

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 30 September 2021

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 by the Customer Experience Board and information about the Council's performance in 2020/21 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 Experience Board in the implementation of a series of measures to improve the customer experience;**
 - (2) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2020/21; and**
 - (3) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.**
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1 Introduction

1.1 In 2020/21 the Customer Experience Board continued to oversee the implementation of a series of measures to improve Customer Experience across the Council. Our working groups and Customer Services Team continued to deliver practical improvements to our communications with customers from their feedback, and staff across the Council adapted to the impact of the pandemic on our delivery of our Customer Promise and customer service to our customers. As well recognised, the impact of the pandemic varied across the departments and services of the Council, and this was also the case for our customer experience work, complaints, Ombudsman complaints, compliments, and formal information requests.

2.0 Customer Experience achievements and developments

2.1 We continued to gather and act on customer feedback. We received around 12,500 ratings from our surveys (website and emails) and over 3,500 verbatim comments from customers. This is compared to 2019/20 with 15,300 ratings from our surveys and over 3,300 verbatim comments from customers. We were unable to gather face to face surveys during 2020/21 due to lockdown restrictions. Even with the impact of lockdowns, customer feedback has continued at a high level and provided a vital facet for gauging the effectiveness of our communication with customers during the pandemic. It provided assurances about quality of content and email communications during the challenges ESCC faced during 2020/21.

2.2 For website surveys, we received an overall customer satisfaction rating of 61%, which remained similar to last year at 62% satisfaction ratings. Website feedback has played a significant role in shaping the information we provide to our customers. The comments we receive remain a crucial element in service improvements, playing a key role in making customer journeys more efficient, and highlighting poor performing content needing reviewing.

2.3 For email correspondence, the satisfaction rating was 78% for 2020/21 compared to 77% in 2019/20. These surveys are a valuable source of feedback that reminds the teams that the majority of customers are happy with the service they receive. East Sussex Highways continues to be the only service to collect feedback by telephone, receiving a 70% overall satisfaction rating from customers.

2.4 It is a huge achievement to continue to receive the same satisfaction ratings in the challenging year we have experienced, and it is a tribute to the dedication of our staff. Further details on all feedback received in 2020/21 is presented as Appendix One.

2.5 In 2020/21 we continued our focus on areas receiving lower satisfactions ratings and improving where this is a result of 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.

2.6 Improvements carried out on our online presence of ESCC website and microsites focused on compliance with the Accessibility Regulations 2018. It also involved improving staff and manager knowledge of web content management policies and best practices in digital content and contributing to Digital Services' website migration to gov.uk style framework. We're gaining more feedback from adding feedback survey to webforms. Further details of these improvements are presented in Appendix One.

2.7 Through phase one and two of the Customer Experience Improvement Plan, the Customer Experience Board has created a foundation of a Council-wide customer experience remit; it has embedded the Customer Promise and customer standards, improved communications from customer feedback, created Council-wide consistent customer service guidance and policies, and put networks in place to communicate across our decentralised customer contact model.

2.8 Moving forward, the Customer Experience Board is currently exploring the next priorities for our customer experience remit. The Board's continued aim is to identify issues and deliver improvements that result in a 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.

2.9 The Board recognised it has been a challenging year for staff when interacting with customers with increased anxiety and pressures, and the impact of the Covid-19 response has changed the way we are communicating with customers, as many teams shifted primarily to working from home. It was discussed that colleagues and managers lost the ability to listen into calls from challenging customers, and to check on staff welfare, provide support and shared learning. The human contact from listening to staff directly is difficult to replicate through technology. The Customer Service Network feedback shows this issue was common across all teams.

2.10 This year the Customer Service Network was utilised especially for supporting customer-facing staff. Staff, from across the authority, shared the challenges their services faced during the different stages of the authority's response to the pandemic as well as highlighting some of the successes they achieved during this trying time. Further insight from the Customer Services Network is discussed in Appendix One.

2.11 In summary, the Customer Experience Board has set out the following priorities for 21/22:

- Explore customer journeys by mapping end to end customer contact with us; an initial focus will be to understand the issues and to improve online payments for customers.
- To ensure the content of ESCC website is the best that it can be with close links to exploring customer journeys and end to end processes.
- To develop the capture of data on our customer contact in order to inform service delivery and improvements.
- Continue to review customer feedback from the customer contact channels of emails, website and face to face visits to drive our commitment to improving customer experience and satisfaction.

3 Complaints and compliments

3.1 The Council received 593 complaints in 2020/21 compared to 731 complaints in 2019/20, which represents a 19% decrease. The decrease is due to the complaints process being deferred in Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) from late March 2020 to September 2020. This enabled the department to focus on its response to the first wave of the pandemic. However, as unsurprisingly

ASCH continued to receive concerns, these were triaged and responded to via newly formed pathways to resolve these. This has allowed ASCH to keep on average a third of concerns raised out of the complaints process. Further details are provided in Appendix Two.

3.2 Of the 593 complaints, 215 were fully or partly upheld, that is 36% of all complaints, which is the same percentage as 2019/20. We continue to analyse the reasons for complaints which 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. A review of complaints by department is available in Appendix Two.

3.3 In 2020/21 we received 1,694 compliments, and in 2019/20 we received 2,179 compliments. These are from individual customers. 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, and this year contact was impacted by Covid-19 lockdowns. Ensuring that we provide channels for both positive and negative feedback which are easy for customers to access, helps services to reflect on what is or is not working. Details for compliments by department is available in Appendix Two.

4 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman letter

4.1 The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) sends a letter annually to each local authority summarising the number of complaints received and decisions made during that period. It informs the Council how many complaints were investigated and 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).

4.2 Due to the response needed by local authorities to Covid-19, the LGSCO paused handling complaints at the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 to June 2020. Once the handling resumed, there was a significant impact due to the backlog of complaints. This pressure and high volume of work is still being felt by the teams involved.

4.3 In 2020/21, the LGSCO made decisions on 68 complaints, compared to 100 in 2019/20, a decrease of 32%. The LGSCO states that the decrease is across authorities and due to the suspension of complaints from March to June 2020, stating, "please consider this when comparing data from previous years". Out of the 68 complaints, 30 complaints were investigated and of those 21 (70%) were upheld. This is similar to the average for similar authorities at 71%, which the LGSCO calculates and makes available on its website. Last year 53% of our complaints investigated were upheld, however, as mentioned, the reduced number of investigated complaints this year should be considered when comparing to previous years. The absolute number of upheld complaints is still low at 21 and only one more than last year (20 in 2019/20).

4.4 The LGSCO monitors the compliance to its recommendations and ESCC achieved 100% compliance. The LGSCO stresses the importance of the Council finding satisfactory remedies before the complaint reached the Ombudsman and we were able to do this for three complaints at 14% compared to an average of 8% in similar authorities. Appendix Two provides a breakdown of LGSCO complaints by department. The LGSCO letter for 2020/21 is presented as Appendix Three.

5 Formal requests for information

5.1 There were 1,793 formal information requests in 2020/21, compared to 1,843 in 2019/20. These requests relate to the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR), Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, and Data Protection Act. These 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. Formal information requests have their own complaint procedure and details on complaints received is presented as Appendix Four.

5.2 This year had an unusual change where in Q1 there was a drop in FOI and EIR requests being made due to the first lockdown of the Covid-19 response. However, once lockdowns lifted

during the following months, requests increased above the normal average and the number of requests overall were 8.5% lower than last year. During 2020/21 the Council achieved a 91% compliance rate in meeting FOI and EIR requests within the 20 working day deadline.

5.3 For Data Protection requests there has been a sharp increase. In 2020/21 we received 497, and in 2019/20 we received 427, a 16% increase. Children's Services continues to receive the vast majority of these requests. Subject Access Requests can be particularly complex and demanding of staff time for validating, retrieving information and documents from across the Council and can include the redaction of thousands of pages. Completing requests is important as it can help people to piece together their life story and to understand why decisions were made, for example why someone might have been taken into care as a child.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 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 2020/21.

6.2 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 2020/21; and
- (3) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None