

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 29 September 2022

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 2021/22 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 new measures to improve customer experience;**
 - (2) support the Customer Experience Board's online payments workstream and endorse future work with the MBOS system to make the customer payments process as easy and intuitive as possible given the technology available;**
 - (3) support the Customer Experience Board's workstream to develop the reporting of Council-wide customer contact data in order to gain oversight and inform service delivery and improvements;**
 - (4) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2021/22; and**
 - (5) 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 2021/22 the Customer Experience Board continued to lead the implementation of a series of measures to improve Customer Experience across the Council. The Customer Experience Board have the following priorities:

- 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, telephone, and face to face visits to drive our commitment to improving customer experience and satisfaction
- 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

1.2 The Customer Experience Board's 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.

1.3 In 2021/22, 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. This report provides a summary of our customer experience

development work, customer feedback, complaints, Ombudsman complaints, compliments, and formal information requests.

2 Customer Experience achievements and developments in 2021/22

2.1 In 2021/22, the Board agreed to have a particular focus on developing our understanding of customer journeys. The Board assessed this to be the area of customer insight at ESCC that was the most fragmented and least advanced. There was recognition that there were pockets of excellence, and it would be advantageous to use this expertise and share more widely across the Council. It was considered this is where we need the greatest focus and better understanding and support for services to improve delivery of their services for customers on their journeys of transactions or gaining information.

Customer Feedback

2.2 We received just over 22,000 ratings from our feedback surveys and over 5,000 verbatim comments from customers, an increase from 2020/21 where roughly 13,000 feedback surveys and 3,500 verbatim comments were received.

2.3 This year, the Board agreed an important development in starting to capture feedback in commonly used forms where customers interact with us. Currently these are the Highways 'report a problem' and School Admissions 'apply for a school place'. This is a significant development as it helps us to monitor customer satisfaction when the customer completes an interaction with the Council and to provide valuable insight to inform service improvements.

2.4 The feedback from forms has been high (5,340 ratings) and overwhelmingly positive at an overall 93% satisfaction rating. It is reassuring to have a consistently high level of customer satisfaction regarding these important customer journeys. It is significant as it shows that customers are happy to use self-serve forms when they find them useful, easy and clear. Feedback surveys have gone live in July 2022 on six forms on the Adult Social Care & Health customer facing portal.

2.5 We continue to gather customer feedback from customers using the ESCC website and from email enquiries. East Sussex Highways continues to be the only service to collect feedback by telephone, receiving a 70% overall satisfaction rating from customers. We were unable to gather face to face surveys during 2021/22 due to lockdown restrictions.

2.6 The volume of website feedback increased by 84% compared to the previous year. This was due to a combination of webpages being published again after being reduced during the response to the pandemic and feedback surveys being added onto some new sections in 2021/22. The overall customer satisfaction rating of the website improved from 61% to 69%. The new website design and framework, by Digital Services, improves our customers' experience providing a more up-to-date, clearer look and feel. Website content produced by Digital Services and content owners across the Council was improved and included comprehensive work on meeting our compliance of the Accessibility Regulations 2018. This review saw a significant reduction of published documents on the website and our digital offer has been improved and customer journeys simplified.

2.7 The overall customer satisfaction rating for emails was 73% in 2021/22 a decrease from 78% in 2020/21. The decrease relates to the change of one of the email surveys to a form survey. It was identified that the email was the start of the journey and that it would be more accurate to gather feedback at the end of the journey, which was when the form was completed via a link in the email. Other comparisons of email surveys indicate consistent satisfaction ratings year on year.

2.8 It is very positive that customer feedback has increased across all channels. It proves the willingness of customers to engage with us, and it provides a vital element for gauging the effectiveness of our communication with customers, especially during the pandemic. It also provides a valuable source of feedback that reminds teams that the majority of customers are happy with the service they receive. Details on all feedback received in 2021/22 is presented as Appendix 1.

Improvements to customer experience – Online payments

2.9 In 2021/22, there was a continued focus on improving areas which receive lower satisfaction ratings. The Board commissioned an options report to identify how to improve the customer journey

of making an online payment. The report concluded the poor satisfaction ratings and higher than average negative feedback is not in relation to WorldPay (third party payment provider), but the surrounding process provided by ESCC. It was agreed to undertake analysis to look at how to improve the customer journey across the central online payments by mapping the customer journey from start to finish. Recommendations from the analysis will be progressed in 2022/23. In the short-term, improvements were made to the instructions for customers for [online payments](#) based on customer feedback.

2.10 It is recommended that as part of the Modernising Back Office Systems (MBOS) Programme, customer payments continue to be a priority. The MBOS programme is assessing a customer portal which could replace several current payment arrangements. In the interim the Customer Experience Board will seek to ensure that there is consistent approach to setting up and maintaining online payments across all business areas and strengthen the link with the MBOS programme to ensure they reflect the new systems and processes that will be adopted.

Improvements to customer experience - oversight of Council-wide customer contact

2.11 At the current time we lack a comprehensive view of customer contact across the Council, for all contact channels. We are gaining a better understanding of the ways customers access council services through investigating and progressing the gathering and reporting of customer contact data.

2.12 There are several benefits for having this information. Understanding the volumes for different contact channels and trends over time could help managers to efficiently allocate resources. An understanding of the nature of enquiries could be a next stage where high volume contact channels could be investigated in greater depth for the reasons behind the contact. This potentially has significant benefits due to identifying what information to provide to customers upfront in order for them to self-serve, particularly outside of opening times, or if contact is needed staff focusing on more complex enquiries. In addition, there is a risk of reputational damage due to the expectation of local authorities to have reportable data on customer contact and the Council not being able to hold itself accountable to responding to customer enquiries effectively (if they cannot be analysed).

2.13 An options report was presented to the Board on what would be required to create a comprehensive view of customer contact on an ongoing basis. It was acknowledged that progression up to this point had been limited due to staff capacity. The Board has agreed to fund a new dedicated staff post which will create capacity to coordinate the efforts of the teams involved and to accelerate the development and implementation of this project. The project will extract the data out of several systems into reportable, user-friendly dashboards (using Tableau). The aim is to provide the dashboards to team managers, senior managers, the Board and CMT in this Annual Report.

ESCC Customer Services Network

2.14 The Board recognised it had been a challenging year for staff in their interactions with customers with increased anxiety and pressures due to the pandemic. As part of this recognition we continue to emphasise and rely on the feedback from the ESCC Customer Services Network (CSN) for insight on experiences of the staff working in public facing roles and their essential support to customers who are seeking information and services provided by ESCC. The CSN is a vital platform for staff from across the authority to share best practice and discuss challenges faced by their services. Further information on the CSN is provided in Appendix 1.

2.15 The Board carried out a review on how telephone calls from customers are answered from working from home and the telephony solutions available to improve answering calls. The Board approved the promotion of Jabber telephone software which provides flexibility of answering calls at home and office desk phones seamlessly, essential to hybrid working. The approach supports best practice in answering and monitoring telephone calls from our customers, which has been demonstrated by feedback from the CSN.

Unreasonable Customer Behaviour (UCB) Policy

2.16 As part of the feedback from the CSN and departmental staff, the Board reviewed and updated the Unreasonable Customer Behaviour (UCB) Policy and supporting staff guidance. The revised, public-facing policy was updated to provide clearer explanations to customers about

unreasonable behaviours, which aligns with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman [guidance on managing unreasonable complainant behaviour](#), and to provide better explanations on warnings which staff will give if they experience unreasonable behaviour from customers. It also explains longer-term restrictions that may be considered. We hope to finalise the policy and guidance in September 2022.

3 Complaints and compliments

3.1 The Council received 664 complaints in 2021/22, compared to 593 complaints in 2020/21, which represents an increase of 12% this year. The increase is due to more complaints received about Adult Social Care from the lower number of complaints recorded during in the pandemic; however, these have not reached pre-pandemic levels. Details are provided in Appendix 2.

3.2 Of the 664 complaints, 256 were fully or partly upheld, that is 38.5% of all complaints, which is comparable to last year at 36%. 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 2.

3.3 In 2021/22 we received 1,706 compliments compared to 1,694 compliments in 2020/21. Compliments, where recorded, are unsolicited feedback from individual customers. 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 2.

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 In 2021/22, the LGSCO made decisions on 89 complaints, which is similar to previous years with the exception of 2020/21 where the LGSCO suspended investigating complaints for a short period due to local authorities focusing on responding to the pandemic. Out of the 89 complaints, 38 were investigated and of these 25 (66%) were upheld. This is lower than the average of similar authorities at 71%, which the LGSCO calculates and makes available on its website.

4.3 The LGSCO monitors the compliance to its recommendations and ESCC achieved 100% satisfaction. 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 12% compared to an average of 8% in similar authorities. Appendix 2 provides a breakdown of LGSCO complaints by department and the LGSCO letter for 2021/22 is presented as Appendix 3.

4.4 The LGSCO notes in the annual letter to ESCC that there were several occasions during the year that investigations were delayed by our Council's failure to respond on time to the LGSCO's request for information. It is recognised by the Council that these delays were caused by the complexity of cases, how time intensive the enquiries are, and the competing challenges that Services are facing. The Council will endeavour to fulfil the request of the LGSCO for our Council to reflect on its practices and take the necessary steps to improve its liaison moving forward.

5 Formal requests for information

5.1 There were 1,607 formal information requests in 2021/22, compared to 1,793 in 2020/21. 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 not validated or withdrawn. Of the FOI and EIR requests completed, we report on meeting the statutory deadline of responding within 20 working days, and in 2021/22 the Council achieved 88% compliance rate. The decrease in

volume in 2021/22 is in relation to the arrangements for Con29s (a specific type of request under EIR) which are now being processed directly by Highway Land Information Team which is simpler and faster for the public.

5.2 ESCC received 457 Data Protection requests in 2021/22 compared to 497 in 2020/21. Children's Services continues to receive the vast majority of these requests. Due to the complexity of the cases, the increase from 2019/20 (16%), and services being under pressure from the response to Covid-19, the responses completed in 2021/22 increased significantly. The Council closed 499 Data Protection requests in 2021/22, versus 457 received during the same year, showing the length of time it takes to fulfil some of the complex cases. Subject Access Requests can be particularly complex and demanding of staff time for validating, retrieving information 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.

5.3 Formal information requests have their own complaint procedure and details on complaints received is presented as Appendix 4.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 This report provides an overview and progress update on measures taken to further improve customer experience and summarises the annual results for complaints, compliments, the LGSCO letter, and formal information requests received in 2021/22.

6.2 Governance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) note the progress of the Customer Experience Board in the implementation of a series of new measures to improve customer experience;
- (2) support the Customer Experience Board's online payments workstream and endorse future work with the MBOS system to make the customer payments process as easy and intuitive as possible given the technology available;
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- (5) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None