

# **NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee**

**20<sup>th</sup> September 2017**

### **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 2016 to 31 March 2017.

#### **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 service responsibilities properly and effectively, complaints can be made for various reasons. Members of the public sometimes complain about lack of consultation about changes, council policy, lack of action or delay to service requests, staff attitude and decision making outcomes.
3. Complaints provide valuable information about how we are performing and what our customers think about our services. Most people who complain tell us what we have done wrong and how we can do better; we use this information to improve our services, strengthen our relationships with customers and make better use of our resources. Publishing this annual report demonstrates the Council's commitment to transparency and a positive approach to dealing with and learning from complaints.
4. 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. We will continue to review the complaints service through 2017/18 and make any necessary changes to ensure that our complaints process remains customer-focused and that the Council is providing the best service possible. 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 provides greater consistency in the way complaints are handled nationally

5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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).
8. Corporate measures regarding complaints and compliments are an important part of the Council’s Performance Management Framework. Summary quarterly reports regarding complaints and compliments regarding each service area/ directorate are a regular item on scrutiny committee agendas. These reports help to identify any trends promptly and places increased emphasis on what the Council is learning from complaints. Also, performance targets for 2016/2017 included a requirement for all services to measure customer satisfaction with individual service areas obtaining and reporting that feedback.
9. Although recorded compliments are increasing, the good service provided every day by some Council departments is not always represented. The complaints officers have reiterated the need to services to ensure our compliments are captured and that we are continuing to take on board what our customers want.

## **Background**

### **Two stage policy overview**

1. **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.
2. **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 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.
3. **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 council's own complaints processes first.

### **Reporting Processes**

1. Although there is no dedicated whole authority complaints unit 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 promotes a consistent approach to handling and recording complaints and to share good practice.
2. The Customer Services Manager also attends the All Wales Complaints Group meetings to discuss and share good practice. A representative from the Public Services Ombudsman Wales

(PSOW) attends these meetings to improve information sharing and collaborative working arrangements. Their information is reported in the PSOW quarterly casebook and the representative advised in the last meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> April that both the number of enquires and number of complaints investigated had increased from the previous year.

3. 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.
4. The Council's Welsh Language Scheme was superseded by the imposition of the Welsh Language Standards at the end of March 2016 with the Council's Comments, Compliments and Complaints policy updated to reflect requirements within the standards. The Head of Corporate Strategy and Democratic Services reported the 3 complaints received in this respect during 2017/17 in her annual report to the Policy and Resources Policy Board on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

### **Summary/Overview 2016/2017**

5. Compliments and complaints data for each service area is reported regularly throughout the year with quarter four performance data being reported to the Policy and Resources Cabinet Board meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2017.

### **Social Services, Health and Housing**

6. Members should note that the Social Services Complaints Annual Report provides explanations regarding the increase in complaints during 2016/2017 when compared to 2015/2016. The number of compliments has significantly increased and the complaints team will continue to raise the profile for compliments to be reported.

## **Environment**

7. There has been a reduction in the number of stage 1 complaints for Street scene and Engineering aspects compared to the previous year at Stage 1(31 down to 19) with no change in Stage 2 (5)
8. Increased awareness of the need to record compliments received has resulted in a substantial increase compared to last year.
9. Regeneration and Sustainable Development reported 1 complaint with the number of compliments doubling from 5 to 10.

## **Education and Lifelong Learning**

10. There has been a dramatic decrease in Stage 1 complaints which is explained by the one off event last year which generated a large number of complaints. The lessons learned from the previous year have been taken on board in relation to the Superheroes event in Margam Park.
11. Stage 2 complaints also decreased from 5 to 2 and compliments slightly increased.
12. Two complaints were received by the Public Services Ombudsman Wales Office with neither upheld.

## **Chief Executives and Finance**

13. The number of complaints slightly increased from 29 to 32 at Stage1 and from 3 to 7 at stage 2. In both categories the vast majority were not upheld. A total of 190 compliments were received for the year which was a slight decrease from the previous year. The majority of these related to the corporate website, customer services and community safety.
14. Any lessons learned from those upheld have been implemented.

## **Summary**

15. 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.
16. The highest standards of service are still expected from departments despite the increasing budgetary challenges. When mistakes happen they should be acknowledged, an apology and explanation provided and that should be put right quickly and effectively. Lessons learned should be acknowledged and identified changes implemented to avoid a repetition.
17. 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, with less staff and reduction or removal of some services to help meet austerity measures.
18. 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 unreasonable and this has been addressed by the use of warning letters. In one instance a restriction on access to Neath Civic Centre was implemented for a persistent complainant and alternative customer contact arrangements made under the policy.
19. Considering the breadth of dealings across the council, it should be noted that the number of recorded 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.
20. 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**

21. There are no direct financial impacts associated with this report.

## **Equality Impact Assessment**

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

## **Workforce Impacts**

23. A review of arrangements for handling violent or aggressive behaviour in the public areas of the civic centres resulted in additional staff members being identified to support incidents where violent or aggressive behaviour is anticipated or experienced. Improved communications and sharing of information across different teams has also helped frontline staff to be better prepared in anticipation of difficult customer queries at the first point of contact.

## **Legal Impacts**

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

## **Risk Management**

25. 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 2016/17.

## **Recommendations**

26. That Members note the above report.

## **Officer Contact**

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