

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TASK GROUP REPORT NO. 5

COMPLAINTS

APRIL 2000

Scrutiny Task Group

COMPLAINTS

1. Membership of the Task Group

The Task Group comprised Councillors Carthew, Daglish, Flemington, Lee and Orchard (Chairman). Councillor Cornwell also attended ex officio. The Task Group was supported by Carol MacBean, (Principal Policy Officer, Corporate Policy Unit).

2. Terms of Reference

To investigate the implementation, across Council services, of the corporate complaints procedure and to make recommendations.

3. Scope of Report

Matters for which there is a statutory right of appeal, objections to a planning decision or explanation of a council policy or practice are not included within the corporate complaints procedure. General principles for dealing with complaints, including customer focus and training are covered by the report.

4. Method of Investigation

4.1. Document Search

Principal documents examined were:

Corporate Complaints Procedure – Guidance for Staff, published 1998.

How to make a complaint or a compliment, published 1998.

Complaint or compliment form.

Information Systems/Information Technology Strategy 1998, Final Report and

Recommendations of the Complaints Monitoring Task Group, August 1998.

"The Right to Complain", booklet published by the Department of Health and Social Services Inspectorate

4.2. Interviews

The following people were interviewed:

John Wright, Head of Leisure Services

Vincent McDonnell, Chief Education Officer

Philip Lomax, Acting Chief Education Officer

Geoff Elford, Head of Adult Services

Janet Cox, Head of Registration and Inspection Unit

John McCormick, Quality and Training Co-Ordinator, Environmental & Operational Services

Bob Alker, Head of Highways and Transport

Richard Mellor, Head of Legal Services

David Barnes, Acting Head of Development Control

Tracy Luck, Manager, Corporate Policy Unit

4.3. Visits

Councillors Carthew, Lee and Orchard made a visit to SouthWest Trains Customer Relations Department.

Councillors Daglish and Lee visited the London Borough of Lewisham's call centre.

5. Findings

5.1. Definition

It is clear that there was some difference in the way departments interpreted the corporate definition of a complaint. Some departments, particularly those who receive a large amount of correspondence with the public, as well as many telephone calls, may treat what a customer sees as a complaint in a variety of ways. These might be categorised as 'representations', 'reports - or re-reports- of defects' or 'failures of service', 'enquiries' or 'comments'. A resident may think he/she has complained; but even a letter stating "I am writing to complain...." may not be treated as a complaint. The advice given in the corporate policy on telephone or complaints made in person doesn't seem to have been taken on board everywhere.

5.2. Responsibility for dealing with complaints.

The majority of services do not have a designated officer dealing with complaints. Complaints handling is allocated to the officer considered most appropriate by the manager or Head of Service. Usually front line staff deal with complaints in the first instance. There are moves to make services more accessible to the public, for instance, Transport Department are shortly to set up a customer care section which will be a one stop shop for all reports and complaints about highway maintenance, street cleansing etc.

5.3. Recording

In practice, often the letters logged and treated as formal complaints are those where there is a specific complaint about the behaviour or failure to act of a member of staff, or where a complaint comes in on the complaints form. These are in effect stage two complaints. Partly for reasons of definition, in some departments, only second stage complaints, directed to the Service Head, or on a complaints form, are recorded.

Some departments, such as Leisure Services, have developed a computer system on which to log and track complaints. This also produces management information, which can be used in producing Performance Indicators. However, in some departments there seems to be no clear procedure for logging and monitoring complaints.

The processes adopted for dealing with complaints is sometimes externally driven, for instance where better information is required in order to collect Performance Indicators, or where a contract to provide a service has been let. This has meant that different services are at different stages of development, even within the same department. In Highways and Transport the Parking and Lighting sections have computerised systems for logging reports and complaints which enables them to be tracked and monitored easily whereas Highway Maintenance and Street Sweeping use paper systems of reporting.

5.4. Monitoring

The corporate standards state that all correspondence should receive a response within seven days. If a response cannot be sent in that time a holding response should be sent in two working days, stating when a reply can be expected. If the investigation into a complaint cannot be completed in seven working days, we aim to respond in 20 working days. Complainants should be kept up to date with progress.

Monitoring of complaints is not sufficient in most services to ascertain whether this standard is adhered to. Some departments, such as Planning are constrained in the way they deal with correspondence because of the level of representations received and resources available.

New arrangements for handling stage 3 complaints to the Chief Executive have recently been introduced. It is too early to judge how well these are working.

5.5. Numbers of Complaints

Complaints recorded by departments

There is great variation between the numbers of complaints recorded by Departments, partly for reasons of definition mentioned above. For the year ended 31 March 1999, Leisure Services received a total of 397 communications consisting of: 232 complaints; 61 compliments; 99 comments and five suggestions.

In contrast Highways and Transport had only logged eight formal complaints this year. They concerned parking tickets (3); cleanliness, sweeping, fly tipping etc (4); and buses (1).

The number of complaints received is not an item automatically included in all Service Plans. Consumer Protection recorded that no formal complaints were received in 98/99.

Complaints to the Chief Executive

There were sixty complaints addressed to the Chief Executive in the period 4 January 2000 to 9 March 2000. These are spread across all services, with a slightly higher proportion relating to Housing, Highways and Transport and Environmental and Operational Services.

Complaints to the Ombudsman

The Ombudsman now only deals with complaints once the Council's own complaints procedure has been exhausted. The number of cases referred to the Ombudsman has remained steady in the last three years; 63 in 96/97, 54 in 97/98 and 61 in 98/99. None has been classified as maladministration within the last two years.

5.6. Training

Information from departments was requested on the type and amount of training received by staff in complaints handling and customer care training generally. This varied tremendously, with some departments offering no formal training, while Social Services trained 53 people in 98/99.

Most training is carried out internally “on the job” to reduce the impact on budgets. This applies to more general customer care training as well as specific training on complaints handling.

5.7. Adherence to corporate procedure

The procedure laid down in the Corporate Complaints Procedure has been amended by Departments to suit their own particular culture and customer base. For instance, Leisure Services have introduced their own version of the complaint form, as an A5-sized, reply-paid, card under the banner ‘Talk-Back’ on which residents can register their complaint. Residents simply identify by a tick the service area with which they have a complaint e.g. Allotments, Arts, Libraries etc. and fill in brief details of the nature of their complaint. The corporate complaints form is rarely used by any of the departments.

5.8. Approach to complaints

Some departments require a complaint to be in writing, whereas the corporate procedure accepts that complaints may be made by telephone or in person.

Often a complaint is not acknowledged as such in the response and this can lead to a lack of clarity in monitoring and recording. Complainants are also not told as a matter of course who to contact if they are dissatisfied with a response.

Complaints about a failure of service are more easily dealt with. A failure of personnel is of more concern to customers. Many residents who complain to Councillors do so because they feel that they are being ignored and that their complaint is not taken seriously.

5.9. Satisfaction with Complaints Procedure

The second wave of research using the Citizen’s Panel included a small number of questions concerning the Council’s complaints policy and procedures and satisfaction with the system. A response rate of 35% was achieved. The main findings were that a majority of residents (60%) were not aware of the formal policy and procedure. A sizeable minority of residents, just under a quarter (23%) stated that they had made a complaint during the year. It is not possible to say that all of these people used the formal system to make a complaint and it is likely that a proportion of them contacted the council, but that their query was not processed as a formal complaint.

Half of respondents were satisfied with the way that their complaint had been handled. Nearly four out of ten people were dissatisfied with the way that their complaint was handled.

6. Conclusions

6.1. General approach to complaints

Despite a well thought out policy, there is no consistency in the approach to complaints across Council departments. Some departments have a defensive attitude when dealing with complaints, but there is also some good practice, in terms of a customer-based approach. We must contrive a much more visibly corporate system, with a more personalised interface with the public, able to be seen as their advocates with services, in house or contractual, which they see as having failed them.

In some areas we take far too long to respond, we do not always try to see the customer's point of view and come over as bureaucratic and unhelpful and rarely apologise when we should. We must be less defensive. The important indicator should not be the number of complaints received but the percentage given a quick and satisfactory response. A low complaint record is not an indicator of good service; indeed an increase in complaint reporting should be encouraged, with staff encouraged to log every complaint and their successful handling of it.

The visit undertaken to two, very different, outside call centres have impressed the Task Group with the potential that IT supported systems have both to improve public access to services generally and to improve both the handling and monitoring of complaints in particular. It will not be possible for the council to ignore these developments. However, in view of the major investment that would be needed and the fact that the Access to Services review already underway will be studying these possibilities, no recommendations on this point are made in our report.

6.2. Clarity of approach

There is a lack of clarity about what is a complaint and the correct response at each stage. It was felt that Stage 2 complaints were not adequately dealt with. There is a need for more transparency about who deals with complaints, records them, the timescale in which they are dealt with, what is done to put things right and the monitoring action taken.

First stage complaints, like service problems raised by members of the public, need a quick, ideally timed, and appropriate response. Many 'complaints' can be defused by tactful handling at the outset. With some complainants a telephone call may be better than an official sounding letter. With difficult complaints, especially at stage two, a meeting may help.

Where letters are received via councillors or MPs the same criteria for deciding if they are complaints should be used. Complaints to Ward Councillors often come about because the complainant has not received a satisfactory answer in dealing directly with a service. These will often therefore be second stage complaints and as noted elsewhere, are often not dealt with adequately or with sufficient despatch.

Good complaints handling requires ownership of the problem and all Departments need a designated officer responsible for the complaints system and able to act sufficiently independently to investigate level two complaints. Complaints should be a standing item for management meetings. The roles of all those who may receive complaints/ issues for resolution need to be clear as to the action to be taken by each person.

6.3. Training

This has been identified as the root of the issue and is probably the easiest to address. Training varies widely from department to department and contributes to a lack of consistency in service. A standard level of training should be offered to staff at all levels, but most importantly, for those staff who have to deal with the public as first contact and to new staff. It is suggested that an enthusiastic outsider experienced in customer care be used to train in-house trainers in the large departments and this training cascaded down.

6.4. Monitoring

Departments generally have failed to set up adequate systems to monitor and most importantly do not evaluate and learn the lessons that complaints provide in order to prevent such situations from recurring. There is an urgent need to set up systems which will provide a satisfactory basis for compliance with the new Performance Indicators, which from 2000/2001 will require us to record the percentage of those making complaints who are satisfied with the way they have been handled.

Our aim must be for a better response to telephone calls, letters and emails from the public, whichever department receives them. There is concern about the time taken to respond to complaints and keeping complainants informed about the progress of their complaint. There should be an annual report on complaints by each department, analysing the most common and saying what has been done to address them, using monitoring as a management tool to improve performance. Ethnic monitoring should be built into any monitoring systems.

A central unit, however small, can play a role in improving and approving systems. It could also ensure that there is training and monitoring of the quality of customer services throughout the Council and for reporting on all levels of complaints. Such a unit should also investigate level 3 complaints independently under the direction of the Chief Executive.

6.5. Ease of access to service

The way in which complaints are handled can be an opportunity to inform the public about what we do. Written complaints should be encouraged and easy to use forms available. Complaints should also be accepted over the telephone and the complaints form should be available for completion on our website. Complaints handling is also an opportunity to ensure equality of opportunity in accessing services. Feedback on our performance from all sectors of the community should be sought and integrated with the collection of Performance Indicators, centrally.

More publicity could be given to the complaints system as a normal part of what people should know in order to get best value from council services. The message must reach all parts of the community, including the more “hard to reach” groups, such as asylum seekers and travellers.

Consideration should be given to the opportunities which the wider use of technology gives, both to improve access by customers to services and to monitor and improve our own performance. The use of call centres and access points, with comprehensive staff training are options to be pursued as finances allow.

With the wider role Councils will have under new legislation, we might one day provide a leaflet on how to complain or get a better service from other public services, with useful contact numbers and addresses. In pursuit of making local providers – private, public or commercial – more locally accountable, we could even discuss their complaints systems with them, and try to make them more responsive. But first we must develop our own practice to provide an open, responsive and well-monitored system for handling complaints.

7. Recommendations

- (1) All services to undertake staff training in complaints handling to ensure that complaints are properly regarded as customer feedback and used as a means of improving service to residents.**
- (2) All departments, with the exception of Social Services (who have a separate statutory procedure) to adopt the corporate complaints procedure as published.**
- (3) Each department to identify a Customer Services manager responsible for the quality of complaints handling, regular monitoring as a management tool and for second stage complaints.**
- (4) Recording and much better, more consistent monitoring of complaints to include those received about outside contractors.**
- (5) A central unit to be responsible, corporately, for oversight of all complaints and related customer service matters, support to the Chief Executive on investigation of stage 3 complaints and related Performance Indicators and regular reporting to Council.**
- (6) Details of the corporate complaints procedure to be on the Council's website**
- (7) Leaflet for the public to be re-titled, updated and re-launched.**
- (8) Each department to include the figures for complaints and compliments in its annual report to Council and criteria for deciding what is a complaint.**
- (9) As soon as practical and finances allow complaints to be dealt with via the Internet where appropriate.**
- (10) After the group's proposals are put to the full Council, a meeting should be arranged with the heads of Department so that the group can convey its findings to them personally and a common approach can be adopted.**

Councillors:

Carthew
Daglish
Flemington
Lee
Orchard (Chairman)