

## **SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel

**DATE:** 1<sup>st</sup> February 2023

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Vijay McGuire

**WARD(S):** All

### **PART I**

### **FOR DECISION**

## **TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT – COMPLAINT HANDLING REVIEW**

### **1. Purpose of Report**

Complaints are an essential element in maintaining the council's reputation and provides a valuable way to understand customers' expectations of service delivery. Data and customer insight provided through the Councils complaints process is an essential part of identifying service improvements and promoting good practice across the council.

In good councils, robust complaints processes put public concerns at the heart of their corporate governance to ensure that the voice of the resident is firmly embedded into all risk management and accountability systems and processes.

In line with the council's focus on strengthening the organisations approach to governance, the Customer and Community Scrutiny meeting held on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2022, approved the creation of a Task and Finish group centred on complaint handling

The purpose of the Task and Finish group was to review the council's complaints process and make recommendations for improvement which would build on the work already reported to the Audit and Governance Committee on 28 September 2022.

The findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group are set out in (Appendix 1) and this report requests approval of the five recommendations as set out below.

## 2. **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

The Panel is recommended to:

1. Review and comment on the report attached at Appendix 1.
2. Agree the recommendations within the report for submission to Cabinet.

Recommendations contained within the report (Appendix 1) are:

### **Recommendation one**

Move to a 2-stage corporate complaint process with extended timescales at each of the two stages

### **Recommendation two**

Introduce accessibility of different languages on the council's website reflective of the ethnic makeup of the borough, to make it easier for customers to access service and navigate information relating to service requests

### **Recommendation three**

Make the online complaint page more robust

### **Recommendation four**

Encourage officers to use various communication methods when investigating complaints

### **Recommendation five**

Strengthen the learning and improvements captured through complaints and ensure that these are incorporated in all future complaints' reports

## **Commissioner's Review**

*"This is a well-researched and documented report and those involved should be commended. It would be helpful to extend the recommendations to deal with a process to ensure that once a complaint has been upheld the action required to remedy the failure is monitored to completion. Many Ombudsman references arise because once a Council accepts that it is at fault, it takes too long to undertake the rectification, thus compounding the original failure. In due course Scrutiny may want to review how their recommendations were implemented. It may be useful as part of that review to look at the areas that generate the most complaints and how these are dealt with."*

## 3. **Slough Corporate Plan**

The Corporate plan includes the following strategic objectives:

- A council that lives within our means, balances the budget, and delivers best value for taxpayers and service users
- An environment that helps residents live more independent, healthier, and safer lives
- A borough for children and young people to thrive
- Infrastructure that reflects the uniqueness of Slough's places and a new vision for the town centre

The corporate complaints governance framework supports all the above objectives by learning from issues raised, using key customer insight to improve standards of service, accessibility and focusing on being more responsive to people's needs.

#### 4. **Implications of the recommendations**

##### (a) Financial

None – support to the Task and Finish Group was drawn from the existing staff involved with complaints. The recommendations are seeking to ensure that the Council's limited resources are used to best effect. At present the system for recording complaints is under review, and recommendations for reviewing the accessibility on the council's platform may require investment and will therefore be subject to a business case for approval

##### (b) Risk Management

The provision of a refreshed approach, and updated Complaints procedure reduces the Council's risks of

- Failing to meet resident expectations
- Inconsistent application of the complaints policy by staff
- Ombudsman cases found against the council
- Loss of reputation

##### (c) Legal Implications

Councils must provide a clear and transparent opportunity for residents to express concerns regarding the services they receive, the recommendations contained within this report, as set out by the Task and Finish Group will meet these obligations. If a complainant remains dissatisfied with the Council's response, they can complain to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) or the Housing Ombudsman dependent on the nature of the complaint. The LGSCO publishes annual report on local authority performance, as well as issues good practice guides both on complaints handling and on suggested remedies for specific complaints. These include guidance relating to council housing repairs, neighbour nuisance, council housing management, benefits, school admissions, special educational needs, environmental health, planning and social care. The Council should regularly review and take account of this guidance and should ensure it has effective systems in place to respond to queries from the LGSCO in relation to individual cases. The LGSCO has powers to make findings of maladministration and issue a public interest report.

##### (d) Equalities Implications

Learning from complaints also assists the Council in fulfilling its statutory duty under s149 of the Equality Act.

Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 sets out the Public-Sector Equality Duty which requires a public authority (or those exercising public functions) to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not.

A number of the recommendations relate to ensuring the Council meets the needs of its diverse communities, including using different communication methods and making information accessible to individuals for whom English is not their first language.

## 5. Supporting Information

Work is underway to review the Council's approach to the management of complaints. This includes

- the introduction of statutory reporting at Audit and Governance committee,
- quarterly reporting at CLT Assurance board,
- weekly report monitoring of all outstanding cases
- a review of the procedure from a three stage to a 2-stage process as detailed in the statutory report to Audit and Governance in September 2022 to encourage greater consistency in handing, monitoring, and reporting.

However, fundamental to the Council's approach will be the Complaints Policy itself and ensuring that is accessible and easily understandable by our residents and which can be implemented effectively by our staff.

At the October 2022 meeting of Customer and Community Scrutiny, approval was sought to establish a Task and Finish panel to review the current process co-chaired by Cllr Brooker and Cllr Kaur. The Task and Finish panel have met four times to consider the process in detail and recommend a series of changes.

The Group agreed to meet with relevant officers and refer to the effective complaint handing guidance from the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman with a view to reporting back to the Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel within three months, subject to the discretion of the Panel Chair.

Appendix 1 sets out the detailed findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group. The report focuses on several key recommendations which focus on:

- **Getting it right** – by complying with the law, and following the councils' policies and procedures – by allowing a longer timeframe to focus on the quality of the response through a revised two stage process
- **Being customer focused** by being clear on acknowledgement, clarity and action being taken.
- **Being open and accountable** – by ensuring that dialogue is maintained with the resident whilst dealing with their case
- **Acting fairly and proportionately** – through clarity, simplicity, and improved accessibility
- **Putting things right** - through the quality of the response, apologising and taking the necessary steps to put right any injustice caused

- **Seeking continuous improvement** - improvements informed by the valuable customer insight / complaints data and embedding learning and continuous improvement through reporting, responses, and thematic reviews

The report highlights how the move from a 3-stage process to a 2-stage process will be advantageous to staff and residents alike as it allows for a stronger emphasis on the quality of response and underpinning the process with a stronger emphasis on learning and continuous improvement. Meetings held with the London Borough of Hounslow and Liverpool City Council were key for the group to feel confident in their recommendations

The Group would like to express their thanks to staff and teams within the Council who investigate and deal with complaints. They recognise their commitment to offer excellent customer service with the aim of resolving and learning from complaints against various day to day working challenges such as resourcing.

6. **Comments of Other Committees**

Cabinet will be asked to consider the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group when deciding of a 2-stage complaint process.

7. **Conclusion**

The Task and Finish Group welcome feedback on its report and would request that the themes and recommendations will be considered by the Council, and wider partnership.

8. **Appendix Attached**

Appendix 1 – Complaint handling review – Report by the People Scrutiny Panel Task and Finish Group

9. **Background Papers**

None