

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

12 SEPTEMBER 2019

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET DECISION

Leader of the Council – Councillor Bob Cook

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS POLICY

SUMMARY

This report provides a background to existing arrangements for managing complaints / customer feedback, the detail of the review of the current policy, suggested changes and next steps with respect to the implementation of the revised policy.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION/DECISION

The existing policy has been in place for several years. Changes to customer needs and expectations, feedback from residents and staff within the council, consideration of national trends and good practice guidance and recommendations from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman have all contributed to the need to review current policy and procedures. Regular monitoring of data and trends alongside some pilot work undertaken on an early resolution process have also contributed to the review of this policy and the recommendations included within this report.

RECOMMENDATION

Approve the Customer Feedback and Complaints Policy with effect from 1 October 2019.

DETAIL

1. The Council's existing Corporate Compliments, Commendations, Comments and Complaints policy and procedure is due for a periodic review. Although many aspects of the policy are effective in managing the expectations of customers, maintaining satisfactory response rates and supporting an approach to early resolution and learning, some aspects are no longer as effective in meeting changing customer needs, responding to national trends and simplifying the process in response to customer feedback. Recent outcomes/ recommendations and good practice guidance issued by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, also support the need to review the existing policy.
2. The management/coordination of complaints, comments and commendations is managed and recorded centrally, with a few exceptions. A dedicated complaints telephone line, an email account and online web forms are the main means by which customers can make a complaint and or provide feedback. Social Media sites are also a valuable source of customer feedback although official complaints received via social media are redirected to the website or a complaints telephone line.

3. Complaints are logged and recorded on one system where all related correspondence is retained. This provides a strategic oversight of customer feedback and reports from the system enable intelligence to be used to effectively manage and monitor timeliness of responses, escalation rates through the various stages of the complaint process, upheld rates and learning.

REVIEW ACTIVITY

4. Research has been undertaken to benchmark current policy/ practice and response timescales with other local authorities, particularly in the North East. Some private sector benchmarking has also been undertaken.
5. National guidance issued by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has been used to inform the development of the policy. Learning outcomes from complaints which have been investigated by the LGSCO have also been considered.
6. Consultation has taken place with numerous interest groups to consider whether the current policy supports need and practices. This included holding focus groups with complaints officers and those involved in responding to complaints from across the Council, consulting with the Council's Residents Panel, discussion and input from the Customer Excellence assessor.
7. Learning and outcomes from existing good practice are used to provide a continuous improvement cycle with respect to dealing with complaints and improving the customers experience. A pilot to introduce an early resolution, where customers will receive a telephone contact and a resolution within 3 days has been piloted in Childrens services. Results show high levels of quick resolution, customer satisfaction and a reduction overall in officer time spent resolving complaints. This learning has informed the revised policy.
8. Feedback and learning from this review suggests the current policy requires updating to continue to meet customer needs and expectations, meet the good practice requirements set out by the LGSCO and the changing needs of the organisation – reduction in staff, new technologies and customer interface.

KEY CHANGES

9. Outcomes from existing intelligence, consultations, discuss and research outlined in paragraphs above have been used to inform the development of a new policy which is attached at **Appendix 1**. Key changes from the existing policy are outlined below.
10. A clear and concise Customer Feedback and Complaints Policy which has prominence on the Councils Website along with signposting to additional support if required. This provides for positive feedback and complaints which is in line with customer consultation feedback.
11. The policy introduces an early resolution stage, for complaints that meet some certain criteria; this supports customers requirements to resolve matters as early as possible. These can be escalated to a stage one investigation should the complainant remain dissatisfied with the outcome. Criteria has been developed to indicate when complaints are appropriate for early resolution so that this is clear for customers and officers. This has worked well in children's services pilot and subsequent rollout which has now been in operation since September 2017.

12. Response timescales have been amended and provide a more realistic window to inform an effective investigation and resolution at the earliest opportunity. Learning suggests that more time spent early in the process leads to an effective resolution and a reduction in the number of complaints that progress to further stages. Early resolution pilot indicates that a high percentage of complaints are managed within three days and fewer move onto stage one or two of the procedure. Where they do progress, having a realistic timescale to investigate provides a more satisfactory response to the complainant. Statistics show a further reduction moving on to stage two. As such it is proposed that Acknowledgements are sent within one working day, Early Resolution within 3 working days, Stage 1 will be responded to within 25 working days and stage 2 within 20 working days. This is an “upto” timescale and internal management of the processes will mean that all complaints are progressed as quickly as possible. These timescales are in line with neighbouring authorities, meet the LGSCO guidelines and Customer Excellence principles. In many instances they out - perform timescales in the Private Sector.
13. Appropriate support for complainants in relation to mental health and advocacy is outlined in the Policy. More information / support has been provided on the council web site. The Policy also clearly outlines the Council’s expectations when it comes to complainant behaviour, in relation to persistent complaints and unreasonable behaviour and unacceptable language. This is strengthened from previous policy.
14. The Policy and procedures make it clear to customers how the council will deal with their feedback (i.e., compliments, commendations and comments)

NEXT STEPS AND TIMESCALES

15. It is proposed that the revised policy is rolled out from 1st October 2019. The council web pages will be updated with the new policy, additional guidance and support information. Council staff will receive training, awareness raising and guidance. Monitoring of the changes will take place to ensure these are working effectively. Reports on progress will be received by the Corporate Governance Group and Senior Management. The Policy will be reviewed periodically.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

16. The Policy considers the needs of all communities and improved information on the council’s web pages provide additional support. There are several ways in which the public can provide feedback which meets the needs of the wider community.

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

17. There are no implications for the Council’s Corporate Parenting Role .

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

18. There are no financial implications to this report.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

19. There are no legal implications. The Policy meets the guidance set out by the regulator the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

RISK ASSESSMENT

20. This Complaint Policy is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

21. Members are consulted as part of the decision-making process.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

22. None.

Name of Contact Officer:	Garry Cummings
Post Title:	Director of Finance and Business Services
Telephone No.	01642 527011
Email Address:	garry.cummings@stockton.gov.uk

