

Audit and Scrutiny Committee

20 June 2013

Corporate Complaints Process

Report by Assistant Chief Executive

Agenda Item	8
Report No	AS/14/13

Summary

The Council's Corporate Complaints handling process has been reviewed further to the decision of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) that all Scottish Local Authorities implement a standardised 2 Stage Complaints Handling Procedure. The Highland Council has implemented the new complaints procedure in accordance with the Ombudsman's guidance, set criteria and timescales. This paper therefore offers an update on the implementation of the complaints process.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Highland Council is committed to providing high-quality services to its communities. Complaints raised by customers are an important way for the Council to gain valuable customer feedback and to put things right when necessary. It is therefore important to have a robust, clear and effective complaints process in place to ensure that any issues raised are dealt with appropriately.
- 1.2 In 2011/12 the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman informed all Scottish Local Authorities of their intention to standardise the way complaints were handled across all public sector organisations.
- 1.3 The SPSO reviewed the complaints handling procedures across all 32 Scottish Local Authorities and determined that they all must put in place a two stage complaints process. All Local Authorities were to either have implemented the new process by October 2012 or have made significant progress towards its implementation. The Highland Council had made significant progress by the end of October 2012 and fully implemented the new process on 28th November 2012. This paper informs the Council on the successful implementation of the Highland Council's new complaints procedure.
- 1.4 Guidance from the SPSO informed practitioners on the required course of action. This guidance set out in detail how the SPSO expected Council's to deal with complaints. The guidance outlined specific criteria on complaint definitions, as well as complaint handling and recording. Councils were also advised on how they should analyse and act upon any complaints received.
- 1.5 In August 2012 a report was presented to FHR Committee outlining how the guidance would be applied to the Highland Councils new Complaint Procedure and how it would be configured and managed through the Highland Council CRM system.
- 1.6 Apart from the guidance and stipulations set down by the Ombudsman, the only other significant factor was that the revised process had to be delivered within existing resources. It should also be noted that Audit Scotland will include the complaints handling as part of the audit process moving forward and that corporate compliance

against the new guidance will be assessed. With this in mind, the Highland Council has re-aligned resource to ensure that there is a dedicated facility within services to effectively co-ordinate and manage complaints and FOI enquiries.

2. The New Process

- 2.1 The new process focusses on ensuring that the Highland Council adheres to the new timescales and two stage process set out by the SPSO. Emphasis is placed on resolving complaint's at the earliest opportunity. It is essential that quality assurance is monitored as any complaint not resolved at stage two can be referred by the customer to the Ombudsman.
- 2.2 The two stage process is as follows;
 - Complaint stage 1 dealt with within 5 days
 - Complaint stage 2 dealt with within 20 days
- 2.3 A copy of to the full procedure can be found [here](#).

3. General complaints handling principles

- 3.1 There is now one system for recording complaints – the Council's Customer Relationship Management system (CRM Lagan) is used to log, track and manage complaints wherever possible. Exceptions to this would be where a statutory process requires the use of a separate complaints process. For example at present Health and Social Care continue to have a separate complaints procedure.
- 3.2 The Ombudsman guidance indicated that customers should have a choice on how they report complaints to their Local Authority. Highland Council's process enables customers to raise complaints in writing, in person, via telephone or by using an online form. The CRM system has been updated to reflect the revised process.
- 3.3 Staff have been issued with detailed guidance and training to on how to deal with complaints alongside targeted training for different groups of staff.
- 3.4 The Council's website has also been updated to include revised guidance, links to the SPSO and an outline of the revised process. The Ombudsman has developed online training material on complaint handling and this is available via their website.
- 3.5 Employee development has developed in house training material including video clips which can be accessed via the "My on-line Learning Portal". A complaints awareness session has also been delivered to over 300 Managers at MDP7 by the Customer Service Team.
- 3.6 The new complaints policy was implemented alongside the revised process. This reflects the changes to the complaints handling procedure but also emphasises the commitment to customers that complaints will be dealt with consistently and within defined timescales.
- 3.7 The CRM System was configured to deal with the new process, and with the deployment of dedicated Customer Services Officers a network of Customer Service Complaint Coordinators across all services is now in place. The network meets on a regular basis to share best practice on managing and co-ordinating complaints. The network contributes to system improvement workshops and provides feedback to the CRM team.

3.8 Using the CRM system for recording complaints enables the Highland Council to report upon the status and progress of complaints. This ensures that the organisation can monitor complaints and take action if a complaint is at risk from falling outwith guideline timescales.

4. Monitoring and Managing Performance

4.1 The CRM captures vital Management Information and a daily report is sent to all service co-ordinators detailing the status of all open complaints. Service co-ordinators use this report to allocate complaints, monitor compliance and support responsible officers in dealing with complaints.

4.2 The Customer Service Team is working with services to develop service reporting. It is expected these reports will enable service directors to glean an insight into the root cause of complaints and address the core issues to improve customer satisfaction. The CRM Team expect a full suite of Management Information Reporting to be available by end of June 2013.

4.3 Key points of note are the importance of the complainant being at the centre of the process (not the organisation) and learning actually happening from complaints received as well as improvements being actioned.

4.4 Current Volumes

The current table highlights the volume of complaints received 28th November 2012–31st May 2013.

Complaints Logged on CRM 28th November 2012 to 31th May 2013		
Total Received	839	
Stage 1 (5 days)	739	<p>88% of all complaints logged are recorded as Stage 1</p> <p>47 complaints (6.3%) had their timescales increased with customer agreement (Good practice)</p> <p>64% of Stage 1 complaints currently meet (or are meeting) target deadlines for response</p>
Stage 2 (20 days)	100	<p>12% of all complaints logged are recorded as Stage 2</p> <p>83complaints (83%) were upgraded from initial Stage 1</p> <p>48% of Stage 2 complaints currently meet (or are meeting) target deadlines for response</p>

4.5 This analysis shows that 62% of all complaints are dealt with within the agreed timescales set out in the Complaints Procedure. 88% were dealt with at Stage One and 64% of these resolved within 5 days. This represents an improvement on previous performance when complaints only had to be dealt with in 10 days. However, 12% of complaints were dealt with at Stage Two and these more complex complaints are still

taking longer to resolve with 48% being resolved within 20 days.

5. Lessons Learned

- 5.1 The process whilst fully implemented has taken sometime to bed in with further training and awareness required to ensure all staff know and understand the new protocols. The volume of complaints being recorded on the system are currently less than would be expected and the Customer Service Team in conjunction with the Corporate Improvement Team are investigating the reasons behind this to ensure all complaints are properly recorded within the system. Services previously had 10 working days to respond to a customer therefore the change in timescales will take some time to implement. Customer Services will continue to work with services to ensure more complaints are managed within agreed time frames and that a higher number of Stage Two complaints, in particular, are resolved within the 20 days.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1 It is the Ombudsman's intention to introduce quality assurance and benchmarking protocols across all local authorities. Once these measures are in place the Highland Council will apply and adhere to their recommendations, The SPSO has been working with the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network to provide support and to help to ensure core principles are being adhered to; with good practice mentored and shared. This Network will form benchmarking protocols with the emphasis placed on measuring the quality of the complaint handling.

7. Summary

- 7.1 The Highland Council achieved the timelines set out by the SPSO for delivering and implementing a revised complaints handling process. This paper has outlined the reasons for the change and presented an update on implementation.
- 7.2 The revised process has taken into account the guidance issued by the SPSO, but has also attempted to improve the customer experience when raising a complaint. The focus is on resolving complaints and ensuring that it's clearly established whether it's a request for service or a complaint and then reaching an appropriate satisfactory outcome. Robust quality checking is key and Customer Service management reviews are built into the process to ensure that complaints responses are of good quality and standard.

8. Resource Implications

- 8.1 There are no additional resource requirements and in some Services staff resources have been reorganised to accommodate the move to the new Complaints Procedure.

9. Risks/Equality/Legal/Climate Change Implications

- 9.1 An initial screening of EQIA was completed during process design. There was no evidence of, or the possibility of, negative impact, and no requirement for immediate remedial or mitigating action be taken without therefore there was no need to undertake a full EQIA.

10. Recommendations

Members are requested to note:

- i. The implementation of the new Complaints Procedure,
- ii. The actions to be taken to ensure the procedure is fully embedded and that complaints are dealt with within the agreed timescales.

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