

APPENDIX E

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

15 SEPTEMBER 2009

EXECUTIVE 29 SEPTEMBER

Title:

COMPLAINTS HANDLING IN WAVERLEY IN 2008/09

[Portfolio Holder: Councillor Richard Gates]

[Wards Affected: All]

Summary and purpose:

This report, which was considered by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting on 15 September, provides information on complaints handling in Waverley in 2008/09, including the number of complaints received, Waverley's performance in responding to complaints, levels of customer satisfaction and lessons learned.

Waverley's performance in dealing with Ombudsman complaints is the subject of a separate report.

How this report relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities:

The investigation of complaints from members of the public provides Waverley with an opportunity to keep under review the quality of the services it provides to the community. It can also help to identify areas in which the Council could provide better value for money in its services, and can result in action that will improve the lives of residents.

Equality and Diversity Implications:

Complaints provide Waverley with an opportunity to review its arrangements for delivering services to all sections of the community. The investigation of complaints can highlight areas where improvements or changes need to be made to ensure that no one is disadvantaged in accessing the Council's services.

Resource/Value for Money implications:

See paragraph on the Corporate Priorities above.

Legal Implications:

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Background

1. Waverley's formal complaints procedure has just three stages – Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. The steps taken at each level are as follows:
 - Level 1 complaints are those which concern a matter that has not been previously raised with the Council. These are usually dealt with by an officer in the section concerned who can solve the problem quickly and informally.
 - Level 2 complaints are those which have not been resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant at Level 1. These complaints are investigated and responded to by the relevant Head of Service.
 - Level 3 complaints are those which have not been resolved satisfactorily at Level 2. The Customer Relations Officer investigates these complaints and prepares a response for the approval and signature of the Chief Executive.
2. If a customer is still dissatisfied having completed the Council's complaints procedure, they can raise their concerns with the Local Government Ombudsman.
3. All complaints received by letter or email are logged on a Lotus Notes database and then passed to the relevant officers for investigation and response. In-coming letters/emails are scanned onto the complaints database, which also holds copies of all acknowledgement letters/emails and the final response sent to the complainant.
4. The current Lotus Notes complaints database has been in use since the beginning of July 2008. The system:
 - records all complaints and compliments received across the Council
 - forwards the complaint to the relevant investigating officer
 - monitors the progress of complaint investigation
 - create automatic reminders to relevant staff when deadlines are approaching or have passed
 - stores relevant scanned documents, and all other documents, including emails that are created during the investigation
 - create standard word documents such as acknowledgement letters and memos
 - records outcome details including lessons learned and action taken
 - provides monitoring information.
5. The database does not record complaints that are, in effect, requests for service. For example, a complaint that a bin has not been emptied is treated as a request for the contractor to return and collect the rubbish. Such events are recorded in the relevant back office system. However, if a customer complains about the repeated failure of the contractor to empty their bin, then

this is treated as a complaint which is logged and tracked on the Lotus Notes database.

6. The complaints database is managed by a number of Service Complaints Administrators. The SCAs log complaints, and monitor the preparation of responses. All Heads of Service have access to the database and can therefore keep under close review complaints that have arisen in their area of work, including action taken to put matters right and any lessons learned.

Waverley's performance in dealing with customer complaints

7. There are currently four local performance indicators on complaints handling:
 - LI 1a – the number of level 3 and Ombudsman complaints
 - LI 1b – the variation in the number of complaints from the last quarter/year
 - LI 1c – percentage of complaints handled within WBC target times
 - LI 1d – customer satisfaction with complaints handling.
8. In the last quarter of 2007/08, the target for responding to all complaints was changed from 15 working days to a more challenging 10 working days, with all complaints being acknowledged within 3 working days. The 15 working day target was retained for planning complaints, due to the complexity of some of the issues raised in this area, but with effect from 1 July 2009 this has been reduced to 10 working days.
9. The Lotus Notes database has enabled officers to produce more detailed information on complaints handling than was possible with the former Datix system, and the following information is attached for the last three quarters of 2008/09.

(i) Percentage responded to within target and number of complaints received at each level, by Service Area

The table attached as Annexe 1 shows an improvement in response times with an average of 94% of all complaints being responded to within the target time in the last quarter of 2008/09. As expected, the greatest number of complaints were received at Level 1.

(ii) Outcome of complaints in Quarters 2 to 4 for each service area

The table attached as Annexe 2 show that majority of complaints (57%) were not upheld. 24% were partly upheld and 19% upheld.

(iii) Nature of complaints by service area

The database provides a menu of complaint subjects for each service. Six of these categories are common to all services ie

- Action requested not taken
- Inappropriate behaviour/attitude of staff

- Inappropriate bias by staff re race, gender etc
- Delay in responding to letters or emails
- Failure to return telephone calls
- Other.

As will be seen from the table attached as Annexe 3, Housing received the highest number of complaints in quarters 2 to 4, with a total of 74, followed by Planning with a total of 59.

Lessons learned

10. When complaints are closed, the Service Complaints Administrators record any lessons learned. Not all complaints result in lessons learned but there has been an increase in the number of comments recorded over the last two quarters of 2008/09. These have tended to fall under two main headings - the need to improve communications, both between Waverley and its customers and between different parts of the Council, and the need to improve/change administrative procedures. Annexe 4 gives some examples of the information that has been recorded during the past year.
11. In addition to recording lessons learned, it is important that officers also record any action that has been taken to avoid similar problems in the future. Currently there is very little information on action taken in response to complaints, and this is an aspect of complaints handling that will be developed further with all Heads of Service in the coming months.

Customer satisfaction with complaints handling

12. At the end of each month, customer satisfaction forms are sent to all those who have received a response to their complaint in that month. A total of 334 forms were sent out to those whose complaints were closed in 2008/09. 81 forms were completed and returned to the Council giving a response rate of 24%. This equals the response rate for the previous year. The following table gives an analysis of those replies.

Customer satisfaction monitoring – summary of responses received for complaints closed in 2008/09 (comparable figures for 2007/08 are given in italics)

Question asked	Yes %	No %	No reply %
Did the Council's response provide a sufficiently detailed answer?	47 (<i>54</i>)	48 (<i>46</i>)	5
Was the complainant satisfied with the outcome?	38(<i>36</i>)	59(<i>64</i>)	3
Did the complainant fully understand the answer?	68 (<i>72</i>)	27 (<i>28</i>)	5
Was the complaint dealt with in a reasonable amount of time?	57 (<i>55</i>)	41 (<i>45</i>)	2
Were staff helpful and courteous at all times?	67 (<i>74</i>)	28 (<i>26</i>)	8

Does the complainant feel that they are receiving a good service now?	37 (44)	38 (56)	25
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<u>Overall satisfaction</u>	18 (20)
Very satisfied	22 (22)
Fairly satisfied	7 (4)
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	14 (22)
Fairly dissatisfied	37 (32)
Very dissatisfied	

13. As will be seen from the above table, a total of 40% of respondents were either very or fairly satisfied with the way in which their complaint had been handled which represents a slight drop in levels of satisfaction when compared with 2007/08.
14. In addition to answering the specific questions on the satisfaction monitoring form, a number of complainants take the opportunity to provide more detailed comments on the way in which their complaint was handled. Often these comments provide valuable information on how Waverley's customers view the service that it being provided, and these are passed to the Head of Service concerned so that they can consider whether there is a need to take further action to improve service quality.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

15. The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee were pleased to note the improving picture in terms of response times, and the relatively low level of complaints bearing in mind the very large number of interactions between the public and the Council.

The Committee expressed some concern about the number of planning complaints, and the fact that almost 50% of these were either upheld or partly upheld (31 out of a total of 65 planning complaints).

The Committee recommended to the Executive that:

- In future years, it would be helpful to draw attention to the total number of complaints received by Waverley at the beginning of the report.
- HOST (Heads Of Service Team) should be asked to develop further the recording of lessons learned and action taken in response to complaints, so that this information could be used more effectively in improving the delivery of services.
- Officers should undertake a review of planning complaints, with a view to effecting a reduction in the numbers of complaints and the proportion of those complaints that were upheld.
- Further consideration should be given to whether there was any real value in obtaining feedback through the customer satisfaction questionnaires, given the low response rate of approximately 24% (despite a reply paid envelope being supplied). If this was considered

important, then officers should look at ways of increasing the feedback from complainants.

- Officers should investigate the feasibility of obtaining comparable complaints handling statistics from other Surrey authorities, bearing in mind that there may well be differences in the way in which other authorities record customer complaints, and report back to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee in due course.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Executive approve the recommendations of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee set out in paragraph 15 above.

Background Papers (CEX)

There are no background papers (as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) relating to this report.

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