

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 20 September 2019

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Customer Experience Annual Report

Purpose: To provide an update on measures being taken to further improve customer experience and information about the Council's performance in 2018/19 in handling complaints, compliments and formal requests for information, including the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The 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 and agree recommendations for 2019/20 and beyond as set out in the report;**
 - (2) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2018/19; 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.

1.2 A two-phase Customer Experience (CX) Improvement Plan was agreed in order to identify and implement some practical improvements and medium-term objectives to improving customer experience across ESCC. Phase One of the plan involved piloting feedback measurement systems from customers using our website and receiving emails from us. As reported in May 2018, the pilot was successful and our learning from this is summarised in section 2 below. Phase Two of the CX Improvement Plan was implemented in 2018/19 and comprised:

- a) continuing to gather customer feedback from our digital channels (website and emails) to increase the overall volume of to provide a wider evidence base for decision making and to allow more teams to trial the system.
- b) starting a new pilot of gathering feedback from customer contact via telephone calls and face to face visits from September 2018 to May 2019 inclusive.
- c) the launch of a Customer Services Network in June 2018 which is made up of staff in customer facing roles from across ESCC. There are approximately 20 members across Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Community, Economy and Transport, and Chief Executive Office.
- d) embedding the Customer Promise with contracted and commissioned services into the Procurement process, in both £181k+ and £25k to £181k frameworks. This was achieved with the cooperation and commitment from staff in Procurement.
- e) updating and rolling out the Unreasonable Customer Behaviour policy and guidance which were approved by CMT in January 2019. These replaced the Unreasonably Persistent Complainants Policy. We held four introductory sessions for staff, which were well attended. In

these sessions we reached over 60 staff from 25 different services from across the departments. We also attended team meetings where requested.

- f) contributing to the development of a Customer Services training course with Personnel and Training, where they had identified a lack of this type of training. It was launched in October 2018.
- g) relaunching the Customer Services Managers Group, a group for Customer Services Managers or equivalents from East Sussex District and Borough Councils, Brighton & Hove City Council and Sussex Police, to come together to improve signposting between the councils and share best practice. The group focuses where the services and enquiries overlap, and in particular where the public finds it difficult to differentiate between our authorities, such as traffic and safety, speeding, maintenance of roads and verges, waste collection and facilities.

2 Summary: what we've learned from CX Implementation Plan Phase One and Two

2.1 The Board has gained a number of key insights through Phase One and Two of the CX Improvement Plan. The main lesson learned is that there is significant value in gathering feedback from customers from across ESCC, and by gathering feedback from a wide range of services and contact channels, we now have a good awareness of the level of customer satisfaction across the organisation. However, we have not been able to succeed in getting valuable feedback from all contact channels that we've investigated, and this is discussed further in Appendix One.

2.2 We have built up a reliable picture of how customers view ESCC overall across most channels. Customer satisfaction is highest where staff interact with customers. There is an 80% overall customer satisfaction level for email interaction; 93% by telephone; and 76% for face to face interactions. The satisfaction level is consistently lower (64%) for our website, where customers self-serve, a channel which is becoming increasingly important for ESCC in reducing the costs of service delivery and information provision, especially in the light of the Core Offer. It is recommended that website customer satisfaction levels form a key part of the future focus of our CX work. We will need to do some further proactive, systematic work to better understand why the website overall receives lower ratings and how we can improve this. It would also be useful to benchmark this rating with other authorities to understand what is a typical level of satisfaction. It is crucial that this channel meets customer needs if we are going to rely on it increasingly in the future.

2.3 We've learned the quality of feedback varies from the different types of channels. The feedback from digital channels (website and emails) is particular effective for highlighting where improvements can be made. The ratings and comments left on a daily basis directly correlate with the customer's experience and how clear and useful the information and transactions have been. The telephone surveys have proven challenging both technically and in providing valuable results. This was primarily due to the difficulty in gaining staff engagement to ask customers to take part in the survey. A number of other technical options were investigated for continuing a Council-wide telephone survey, but none of the options have proven financially or technically possible. The face to face surveys provided some useful results, such as an overall level of satisfaction, but the uptake of the surveys across the locations varied. The project team has investigated using software that gives the customers the ability to leave comments about their visit, which would be useful to gain further insight. Please see Appendix One for an evaluation of Phase One and Two of the project and Appendix Two for the results of the surveys.

2.4 The Board has found that the Customer Services Network has proven very popular with staff and has been successful in providing valuable customer insight, sharing best practice, providing peer support, and tackling difficult issues and frustrations. We feel the network can provide valuable insight, contribution and evidence to the Customer Project Board when considering changes being made to services due to the Core Offer and the impact on customer satisfaction, and can act as a group of champions to lead on new approaches etc.

2.5 Through the project's research and feedback gathering, the project team have been able to develop the skills and knowledge about what is technically and practically possible in the field of CX

and what works for ESCC. The team have learned that being flexible in their approach has been essential for success and feel that it is the best course of action going forward when gathering feedback. We've learned that the satisfaction level is realised quickly and remains static (if nothing is changed, e.g. web content is not amended), and whilst the running costs of feedback systems are low, snapshots and one-off campaigns are equally effective as embedding long-term customer feedback into everything we do.

2.6 The project team can apply the knowledge acquired during the CX project and provide ongoing support across ESCC, adding value to specific projects, in particular when changes are being designed for services (e.g. implementation of the Core Offer). The measurement tools and evaluative skills can help monitor CX and ensure that, overall, that experience is a good one, even if it is in an environment where our communications with customers is more standardised and where we channel shift to greater online self-service. The team can also contribute a CX perspective to wider agendas such as digital / AI developments for ESCC and identify how they could be exploited to deliver a good CX at lower cost.

3 CX recommendations for 2019/20 and beyond

3.1 The Board has the following recommendations for providing a permanent focus of CX within ESCC, based on the lessons learned in Phases One and Two of the project. Further rationale supporting these recommendations is presented in Appendix One and the results of the feedback streams are provided in Appendix Two:

- a) The CX project to end, but the CET Customer Services Team to continue to lead on the corporate CX agenda and incorporate the activities below (if approved) into its role.
- b) CX development work across ESCC to continue to be reported to CMT in this annual report.
- c) The Customer Project Board to become the CX Board and meet twice a year to discuss and approve developments for CX, with highlight reports provided virtually to the Board for the two alternate quarters. The Board would therefore provide a corporate overview of ESCC's CX activity and take a view on issues and recommendations raised by the Customer Service Network, Customer Services Managers group and Corporate Content Strategy group.
- d) The webpage feedback surveys to continue and increase. Webpage feedback has been proven very valuable in improving customer experience and correcting or improving content of the website, but as discussed above, we need a better understanding of why customers have overall low levels of satisfaction with its use, and seek to improve this.
- e) The email feedback surveys to continue where teams wish to carry on using them, and to be used on an ad hoc basis as agreed by the Board. Email surveys provide us with valuable feedback for assessing this communication channel, but a more flexible approach would be more appropriate.
- f) The telephone surveys to be discontinued from an ESCC-wide approach.
- g) The face to face feedback surveys to continue, with a change of software to enable customers also to leave comments.
- h) The Customer Services Network to be continued.
- i) To work towards to establishing a comprehensive (as much as possible) customer contact baseline for ESCC. This includes telephone calls, emails, and online forms. Understanding where our high volume contact points are will be important in order to further evaluate CX and also to help channel shift customers where appropriate. However, it is essential that before we channel shift customers that we ensure our online alternative is easy, clear and any transactions are fit for purpose. Website feedback surveys will also play a vital role in this shift. Please see Appendix Three for details on the data already gathered and this proposed development.

3.2 The total cost for 2019/20 for the survey software would be approx. £1,700. For 2020/21 and onwards, the survey software would cost approx. £2,000 per annum. Costs can be absorbed within CET's Customer Services Team's budget, due to a small reduction of staff resources, from a staff member reducing to part time to allow for caring responsibilities.

4 Complaints and compliments

4.1 The Council received 774 complaints in 2018/19, which represents a very small increase of 0.5% from 2017/18 where there were 770 complaints. Of the 774 complaints, 266 were partly or fully upheld, that is 34% of all complaints, which is a decrease from the previous year at 39%. A detailed review, by department, is attached as Appendix Four. Please note that departmental comparisons of complaints and compliments are not valid due to the varying nature of services provided by departments.

4.2 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 customer's problems as effectively as possible, but also to identify where possible service-wide improvements that can be made to create a better experience. Further details are attached as Appendix Four.

4.3 The Council continues to receive more compliments than complaints. In 2018/19 we received 2,244 compliments; further details are provided by department in Appendix Four. 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.

5 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman letter

5.1 The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) sends a letter annually to each local authority summarising the number of complaints received, and the decisions made about the authority during the period. The LGSCO informs the Council of the complaints it has investigated and how many were either upheld or not upheld.

5.2 For 2018/19 the LGSCO received 87 complaints about ESCC, a decrease from 96 in 2017/18. There were 90 complaints where decisions were made during 2018/19, a slight increase of 2% from 88 in 2017/18. This report focuses on the complaints where decisions were made in 2018/19 and within these the ones that were investigated. The difference in the number of complaints received compared to the number of decisions made is due to the time it takes to investigate. Some decisions made in 2018/19 relate to complaints originally made in 2017/18. Appendix Four provides a breakdown by department of the complaints and the LGSCO letter for 2018/19 as Appendix Five.

5.3 For 2018/19, of the 90 complaints where decisions were made for ESCC, 41 complaints were investigated, and of those, 28 were upheld. There has been an increase for ESCC in 2018/19 of the percentage of upheld complaints (of those investigated) to 68%, which is above the national average of 58%. When compared to the total number of decisions made by the LGSCO in 2018-19 (as opposed to cases that go through to a full investigation), the upheld figure is 31%. The upheld rates for previous years are listed in Appendix Four.

5.4 This year the LGSCO provided an additional report on the compliance of the remedies they recommended for complaints they upheld. The LGSCO believes this will provide a more comprehensive and insightful view on our approach to complaint handling. The LGSCO provided specific recommendations and often with a time-frame for completion, which they followed up with authorities and gathered evidence that recommendations were implemented. Of the 28 upheld complaints for ESCC, the LGSCO recorded the compliance of recommendations for 22 complaints. ESCC succeeded on satisfying compliance on all 22 of the complaints.

5.5 The report on compliance provides descriptions of the recommendations for each of the 22 complaints, and since there can be more than one recommendation per complaint, this shows more of a trend of what the remedies were for the injustices caused or maladministration, than the 'decision made' report. The following were the remedies that ESCC carried out (but there were a further two unidentified 'other remedies'):

- Apology (16)
- Financial Redress (18): due to avoidable distress / time (10), quantifiable loss (5), loss of service (3)
- New appeal, reconsidered decision, reassessment (5)
- Procedure or policy review / change (4)
- Training and guidance (2)
- Add or correct records (1)

5.6 The LGSCO noted this year that they issued one public report about ESCC in 2018/19, regarding the handling of a child's absences from school. A public report of a complaint is issued by the LGSCO when it believes it's in the public interest to highlight a particular issue or when an authority disagrees with a recommendation. In this instance the LGSCO issued the report as ESCC did not accept all of the analysis and recommendations within the draft decision statements. In the end, the public report issued contained a significantly more measured and accurate view of the events than previous draft decision statements and we accepted the recommendations in full. The Governance Committee considered the report and the Council's response at its meeting on 26 June 2018.

6 Formal requests for information

6.1 There were 2,039 information requests in 2018/19 compared to 1,814 in 2017/18. These requests relate to the Environmental Information Regulations, Freedom of Information Act, and Data Protection Act. These 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.

6.2 During 2018/19 the Council achieved a 94% compliance rate in meeting Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests within the 20 working day deadline. The monitoring threshold set by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is 90% to be answered within this timescale.

6.3 We continue to have a high number of FOI and EIR requests, receiving 1,597 in 2018/19 compared to 1,491 in 2017/18, an increase of 7%. We continue to explore efficiencies in order to meet the increase. As stated in the customer and support service section of the Core Offer, we have a statutory obligation to respond to formal information requests. We encourage staff to respect the public's right to ask these requests and to view responding to these requests as part of their core duties, and as part of our Core Offer. However, we will find ways to make information more readily accessible for the public to reduce the need to make a request and in the process try to reduce staff time needed to answer bespoke requests.

6.4 In October 2018, we launched the 'disclosure log'; this log is part of the functionality of the case management system and it publishes our FOI and EIR responses on the Council's website. The disclosure log has helped improve transparency and access to public information in general. And although it should be recognised that few FOI requests are identical, the log has already proven useful to point the public to previous requests in order to provide answers in full or in part to their requests.

6.5 With the widely publicised new data protection legislation that came into force on 25 May 2018, the number of data protection subject access requests (SARs) increased significantly in 2018/19. We received 442 requests in 2018/19 compared to 323 requests in 2017/18, an increase of 37%. There is no limit applied to staff time for SARs; it is the Council's obligation to provide the information.

6.6 Complaints regarding the final responses to FOI and EIR requests have their own procedure, first as an internal review carried out by Orbis Public Law, and then the option to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) if the customer remains dissatisfied. For SARs, we review our response if the customer remains dissatisfied and ask for legal support if it is particularly complex.

In 2018/19, we received nine requests for internal reviews, the same number as in 2017/18. The Customer Services Team and Orbis Public Law continue to work together to identify where improvements can be made due to customers being dissatisfied with our responses to their requests. Out of the nine internal reviews, Orbis Public Law found fault in the way the exemptions, allowed by the legislation, were applied for three cases. There was no fault found with four internal reviews and one is still outstanding.

6.7 In 2018/19, the ICO received six complaints about the Council, compared to eight in 2017/18. All six complaints were regarding SARs. Of the six complaints the ICO ruled that the Council had been compliant in discharging its statutory duties in three cases, and non-compliant in three cases. Of the three upheld complaints, one was remedied by raising awareness with ESCC staff on recognising SARs from the public, one by providing further information to the requester, and the other providing an apology for the delay in our response to the requester.

7 Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 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 2018/19.

7.2 The 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 and agree the recommendations for 2019/20 and beyond;
- (2) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2018/19; and
- (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