

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 18 September 2018

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Customer Experience Annual Report 2017/18

Purpose: To provide an update on measures being taken to further improve customer experience and information about the Council's performance in 2017/18 in handling complaints, compliments and formal requests for information, including the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Governance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) note the progress of the Customer Project Board in the implementation of a series of measures to improve customer experience;**
 - (2) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2017/18; and**
 - (3) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.**
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1 Improvements in Customer Experience

1.1 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 with regard to customer experience.

1.2 The analysis concluded that, although there were areas of strengths for the Council, customer experience across the organisation could be more consistent and we could be more responsive and clearer with individual customers. It also concluded that there was room for improvement in staff training on customer experience, in order that all staff understand what a good customer experience should look and feel like, and how they can deliver it in their role. It also concluded that we could improve by seeking more customer feedback and systematically learning from it.

1.3 With this strategic aim, in 2016/17 the Board set out a Customer Experience Improvement Plan, and through this, achieved some practical improvements and medium-term objectives to understand further how to improve customer experience across the Council. These were new corporate email signatures and auto-acknowledgements, creation of a Customer Promise, and a gap analysis which identified where the Council is lacking feedback from customers about the services it delivers.

1.4 The Customer Experience Improvement Plan continued this staged approach, carrying out phased pilots of gathering feedback from customers according to the different channels they use to contact us, e.g. webpages, emails, telephones and in person. This approach ensures that the project is proportionate and affordable, and enables us to focus on areas where, for example, we may have high volumes of customer contacts, or where getting the customer experience right is particularly important.

1.5 In 2017/18 the Board oversaw the following key successes in Phase One of the Customer Experience Improvement Plan:

- **Roll out of the Customer Promise to staff, August 2017 onwards.** This involved updating the Customer Experience guidance on the intranet, providing news items in departmental newsletters and CMT Brief, and an updated Customer Service e-learning module, which is part of the new starter induction and available to all staff as a refresher and as a resource for managers to direct staff towards if staff members are moving into roles with new or different interactions with customers. Small “lunchtime learn” sessions for staff were held across three Council sites, to support staff with queries and talk through changes within teams in order successfully to implement the Customer Promise.
- **Roll out of the Customer Promise to customers, October 2017.** This involved a launch on the website and a small article within Your County. Copies of the Customer Promise are displayed in reception areas of Council buildings.
- **Implementation of a feedback measurement system and Phase One pilot, August 2017 onwards.** Gaining feedback from customers was identified in the gap analysis in 2016/17 as an area needing development. A suitable feedback system was procured, and a pilot run from August 2017 to February 2018. It proved that customers were able quickly and simply to provide us with feedback about their experience in contacting the Council and for us it has been a valuable exercise in gaining a clearer picture of how customers view us and what kind of improvements they expect to see. The feedback enabled us to make immediate actionable improvements to the website, and has highlighted areas where customer experience is not where we would wish it to be, so that we can start to identify longer-term improvements in these areas. The system proved to be very cost effective during the pilot (total cost £2,600 in 2017/18). Please see Appendix One for a brief summary of the Phase One feedback pilot analysis.

1.6 Phase Two of the Customer Experience Improvement Plan is underway. This entails continuing to gather feedback from our digital channels (website and emails), and starting a new pilot of gathering customer feedback from customer contact on telephones and in person. Phase Two also includes embedding the Customer Promise with commissioned services into the Procurement process and setting up the Customer Champions Network. Appendix One provides more information about Phase Two.

2 Complaints and compliments

2.1 The County Council received 770 complaints in 2017/18, which represents a small increase of 4% from 2016/17. Of the 770 complaints, 300 were partially or fully upheld, that is 39% of all complaints. A detailed review, by department, is attached as Appendix Two. Please note that departmental comparisons of complaints and compliments are not valid, due to the varying nature of services provided by departments.

2.2 Analysing trends and reasons for complaints provides us with valuable feedback on how we can provide services that meet customers’ needs and manage their expectations. How we handle complaints is a crucial element of customer experience, and is an area where the Council is seeking continuous improvement to ensure we resolve individual customers’ problems as effectively as possible, monitor trends in complaints to intervene quickly where it can be seen that things are going wrong, and learn lessons when things have not gone right. Implementing improvements from those lessons can also reduce the number of complaints that are made. Further details are attached as Appendix Two.

2.3 The Council continues to receive more compliments than complaints. In 2017/18 we received 2,731 compliments; further details are provided by department in Appendix Two. Ensuring that we provide 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 Project Board.

2.4 An important achievement that helps improve the way we manage and monitor customers’ enquiries effectively and efficiently has been the implementation of new case management system, icasework. This replaces our now obsolete Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and a patchwork of other electronic and paper-based systems. After a comprehensive testing and implementation phase, the new system went live in July 2018. This new system is being used to manage all formal complaints and information requests across all departments, and enquiries handled by the

Chief Executive's Support Team, and Communities, Economy and Transport Directorate Support Team. As well as being a more up-to-date, fit for purpose system that streamlines all the case types it manages, it will greatly improve our efficiency in handling enquiries that involve multiple departments, as staff work from a single case, avoiding duplication of data handling across different systems. Since all of the teams now work from the same system, and view the same information about enquiries, this will help avoid delays and provide a better One Council service to customers. It will also be easier to identify and monitor trends, which as explained in the previous section, will make it possible to identify quickly where things are going wrong and lessons learnt.

3 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman letter

3.1 The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGO) sends a letter annually 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 Council of the complaints it has investigated and says how many were either upheld or not upheld.

3.2 For 2017/18 the LGO received 96 complaints about East Sussex County Council, an increase from 87 in 2016/17. The number of complaints where decisions were made during 2017/18 was 88, an increase of 11% from 79 in 2016/17. The difference in the number of complaints received compared to 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 decisions made in 2017/18 relate to complaints originally made in 2016/17. This report focuses on the complaints where decisions were made in 2017/18 and within that the ones that were investigated.

3.3 The following table presents the number of complaints where decisions were made and the percentages of upheld complaints for the Council compared to national rates for 2016/17 and 2017/18. There has been a significant improvement for the Council with a decrease in the percentage of upheld complaints that were investigated. In contrast, the LGO saw their national uphold rate increase by 3% from 2016/17 to 2017/18; however, the Council's uphold rate decreased 20% from 2016/17 to 2017/18. In 2016/17, the Council's uphold rate was 12% above the national rate, and in 2017/18 was 11% below the national rate. The context nationally for these figures is that the LGO had an increase of registered complaints and enquiries (16,863 in 2016/17, compared to 17,452 in 2017/18).

Year	Investigated	Upheld	Not upheld	Not investigated (see 3.6)	Total	ESCC Uphold rate %	National uphold rate %
2017/18	35	16	19	53	88	46%	57%
2016/17	32	21	11	47	79	66%	54%

3.4 The outcomes of the 16 upheld complaints cover four main areas of resolution (please note that 2016/17 figures are listed in parentheses):

- 3 (2) recommended an apology was given
- 5 (3) recommended financial redress, reimbursement or write off debt
- 3 (13) recommended a new appeal and review
- 5 (3) where we had carried out an action or found resolution that the LGO found satisfactory without needing to make a recommendation

3.5 It has been a successful year in reducing the number of LGO complaints which have been upheld. More significant, however, has been the reduction from 13 to 3 in the number of upheld complaints where the LGO recommended a new appeal and review. It is explained in the LGO annual letter that one of the most significant statistics is the number of upheld complaints, but it also states, "Equally importantly, [is the] figure for the number of cases where we decided your authority had offered a satisfactory remedy during the local complaints process". Our Link Officers (who communicate and organise our responses to the LGO) have focussed on finding lessons learnt and remedies as part of the process of providing their responses to the LGO investigators. This is reflected in the reduction in upheld complaints, and also in the reduction in recommendations of a new appeal and review. Other categories for upheld complaints continued to remain low.

3.6 Of the 53 complaints not investigated, 25 were referred back for local resolution, 20 were closed after initial enquiries, and eight were considered invalid or incomplete. Appendix Two provides a breakdown by department of the complaints where decisions were made in 2017/18. The LGO letter for 2017/18 is attached as Appendix Three.

3.7 In our LGO letter for 2016/17, it was noted that our authority had had a number of instances where there had been delays in responses, even to relatively uncomplicated enquiries. From April 2017, our Link Officers recognised the need for improving our collective response times and have taken steps to improve the communications with their key contacts, who need to organise timely responses to the LGO. A clearer protocol for the steps involved in the LGO investigations and complaints was implemented. This year's letter states, *"Although there has still been some delay responses I am pleased to say the Council's performance in replying to our enquiries has improved"*, which is a positive outcome from the actions put in place by the Link Officers to improve response times.

4 Formal requests for information

4.1 There were 1,814 information requests in 2017/18 compared to 1,711 in 2016/17. These requests relate to the Environmental Information Regulations, Freedom of Information Act, and Data Protection Act. They include requests where information was provided in full or part, where no information was provided or held, and requests that were not valid or were withdrawn.

4.2 During 2017/18 the Council achieved a 93% compliance rate in meeting Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests within the 20 working day deadline, an increase from 91% in 2016/17. For 2017/18 the threshold set by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) was for 90% to be answered within this timescale; this increased in April 2017 from 85%. Our 93% compliance demonstrates the commitment from staff across the Council to answer our requests in a timely way.

4.3 We continue to have a high number of FOI and EIR requests, receiving 1,491 in 2017/18, a 6% increase from last year. We continue to explore efficiencies in order to meet the increase. As part of the functionality of our new case management system, the Council will be able to automate the publication of FOI and EIR responses on its website. This 'disclosure log' is in test mode and will go live in Q2 of 2018/19. This will help improve transparency and access to public information and potentially reduce the number of requests, although it should be recognised that few FOI requests are identical. Once the disclosure log is in place, a review of the publication scheme will be carried out to ensure it is up-to-date, listing all the information that is already readily available to the public.

4.4 Complexity is a particular challenge for Data Protection Subject Access Requests (SARs), which continue to increase. We received 323 requests in 2017/18, an increase of 5% from the previous year. These requests may involve hundreds of pages of information being located, scanned and redacted for each request. There is no limit applied to staff time for SARs; it is the Council's obligation to provide the information. Whilst the Council places a great deal of importance on the rights of individuals to access information we hold about them, it should be recognised that these requests involve a significant amount of staff time to complete.

4.5 As widely publicised, new data protection legislation came into force on 25 May 2018 in the form of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and a new Data Protection Act 2018. Under this new legislation, individuals have more control over how their data is used and more rights when it comes to non-compliance with the legislation. Fine limits have increased and individuals can take legal action against the Council. Although the Council prepared for receiving 'Individual Rights Requests' (IRRs) as part of more individual rights under the new legislation, such as the right to be forgotten, no IRRs have been received to date. However, there has been an unprecedented spike in the number of SARs in Q1 of 2018/19, (a 52% increase compared to Q1 in 2017/18). It would be safe to assume these are a result of the publicity of the new legislation. Any continuing trend will be reported in next year's annual report for 2018/19.

4.6 Complaints regarding the final responses to information requests have their own procedure, first as an internal review carried out by Legal Services, and then the option to complain to the ICO if the

customer remains dissatisfied. In 2017/18, we received nine requests for internal reviews, compared to 25 in 2016/17, a notable decrease of 64%. The Customer Services Team carried out an audit of internal review decisions in June 2017 in order to identify where improvements could be made to reduce dissatisfaction. As a result, communications were improved, focussing on tone, consistency, accuracy, and using more approachable language. The team also developed a more active role in interpreting data and providing clearer explanations about information being provided, or why information is not held or not being disclosed.

4.7 In 2017/18, the ICO received eight complaints about the Council, compared to six in 2016/17. All eight complaints were regarding data protection (versus FOI or EIR related), and five of these complaints were received in Q4; this increasing trend is continuing into 2018/19. Again, it's safe to assume this is the result of raised awareness of individual rights due to the new legislation. For 2017/18, of the eight ICO complaints, one is still under investigation and seven were completed. Of these seven complaints the ICO ruled that the Council had been compliant in discharging its statutory duties in five cases, and non-compliant in two cases. Of these two cases, no action was recommended by the ICO as the remedial actions had already been undertaken by the Council by the time of the ICO decisions.

5 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

5.1 This report provides an overview and progress on measures being taken to further improve customer experience and summarises the annual results for complaints, compliments, the LGO letter, and formal information requests received in 2017/18.

5.2 Governance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) note the progress of the Customer Project Board in the implementation of a series of measures to improve customer experience;
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- (3) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None