

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 2 October 2020

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 2019/20 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 Experience 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 2019/20; 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 It was agreed by CMT in August 2019 that the CET Customer Services Team (CST) would continue to lead on the corporate Customer Experience agenda and incorporate these activities into its role on a permanent, business as usual basis, thus ending the Customer Experience Project. The Customer Project Board would also become permanent as a Customer Experience Board.

1.2 The Customer Experience Board has representatives from all departments. Its aim is to identify an ongoing 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.

1.3 The Customer Experience Project had a two-phase Customer Experience Improvement Plan which identified and implemented practical improvements and medium-term objectives to improve customer experience across ESCC. Phase One in 2017/18 involved developing and launching a new Customer Promise for ESCC and piloting feedback measurement systems from customers using our website and receiving emails from us.

1.4 Phase Two in 2018/19 continued to gather customer feedback from our digital channels (website and emails) and expanded the pilots of gathering feedback to cover customer contact via telephone calls and face to face interactions. It also involved the launch of the Customer Service Network, embedding the Customer Promise into contracted and commissioned services within the procurement process, the roll out of the Unreasonable Customer Behaviour (UCB) policy and guidance, the development of a Customer Services training course with HR&OD, and relaunching of the Customer Services Managers Group (across East Sussex District and Borough Councils, Brighton & Hove City Council, and Sussex Police).

1.5 In 2019/20, with the permanent remit granted for continuing the corporate Customer Experience agenda, we have been able to continue with all the activities we felt so vital to improving our customers' experience. The most important part is gathering valuable customer feedback. We gather feedback from the website, email correspondence, and face to face visits. As explained in last year's report, telephone feedback proved unsuccessful as there are too many telephone systems to be able to carry out an effective Council-wide evaluation.

2 Customer feedback for 2019/20

2.1 It has been a successful year in receiving and utilising customer feedback. We received over 15,300 ratings from our surveys (website, emails and face to face) and over 3,300 verbatim comments from customers. These comments are fed back directly to services and have become a crucial element in service improvements.

2.2 For website surveys, we received an overall customer satisfaction rating of 62%, which remained the same as last year. Website feedback has played a significant role in shaping the information we provide to our customers. The comment function remains extremely useful for services and provides real-time alerts to issues such as broken links or out of date information. Comments also play a key role in making customer journeys more efficient, and highlighting poor performing content that needs reviewing. Our website feedback scored the lowest of all our channels, and in 2019/20 we focused on this area of development and improvement, which is discussed further in section 3.

2.3 For email correspondence, the satisfaction rating was 77% in 2019/20. Whilst this is still a very high level, it was down from 85% in 2018/19. However, the volume of feedback has increased hugely (up by 60% from 2018/19) and provides a wider range of services, which now includes Highways and Parking. The face to face surveys located in Eastbourne and Hastings Libraries, St. Mary's House, Ocean House and County Hall, still provide positive evidence that customers were happy with the customer service they received during their visit. The overall satisfaction rating is 87% for 2019/20. During 2019/20, East Sussex Highways was the only service to continue collecting feedback by telephone, receiving a 92% satisfaction rating about the service customers had received.

2.4 Surveys continue to be used as a tool to guide improvements to provide clear and concise information. We know from feedback from service managers that the results are being used as part of their management information for business development, tracking the performance of a service offer, for staff training and performance reviews, as well as service and systems improvements. Sometimes, where there is little other feedback from customers, these surveys are a valuable source of feedback that reminds the teams that the majority of customers are happy with the service they receive. Further details on feedback received in 2019/20 is presented as Appendix One.

3 Customer Experience developments 2019/20

3.1 In 2019/20 we carried out further work to better understand the lower satisfactions ratings for the website and any improvements that can be made. It is important to understand this, as the website is an essential channel for ESCC when communicating with customers, especially as we increasingly rely on it to reduce the costs of service delivery and information provision, in the light of the Core Offer.

3.2 Reasons for lower satisfaction ratings include poor quality content, complex text, customers unable to find what they need or faced with a prolonged customer journey navigating to the information they want, and often resorting to contacting the Council by email or telephone. For example, during 2019/20 we identified that the corporate 'contact us' section of the website receives very low satisfaction ratings, with 74% of feedback graded as 'poor' compared to the website overall at 38% 'poor'. CST carried out an evaluation of how to improve it and will test changes to the layout and information provided and monitor for six months to see if the satisfaction ratings improve. If not, a more radical re-design will be considered with approval from the Customer Experience Board. Another example of where we are seeking to improve content is in Communities, Economy, and Transport (CET). CET web content receives consistently lower ratings, with approximately 40% of website feedback rated 'poor' (compared to Children's Services and Adult Social Care with 27% of website feedback rated as 'poor' following a similar type of content review). CST carried out an analysis to identify improvements that will reduce the amount of content, increase readability and simplify the customer journey for CET's services and information. We hope to see the results of this in next year's Customer Experience Annual Report. Further considerations into the satisfaction rating for the website are presented in Appendix One.

3.3 In 2019/20, CST continued work on getting reporting systems in place to create a customer contact baseline, so that we have an overview of the volume of customer contact across ESCC via different channels. It focussed on customer-facing contact points for telephone numbers, email addresses, and online forms. Work is ongoing with IT & Digital Services in Orbis to create the reports on enquiries from customers by email. When complete, the baseline should provide us with a valuable understanding of how customers interact with us and will support our Core Offer aim for customers to use online resources where possible, by identifying further opportunities for channel shift.

4 Complaints and compliments

4.1 The Council received 731 complaints in 2019/20, which represents a slight decrease from 2018/19 where there were 745 complaints. Of the 731 complaints, 263 were fully or partly upheld, that is 36% of all complaints, the same as the previous year. 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.

4.2 Analysing 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 the Council seeks continuous improvement to ensure we resolve individual customer's problems as effectively as possible, but also to identify where service-wide improvements can be made to create a better experience. Further details are attached as Appendix Two.

4.3 The Council continues to receive more compliments than complaints. In 2019/20 we received 2,179 compliments compared with 2,244 in 2018/19. Further details are provided by department in Appendix Two. The number of compliments can vary from year to year due to events held or one-off campaigns which contact a high number of residents. Ensuring that we provide channels for both positive and negative feedback which are easy for customers to access and which helps services to reflect on what is or isn't working, is a priority for the Customer Experience 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 and the decisions made about the authority during the period. It informs the Council how many of those complaints investigated were either upheld or not upheld, closed after initial enquiries, or referred back to the Council for local resolution (as they were brought too early to the Ombudsman).

5.2 In 2019/20 LGSCO made decisions on 101 complaints, compared to 90 in 2018/19, an increase of 12%. However, only 38 complaints were investigated fully (compared to 42 in 2018/19), and of those 20 were upheld. In 2018/19 there had been an increase in the percentage of complaints that the LGSCO had investigated and upheld against ESCC, which rose to 67%. For 2019/20 this has reduced to 53%, below the average of similar authorities (66%). Appendix Two provides a breakdown by department of the complaints. The LGSCO letter for 2019/20 is presented as Appendix Three.

5.3 The LGSCO focuses on the outcomes of upheld complaints and what can be learned from them, stressing compliance with its recommendations, which it monitors. Where it finds fault, it considers what can be done to correct or resolve the injustices and maladministration it finds, and recommends a number of remedies to put things right. It then monitors the Council's compliance of its recommendations. In 2019/20 the LGSCO recorded the compliance of recommendations for 18 complaints and ESCC succeeded on satisfying compliance on all of these. In 2018/19 we were also 100% compliant. A breakdown of the remedies we carried out is provided in Appendix Two.

5.4 The LGSCO noted in the annual letter that it issued a public report about ESCC in 2019/20. This was regarding home to college transport for an adult learner. 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 found fault with the relevant ESCC policy even though it had previously deemed the same policy to be in line with the law. Governance Committee discussed the public report on 21 April 2020 and agreed to accept the

findings and implement the recommendations of the report. At the direction of Governance Committee, we wrote to the LGSCO to express our disappointment with how their investigation into this case was conducted.

6 Formal requests for information

6.1 There were 1,843 formal information requests in 2019/20, compared to 2,039 in 2018/19. 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 in part, where no information was provided or held, and requests that were not validated or were withdrawn.

6.2 There was a decrease of 11% to 1,416 in freedom of information (FOI) and environmental information regulations (EIR) requests received in 2019/20. Whilst we have no specific evidence that this is the case, it may be attributed to the public finding more information online by searching the disclosure log (an online archive of answers to previous requests) instead of having to submit their own request. During 2019/20 the Council achieved a 92% compliance rate in meeting FOI and EIR requests within the 20 working day deadline. For 2019/20, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) set a monitoring threshold of 90% to be answered within timescale. In 2019/20 there were 427 data protection requests received across the Council. Children's Services continues to receive the vast majority of these requests with the complexity and number of responses finalised and sent increasing significantly in 2019/20. Details on formal complaints regarding information requests is presented as Appendix Four.

7 Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 This report provides an overview and progress update on measures being taken to further improve customer experience and summarises the annual results for complaints, compliments, the LGSCO letter, and formal information requests received in 2019/20.

7.2 Governance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) note the progress of the Customer Experience 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 2019/20; 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