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## Report of the Chief Customer Services Officer

### Corporate Governance & Audit Committee

Date: 14<sup>th</sup> December 2010

Subject: Report on Governance of the Complaints Process - 2010

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#### Electoral Wards Affected:

Ward Members consulted  
(referred to in report)

#### Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

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### Executive Summary

1. This report provides information and clarity to the Committee as to the current resourcing of the complaints function on a corporate and council wide basis and also provides assurances that complaint performance and lessons learnt from complaints remain high on the corporate agenda – **See 1.1.**
2. With regards to council wide complaints management, within each directorates and ALMO's is a named officer who has the responsibility for overseeing the complaint management for their services. This officer is given the role title of Directorate Customer Relations Officer (DCRO) – **See 3.4**
3. The DCRO's play a leading role in ensuring that lessons are learnt from complaints at all stages of the process (stages 1, 2 & Ombudsman cases) and are taken forward and incorporated into daily working practices – **See 3.10.**
4. Every quarter the Corporate Customer Relations Manager presents a report to the Customer Strategy Board detailing performance across the council with regards to compliments, complaints and Ombudsman cases. Full details of what is reported on can be found at **3.27** in this report.
5. In light of the current and ongoing financial constraints, the Assistant Chief Executive, Policy, Planning & Improvement charged the Corporate Customer Relations Manager with carrying out a review of how complaints are currently being dealt with to ensure that the process is both customer focused and cost effective – **See 3.41.**

## **1.0 Purpose Of This Report**

- 1.1 This report was requested to provide further information and clarity to the Committee as to the resourcing of the complaints function on a corporate and council wide basis and also to provide assurances that complaint performance and lessons learnt from complaints remain high on the corporate agenda.

## **2.0 Background Information**

- 2.1 On 29<sup>th</sup> July 2010 the Committee received a report from the Chief Officer of Customer Services on the Ombudsman's' Annual Letter for 2009/10 and the council's performance on Ombudsman cases received for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010.
- 2.2 The Committee asked for a further report detailing information on the resourcing of the complaints function corporately and council wide, the costs of dealing with complaints and what arrangements are in place for ensuring that lessons are learnt from complaints

## **3.0 Main Issues**

### **3.1 Resourcing of the complaint function**

- 3.2 There are two officers employed by the council to oversee the corporate complaints function. The Corporate Customer Relations Manager (CCRM) and the Ombudsman Liaison Officer (OLO). The CCRM has overall ownership of Leeds City Council's Corporate Compliments and Complaints Policy, with responsibility for overseeing and monitoring the implementation of the compliments and complaints procedure council wide. The CCRM also has management responsibilities within Customer Services for 4 of their support teams (Training, IT Systems Development, Customer Relations & Administration).
- 3.3 Based within the Customer Relations Team in Customer Services is the Ombudsman Liaison Officer (OLO) whose corporate role is to monitor and overseeing all Ombudsman cases for the council, ensuring quality responses are provided within relevant timescales and maintaining good working relations with the Ombudsman, her Investigators and service managers within the council. The OLO also supports the Data Protection and Freedom of Information function within Customer Services. There is no admin support for either of these roles.
- 3.4 With regards to council wide complaints management, within each directorates and ALMO's is at least one named officer who has the responsibility for overseeing the complaint management for their services. This officer is given the role title of Directorate Customer Relations Officer (DCRO).
- 3.5 All DCRO's regularly report to the Corporate Customer Relations Manager (CCRM) with regards to complaints performance, lessons learnt from complaints and best practice from their directorates / ALMO's. The majority of these officers are employed in other full time roles and do the customer relations related work as a part of their daily duties – each one to a different degree.

3.6 The table below gives details of the estimated proportion of time spent by each DCRO on carrying out their customer relations duties.

3.7 Q - How much of your working day is spent on customer relations duties:-

Adult Services	Children's Services & Ed Leeds	City Dev	Early Years	E&N Environ.	E&N N/hoods	PP&I & Corp Gov	Resources	AVH	BITMO	ENEHL	WNWHL
100%	100%	10/20%	15%	70%	35%	100%	15%	85%	5%	40%	80%

3.8 A meeting is held every six weeks and all DCRO's from the directorates and ALMO's are invited to attend. The CCRM chairs the meeting and uses it to disseminate good practice and discuss performance issues, if required.

3.9 One of the benefits of having the DCRO's based in the directorates / ALMO's is that they usually have "the ear" of the relevant Chief Officer(s), ensuring that complaint performance stays high on their agenda – performance not just being the number of days to acknowledge and respond to complaints but also the quality of the response at resolving the issue first time, most of the time. As reported previously to the committee, last year the council received 7946 stage 1 complaints and only 529 progressed to stage 2.

3.10 The DCRO's in the directorates / ALMO's also play a leading role in ensuring that lessons are learnt from complaints at all stages of the process (stages 1, 2 & Ombudsman cases) and are taken forward and incorporated into daily working practices. This is done by reporting on a regular basis to their own Management Teams the types of complaints they receive and their outcomes.

3.11 These reports ensure that lessons are learnt and where relevant changes in processes are made to ensure that the same issues do not continue to occur. This in itself is not only customer focused but cost effective, reducing errors in processes and like for like complaints.

3.12 It is difficult to put a number on exactly how many officers are involved in investigating complaints throughout the council but it is reasonable to say that most officers of managerial grade (Principal Officer and above) as well as any junior officers with service specialist knowledge are called upon as part of their daily duties to be complaint investigators, therefore involving a significant number of our officers across the council on an ad hoc, as required basis.

**3.13 The cost of dealing with and resolving a complaint.**

3.14 It is not possible to put a definitive figure on how much it costs to process a complaint as it depends on a number of factors:-

3.15 The first one being the amount of time needed to investigate the issue(s) raised along with the grade of the officer(s) carrying out the initial investigation.

- 3.16 For example, an initial complaints may be dealt with and responded to by a junior officer who has the relevant knowledge and can provide a full response and resolution within half an hour – the cost will be only a few £'s – whereas another complaint may have to be dealt with by a service manager with input from a number of other officers and may take a couple of weeks to pull together all the information required and respond to – the cost of this in staffing time alone could run into the £100's.
- 3.17 If the complaint then progresses to stage 2, the costs increase as more officers of higher grades become involved and the second investigation may take longer.
- 3.18 Finally, if the complaint progresses to the Ombudsman the cost escalate even further as all officers previously involved at stages 1 & 2 may be involved again and now the relevant Chief Officer, the council's Ombudsman Liaison Officer and the Corporate Customer Relations Manager are also involved. There is also the potential that if the Ombudsman finds against the council, a Local Settlement payment may be incurred – thus increasing the costs even further.
- 3.19 Last Year a total of 44 of the 168 Ombudsman cases received by the council were found as Local Settlements with a financial outlay of £16,575.35 in total.
- 3.20 The table below shows how year on year the number of complaints being investigated by the Local Government Ombudsman has been decreasing along with the % of cases where fault was found against the council and the monetary settlements. A large part of this success is down to proactive work taking place within services by complaints staff to ensure that the correct outcomes are reached earlier in the process for more customers.

### 3.21 Number of complaints and Local Settlements Paid Out.

Year	Number of Stage 1 Complaints Received	Number Ombudsman Cases	Number Where Fault Was Found	Percentage	Amount Paid Out
2006/07	7299	242	86 cases	35%	£35,471.00
2007/08	6466	183	68 cases	33%	£42,000.00
2008/09	7632	170	65 cases	32%	£67,866.75
2009/10	7496	168	44 cases	25%	£16,575.35

- 3.22 As shown earlier in this report in 3.7, most officers who manage and maintain the complaints functions within the Directorates and the ALMO's do not do the function full time so detailed below is *estimated* costings as to how much the management of the complain function across the council costs at this time. The figures quoted include on costs.

3.23 Estimated staffing cost for managing the complaints function ( see sec 3.7 above for %'s applied )

<b>Area</b>	<b>No of Officers</b>	<b>Estimated cost per annum £ K</b>
Corporate	2	61.6
Directorates	7	206.0
ALMO's	4	72.8
<b>Estimated Total</b>		<b>340.4</b>

### **3.24 Reporting on complaints performance & lessons learnt.**

3.25 The Corporate Customer Relations Manager is a member of the Customer Strategy Board which meets every six weeks. The remit of the board is to play a key role in the business transformation of the council, particularly in driving forward the business priorities of customer involvement, choice and satisfaction and putting the customer first.

3.26 The Assistant Chief Executive, Policy, Planning & Improvement, chairs the meetings and provides a direct link to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). The Board consists of senior customer champions from each directorate and it is their remit to feedback on all agenda items to their Management Teams.

3.27 Every quarter the CCRM presents a report to the board detailing performance across the council with regards to compliments, complaints and Ombudsman cases. The report details the following:-

- *Performance against the corporate standard of a response to a stage 1 complaint within 15 working days (or 20 working days for Adult & Children's Social Care).*
- *Information on holding responses issues.*
- *The number of stage 1 complaints received within each directorate / ALMO*
- *The number of stage 1 complaints responded to within 10 working days within each directorate / ALMO*
- *The number of stage 2 complaints received within each directorate / ALMO*
- *The number of stage 2 complaints responded to within 15 working days within each directorate / ALMO*
- *The number of compliments received within each directorate / ALMO.*
- *The number of Ombudsman cases received within each directorate / ALMO.*
- *The number and type of Ombudsman decisions received within the reporting period.*
- *The average response time taken to provide responses to the Ombudsman by each Directorate / ALMO.*

- *Details of all cases where a Local Settlement was the outcome along with details of what lessons were learnt and what changes made due to these.*

3.28 Each Local Settlement case has its own write up showing details of the service involved, a brief synopsis of the actual issue raised by the customer, details of the settlement and finally what lessons were learnt from the complaints and what actions have been taken by the service to ensure that the issue will not occur again.

### **3.29 A review of the complaints process.**

3.30 In light of the current and ongoing financial constraints, the Assistant Chief Executive, Policy, Planning & Improvement charged the Corporate Customer Relations Manager with carrying out a review of how complaints are currently being dealt with to ensure that the process is both customer focused and cost effective.

3.31 The initial part of the review identified that from a cost perspective the resourcing levels on complaint management is already at minimum levels as most areas are already doing this role on a part time basis.

3.32 However, an area that has been identified as key to maintaining customer focus and improving cost effectiveness is the actual investigation of the issue and the response to the customer.

3.33 The review will aim to encourage services and in particular the Investigators to carry out more verbal interaction with the customer from the earliest stage – i.e. from receipt of the complaint right up to resolution. By doing this, more clarity as to what the actual issues are should be obtained and also quicker and more relevant resolutions agreed.

3.34 To take this forward a project mandate has been written to provide clarity as to what the Corporate Customer Relations Manager is looking to achieve council wide. The mandate will be presented to the Customer Strategy Board to gain sign up and agreement from all areas of the council.

3.35 It is envisaged that this change in focus from mainly written responses only to more interaction with the customer throughout the process will pay dividends in improving the customer experience and resolving more issues first time – thus benefiting the customer and saving officer time.

## **4.0 Implications For Council Policy And Governance**

4.1 The content of this report hold no issues for Council Policy or Governance however there are potential implications for the council if we do not continue to learn lessons and implement changes to processes / procedures where relevant, following the receipt and investigation of all complaints and Ombudsman cases.

## **5.0 Legal And Resource Implications**

5.1 This report is not considered to have any specific legal or resource implications, although individual LGO complaints may have both legal and financial implications, e.g. local settlements. Any Local Settlements made are met from the relevant Directorate / ALMO budget. Officer may feel that personal contact may take longer initially but it should reduce the length of time taken on resolving complaints in the long run.

## **6.0 Conclusions**

- 6.1 The report shows good performance monitoring taking place and overall performance in all areas is high. It does however also highlights the need for officers to strive to resolve customer complaints at an early stage in the process by more personal contact – this will not just benefit the customer but should also reduce the financial impact on council services.

## **7.0 Recommendations**

- 7.1 The Committee is asked to note the content of this report and acknowledge the ongoing improvements in performance and good feedback on the same from the Local Government Ombudsman.

### Background Documents Used

LGO Annual Letter Report – 2009/10 – Presented to the Corporate Governance & Audit Committee Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2010 – Author – W Allinson

Quarterly Reports to Customer Strategy Board – Author – W Allinson

Improving Complaint Investigations & Outcomes – Project Mandate – Author - W Allinson