

## **WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE – 6 FEBRUARY 2018**

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**Title:**

**WAVERLEY'S COMPLAINTS HANDLING POLICY AND REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS  
RECEIVED IN 2016/17**

**[Portfolio Holder:Councillor Julia Potts]  
[Wards Affected:All]**

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**Summary and purpose:**

This report proposes changes to the Council's complaints handling policy and the introduction of a new two stage complaints procedure with immediate effect. The report also provides a brief summary of the complaints received by Waverley in 2016/17 and the Council's performance in responding to those complaints.

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

Investigating complaints provides the Council with an opportunity to keep under review and improve the quality of its services to the community, and is a key part of understanding residents' needs. Lessons learned from complaints help the Council to meet its priorities of delivering excellent customer service, providing value for money and improving community wellbeing.

**Equality and Diversity Implications:**

Waverley's complaints handling policy helps to ensure that there is no discrimination in the way in which it delivers services in a fair and equal way.

**Financial Implications:**

Sometimes the appropriate remedy for a complaint will be to offer the complainant compensation and this may be financial. All compensation payments must be authorised by the relevant Head of Service.

**Legal Implications:**

There are no legal implications associated with the proposals. The Council's complaints handling process is fully consistent with best practice and the most recent guidance from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

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## **Proposed changes to Waverley's complaints handling policy and procedure**

1. Waverley's complaints handling policy has recently been reviewed by the Chief Executive and a new more concise policy is attached at Annexe 1 for the consideration of Members, together with a revised procedure at Annexe 2.
2. The revised policy has the following aims:
  - To improve customer satisfaction
  - To ensure a continuous improvement in services; and
  - To make the best use of limited resources.
3. As Members will know, the Council's complaints procedure currently has three internal levels before referral externally. At Level 1 the complainant can raise their concerns with a member of staff in the service they are complaining about; Level 2 raised the matter with the Head of Service and Level 3 involves a review by the Head of Paid Service. If the complainant remains dissatisfied having completed the complaints procedure they can take their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman or, if they are concerned about a housing matter, to the Housing Ombudsman Service.
4. Having reviewed the current policy it is proposed that the procedure should be reduced from three to two internal levels before external referral. This will reduce the time spent in dealing with complaints for both the customer and Waverley, thereby making the best use of limited resources. In practice, very few Level 3 judgements have disagreed with Level 2 decisions, and so this third stage may be viewed by the complainant as unnecessary or frustrating.
5. Under the new procedure, it is proposed that Level 1 complaints will be investigated by the appropriate Team Leader or Manager in the Service that is being complained about, and Level 2 complaints will be investigated by the appropriate Head of Service assisted by the Corporate Complaints Officer. Additional training will be given to all staff involved in complaints handling to ensure that the new process is applied effectively and that customers' complaints continue to be investigated as thoroughly and impartially as under the current arrangements.
6. It is suggested that the target time for responding to complaints should remain unchanged, ie 10 working days for Level 1 complaints and 15 working days for Level 2. The final 15 working day period for Level 3 is removed, thereby reducing the amount of time within the internal process before external referral.
7. Most neighbouring councils operate a two-stage formal complaints procedure: Chichester, East Hampshire, Guildford, Hart, Horsham and Rushmoor. Hart's 'step 1' is informal and then has two formal stages. Mole Valley is the only neighbour with three stages.
8. There will be a short period of transition while complaints submitted under the current procedure complete the current three stage procedure, but it is anticipated that the new two stage procedure will be fully in place no later than 31 March 2018.
9. The Chief Executive and Directors will continue to take a close interest in complaints handling through their regular review of corporate performance. During

this period of transition to a new process, they will be seeking additional feedback from the Corporate Complaints Officer and Heads of Service.

### **Analysis of complaints received and closed by Waverley in in 2016/17**

10. At the beginning of January 2017 a new database was introduced to track complaints handling in Waverley. The new database is now working well in terms of tracking complaints, but officers are still developing the reporting templates. This, together with the need to collate information from two different databases for 2016/17, means that the following statistics are more limited than Members have received in previous years. More detailed information will be provided in future years, including the outcome of complaints ie whether complaints were upheld, and lessons learned.

11. The following table shows the number of complaints closed in 2016/17 for each service and at each level.

<b>Service</b>	<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Level 3</b>	<b>Total</b>
Communities	6	1	0	7
Elections and special projects	2	1	0	3
Environment	37	12	3	52
Finance	22	4	1	27
Housing Operations	186	47	19	252
Housing Strategy and Delivery	10	6	3	19
Planning	63	45	21	129
Policy and Governance	1	0	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>491</b>

It is encouraging to note that 66% of all complaints closed in 2016/17 were resolved at Level 1, and just 10% took their complaint to Level 3.

12. As in previous years Housing received the highest number of complaints followed by Planning. The majority of Housing complaints concerned responsive repairs, whereas in Planning the majority of complaints concerned development control matters.

### **Waverley's performance in responding to complaints**

13. In 2016/17 90.5% of all complaints closed were responded to within the target timescales compared with 81% in 2015/16. This is a significant improvement. The corporate target is currently 95% of all complaints to be responded to within the target timescales.

14. It is proposed that the corporate target remains unchanged for the time being, but is reviewed towards the end of the first year of the new procedure.

### **Value for Money and Customer Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

15. The Value for Money and Customer Service Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered this report at its meeting on 22 January 2018 and agreed to pass the following observations to the Executive:

The Committee reviewed the revised complaints policy and agreed that a more streamlined process would help to reduce the length of the complaints process for residents. Members, however, felt that even though the Chief Executive was no longer specifically involved in the last stage, he and the Strategic Directors would still be monitoring the process carefully to draw out the learning and this should be set out in the procedure document.

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### **Recommendation**

It is recommended that the new complaints handling policy, at Annexe 1, be approved and the statistical information in the report be noted.

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### **Background Papers**

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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