

Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 20th October, 2022.

Present:- Councillors Begum (Chair), Muvvala (Vice-Chair), Ali, Brooker, Kaur, M. Malik, S. Malik, Mohammad

Non-voting co-opted members: Trevor Pollard and Manvinder Matharu

Apologies for Absence:- None

PART 1

14. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

15. Minutes of the Meeting held on 7th September 2022

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 September 2022 be approved as a correct record.

16. Member Questions

None received.

17. Task & Finish Group: Complaints Handling

The SBC Head of Governance and Scrutiny presented the report Task and Finish Group: Complaints Handling. He provided a summary of the proposed scope, remit, output and associated timescales for the Task and Finish Group (T&FG).

The SBC Deputy Monitoring Officer emphasised the critical importance of aligning the work of the T&FG to the following:

- the 2021 governance review of Slough Borough Council, which could be described as a 'best value' inspection. The Local Government Act 1995 placed a duty of ensuring 'best value' on all local authorities, which requires all local authorities to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, while having regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- Complaints should be considered a good source of data and information regarding the Council's performance, information which was key to this process of continuous improvement.
- The Statutory Directions from the Secretary of State following the issuing of the 114 notice, which set out a number of requirements on the Council, three of which were particularly relevant to the scrutiny function:

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- i. Produce an action plan
- ii. Devise and implement a programme of cultural change and be open to learning
- iii. Take steps to enable better and evidence-based decision-making, by enhancing data and insight functions.

She added that the T&FG would:

- Be in accord with the core principles of a Best Value Inspection;
- Enable detailed investigation of a single issue, focussed on producing substantive recommendations (something that was not always possible in a 2-hour committee meeting; and
- T&FGs would allow improved cross-party working.

The LGA and Social Care Ombudsman had advised taking a cyclical approach to the analysis of complaints data and produced a series of questions to aid the T&FG in its work.

The SBC Associate Director for Business and Customer Services and the SBC Complaints Caseworker and FOI Lead made the following points:

- The complaints process had not been reviewed in some time and this was a good opportunity to carry out a thorough survey.
- Officers acknowledged Members concerns regarding complaints and this would be an opportunity to improve the process.
- Improving information sharing and communication with residents was key.
- Review key distinctions between complaints, casework and service requests and the process to be followed for each area.
- Complaints were a key customer insight and would help embed continuous improvement in services, inform the direction of travel, ensure proper governance and contribute to the recovery journey. Any decisions made regarding changes to service provision should be evidence-based and be focussed on improving the residents' experience. It should be noted that officers faced a number of challenges, and constraints in delivering services. The aim should be to improve resident satisfaction while supporting staff to undertake their duties.
- The Annual Report contained key information and data and the guidance from the Ombudsman was being embedded in staff training.
- Going forward, the service would be collating and sharing quarterly reports of complaints data with Members.

Members asked the following questions and received the responses set out below.

A Member stated that the report stated that 42% - in his view this was a significant underestimate, as it was his understanding that most complaints went direct to Osborne. The company had a poor rating on google and had received unfavourable comments from its clients. The T&FG should look into any complaints sent direct to Osborne. He added that most of his casework related to Osborne.

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The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that corporate complaints included all complaints other than those relating to children or adults' services, both which had a separate complaints process. A separate T&FG would be convened to look at contract management and may look into Osborne's performance. She added that at a time when the authority was facing financial difficulties and reduction in service provision, one could expect to see resident dissatisfaction with services. It was therefore crucial to identify the core issues giving rise to these complaints.

Following a question from a Member regarding the significant increase in the percentage of complaints to the Ombudsman, she advised that the use of percentages for cases fewer than ten gave a misleading impression, and that the total number of cases in this instance was four. She added that the T&FG should scrutinise complaints data in conjunction with the Ombudsman's report. The SBC Complaints Caseworker and FOI Lead advised that the Ombudsman had taken the unprecedented step of stopping casework during the covid lockdown, which had had a significant impact on the figures.

Following a question regarding timescales for dealing with complaints and how they were prioritised, it was agreed that this issue would be further clarified at the T&FG.

The co-opted member of the Residents' Panel advised that he had significant information and contacts among residents and could provide extensive feedback regarding complaints against Osborne as well as other issues affecting residents. The Panel agreed that the co-opted member be called as a witness to the T&FG.

In future, could the complaints data be broken down into categories i.e., type of complaint, reason for complaint? An officer responded that there would be an opportunity to drill down deeper into the data and improve reporting.

A Member stated that a number of complaints were being directly submitted to the LGO, bypassing the Council's internal complaints process. More should be done to make residents aware that they should submit their complaints to the council in the first instance before approaching the Ombudsman.

A number of Members highlighted the lack of clear lines of communication between internal council directorates and departments.

Members asked how the Council could justify additional officer resources being dedicated to the T&FGs at a time of financial difficulty and reduction in resources and service provision.

Officers responded that it was important to achieve a balance between making savings and adhering to the Directions from the Secretary of State and the duty of achieving best value. Undertaking the scrutiny function would not only ensure good governance by holding the executive to account but would also fulfil the requirement to ensure continuous improvement in services.

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er issues e.g., school admission, community safety, many services struggling and increase in cuts.

Following a question about the timescales for resolving some of the Adult social care complaints, the SBC Complaints Caseworker and FOI Lead advised that this would be further investigated at the task and finish group.

Resolved – That:

- 1) A complaints Task and Finish Group be convened adopting the 'key lines of enquiry' set out at section 5.7 of the officer report, subject to any input from the committee in light of the report and its appendices.
- 2) The T&FG be made up of the following members from the committee (Councillors Brooker & Kaur) and report its findings to the Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel within three months, subject to the discretion of the Panel Chair.
- 3) The report be noted.

18. Members' Attendance Record

Resolved – That the attendance record be noted.

19. Date of Next Meeting - 7th December 2022

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 7.38 p.m.)