

Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee

19th May 2016

Report of the Head of Corporate Strategy and Democratic Services – Karen Jones

Matter for Information

Wards Affected: All Wards

Comments, Compliments and Complaints Annual Report

Purpose of the report

1. To provide an overview of the complaints, compliments and comments received during the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016 in accordance with the Council's two stage policy.

Executive Summary

2. Neath Port Talbot Council is a large organisation providing a variety of services and whilst every effort is made to carry out services responsibilities properly and effectively, complaints can be made for a number of reasons. Members of the public sometimes complain about lack of consultation about changes, lack of action or delay to service requests, staff attitude and decision making outcomes.
3. The Council recognises that in order to meet the needs and concerns of members of the public the monitoring of customer feedback is a valuable resource to continually improve services. The two stage complaints model recommended by Welsh Government has been operating in Neath Port Talbot Council for some time and this approach has been subsequently adopted over time by all Welsh Authorities. This should provide greater consistency in the way complaints are handled nationally
4. The guiding principle underlying the policy is “investigate once, investigate well” with an emphasis on conducting one investigation to deal thoroughly with the concerns raised, rather than multiple investigations at differing levels of the Council.

5. As well as the two stages in the policy complainants who are dissatisfied with the Council's response after those stages have been completed can refer their complaint to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales or another appropriate organisation for independent external consideration.
6. Lessons can usually be learned from complaints received where upheld (and possibly where the complaint was not upheld but the Authority recognised that improvements to services can still be made).
7. Revised guidance has been prepared for all Heads of Service to further develop and refine the business planning processes in 2016/2017. This includes corporate measures regarding complaints and compliments as an important part of the Council's Corporate Performance Management Framework. Also, a performance target for 2016/2017 is that 100% of services will measure customer satisfaction with individual services deciding how best to obtain that feedback.

Background

Two stage policy overview

8. **Stage 1 - informal resolution** - complaints that fall into this category are requests for a service that has not been actioned or properly dealt with. These complaints are handled by the staff and/or manager directly responsible for delivering the service with a response to be provided within 10 working days.
9. **Stage Two- formal investigation-** if a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of a stage 1 complaint, the complaint is then formally investigated by the designated complaints officer within the relevant Directorate and a response is to be provided within 20 working days. This includes a review of all relevant correspondence and often incorporates discussions with both the complainant and relevant officers from the service department concerned to enable a fuller response to be provided.
10. **Independent external consideration** – at the conclusion of stage 2, the complainant is made aware of the ability to refer their complaint to another organisation for external consideration e.g. the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. Before agreeing to investigate further, the Ombudsman should normally be satisfied that the matter has already been raised with the Council and that the Council has had a reasonable opportunity to investigate and respond in accordance with the two stage

policy. Where this has not been done, the Ombudsman will usually refer the complaint back to the Authority to provide an opportunity to attempt to resolve the complainant's concerns through the internal complaints processes first.

Reporting Processes

11. The Council has a Corporate Complaints Group which is responsible for implementing the policy and co-ordinating responses to complaints for the relevant directorate in which they arise. This group is chaired by the Customer Services Manager and meets regularly to promote a consistent approach to handling and recording complaints and to share good practice.
12. The Customer Services Manager attends the All Wales Complaints Group meetings twice a year to discuss and share good practice. The Public Services Ombudsman also attends these meetings which helps to strengthen collaborative working.
13. Summary quarterly reports regarding complaints and compliments relating to each directorate are a regular item on scrutiny committee agendas. Additionally, this information is now incorporated in to service related performance scorecards.
14. The Head of Legal Services also reports annually to the Policy and Resources Committee on complaints referred to the Ombudsman following receipt of the Ombudsman's Annual Report to enable comparisons between this authority and other Welsh Councils.
15. Finally, the Council's Welsh Language Scheme was superseded by the imposition of the Welsh Language Standards at the end of March 2016. The Council's Comments, Compliments and Complaints policy has been updated in line with requirements included within the standards. The Head of Corporate Strategy and Democratic Services will continue to report annually on complaints regarding the Council's Welsh Language provision to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

Summary/Overview 2015/2016

Social Services, Health and Housing

16. The Social Services Complaints Procedure (Wales) Regulation 2014 and the Representation Procedures (Wales) Regulation 2014 came into effect on the 1st August 2014. A key implication flowing from the implementation of the regulations on complaints is the need for all councils to strengthen the way in they manage the process of investigating and responding to complainants within required timescales and of learning and applying any lessons that are identified.
17. Arrangements are now differentiated to clearly separate the administrative and investigative functions at Stage 1 of the complaints process.
18. For Neath Port Talbot Council, there has been a 46% decrease in the number of complaints received at **Stage 1** when compared to 2014/15 – 153(complaints received in 2014/15) to 84 (complaints received in 2015/16)
19. **Stage 2** – 2015/16 has seen a slight increase in the number of Stage 2 complaints received when compared to 2014/15 from 3 to 5; Members should note that these were spread across the Directorate, with 1 stage 2 investigation in both Children’s and Adult Services, whilst 2 were required for Housing Options and 1 within Environment & Trading Standards.
20. Members should also note that the Social Services Complaints Annual Report will provide further detail, including data to reflect as well as seeing a reduction in complaints, the number of compliments has also more than doubled. The complaints team will continue to raise the profile for compliments to be reported alongside complaints.

Environment

21. For services reported to the Economic and Community Regeneration Committees, the number of Stage 1 complaints has remained unchanged over the last 2 years. There has been an increase in the number of Stage 2 complaints which may be attributed to legislative and operational changes within the Planning and Development Control section. The compliments received have remained the same since last year.

22. With regards to the Environment & Highways Committees, there has been an increase in the number of Stage 1 complaints received within the Waste Services area for 2015/16. This may be attributed to an improved method of recording complaints within the section however, it is noted that this increase is not reflected in the Stage 2 complaints reported for 2015/16 as this figure has remained as the previous year. This suggests that the majority of Stage 1 complaints are dealt with effectively at operational level. There is also a slight increase in compliments received in 2015/16.

Education and Lifelong Learning

23. There was a significant rise in Stage 1 complaints due to one Superheroes event at Margam Park last year. 552 stage 1 complaints were received (compared to 15 the previous year) of which 481 were upheld with lessons learned being taken on board.
24. Predicting visitor attendance on Bank Holiday events is very difficult with other factors such as weather influencing this. In this instance social media interest was unusually high therefore the park management will take this information into account when planning the welfare and catering provision for future family events to reduce the likelihood of a possible re-occurrence.
25. Five stage 2 complaints were received (compared to 20 the previous year) of which 1 was partly upheld. As a result of this there has been an increase in staff and staff training and a review of internal processes in the Additional Learning Needs Team.
26. Four cases were referred to the Public Services Ombudsman Wales Office with one being upheld in relation to a school transport matter. The service agreed to improve its decision letters and review its policy in the light of advice received.

Finance and Corporate Services

27. A total of 226 compliments were received for the year. The majority of these related to the efforts to capture website feedback as a result of the changes and improvements made including the ability to raise online service requests. There were also compliments thanking staff for being helpful across Chief Executive and Finance/Corporate Services teams.

28. **Stage 1** complaints have remained the same this year as in 2014/15. There were 8 upheld complaints, 5 of those related to the processes which currently exist, therefore a change in service procedures are being introduced into those services. Two complaints relate to public facilities within a specific service which is currently in the process of being reviewed to enable those facilities to be improved. The other related to an employee not having full knowledge of the service, which has resulted in the need for training and increased internal communication.
29. The partially upheld complaints were mainly attributed to the customer perception of staff attitude which resulted, where appropriate, in managers speaking to the individuals involved and/or the team to reinforce the need for good customer service. **Stage 2** complaints have decreased this year and both of those received were not upheld.

Summary

30. Embedding a culture of good practice across the Authority where staff and customers are clear about service standards is an essential part of managing the customer experience.
31. The highest standards of service are still expected from departments despite the increasing budgetary challenges. It is therefore vital to keep complaints to manageable levels. When mistakes happen they should be acknowledged, an apology and explanation provided and that should be put right quickly and effectively.
32. Managers should also encourage the recording of compliments to help others learn from what our customers tell us we do well. This has a positive impact on staff morale and allows teams to recognise good practice. This is particularly important during the current savings targets, less staff and reduction or removal of some services to help meet austerity measures.
33. While there are relatively few customers whose actions are considered by the Council to be unacceptable, over the last year there have been a few instances where customer behaviour towards staff members has been unacceptable or unreasonable and this has been addressed by the use of warning letters. In two instances restrictions on access at the Civic Centres were necessary.

34. Considering the breadth of dealings across the council, it should be noted that the number of complaints upheld was relatively low with the majority being resolved or not upheld. That said, complaints will continue to be monitored via the relevant policy and resources scrutiny processes to help identify the cause of any continuing or recurring service area issues.
35. The level of activity demonstrates that customers are using the complaints process appropriately. The low level of complaints escalating to stage 2 evidences that, in the main, complaints are addressed by managers at an early stage and, where applicable, lessons learned following investigation are being implemented.

Financial Impact

36. There are no financial impacts associated with this report.

Equality Impact Assessment

37. The nature of complaints made and the profile of complaints raises no equality issues that require to be addressed.

Workforce Impacts

38. A review of arrangements for handling violent or aggressive behaviour in the public areas of the civic centres was undertaken following the two incidents referred to above at paragraph 33. Additional staff members were identified as a result of the review to be available to support incidents where violent or aggressive behaviour is anticipated or experienced.

Legal Impacts

39. The main frameworks that govern the management of complaints and compliments have been identified in the body of this report.

Risk Management

40. The profile of complaints made during the year, their resolution and lessons learned is taken into account when the Council's Annual Governance Statement is prepared. There were no systemic failings in the Council's Governance systems identified from complaints recorded, investigated and concluded in 2015/16.

Recommendations

41. That Members note the above report.

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