



## AGENDA ITEM:

### SUMMARY

<b>Report for:</b>	<b>Finance and Resources Overview &amp; Scrutiny</b>
<b>Date of meeting:</b>	<b>12 June 2012</b>
<b>PART:</b>	<b>1</b>
If Part II, reason:	

<b>Title of report:</b>	<b>Complaint Handling</b>
Contact:	Councillor A Williams, Leader of the Council.  Author/Responsible Officer:  Jim Doyle Group Manager – Democratic Services
Purpose of report:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To provide an update on improvements to Complaints Handling in the Council</li> <li>2. To outline future expansion of the complaint handling process for 2012/13</li> </ol>
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To note actions taken to improve performance in the handling of customer complaints.</li> <li>2. To note areas of intended future expansion for 2012/13</li> </ol>
Corporate objectives:	<p>Dacorum Delivers – improvements in the handling of complaints will continue to support the ‘Dacorum Delivers’ corporate objective by improving the level of service to customers and delivering better value for money for all residents.</p> <p>Building Community Capacity – Improved complaints handling means we can respond effectively and produce information that will be useful in improving outcomes for Dacorum’s communities and building community cohesion.</p>
Implications:	<p><u>Financial</u></p> <p>The Service improvements outlined will be sourced from existing budgets and staffing resources.</p>

	<p><u>Value for Money</u></p> <p>Improved Complaints handling, recording and monitoring could identify efficiencies which contribute to improved value for money.</p>
Risk Implications	Risk Assessment reviewed and risks associated are addressed. Poor handling of complaints can damage the Council's reputation with residents and other related local government bodies and institutions.
Equalities Implications	Equality Impact Assessment reviewed. Action taken to improve performance and resilience will enrich the council's responses to residents and assist in concentrating the Council's efforts in identified areas of need.
Health And Safety Implications	There are no health and safety implications arising from this report
Consultees:	Internal Audit; Service Users
Background papers:	Internal Audit Report - May/June 2012

## 1. Introduction

This report is intended to update the committee on the progress with improving our complaints handling and monitoring and to set out the future targets for further improvement and expansion into the related areas of Ombudsman Investigations and MP enquiries.

## 2. History.

2.1 During 2011, as part of the Admin Review process, the conduct and operation of the Council's Complaints Procedure was consulted upon and various options considered to improve the process. The main aims of this review were to:

- Improve and simplify the actual complaints procedure;
- Identify Central Admin staff to compile, collate, record and oversee the responses;
- Monitor the responses and response times centrally;
- Encourage officers to engage with the process and take ownership of the complaint and its response;
- Identify, install and maintain computer based, complaints recording and monitoring software/systems.

2.2 With these aims in view a new Complaints process was developed, adopted and introduced during the latter half of 2011, (while an improved interim process remained in place to bridge the gap till the introduction of the new system in spring 2012). To support this new process, several off-the-shelf Complaints Management Software Systems were identified. During this time a relatively robust and easily maintained, web based alternative was also developed 'in-house'. This web-based

option was made viable, adopted and came into operation in April 2012. Those operating and monitoring the Complaints Process were trained in the use of the system during early 2012.

2.3 However, while the process has been made more efficient, the Council has also continued to develop the in-house solution as part of the Web and Customer Access Strategy to address wider issues. Logging complaints is one way in which the local community interacts with the Council and this strategy is concerned with improving Customer Services processes. The in-house solution aims to rectify a number of inefficiencies which remained in the interim complaints handling system, for example, MP enquires are currently not integrated into the Corporate Complaints System, but will be integrated into the new software. The system is currently dealing mainly with Customer Complaints but it has been designed to be expandable and the intention is to roll it out to include Ombudsman Enquiries, MP Enquiries and in the future 'Freedom of Information' Responses.

2.4 In addition to the new software, the Central Admin team have introduced a new leaflet/poster display for the Customer Service Unit. Furthermore, the complaints policy is printed on the reverse of all complaints acknowledgement and response letters. This is being implemented to ensure that customers are fully aware of the Corporate Complaints Service, what it can and cannot cover and what the escalation process is if they are unhappy with the handling of their complaint. This will also include details of how to refer the complaint to the Ombudsman should they remain dissatisfied after it has gone through all stages of the process.

2.5 The new system has been in operations for just under a month and the first sets of results are becoming available. A further report could be scheduled for autumn 2012 to examine the actual results and assess the effectiveness of the new processes.

### 3. Internal Audit

3.1 While the new Complaints Procedure was being developed an Internal Audit investigation into Complaint Handling was undertaken. At the time of the Internal Audit being carried out, work was already in progress to build the new in-house software system and the software went live on 16th April 2012. All areas identified at planning stage for inclusion into the new system are incorporated, and some areas - specifically around reporting, are scheduled for development when the initial roll out phase is complete.

#### 3.2 Internal Audit Result

This audit investigation revealed the Complaints procedure and processes to be substantially sound.

#### 3.3 Internal Audit Recommendations

However, the audit investigation also identified some weaknesses in four areas that fall under Priority 2 recommendations ..... 'which, although not fundamental to the system, provide scope for improvement to be made'.

These recommendations are:

- Key documentation should be retained;
- Responses should be issued within the required timeframe;
- Complaints analysis should be fed into the Risk Management Process; and
- Investigation into the poor performance of Complaints KPIs.

✓ Key documentation should be retained

Recommendation 1 had already been incorporated at the planning stage of the new software – all documentation is now held within the interaction record for each customer/complaint. At the time of the Audit taking place, responding officers did not have direct access to the system used (i.e. Flare: due to restrictions around user licence numbers), therefore the central complaints handlers had to export documents to send to the responding officer in order that they could prepare their response and return it to them to upload. Under the new system this issue no longer exists, responding officers receive automatic notification if they have been assigned a new case with a hyper link to the customer contact. They are able to fully access the system to view any documents that relate, their draft response must be complied electronically within the system and when authorisation of the response content is complete the system automatically generates the response (in line with the customers preferred contact method). All documentation is therefore stored within the system and no export/import takes place after the initial logging of the complaint details.

✓ Responses should be issued within the required timeframe

Recommendation 2 had already been taken into consideration following our own review of procedures and again was incorporated at the planning stage of the new software. The working day deadlines were agreed as part of the Phase 1 review of complaints and all responding officers & complaints handlers are aware of these timeframes. Within the new software, automatic reminders are scheduled to electronically notify the responding officer that their complaint has reached it's due date, holding letters are available and can be system generated where required to notify the complainant that we need longer to complete our investigation. Further work is scheduled to expand the suite of electronic reminders and incorporate escalated reminders/reporting facilities where complaints have gone overdue.

✓ Complaints analysis should be fed into the Risk Management Process

Recommendation 3 was not something we considered at planning stage of the new software, this recommendation will be taken forward with a view to building the link between complaints analysis and the risk management process.

✓ Investigation into the poor performance of Complaints KPIs

Recommendation 4 is already in place within our performance management cycles. Complaints data is considered at the Monthly Performance meetings attended by Cllr Andrew Williams, Cllr Brian Ayling, Daniel Zammit, Louise Miller & Janice Milsom. Poor performance is highlighted and where it is felt necessary, Group Mangers are requested to attend to present improvement plans to the group. On a service level, a suite of electronic reports will be developed to allow service managers and responsible officers access to information relating to potential risks based on historic data and performance issues within their directorate via the Complaints Management Software.

#### **4. Ombudsman Enquiries**

4.1 During the review concern was expressed regarding the deteriorating performance in respect of Ombudsman response times. The target for response is 28 days. Our performance is published annually by the Local Government Ombudsman. The figures below show our performance has declined year on year and falls well below the expected standard.

Annual statistics (average number of days to respond)

2008-09	42.1 days
2009-10	49.8 days
2010-11	51.8 days

#### 4.2 Response

Steps were taken to tighten our controls following phase 1 of the Complaints Review, however the Ombudsman enquiries still sit outside of our complaints software systems and are therefore not reported as monthly performance data and do not provide us with a robust audit trail or a link to any investigation through our own complaints process prior to the Ombudsman involvement.

4.3 However, as a result of the tightened controls, the provisional annual statistics provided by the Local Government Ombudsman for 2011-12 indicate a vast improvement in performance with an average number of days to respond of 29.9 days.

4.4 The Chief Executive has made it clear that it is a corporate responsibility to ensure performance in this area improves to the required standard.

4.5 It is agreed with Corporate Directors that they be copied into any Ombudsman information requests that fall within their service area (information requests should still be sent to Group Manager for response). Corporate Directors will take responsibility for ensuring Ombudsman complaints/information requests within their service areas are responded to in a timely fashion.

#### 4.6 Ombudsman Contact

Contact from the Ombudsman, in most cases, falls within one of five categories;

1. An enquiry/request for information so that they may take a provisional view as to whether or not they should investigate.
2. A notification of their provisional view that no action is needed.
3. Notification of a premature complaint, with a request it be investigated through our own Corporate Complaint Process.
4. Notification that a complaint is being investigated with a request for specific information relating to the case.
5. A final decision notice on a complaint.

4.7 A trial process was put in place in April 2012, with additional measures as listed below. The Democratic Services Team leader (Admin) uses a scheduler to electronically log new cases in a shared calendar and set task/reminders to pop up within Outlook to notify when deadlines are approaching. Responsibility for the management of Ombudsman enquiries now sits solely with this officer (with back up officers trained to cover in their absence). The process is as follows;

1. Any enquiries/requests for information are forwarded to the relevant Group Manager, with a copy to the Directorate Support Team & Corporate Director. The GM is asked to respond direct to the Ombudsman, with a copy to the [ombudsman@dacorum.gov.uk](mailto:ombudsman@dacorum.gov.uk) mailbox for our records.
2. Notification of a provisional view is passed to the relevant Group Manager for their information only, with a copy to the Directorate Support Team.
3. Premature complaints for investigation through our own complaints handling system are logged into our Complaints Management System at Stage 1, in the usual way (with the customer as the contact) attaching all the Ombudsman documents and making it clear in the text of the complaint that it was received via the Ombudsman. The response will be sent direct to the customer.
4. Notification of a new complaint to be investigated by the Ombudsman, along with all paperwork and information requests are sent to the Group Manager for their attention, with a copy this to the Corporate Director, Assistant Director, Directorate Support Team. The Group Manager is asked to draft a

response to the Ombudsman, to be returned to the [ombudsman@dacorum.gov.uk](mailto:ombudsman@dacorum.gov.uk) mailbox. The Group Manager is notified of the deadline for draft response (the target that we are measured against by the Ombudsman is 28 days. The final response will be compiled in the Chief Executive's office, for his signature. To allow sufficient time for the response to be finalised & sent, the target for Group Managers to provide the draft is 15 working days from date of receipt).

5. Any final decision notices are forwarded to the Group Manager, Corporate Director, Assistant Director & Directorate Support Team for information.
- 4.8 This trial process is running well and is now due to move on to the next stage. This stage entails work with the Web Management section to develop our Complaints Management System to allow the integration of the above process to ensure the system can fully support it and that audit trails, performance information and a clear easy channel of cascade of information is available to responding officers when providing draft responses for the Chief Executive's approval & signature. It is intended to go live with this new integrated solution no later than August 2012.
5. **MP Enquiries:**
  - 5.1 Insufficient performance data has been gathered regarding the processing of MP Enquiries and the performance around response times. The system in place has not been reviewed or updated as part of the Complaints Review and is based on a spreadsheet logging and email distribution of requests to various officers/departments around the organisation for their direct response to the MP. Controls need to be tightened so that this element of customer contact can be performance monitored/managed.
  - 5.2 Following the full implementation of a new and integrated Ombudsman process, the Democratic Services Team Leader (Admin) will be undertaking a review of MP enquiries. It is necessary to ensure we enter into dialogue with the MPs office and take into consideration/manage their expectations around the way in which their enquiries are handled and responded to.  
The aim is to introduce a 3 stage escalation process for MP queries, similar to that we have in place for standard complaints, with the ability to cross reference to existing customer contact on the same issue that we (may) have received directly via our own Complaints Management Software.
  - 5.3 Work cannot begin on this area of customer contact until the work around Ombudsman has been completed; it is therefore proposed to start work on reviewing and designing this process in August 2012, with an intended go live date of October 2012.