



Report for:	Cabinet
Title of report:	Cabinet Report: Complaints Policy
Date:	15/11/2022
Report on behalf of:	Councillor Graeme Elliot, Portfolio Holder Corporate Services
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	N/A
Appendices:	Appendix 1: Complaints Policy (separate document)
Background papers:	Overview and Scrutiny Papers for: Finance and Resources (1 st November 2022) Housing and Communities (2 nd November 2022) Strategic Planning and Environment (8 th November 2022)
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	DBC: Dacorum Borough Council CSU: Customer Service Unit EDI: Equality, Diversity, Inclusion

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Corporate Priorities	Ensuring efficient, effective and modern service delivery
Wards affected	All
Purpose of the report:	To present to Cabinet Members the Complaints Policy
Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s):	That Cabinet:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Agrees the proposed Complaints Policy as described in this report and annexed as appendix 1. 2 Delegates authority to the Strategic Director (People and Transformation) to make any further changes to the policy following feedback from the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.
Period for post policy/project review:	One year from implementation, December 2023.

1 Introduction:

- a. One of the key work-streams within Dacorum Borough Council’s Transformation Programme has been the development of our Customer Strategy, which was approved by Cabinet in February 2022. The Customer Strategy outlined how we will engage with our customers to review where we have not met customer expectations, where we may be excluding customers and where we have low areas of customer satisfaction. The strategy set out how we will use the findings from this customer engagement to embed customer focus in everything we do, and how we do it, in order to achieve the overarching vision:

“To put the customer at the centre of our services in order to provide a positive and effective customer experience, and to empower our staff so they can deliver consistent and quality Council services.”

- b. During the development of the Customer Strategy, the project team reviewed the ways the Council engages with its customers. This involved a root-and-branch review of the current complaints process. This review identified several opportunities to improve the complaints workflow, increase communication at key stages of complaints, align the policy to revised Ombudsman guidance, and ensure customer feedback is fed into service improvement activities.
- c. One output of this work is the proposed draft Complaints Policy (Appendix 1). This paper outlines the key changes to the Complaints Policy and the reasoning behind the changes, before setting out how the revised Complaints Policy will be implemented across the organisation.
- d. The previous Stage One complaints process followed a 15 working day target for a response, led by Group Managers. This no longer aligns with Ombudsman timescales and has often been missed. If the complainant could demonstrate why the process or outcome of Stage One was unfair, the complaints progressed to Stage Two. This was an independent review, led by an Assistant Director from a different service area, who provided a formal response within 20 working days.

2 New Complaints Policy

2.1 The new Complaints Policy incorporates a number of changes to our previous approach and sits alongside the organisational structural changes we have made to centralise our complaints function within the Customer Services Unit.

2.2 Scope & accessibility:

- We have excluded compliments and comments, which will now be submitted via our website (subject to accessibility requirements).
- We have reviewed the Policy from a “plain English” point-of-view, to make it easy for customers to understand the process.

2.3 Response times:

- Rather than setting out a variety of separate complaint response times to align with different Ombudsman complaint processes, we have chosen consistency by prioritising the quickest complaint response times (those provided by the Housing Ombudsman). The Policy recognises that the Council needs to act quickly to investigate, and respond to, customers’ complaints.
- From moment of receipt, the customer will receive an acknowledgement within 5 working days, and will receive a Stage One response within 10 working days of receipt (longer in exceptional circumstances, discussed with the customer). If a customer is unhappy with the Stage One response, they have 28 days to respond to the Council to request a Stage Two response. The customer will receive a stage 2 response within 20 working days of stage 2 process initiation, (this could be longer in exceptional circumstances, and would be discussed with the customer).

2.4 Levels of responsibilities for complaint responses:

- The new reporting structure moves responsibility for complaint responses down the corporate hierarchy. The current policy sees Heads of Service and Assistant Directors responding to Stage One and Stage Two complaints respectively. The new policy moves these tasks to Team Leaders (Stage One) and Heads of Service and above (Stage Two). This means that staff responding to individual complaints have a closer connection to direct service delivery while also expanding the pool of staff available to provide complaint responses. This will both speed up our response times and improve their quality. It will also encourage ownership of complaints and issues and will help to embed our learning from complaints that we receive.

2.5 Customer contact

- The priority of the new Complaints Policy is to provide an effective customer experience that swiftly investigates and resolves the basis of a customer’s complaint. The Complaints Policy prioritises talking directly to residents over the phone in the first instance by the relevant officer. In every case, the responsible Team Leader will call the customer to talk directly on the telephone about their issue. If a complaint can be resolved quickly and informally, this will be pursued.

2.6 A customer can still challenge a Stage Two response at the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) or the Housing Ombudsman Service, within 12 months after the customer first complained.

3 Implementation

3.1 Implementation of the new policy will require training for staff across the organisation. This is being designed by the project team and will be disseminated accordingly, prior to the launch of the new policy. Areas include:

- Introductions to the new Complaints officers and their responsibilities
- Demonstrations, (in-person, Teams classes, and videos), on the new process for all Team Leaders and Heads of Service
- Creating the role of a multi-directorate case owner for Ombudsman responses
- Staff-facing documents and processes for reference
- Incorporating new requirements into service plans, workflows, and team responsibilities

3.2 We are also committing to reporting upon, and learning, from the complaints we receive. This will help us to improve our performance and the feedback we receive will be used to help us improve Council services. In time, we should also see a reduction in the number of complaints we receive.

3.3 The launch date for the new policy is Thursday 1st December 2022.

4 Options and alternatives considered

4.1 The 'do nothing' approach was considered, however, this would put the Council in contradiction with the Housing Ombudsman timescales and risks the Council being found in contravention in future investigations. It will not help to improve customer satisfaction with Council services.

5 Consultation

5.1 The wider customer strategy has involved significant customer engagement. This has fed in to the development of this policy.

5.2 Key stakeholders at the Council have been consulted, such as the Customer Service Unit (CSU), and the new Complaints team within the CSU, as well as services which currently receive higher numbers of complaints from residents, such as Property and Place, Development Management, and Waste services.

6 Financial and value for money implications:

6.1 The new reporting structure moves responsibility for Stage One responses to Team Leaders, which is expected to increase speed of response and efficiency of the process. This policy will form part of the wider benefits realisation assessment resulting from the implementation of the Customer Strategy.

7 Legal Implications:

7.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Any complaints relating to legal matters will be dealt with outside of this policy by the Legal Team.

8 Risk implications:

8.1 No implications

9 Equalities, Community Impact and Human Rights:

9.1 The Council's EDI officer has been involved in the development of the new Complaints Policy. This has led to new information for customers regarding advocacy support and reasonable adjustments.

10 Sustainability implications (including climate change, health and wellbeing, community safety)

10.1 No implications

11 Council infrastructure (including Health and Safety, HR/OD, assets and other resources)

11.1 No implications

12 Statutory Comments

Monitoring Officer:

The revised policy provides an appropriate framework to ensure that Customer Complaints are responded to in a timely manner at an appropriate level within the organisation. This should help to ensure the resolution of complaints and minimise further complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman.

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The proposed complaint policy changes are not expected to have a financial impact on the Council, but they form a part of the wider customer strategy changes that are expected to deliver £200k of efficiencies as part of the current Medium Term Financial Strategy.

13 Conclusions:

13.1 The new Complaints Policy will change how complaints to the Council are dealt with. The focus is on the customer and ensuring their experience of interacting with us is positive whilst we investigate their complaint. No matter the result, the customer must feel assured that we have followed a fair, rigorous, and detailed policy (within reasonable timescales) that is consistent with national guidelines. The Complaints Policy empowers officers to contact customers directly to resolve issues informally, as well as setting out in detail how to conduct a formal complaint response.

14 Recommendations:

14.1 The report recommends that the Complaints Policy is approved by Cabinet members.