

**Report to:** Governance Committee

**Date of meeting:** 28 September 2023

**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 2022/23 in handling complaints, compliments, and formal requests for information, including the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter.

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## **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) support the Customer Experience Board's project which will develop and implement a system that will provide a single, comprehensive dataset of customer contacts across all channels in order to improve service delivery and potential channel shift;**
  - (3) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2022/23; and**
  - (4) 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 2022/23 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 has 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 customer contact channels to drive our commitment to improving customer experience and satisfaction; and
- 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, and a One Council approach.

1.3 In 2022/23, the Customer Experience Board continued to deliver improvements to our customer journeys and communications with customers from their feedback. 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 2022/23**

2.1 The Board continues to have a particular focus on developing its understanding of customer journeys. There was recognition that there were pockets of excellence, and that it would be advantageous to use this expertise and share more widely across the Council. It was considered

that this is where we need the greatest focus and better understanding and support for teams to improve the delivery of their services.

### Customer Feedback

2.2 In 2022/23 we received over 26,000 ratings from our feedback surveys and over 5,800 verbatim comments from customers, an increase from 2021/22 where approx. 22,000 feedback surveys and over 5,000 verbatim comments were received. We had already seen a significant jump from 2020/21 in which we received approximately 13,000 feedback surveys and 3,500 comments. The increase of 18% of customer feedback during 2022/23 is due to the return of the face-to-face feedback devices and the increase of surveys on forms where customers interact with us.

2.3 The overall customer satisfaction rating for 2022/23 was 78%, an increase of 2% compared to the previous year. Feedback surveys remain well used and help monitor and improve customer journeys and experience. This section highlights some key areas of development and improvement. A breakdown of statistics and key points for the contact methods of: website, emails, face to face, interactive forms, and telephone calls (Highways only) is set out in Appendix 1.

2.4 Feedback is being captured on 10 commonly used forms where customers interact with us (for example the Schools Admissions form), with a further four to start in 2023/24. The overall satisfaction rating on forms is 93% (the same as 2021/22). It is reassuring to have a consistently high level of satisfaction when customers complete these important customer journeys, and it shows that customers are happy to use self-serve forms when they find them useful, easy and clear. The surveys provide valuable insight into service improvements such as providing clearer wording and improving procedures.

2.5 Face to face survey devices were rolled out again in 2022/23 as the pandemic restrictions were lifted. Devices have been placed again in Hastings and Eastbourne libraries and County Hall reception and have been well received with satisfaction ratings of 94%.

2.6 For our surveys on the ESCC corporate website, services continue to analyse where their web content can be improved in response to feedback, such as improving information provided, clearer signposting, improved format changes and using surveys as a monitoring tool for trialling improvements. Surveys have also helped to inform requirements when changing systems used by customers, such as applying for parking permits and interactive maps. Further details are provided in Appendix 1.

2.7 Receiving feedback proves the willingness of customers to engage with us, and it provides a vital element for gauging the effectiveness of our communication with customers. It also provides a valuable reminder to teams that the majority of customers are happy with the service they receive. Staff have also recommended implementing the surveys to other colleagues, showing the perceived value of having feedback surveys.

2.8 Given the value of feedback, in 2022/23 the Board agreed a number of areas to further rollout feedback surveys. This includes increasing them in already established customer feedback channels and to explore rollout of surveys on the People's Network (customer facing computers and internet access), Microsites (websites outside the corporate website of eastsussex.gov.uk), and a trial on newsletters. The further rollout will continue our commitment to investigating and improving our customer journeys. Analysis and results will be reported in the next annual report.

### Improvements to customer experience – Online payments

2.9 In 2022/23 we improved the online payment interactive webpage on the ESCC corporate website, due to poor satisfaction ratings and negative feedback the Council received on this process. Improvements have been made to ensure consistency for the online payments system customer experience including better signposting, instructions, and a new webpage design improving accessibility.

2.10 The Board ensured a consistent approach to improvements to the online payments across all business areas by setting up an Online Payments Steering Group of key stakeholders from relevant services across the Council. The steering group will continue to monitor the performance of online payments and will maintain oversight of the lifecycle of the payment forms. Once MBOS has

been implemented the Board are keen to explore what further improvements can be made to make the customer payments process as easy and intuitive as possible.

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

2.11 As reported in last year's report we currently lack a comprehensive view of customer contact across the Council, for all contact channels. The Board has now commissioned a project to develop and implement a system which will provide a single, comprehensive dataset of customer contacts across all channels. The Board has funded a 12-month Customer Contact Data Coordinator post until December 2023, and this has created the capacity to coordinate the efforts of the teams involved and to accelerate the development and implementation of this project. The project is extracting 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. By 31 July 2024, the project aims to deliver outline, reliable monthly reports on:

1. external received calls;
2. external emails received to public facing group inboxes; and
3. data on webforms used on the ESCC website.

Results of the first year of this project will be presented in the Annual Report 2024/25.

2.12 There are several benefits of 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 staff being able to focus on more complex enquiries. There is also a risk of reputational damage due to the expectation of local authorities having 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).

#### ESCC Customer Services Network and Customer Promise

2.13 The ESCC Customer Services Network (CSN) continued to provide a vital platform for staff from across the authority to share best practice and discuss challenges faced by their services. Further information about the CSN sessions is provided in Appendix 1.

2.14 The [Council's Customer Promise](#) sets out our values and customer service standards. It tells customers what they can expect from us and how they will be treated when they contact us. In 2022/23, refreshed posters for the Council's Customer Promise were placed around our corporate buildings for display in staff areas and public facing points of our buildings – to show our continued commitment to the public in fulfilling our Customer Promise. A reminder of the Customer Promise and of the e-learning course was posted on Yammer.

#### Unreasonable Customer Behaviour (UCB) Policy and Customer Service Training

2.15 In 2022/23 the revised [Unreasonable Customer Behaviour \(UCB\) Policy](#) and [supporting staff guidance](#) was approved by CMT and was rolled out to all ESCC staff and contractors. The 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 from staff if they experience unreasonable behaviour from customers, and longer-term restrictions that may be considered. The [Easy Read version](#) of the policy was also updated.

2.16 Training sessions were provided departmentally to staff by their respective Complaints Teams. The corporate (in person) Customer Services training course was updated with more in-depth explanation of the UCB Policy and guidance. The training also includes the Violence and Aggression at Work Policy in conjunction with the UCB Policy and how these policies work together for ESCC staff.

### **3 Complaints and compliments**

3.1 The Council received 785 complaints in 2022/23 compared to 651 complaints in 2021/22, which represents an increase of 21% this year. Of the 785 complaints, 49% were fully or partly upheld (387), compared to last year at 40% (262) of all complaints. 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.

3.2 In 2022/23 we received 2,564 compliments compared to 1,706 compliments in 2021/22. 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 of compliments by department are 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, 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 2022/23, the LGSCO made decisions on 84 complaints, which is similar to previous years (in 2021/22 there were 89). Of the 84 complaints, 26 were investigated and of these 20 (77%) were upheld. This is below the average of similar authorities (80%), which the LGSCO calculates and makes available on its website. A breakdown of LGSCO complaints by department is provided in Appendix 2, and the LGSCO letter for 2022/23 is presented as Appendix 3.

4.3 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 and that on five occasions the remedies recommended by the Ombudsman were implemented late. 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 continue to endeavour to fulfil the request of the LGSCO for our Council to reflect on its practices and take the necessary steps to reduce delays going forward.

#### **5 Formal requests for information**

5.1 There were 1,670 formal information requests received in 2022/23, compared to 1,607 in 2021/22. 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 which were completed (1,036) in 2022/23, the Council achieved 88% compliance rate of meeting the statutory deadline of responding within 20 working days. The Council processed 1,654 "Con29s" (a specific type of request under EIR) directly by the Highway Land Information Team, which is simpler and more direct for the public.

5.2 ESCC received 483 Data Protection requests in 2022/23 compared to 457 in 2021/22. Children's Services continues to receive the vast majority of these requests. The number of Subject Access Requests (SARs) continue to be high. 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. The process and the complex nature of fulfilling SARs is further explained in Appendix 4.

5.3 Formal information requests have their own complaint procedure and details on complaints received is presented in 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 2022/23.

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;
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- (4) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.

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**BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None