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**PROPOSED CHANGES TO CORPORATE COMPLAINTS PROCESS**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor Jenny Chapman,  
Communities and Engagement Portfolio**  
**Responsible Director – Lorraine O'Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. To inform Members of the proposed changes to the Council's Corporate Complaints process and to seek outline approval for the process changes and funding required for implementation.

**Information and Analysis**

2. The Council has in recent years undertaken a variety of programmes to improve its services and its customer care, for example the establishment of the customer contact centre which now provides a 'one stop shop' for the most frequent enquiries and service requests. The establishment of the Connecting with Communities unit is intended to improve and drive forward greater consistency in high standards of customer care and public involvement. The management of complaints when Council services do not satisfy the public is a vital part of customer care and over the spring and summer of 2007 a review has been undertaken to identify improvements in the process.
3. This report outlines the need to improve the customer experience of our complaints process, in order to reduce the number of Ombudsman complaints and in particular those referred prematurely. The report also sets out a need to drive through a culture which embraces public feedback, and sees complaints as an opportunity to drive continuous improvement in service delivery. The current complaints process consists of three stages. In the first stage the complaint is referred to the service manager within the department for investigation and opportunity to resolve. If the complainant is still dissatisfied with the response from this initial stage they may escalate their complaint to stage 2 where it is referred to an Assistant Director outside of the immediate service area for a full investigation. If the complainant again remains dissatisfied with the outcome of this investigation they may refer their complaint to the Chief Executive for a stage 3 investigation. For those complainants still dissatisfied at this stage they have the option to refer their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) for independent investigation. The LGO will not investigate any complaint that has not been through the Council's own internal investigation procedures.
4. A lack of centralised recording and monitoring of complaints as well as the large percentage of complaints escalating from stage 2 to stage 3 (53%) indicates that we are currently failing to utilise the learning opportunities presented by the sector of the public currently dissatisfied with our services. It also means that expensive resources are being utilised to re-investigate complaints at stage 3, which arguably should have been resolved at stage 2.

5. It is proposed that the complaints process was reduced from a three to two stage process, and that a centralised complaints handling function is established. Removal of the third stage will aid in speeding resolution of the complaint as well as increasing the complainants' confidence in the outcome, by escalating the complaint to an impartial officer sooner than is currently the case.
6. Centralisation of complaints handling into a dedicated unit will also drive an improvement in the consistency and quality of the investigation process and the output received by the public.
7. The current lack of consistency in recording and monitoring of complaints hinders the potential to monitor trends in complaints, and contributes to our current failure to maximise the learning opportunities presented. Sharepoint has been identified as a system that could be used corporately to record and monitor all complaints with the ability to gather management information of significantly improved quality. It would also facilitate electronic storage of related data and correspondence, generate a work flow and hence allow an audit trail to be established. The preliminary cost of implementing this system would be approx £8k.
8. As well as corporate complaints the Council also handles complaints in Adults and Children's Social Care via separate (multiple stage) statutory complaints processes. The possibility of integrating these with corporate complaints was examined. Whilst it is not proposed to integrate the statutory and corporate processes at this stage (due to the extended timescales available within the statutory processes), best practice in statutory complaints handling has been identified for transfer to the corporate complaints process. It is however proposed that all complaints, statutory or corporate, would be recorded within a single system. This would aid statutory as well as corporate complaints by minimising the number of times a statutory complaint is handled before it reaches the relevant investigating officer, hence reducing the potential to miss statutory acknowledgement timescales.
9. Customer satisfaction data relating to complaints handling is currently gathered via the annual overall customer satisfaction survey which does not specifically target complainants and the resulting data is therefore recognised as potentially spurious. A revised feedback mechanism would target only complainants and aid the quality of management information relating to customer satisfaction. Rapid follow up, following complaint close out would also improve the customer experience of complaints by ensuring that they feel their complaint is seen as important and has been treated as such.
10. A review of the policies and procedures currently in place revealed that there is currently no policy or procedure in place for the handling of persistent or vexatious complaints, and the visibility of the existing procedures could be improved both in terms of access by the public and Council employees. A review of the content and accessibility of the current procedures is proposed.
11. It was recognised that staff training in complaints handling is not routinely delivered although courses are available from LGO. It is proposed that this training is provided to 160 staff who routinely deal with complaints, at a cost of £8.28K.

## **Conclusions**

12. A centralised complaints unit will improve customer satisfaction and prevent premature escalation of complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman.
13. The current system of recording and monitoring complaints is disparate and does not allow easy comparison or collation of data from across the organisation. The greatest improvements to the current system would be the introduction of a single tracking system, and the introduction of a single impartial point of contact for stage 2 complaints.
14. A Complaints Unit should be established, consisting of a Complaints Manager and a Complaints Assistant. The funding of these posts would be partially offset by the Admin review (1 x FTE Complaints assistant identified), but funding would still be required for the Complaints Manager (approx. £35K subject to job evaluation).
15. Training of staff is required in order to ensure consistency in complaints handling throughout the organisation.
16. The total cost of implementing a central complaints unit will be £51K (£35K staff costs, £8.032K software costs, £8.28K training costs).

## **Outcome of Consultation**

17. Informal consultation with staff currently handling complaints monitoring was undertaken as part of the review.

## **Legal Implications**

18. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

## **Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998**

19. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

## **Council Policy Framework**

20. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework.

## **Decision Deadline**

21. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

## **Key Decisions**

22. The contents of this report represent a key decision as funding as this proposal will affect the way in which residents of all wards within the Borough will access Darlington's corporate complaints process.

## **Recommendation**

23. It is recommended that :-

- (a) A streamlined 2 stage complaints process that is managed centrally is adopted.
- (b) Approval is given for the release of £51K of funding to allow implementation of the above changes.

## **Reasons**

24. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-

- (a) The need to reduce the number of complaints being received by the LGO either following full internal investigation or prematurely.
- (b) The need to improve customer satisfaction with respect to complaints handling.
- (c) The need to readily establish the position of a specific complaint or overall complaints received/pending/resolved at any point in time
- (d) The need to reduce duplication of effort in investigating complaints at stages 2 and 3.

**Lorraine O'Donnell**  
**Assistant Chief Executive**

## **Background Papers**

Proposed Revisions to Corporate Complaints Handling Arrangements (CMT 08.11.2007)  
Future of Complaints Handling (CMT 19.07.2007)

Debbie Spence : Extension 2902