within the 20 working day deadline. However, the complexity of Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests continues, meaning that the amount of staff resource taken to deal with these requests has not decreased with the reduction in overall numbers, although the Council may legally refuse to answer these requests if they will cost the Council more than £450 each to respond to (equivalent to 18 hours of staff time). The County Council is also investigating the publication of FOI responses on its website. It is hoped this would both improve transparency and access to public information and potentially reduce the number of requests.

3.3 Complexity is a particular challenge for Data Protection (Subject Access) Requests, which also increased in number by 28% from 225 in 2014/15 to 289 in 2015/16. These requests may involve hundreds of pages of information being located, scanned and redacted for each request. The Council has 40 calendar

days to complete a request. There is no limit applied to staff time for Subject Access Requests, it is the County Council's obligation to provide the information. Teams will look into streamlining the delivery of these requests this year, including exploring the provision of more information in electronic formats instead of paper copies, and whether information can be scanned directly at the Council's records centre and archives, which will have the added benefit of helping to reduce the risks around data 'in transit'.

4 Improvements in Customer Experience

4.1. In 2015 a Customer Project Board was set up with representatives from all departments to undertake a review of customer experience. The aim was to identify a strategy for better and more consistent customer experience across the authority, considering our corporate priorities, particularly making best use of our resources in the current financial climate, and a One Council approach. A substantial amount of development and analysis work has been carried out by the Customer Project Board, and this included analysis of our current key data and interpretation of, and observations on, our current position.

4.2. This work identified that the County Council's current position against eight key customer expectations were broadly positive, with some real strengths including transparency and accountability in the County Council's dealings with customers. The work also identified that staff are knowledgeable, fair and respectful to customers. However, customer experience was not always consistent across the organisation and the Council could be more responsive and clearer with individual customers. The analysis concluded that there was room for improvement in staff training on customer experience, in seeking more customer feedback and systematically learning from it, and in getting everyone performing closer to the best. Staff being more informed through training and a consistent understanding of how to improve customer experience across the Council, can be a major contributing factor to reducing complaints.

4.3. In terms of an assessment of the risks and opportunities, the work concluded that having - and more importantly implementing - a clear set of customer values would lead to a better customer experience. With fewer, more targeted resources, the County Council is delivering increasingly difficult messages to customers and how it delivers these messages directly affects people's experience of the organisation. It is also important that the County Council's own values are embedded into new contracts and commissioned services so that customers get the same customer experience whoever is providing its services. Effective measurement of this across all services would provide Members with an oversight of customer experience and feedback. There are further potential benefits in that customer feedback may help the Council identify ways to redesign services so that they are cheaper to deliver and show where savings can be made without significant impact on customer experience. A commitment to continuous improvement and positive feedback is also good for staff morale and could help with recruitment and retention of staff.

4.4. As a first step towards greater consistency, the Council's Customer Promise will be reviewed together with the existing customer care standards. The Customer Promise will be tested with staff, customers and Members prior to adoption

4.5. Members, as representatives of all of the County Council's customers will play an important role in any customer experience plans that we develop, and a Members' Reference Group is therefore being established to help shape the work.

4.6. Work on a series of other priorities will continue during the coming months. This includes proposals to:

- provide staff training and online guidance on customer experience and the new Customer Promise
- review and update the Council's webpages on customer service
- ensure that all public facing email inboxes automatically provide a response to the customer to acknowledge receipt of their enquiry and set out response and resolution timescales and standards
- implement new standard email templates for each department/service (including partnerships) to improve perceptions of professionalism (ESCC logo, font, colour etc.)
- review the way in which the number and detail of compliments are gathered across the organisation to ensure that all service areas are covered

- work with the East Sussex boroughs and districts and other public sector organisations to identify what practical steps could be taken to 'join up' public services for the customer.

4.7. It is recognised that there are likely to be further opportunities for improvements in the quality and consistency of customer experience across the organisation which would require more analysis and an assessment of the costs and benefits. During the autumn and winter of 2016 a gap analysis will be undertaken to identify where the County Council currently lacks qualitative and quantitative customer feedback data (including data on outsourced and commissioned services). This will be supplemented with further evidence to provide the County Council with a more detailed assessment of our current strengths and weaknesses and will enable a costed options appraisal of potential customer experience measurement systems to be developed, so that the Council understands the resources that would be required to implement a system and the ongoing resource requirements to analyse the data. The Customer Project Board will continue to oversee the development of the Council's work on customer experience with advice and support from staff with customer experience/services roles across the Council and from the Members Reference Group.

4.8. Further actions to improve customer experience will be guided by the Council's digital principles, as further steps are taken to encourage customers to self-serve (where appropriate) as a means of reducing cost and providing easier access, and as the County Council continues to use social media and channels like webchat as a means of communicating with and serving customers.

4.9 With the development of a stronger corporate customer experience agenda it is proposed that Governance Committee would, in future, be provided with a more comprehensive annual report covering not only a summary of annual data on complaints and compliments and the LGO's annual letter, but also a progress report on work to enhance customer experience with our customers and service users.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None