

**FEEDBACK PROCEDURE
(Report by Head of Administration)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Panel of the outcome of a review of the Council's complaints procedure.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Council's existing complaints procedure has been in place for in excess of ten years. A number of factors have been driving a review of the procedure:

- an audit of the procedure resulted in several recommendations being made, which were intended to improve it;
- given the length of time the procedure has been in place it is now out of step with acknowledged best practice, and
- changes in the way the Council interacts with its customers and in its operating procedures generally mean that there is a need for alignment with new practices and to ensure there is widespread understanding of the procedure.

3. A NEW FEEDBACK PROCEDURE

- 3.1 In line with other local authorities, the procedure has been recast as a general feedback procedure, which encompasses suggestions, compliments and complaints. Guidance has been produced for officers on how the procedure will operate and a leaflet is to be made available containing information for customers on the various methods that are now available for them to pursue a complaint or provide the Council with other feedback. The guidance for officers, which is attached as an Appendix, describes the new process in detail.
- 3.2 As it forms the greater part of the Council's work, the main use of the new procedure will be to guide how the Council handles complaints and, in addition to the inclusion of sections on handling suggestions and compliments, a number of other important changes have been made to the complaints handling process.
- 3.3 The previous complaints procedure comprised three formal stages at which a complaint could be pursued. It is intended to reduce the number of stages in the procedure. This will be achieved by combining the stages at which a Director and the Chief Executive investigate a complaint. The general principle is that a chief officer who is independent of the department that is the subject of a complaint should carry out the investigation. This is in line with the Ombudsman's model procedure. It will also enable the Council to complete the complaints procedure more expeditiously. This is desirable generally and because, in cases involving the Ombudsman, the Council has a limited amount of time to complete its complaints procedure and submit its findings.
- 3.4 Making clear the time period in which complainants should notify the Council if they wish to take a complaint to the next level will enable the

Council to be more rigorous in determining when complaints have been closed and will assist in completing the procedure expeditiously. This is important in complaints involving the Local Government Ombudsman.

- 3.5 There is strong pressure from the internal improvement planning process for the Council to undertake formal monitoring of feedback received. It is intended to monitor feedback in two ways. Firstly, service departments will formally monitor the progress of complaints and review each one once it has been closed for possible changes / improvements to services. A monitoring form has been drafted for this purpose. Secondly, an initial Equality Impact Assessment of the procedure has identified that monitoring of complaints and complainants is an important contributory factor in enabling the Council to meet its general equalities duty and the specific terms of its Corporate Equality Policy. The intention is for a form to be sent to complainants once a complaint has been resolved seeking feedback on their experience of the procedure and the necessary equalities monitoring information.
- 3.6 The Corporate Governance Panel has previously adopted a Persistent and/or Vexatious Complainants Procedure. This is referred to in the new procedure. As it deals with exceptional cases it is not discussed in detail. It is only necessary to note that complainants will not be classed as persistent and/or vexatious until the complaints procedure has been exhausted.
- 3.7 The new procedure contains a section on remedies, which will be amended when the Government publishes guidance on this in 2009. Attention is drawn to the existing provisions in the Constitution for settlement of complaints by financial payment, which require prior consultation with the Chairman of the Corporate Governance Panel.
- 3.8 The Ombudsman's guidance on good practice states that councillors and leading officers should receive regular reports analysing complaints by, for example, number, subject and outcome. In this way trends can be identified together with lessons of general importance. At present the Corporate Governance Panel receives a report annually at its June meeting on the number of complaints received by department and on the complaints dealt with by the Ombudsman. It is suggested that this report should be developed to include greater analysis of the complaints that the Council receives.

4. RECOMMENDATION

It Panel is

RECOMMENDED

to endorse the revised procedure for handling customer feedback.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Huntingdonshire District Council Feedback Procedure

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