

Standards Committee – Monday July 9th 2018

Corporate Complaints, Comments and Compliments Process Review

Summary of report:

This report has been prepared in response to Members' request from the previous Standards Board on the 24th April for an update regarding proposals for the Council's Transformation Programme to review the Council's approach to Complaints, Comments and Compliments.

Members asked for an initial briefing on the areas of focus for the review, how this work would be taken forward and in what timeframe and this report sets out the relevant details.

Recommendation

1. Committee is recommended to note the contents of this report
2. Committee is recommended to approve the request to return to the next Standards Board to provide a further update on the progress of the review

1.0 Background

1.1 Context

Complaints, Comments and Compliments provide vital insight into the way the Council conducts its business. It enables the Council to take a holistic view of areas of service feedback from across the Council, understanding where we can improve in addition to offering the opportunity to acknowledge and reflect when we are doing things well. Feedback helps to understand resident expectations of services, where we can improve and where we fall short of these expectations. Listening to feedback is essential in all organisations who want to provide good service-user experiences and in public bodies like Walsall Council in order to help to build trust, strengthen our reputation and ensure we can have pride in the services we provide as a Council.

The Council's recently revised Corporate Plan sets out the priorities for the organisation to 2021. One of the six priorities is to have an 'Internal Focus' and to ensure 'all services are efficient and effective'. An effective approach to receiving, logging, tracking and learning from complaints, comments and compliments is central to the Council's drive towards efficient and effective services.

Walsall Council is looking to review and improve its corporate approach to receiving, logging and analysing Complaints, Comments and Compliments, and both the Policy and Procedural frameworks that underpin the approach. This is a key aspect of the Customer Experience Project as the Council seeks to embed the 'Voice of the Customer' at the heart of its service improvement journey.

The council has had a corporate complaints, comments and compliments handling procedure, called 'Tell Us', for many years, this was most recently updated in 2015.

1.1 Summarising the Challenges – Member Feedback

At the previous Standards Board in April 2018 Members provided a broad range of feedback on the current corporate approach to complaints with some of the themes summarised below;

- Members felt there was a lack of consistency in the Council's approach to managing resident feedback including inconsistent complaint handling standards and the associated timescales for receiving responses
- Concerns were raised that complaints were not replied to promptly and that there was poor customer communication throughout the process regarding any updates to more complex and lengthy complaint investigations
- Members proposed that the Council should have more information easily available on its website for 'popular' queries or concerns to help reduce the number of enquiries and to enable customers to seek information themselves
- There was feedback to suggest that complaints involving other agencies – e.g. WHG – need a more joined up approach to ensure matters are fully resolved. It was discussed that potentially locality meetings could be a useful forum to stop things falling between the gaps in service providers and ensuring ownership of feedback and resolution of cases
- Members believed that there was an opportunity for complaints to be used as a means of learning and service improvement. It was suggested that this might include developing a means of reviewing clusters of complaints to understand service users' needs and expectations, help ensure services provided are effective and efficient

1.2 Summarising the Challenges – Officer Reflections

In addition to this Council officers, including the Head of Customer Services Transformation, have been undertaking an initial assessment of the current position with key themes summarised below;

Current Good Practice

- There are several pockets of good practice where responses are issued in a timely fashion and responses are clear and plainly written
- The Chief Executive's Office has an embedded quality assurance role in complaints and member responses that are directed to the Chief Executive's Office - a similar approach could be applied across all complaints

- The Council has a well established, albeit fairly flexible, procedure in place across directorates
- The numbers of Local Government Ombudsman cases found against the Council are very similar other local authorities
- Restorative approaches are being embedded within parts of the Council including Children's Services – restorative practice puts a people centred approach to improving relationships and finding solutions and resolutions

Procedural Opportunities

- The most recent corporate 'Tell us' procedure was updated in 2015 and acknowledges that different service sections have different approaches to complaints management. There is the opportunity for the Council to take stock of the approach corporately and for a new procedure to be developed and re-launched with the Council having a clear, consistent, more joined up and interconnected approach across the Council to managing complaints comments and compliments so we can get an overarching picture of feedback across Council services
- There are numerous points of access for customers to make a complaint, comment or a compliment – this makes things difficult for customers to know where they need to go if they want to give feedback or need a matter resolved and can also lead to duplication of officer effort in investigating and responding to enquiries
- The Council would benefit from having a shared view of what constitutes a complaint, a comment and a compliment and what should be classified as a service request
- The Council would benefit for putting steps in place that ensures customers must have requested a service before they can issue a complaint i.e. residents must give us the opportunity to fix an issue in line with agreed processes and procedures before they progress a complaint
- At present the organisation cannot confirm whether all complaints are acknowledged or actioned within agreed timescales and there is no routine monitoring of service compliance against agreed standards outside of the Statutory Social Care Complaints procedures in Children's Services and Adults Services for which there is robust monitoring and reporting
- The Council has the opportunity to define appropriate management levels for who are responsible for signing off responses to complaints, at present the approach is inconsistent across the organisation; to ensure responses are timely, accurate and of a high standard. This could be at service manager for an initial complaints response then a Head of Service/ or a Director.

- The Council could issue email responses to complaints where customers are happy for us to do so. This often means responses are issued in a more timely fashion and prevents delays.

Quality of Responses

- The quality, style and format of responses varies across the business and there is a lack of consistency in the use of plain language and in the structure of responses which could be achieved by a new corporate template for both letter and potentially email responses

Keeping Residents Updated/ Communication

- One current trend with Council complaints that there can be a lack of communication and keeping residents updated as a matter or complaint progresses, particularly when there are delays. Communicating with residents in the right way during a complaint is vitally important in helping to manage expectations and demonstrate what steps the Council is taking to understand and address an issue. A quick telephone call or even a face to face meeting to discuss the matter can often help resolve the matter (but this is not yet consistent and routine across the Council), and can help the Council better understand what needs to be done to put it right. Technology may help to underpin improved communication by sending automated updates as a matter is updated.
- The Council does not routinely update residents with what steps it has taken to address complaints feedback and how the Council has learnt from this.

Monitoring and Trend Analysis

- The Council does not have a consistent corporate approach to receiving, acknowledging and reflecting on service compliments and ensuring these are shared with relevant teams and colleagues to recognise their good work. In some areas compliments are shared widely and celebrated in others colleagues are unclear how to log and share formal compliments. Compliments are just as important as complaints as we embed the 'Voice of the Customer' in our service delivery and acknowledge the achievements of our staff who are proud to work for Walsall
- There is the opportunity for the organisation to learn from themes and trends in complaints, comments and compliments – and to use this feedback to help shape the provision of services, and enable greater focus on what really matters to our customers. There is no regular routine monitoring of complaints, comments and compliments Council-wide, however, this does happen within some service sections.

Policy

- There is no Corporate Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy in place which has been agreed in recent years by Members to define the

corporate approach. Many Council's have a Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy which helps to define the Council's approach and set this out clearly for residents

Underpinning Technology

- A complaint case management system, Respond, used for statutory social care complaint case management has been in use for many years and could better support the process of managing Complaints, Comments and Compliments, across the organisation.
- There is the opportunity to better utilise technology to keep residents informed of progress with responses to Complaints, including through issuing of automated email updates
- Technology could help to improve our ability to analyse key themes, issues and trends in customer feedback using data dashboards to help visualise data and enable learning and trend analysis
- The Council's website could be much clearer for residents and the e-forms currently used to make online contact could be streamlined and made more user-friendly focusing on how we can resolve the issue rather than documenting the problem or concern

Further evidence gathering will be progressed as part of the review to help build and our understanding of the current position, to enable learning and process improvement and to set the foundations for any future approach. The Council's Transformation Team has appointed a Service Analyst whose role it will be to further build an understanding of the current position, to establish clear and unequivocal data regarding complaints, comments and compliments and to review best practice from other Council's approaches in this area to feed into the Council's review.

1.3 Overview of the Current Approach

The corporate complaints procedure Tell Us is managed by the Corporate Assurance team within the Resources & Transformation directorate. There are also officers in all council directorates who are responsible for coordinating complaints, comments and compliments in their service areas.

The procedure indicates the following timescales:

- 5 working days from registration to acknowledge the complaint
- a further 15 working days to reply in full

Where this is not possible, complainants should be kept fully informed of the reasons for delay and about revised timescales.

These are maximum timescales – services should aim to respond to complaints and concerns as quickly as possible.

There are five 5 possible steps involved in processing a complaint:

Step 1

If a complaint cannot be resolved locally by the service concerned a complaint can be made:

- At the office dealing with the matter
- At any Council office
- Via the 'contact us' form on the council's website: www.walsall.gov.uk
- By email to complaints@walsall.gov.uk
- By post to Walsall Council, Civic Centre, Darwall Street, Walsall, WS1 1TP
- By telephone to any council office
- By text phone to 01922 654000.

Step 2

An acknowledgement should be made within five working days – if the full reply can be made within this time, services may not need to send a separate acknowledgement.

Step 3

The complaint will be investigated by the service concerned and a formal response will be sent within a further 15 working days. In cases where investigations require more time, the complainant should be advised of any delay, and given a revised timescale for the response.

Step 4

If the complainant is not satisfied with the response, she/he can ask for their complaint to be considered by a senior manager in the service or directorate.

Step 5

If the complainant is still not satisfied the matter can be referred to the Local Government Ombudsman.

1.4 Complaints about social care services

Members will be aware that there are different procedures, and different timescales, for complaints about social care services for children and young people, and about adult social care, established by statute, as currently set out in the Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 and the Local Authority Social Services and NHS Complaints (England) Regulations 2009.

1.5 Complaints Statistics

It is difficult to provide figures for the number of corporate complaints, comments and compliments received by the Council, given the multiplicity of routes by which complaints can be made and received, and the challenge of defining what is a complaint about the Council and its services rather than a complaint raised with the council about someone or something else, or about another organisation or agency.

Figures are collected relating to the number of complaints raised with the Council through the 'contact us' facility (complaints@walsall.gov.uk) only, or direct to the

corporate Assurance team. For the year from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017 these figures are as follows, including both complaints registered on Tell us and those referred on to the relevant service for action:

Period	Number received
April 2016	83
May 2016	84
June 2016	82
Q1 sub total	249
July 2016	177
August 2016	197
September 2016	112
Q2 sub total	486
October 2016	114
November 2016	108
December 2016	59
Q3 sub total	281
January 2017	99
February 2017	101
March 2017	109
Q4 sub total	309
TOTAL	1325

By directorate these figures are distributed as follows:

Economy & Environment	1061
Resources & Transformation	113
Children's Services	75
Adult Social Care	46
Other	30
TOTAL	1325

Committee should be aware that the figures shown here for Children's Services and Adult Social Care represent those received through the 'contact us' facility and are largely separate from complaints received and processed as statutory complaints under the regulations outlined in paragraph 1.3 above. In 2016/17, around 200 complaints were received via these statutory procedures

It is acknowledged that as part of the review, and in streamlining points of entry we will have more robust and accurate data on which to ensure corporate learning and to get the whole picture of Council feedback.

1.6 Focus of the Review

Members will be aware that the council has embarked on a transformation programme which includes as one of eight strands of work to examine how the council and its services communicate and engage with our customers, seeking to ensure that our processes are as straight forward as possible, clear for our

customers to use, looking to improve customer service and make the best use of technology.

The focus of the review in the area of complaints comments and compliments will be the following;

- To gather evidence on which to fully review the corporate approach to receiving logging and learning from customer feedback. To ensure we have a clearly established and agreed baseline position capturing the current Council 'as is' approach before looking to define the 'to be' processes and procedures.
- To learn from other public authorities approaches to help guide and shape any future approach in Walsall.
- To engage with members on the shaping of a new Policy framework for the Council's approach to complaints, comments and compliments.
- To consult with the workforce the project and establish a cross-section working group to iterate and develop this mandate and guide the review in this service area.
- To review the current web pages – to give customers clarity as to where they go to process a complaint/comment/compliment- best practice suggest we include a visual flow chart which would give transparency for customers.
- To set an approach that enables the Council to continually improve the procedure for complaints, comments and compliments. For examples, the website could include a "Was it helpful" to capture user experiences on using the procedure itself and may look to consider some post complaint surveys to garner experiences of those who have been through the process and understand if a matter has been fully resolved.
- To develop a Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy and an updated accompanying procedure, shaped by Councillors and colleagues and agreed by CMT and Cabinet. This will include; definitions of a service request, complaint, comment, compliment, service standards, appeals and escalations procedures, and links to other Policies including the new Corporate Vexatious Complainants Policy.
- To define how the Council will work with partners and the new locality model to ensure effective communication regarding complaints and to ensure clear lines of responsibility are in place to resolve a matter.
- To review the end to end process and seek feedback from complainants on what their experiences were like and how this could be improved. To explore how a process might be designed to give an emphasis on restorative practice.
- To reflect on the wider process and to explore options as to how customer expectations and be managed and communication throughout the complaints process could be improved.

- To define a cyclical approach to reflecting on trends and themes in complaints, comments and compliment feedback to help enable oversight and for the organisation to learn where and how it can improve. The proposal is for a bi-annual report to be issued to members on complaints themes and trends to Cabinet CMT but may also include reports to other Officer forums and Member Committees and will be happy to ensure that Standards report receive a copy of this report at each cycle.
- To streamline the various e-forms that currently exist explore the potential benefits of a single initial point of access for corporate complaints to ensure that the nature of the customers anticipated outcome is so the Council can determine whether or not this is achievable.
- To review underpinning technology for complaints comments and compliments and what can the Council put in place to help utilise technology to enhance the ability to report on themes and trends in complaints, comments and compliments data, but also to improve user experiences

1.7 Review Timeline

This review will be supported by a cross-directorate working group who will shape and develop a new corporate approach.

The first meeting of this Officer Working Group was held at the end of June. The anticipated launch of the new Policy and Procedure is in the Autumn of 2018.

Prior to this launch it is recommended that the Head of Customer Services Transformation will bring the outcomes of the review to the Standards Board on October 1st, and other Committees as required, as well as a copy of the revised draft Policy Framework for Cabinet approval which is anticipated in October of this year

2.0 Resource and legal considerations:

2.1 The council is required by statute to have complaints procedures in relation to social care services in accordance with relevant statute.

2.2 Standards Committee as part of its wider governance remit deals with elements of complaints and has received reports in relation to the Local Government Ombudsman on an annual basis.

3.0 Performance and Risk Management issues:

3.1 Complaints, comments and compliments provide a valuable source of information about the performance of council services and routine monitoring and measuring will form part of future corporate performance monitoring at CMT.

3.2 Managing complaints effectively will help to mitigate corporate risks by building an awareness of themes and trends and identifying where remedial action where be required to mitigate risks before these escalate.

4.0 Equality Implications:

4.1 It is important that the council's complaints, comments and compliments procedures are delivered, and that complaints are processed, fairly and in an open and transparent manner.

5.0 Consultation:

5.1 Any future Policy and Procedure will go through a formal EQIA and consultation process in line with Council procedures.

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