

Complaint Handling Review

Findings and Recommendations

**Report by the Customer and Community
Scrutiny Panel Task and Finish Group**

January 2023

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1. Chairman's forward

The complaints procedure has been looked at recently by the Audit and Governance Committee and the Customer and Community Scrutiny panel. It was decided to have a Task and Finish group to look at the system. It was clear through our investigations that it needed revising. This is particularly the case when there is confusion between what is a complaint and what is a request for service for example asking for a fly tip removal is not really a complaint but a request for service. If it is accepted as a complaint, it creates extra paperwork and delays the fly tip removal. The same applies to Councillors submitting the matter as case work.

The joint chairs would like to thank the officers from other local authorities who took time to explain how their complaints are dealt with and the help and guidance of the Slough officers.

Councillor Preston Brooker and Councillor Kamaljit Kaur

2. Executive Summary

A Customer and Community Task and Finish centred on complaint handling was convened in November 2022 following approval at the Customer and Community Scrutiny meeting held on the 20th October 2022.

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 main objectives of the Complaints team are to:

- Provide a framework for raising complaints which is simple for customers to use and is equally accessible to all
- Give customers confidence that their comments are listened to, and that their complaints are being dealt with effectively
- Ensure action is taken to solve problems and approach complaints with a positive attitude, in that complaints provide an invaluable rich source of feedback to our organisation
- Learn from complaints and prevent the recurrence of problems – with a focus centred on continuous improvement
- Generate a consistent approach to feedback and complaints throughout the Council

The Task and Finish Group have concluded their review and made the following five key recommendations to improve the organisations approach to complaint handling:

Recommendation 1

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

Recommendation 2

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 3

Make the online complaint page more robust

Recommendation 4

Encourage officers to use various communication methods when investigating complaints

Recommendation 5

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

The recommendations highlighted above will lead to an improved, streamlined, and accessible complaints process for residents. For the organisation the recommendations will ensure that we distil a culture of learning and continuous improvement from complaints.

The Customer and Community Scrutiny panel are asked to review and endorse the recommendations from the Task and Finish group.

3. Group membership and Terms of Reference

The group was jointly chaired by:

- Councillor Preston Brooker and Councillor Kamaljit Kaur

Attendees invited on request:

- Co-opted member Trevor Pollard (Resident's Panel Board)
- Lead Officers-Vijay McGuire; Associate Director - Business & Customer Services, Finbar McSweeney; Complaints, Casework & FOI Lead
- Scrutiny Lead Officer – Alexander Polak – Head of Governance and Scrutiny
- Democratic Services – Manize Talukdar

Terms of Reference

The Aim of the Task and Finish Group were to

- Provide constructive 'critical friend' challenge
- Amplify the voices and concerns of the public
- Be led by independent people who take responsibility for their role
- Drive improvement in public services

The objectives of the group set out in the terms of reference were to:

- Ensure residents had an easy and accessible method to submit any formal dissatisfaction about Council services and staff
- Consider the processing of complaints and determine if sufficient methods were in place to monitor performance and collate real time reports
- Understand what actions were taken where the level of service provided was less than expected
- Determine what learning was being carried out and being shared to avoid complaints of a similar nature being submitted

The Board would:

- Review the complaints process and make recommendations, building on the work already reported to the Audit and Governance Committee.
- Meet with relevant officers and refer to the effective complaint handing guidance from the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman; and

- Report back to the Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel within three months, subject to the discretion of the Panel Chair.

4.Context

Why did we set up the group?

On 28 September 2022 the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee received the annual statutory complaints report. The report included:

- A summary of decisions upheld by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (i.e., where an independent body has upheld a complaint about The council)
- A summary of complaints received by the Council
- A thematic summary of the nature of the complaints and the actions taken to demonstrate improvement and learning arising from the complaints received

One of the actions from section 3 of the report to Audit and Corporate Governance Committee (Appendix A) advised.

Officers are liaising with scrutiny members in relation to setting up a task & finish group to look at best practice guidance and the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's training programme to enable recommendations to be made to cabinet on improving the complaints process.

Councillors have an important dual role signposting complaints on behalf of members of the public and scrutinising the delivery of local services. Councillors therefore have a unique perspective on the Council's complaints process, and many reasons to want to make sure it works effectively.

It is critically important that Councillors have confidence in the arrangements which their own council has in place for handling residents' complaints on their behalf, as well as understanding the system and feeling an ownership of it. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to learn about the Council's performance in numerous areas by looking at trends and themes in the complaints it receives.

This demonstrates the importance of complaints in the overarching governance of the Authority and provides a valuable source of data insight & information for Overview and Scrutiny.

What was the methodology?

On 2 November 2022 a meeting with the co-chairs was held to scope the Task & Finish review.

The agreed scope of the task and finish group was to:

- Define what is a complaint and what isn't a complaint

- Understand the complaints process itself - with a view to making recommendations on how to improve the process
- Understand service-by-service performance on complaints – and propose recommendations to help improve performance and how to respond to a complaint

Research conducted by the group included

Definition

Online searches to determine the various definitions of a complaint which included:

- Reviewing the Council's current corporate complaint process and its Tenant and Leaseholder complaints policy
- Reviewing the external review of Liverpool City Council's complaint procedure carried out by the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)
- Reading the Local Government Association (LGA) and the LGSCO websites for information on complaints

Understand the complaints process

- Referring to documentary evidence received from officers. Please see the list on page 8 titled **What Did We Read?**
- Communication and engagement with officers responsible for complaint management within directorates to understand the issues, challenges, and current processes in place at directorate level
- Reading and reviewing examples of (redacted) repeat complaints – to ascertain the root cause of the issue which would then seek to identify improvements to eradicate repeat contact, reduce demand levels and ultimately improve the resident experience
- Networking with other authorities to understand their processes, for comparison and context to inform the Task and Finish Review
- Researching how to handle complaints - and identifying good practise to inform the recommendations of this Task and Finish Group

Understand service-by-service performance on complaints and identify recommendations to help improve performance including how to respond to a complaint

- Reading the annual and quarterly complaint reports, to inform the current baseline position
- Reviewing the number of complaints received by type, service, and issue
- Understanding why complaints responses miss deadlines and reading policies and case studies of issues. With a view to determining if provided any insight as to the process. In addition conversations with lead officers from various departments to deep dive into service specific issues and challenges relating to complaint handling and management.

Who Did We Speak To?

Between November and December 2022, the Group convened meetings and interviews to gather as much information to inform the current baseline position of handling and management of complaints. Members were keen to hear from other local authorities to compare how their complaints were being handled and managed. The Group were also keen to speak with officers responsible for complaint management within directorates. The Group spoke to the following people:

- Tina Dunkin, Acting Director Customers, Culture, Libraries and Registration London Borough of Hounslow

Andrea McGuire Customer Feedback Manager, Liverpool City Council

Slough Council officers responsible for complaint management within directorates

- Corrine McNeal – Council Tax
- Jamal Imam-Customer services
- Kingsley Yirenyi-Customer services
- Tony Turnbull-Housing Neighbourhood services
- Vikki Swan – Housing repairs (Osborne)
- Kam Hothi- Parking, Highways & Street works

How Did We Engage With People?

The Task and Finish Group carried out virtual interviews with the London Borough of Hounslow, Liverpool City Council and held a virtual round table session with internal officers responsible for managing complaints within directorates

Email correspondence and telephone calls were undertaken with the Complaints team

What Did We Read?

The Group was provided with a large amount of background information to assist with their discovery phase of the review. The documents that were used included :

- Definition of a complaint examples taken from the website [Corporate complaints – Slough Borough Council](#) and the Housing policy [Complaints and neighbourhood services – Slough Borough Council](#)
- Content of an Adult Social Care complaint originally logged in August 2021 which took over 100 days to be responded to
- Housing Repair related complaint determined in October 2022 and outcome included repeat concerns
- Housing Ombudsman complaint handling code and link for the complaint handling self-assessment which the Council completed; [Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code - self assessment – Slough Borough Council](#)
- Number of complaints responded to within the relevant timescales

- Quarterly report and reference to Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Public Interest Report [Slough woman unable to access upstairs because of council grant delay - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)
- Templates for complaint replies
- Open letter in November 2022 from the Housing Ombudsman about handling damp and mould complaints; [Ombudsman writes open letter to social landlords urging renewed focus on damp and mould approach - Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](#)

5. Key themes which determined the Recommendations

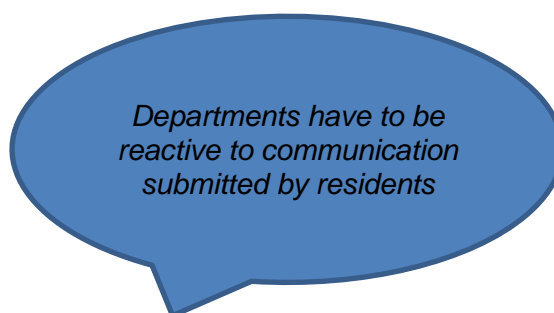
These include learning from London Borough of Hounslow and Liverpool City Council

Quotes from the officers responsible for complaint management within directorates are shown in speech bubbles.

Recommendation 1

Move to a 2-stage corporate complaint process with extended timescales at each stage.

- Websites from Buckinghamshire Council, Royal Borough of Windsor, Liverpool City Council, Maidenhead and London Borough of Hounslow were reviewed. The group noted their 2-stage process and the benefits of the process change
- Conversations with Hounslow and Liverpool councils confirmed that over a period of one year, a reduction in stage 2 complaints had been seen,



- LGSCO complaints and guidance were reviewed– their advice is the number of stages should be minimised; [Guidance on Effective Complaint Handling for Local Authorities - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)
- An FOI request was sent by the Complaints team to various local authorities of a similar population size, requesting information on their approach to complaints. A summary of the responses received are shown below:

20 Local Authorities responded, of these 15 currently have a 2-stage complaint process.

Table 1.1 shows the timescales allotted to each stage of the complaint process by each Authority.

10 of those who responded have a 10-day response timescale at stage 1 and the remaining 15 days or more.

Of all councils who responded 17 have a response timescale of 15 days or greater at stage 2, with 5 of these allocating a 15-day response time and the remaining authorities 20 days or more.

One local Authority Bracknell Forest who has a stage 3 process has a response time of 10-20 days for each stage of their process.

Table 1.1 Local Authorities Complaint process by stages and number of working days required to respond at each stage.

Local Authority	Number of Councillors	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Test Valley	36	10	15	
Halton	54	10	28	
Bracknell Forest	42	10-20	10-20	10-20
Thanet	56	10	20	
Malvern	45	15	15	15
Teignbridge	46	20	20	
Preston	48	20	35	
Epping Forest	58	10	15	
Blackpool	42	10	15	Undefined
North Herts	49	10	10	
Lancashire	84	20	20	
Ipswich	46	10	20	20
Horsham	48	20	20	
East Lindsey	54	15	20	
Waverley	57	10	15	
Tendring	48	15	20	
Hillingdon	53	10	10	15
Reading	48	20	30	
Warwick	44	20	20	
Nuneaton	34	10	Undefined	

Recommendation 1

After speaking with Hounslow and with Liverpool councils and noting the Complaint teams' findings, a 2-stage process is preferable to allow more time for a robust and quality of response to be sent.

The recommendation therefore is for stage 1 complaints to be answered within 15 working days. This allows officers more time to produce a thorough and qualitative response with the aim of mitigating complaints escalating to stage 2. This acknowledges the challenges the organisation has in terms of resource and capacity in departments to give them the time to deal with a complaint under stage 1.

A recommendation that Stage 2 be extended to 20 working days – in line with other local authorities. This will allow a thorough final investigation and reply. This timing also considers allocating a senior manager to investigate and respond.

Holding replies should only then be used sparingly and when needed. The ending of the Stage 2 will refer the complainant to the relevant Ombudsman if they remained dissatisfied.

Recommendation 2

Introduce accessibility of different languages on the council's website reflective of the ethnic makeup of the borough.

- Some case studies highlighted that customer sometimes have difficulty explaining what outcome they seek and it is therefore important for officers to fully understand what points are within a complaint.


After the group spoke with Hounslow Council and viewed their website [London Borough of Hounslow Website homepage](#) they thought it would be beneficial for Slough's website to be explore and consider opportunities similar to that of Hounslow to improve accessibility. There is a translation function on Hounslow's website home screen which allows the whole website to be available in languages that are reflective of the ethnic makeup of the borough. In turn, this would improve ease of access to help customers raise complaints and access other services. The recommendation is for the Council's website to be accessible in different languages therefore making it reflective of the ethnic makeup of the borough.

Recommendation 3

Make the online complaint page more robust.

After reading local authorities' websites mentioned in Recommendation 1, the group were impressed with the layout and simplicity of their respective complaint information contained within their web sites. The Group therefore felt that information relating to complaints must be easy to understand, and which explains what constitutes a complaint, the stages involved, what is and is not a complaint and

how to submit a complaint. The group further noted that some customers complain when they are refused service for which there are existing appeal processes already in place.



We have to quantify what is a complaint - Could a matter be an appeal or request for service instead?

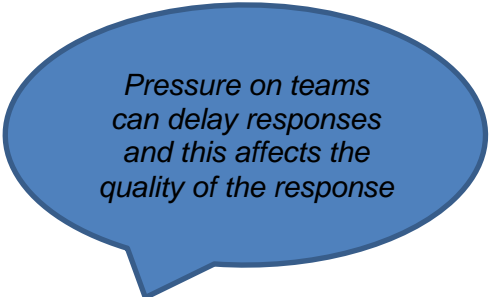
The recommendation deduced from this discovery stream is to update the Council's website page to:

- Ensure the new 2 stage complaint process is thorough and clearly available on the website once formally approved.
- Define and make clear the differences between complaint and service request.
- Include a Report It button at the top of the complaint page – like the website of Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead. This would assist customers in realising that they do not need to submit a complaint when asking for action to take place e.g., remove litter, fix a non-working streetlight.
- Ensure information on how to Appeal a decision is highlighted on the complaints page e.g., Benefit appeal, Penalty Charge Notice, Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) appeal. This would allow customers to make the distinction between an appeal against a decision and a valid complaint relating to dissatisfaction of services received

Recommendation 4

Encourage officers to use various communication methods when investigating complaints.

The group noted that officers currently communicate with customers predominantly by email when complaints are investigated. Contacting customers via telephone could eliminate confusion on points contained within the original complaint and could be used when providing progress on their complaints



Pressure on teams can delay responses and this affects the quality of the response

The recommendation proposed by the group is for officers to wherever possible or appropriate contact customers via telephone to provide clear explanations, progress updates and to be more accessible which in turn will improve times



Clarifying concerns with the complainant by telephone is often beneficial

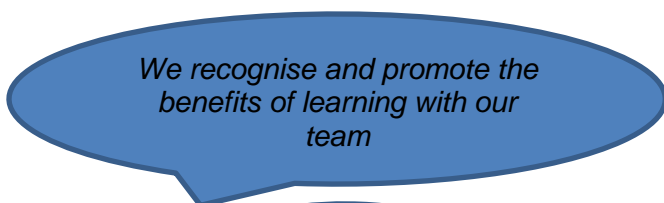
Calling customers will provide them with the assurance that their complaint is receiving attention.

By keeping the customer informed throughout an Investigation and providing timely updates/holding replies, customers will have reassurance that their concerns are being taken seriously and help to mitigate complaints moving to the next stage of the process

Recommendation 5

A greater emphasis on enhanced learning themes with appropriate improvement action which will be reported through quarterly and annual reports.

After speaking to Housing and to Liverpool Councils and reading various complaint related literature, the group understood it is not possible to embed an effective complaint process if the Council does not have a robust mechanism by which improvements can be made to service delivery informed by feedback and data from our residents.



We recognise and promote the benefits of learning with our team



We discuss complaints/learning in monthly departmental meetings and where we can improve



Currently it takes a while to implement changes but we realise learning from complaints does need to happen

The group acknowledged that

- Complaints attributed to service departments must be used to recognise and improve service provision, ensuring accountability and ownership of cases
- Departments have continued to work well against the backdrop of challenges relating to capacity and depleted resources
- Departments must improve their approach to learning and embed continuous improvement through the findings of their complaints and for the complaints team to continue to request learning / improvements implemented resulting from upheld complaints.
- Ensure that learning and improvements are embedded as part of business as usual when complaints are being investigated and for these to be appropriately recorded and shared through the suite of governance complaint reports to provide assurance and compliance
- Identifying improvements and learning is the responsibility of the service areas
- All complaints reporting should include detailed learning themes by directorate. This highlights what service improvements have been made because of a complaint investigation and should seek to identify and measure the impact of proposed improvements to see if there is a reduction of cases or whether further changes need to be implemented
- As part of reporting improvements resulting from complaints, services should be held accountable if there are re-occurring themes against which they have previously reported improvements. Furthermore, if reports continue to highlight the same themes - despite improvements being identified service areas will be formally reminded to review and evidence effective implementation of improvements

As a Council, we must.

- Actively listen, understand, and read all correspondence from the resident
- Acknowledge in writing or telephone to confirm receipt, seek clarity, and advise of steps being taken to resolve their complaint
- The tone and language in a response is integral to the customer experience and must be clear, concise, jargon free and in plain English. Follow up communication asking if the resident is satisfied with the final outcome of the complaint is essential to the resolution / closure of each complaint with a specific emphasis on next steps that can be taken if they still remain dissatisfied.

The Task and Finish Group requested that a full review of the complaints procedure be undertaken after 2 years to analyse how effective these recommendations have been and whether data is showing improvements across all departments' council wide.

Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group have made the following five key recommendations to improve complaint handling along with proposed completion dates;

Recommendation 1

Move to a 2-stage corporate complaint process with extended timescales at each stage. **Completion by September 2023**

Recommendation 2

Introduce accessibility of different languages on the council's website reflective of the ethnic makeup of the borough. **Completion by end of February 2023**

Recommendation 3

Make the online complaint page more robust. **Completion by September 2023**

Recommendation 4

Encourage officers to use various communication methods when investigating complaints. **Commence immediately and will be continual**

Recommendation 5

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

Commence immediately and will be continual

The Task and Finish Group propose that the recommendations highlighted above will lead to a much improved, more streamlined, and accessible complaints process for residents and staff which will ensure that as an organisation we distil a culture of learning from complaints. This in turn will demonstrate our commitment to continuous improvement. Customer and Community Scrutiny panel are asked to review and endorse the recommendations from the Task and Finish group.

7. Appendix

LGSCO and Complaints Report - Audit and Corporate Governance Committee.