



# Northumberland

## County Council

COMMITTEE: COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 12<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2022

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### **Complaints Improvement Framework - Update**

**Report of:** Julie Dennitts-Seal, Corporate Complaints Manager

**Executive Director:** Maureen Taylor, Interim Executive Director of Communities and Business Development

**Cabinet Member:** Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Corporate Services

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### **1. Purpose of the report**

As a result of attending the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2021, the corporate Complaints Manager was invited back to provide an update on the work being carried out as part of a broader Complaints Improvement Framework.

This report provides a brief update, comments on the Local Governments and Social Care Annual Letter 2020/21 and outlines subsequent steps for 2022.

### **2. Background**

In June 2021, the 2019/2020 Annual Complaints Report was presented, and it was advised that the current reporting mechanisms were being reviewed as part of the broader Complaints Improvement Framework. The Corporate Complaints Manager was invited back to update the committee on the Service Plan and to offer reassurance around the improvements previously discussed.

It should be noted that the previous Annual Complaints Report was provided out of sync with the new proposed reporting schedule to provide information on the review. Corporate Complaint Annual reports will be produced in August/September in alignment with the suite of Complaints Reports.

The 2019/2020 Annual Report advised that the Corporate Complaints Manager had reviewed the current complaints reporting mechanisms. A comprehensive action plan has been drafted, providing more detail and responsibility lines for those actions.

### **3 Refreshed suites of policies**

Effective policies and procedures, including complaint management, are living documents that must grow and adapt with a company. While the core elements and the intention of a

policy will likely remain the same, how to make it happen need to adapt to the changes in the Government legislation and Council procedures.

### **3.1 Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Contact Policy**

Following a review of existing arrangements, it was identified that the current policy in place to manage challenging behaviour exhibited by a small minority of customers (the Habitual or Vexatious Complainants Policy 2010) had been in place for some time and would benefit from updating.

In July 2021, the Council replaced its policy with an updated 'Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Contact Policy', which is necessary to allow Northumberland County Council to operate a fair, effective, and efficient complaints process and reflect good practice advocated by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

### **3.2 Corporate Feedback Policy**

The Council currently has a complaints process flowchart that summarises what a customer can expect at each stage of the process.

A new policy will provide the Council's approach for handling corporate feedback, emphasising getting the most appropriate outcome for our customers. We want to ensure that when our customers tell us that they have an issue regarding our service, we respond in a timely and sensitive way that considers the customer's experience of dealing with us.

Our approach is built on the following principles in line with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) guidance for an effective complaint's procedure:

- Accessibility – We will ensure that the complaints process remains accessible, easy to read and that the information we publish is accurate and up to date.
- Communication - We will ensure direct contact is made early on and clear communication channels remain open throughout the process.
- Timeliness – We will respond within a reasonable timescale as set out in this policy wherever possible or agree to a reasonable timescale with the customer depending on the issue's complexity.
- Fairness – We will be clear about roles and responsibilities and ensure that complaints are dealt with in an open-minded and impartial way. Responses are proportionate; one size does not fit all.
- Credibility- We will ensure an individual competently manages the process with the relevant Authority.
- Accountability – Information is provided clearly and openly and is appropriately managed.

The draft policy is currently being circulated for comments with an aim for it to be presented to the Executive Team in January. The appropriate ratification process will then be followed.

## **4 Case management system**

One of the main improvements identified was to update the case management system. The existing system is outdated and not bespoke for complaints management, it is cumbersome to use, and staff engagement can be sporadic. This makes data retrieval and analysis challenging and unreliable.

The proposal is to purchase a bespoke case management system that allows officers and case handlers to manage the case management process better using smart workflows. The use of real-time dashboards will enable senior officers to evaluate team and individual performance and a granular understanding of any connections. An improved, user-friendly system will promote more accessibility to the complaints process and recognise the importance of being accessible, open, and transparent, as set out in the Local Government Ombudsman's complaints handling and best practice guidance.

Case handlers can be prompted to identify case specifics, such as service process and root cause, by categorising any part of the case. For any unique reporting requirement, categories can be cross-referenced and mapped.

Key officers have attended several demonstrations, and cost-saving modelling is being undertaken to support a business case seeking approval to subscribe to a bespoke case management platform.

The platform we have chosen supports additional types of case management and will significantly reduce the duplication of internal resources and the risk of inconsistent customer responses. Putting all statutory case management in one means it's easier to manage the caseload and collaborate internally, define subsequent actions, keep to timelines determined by compliance requirements, and engage with all stakeholders in a meaningful way. It has been agreed that Information Governance will also adopt the new case management system to manage and report on all Freedom of Information Act requests, Environmental Information Regulations requests, personal information requests, public record requests and GDPR Case management. Working collaboratively across one platform will allow for improved and more intelligent data sharing.

It is expected that the business case will be completed by 1<sup>st</sup> February 2022. The exact scale of the project will be dependent upon the agreed scope and implementation approach however pending approval it is expected that it can be implemented within an 8-week timeframe.

## **5 Ombudsman Annual letter 2020/21**

To allow authorities to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ombudsman did not accept new complaints and stopped investigating existing cases between March and June 2020.

Similarly, to the data provided in the 2019/20 report, it is reported that the Council continues to perform well compared to similar authorities in 2020/21. In the coming months, further detail will be provided in the 2020/2021 Annual Complaints Report.

The County Council continues to perform well compared to similar authorities in 2020/21. The Ombudsman recognises that the North East of England collectively has the lowest number of upheld complaints compared to other regions.

In the Annual Complaint Forum, the LGSCO highlighted a general concern that Nationally there appears to be corrosion of effective complaint functions in local authorities. With this context in mind, the LGSCO is developing a new programme of work that will utilise complaints to drive improvements in local complaint systems and services. The County Council has volunteered to be part of their focus group.

We will continue to fully support this initiative and demonstrate that we are building a solid listening and learning culture. Learning is fed back to our residents and used internally to drive improvement by implementing our new initiatives.

## **6. Next steps**

Some aspects of the Service Plan were delayed allowing services to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. As business returns to normal, efforts are being refocussed, and arrangements to centralise a Complaints Team will be resumed following the dissolving of the formal partnership arrangement between Northumbria Healthcare Foundation Trust and Northumberland County Council.

The County Council constantly works hard to improve our services, and complaint management is no different. In line with our culture of continuous improvement, we are developing a framework to improve complaint handling within the Authority; this includes considering other ways to utilise complaints as a positive learning tool and enhance the quality of data recorded.

The Corporate Complaints Manager continues to collaborate with our Customer Service Team to ensure effective customer-focused communications across the Council. A Customer Response Strategy working group has been created to develop a cross council strategy which will ensure that service provision is designed and delivered to meet local needs and that service improvements are customer-led and outcome-focused.

In summary, the key next steps to be actioned are:

- Procure a specifically designed case management system for capturing, managing, and reporting on complaints and all other feedback across the Council – **February 2022**
- Adopt a new Corporate Feedback Policy – **January 2022**
- Establish a central feedback team – recruitment to start between Feb - **April 2022**
- Continue to work through the Improvement action plan - **ongoing**

### Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the 'Thriving and Inclusive Communities' priority included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2019-2023

### Implications

<b>Policy</b>	By collecting and analysing corporate feedback, services can use the results to determine, shape and influence future policies.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	There are no financial implications directly associated with this report.
<b>Legal</b>	Where appropriate, advice is sought from the Legal Team on specific complaints.
<b>Procurement</b>	Not applicable
<b>Human Resources</b>	Not applicable
<b>Property</b>	Not applicable
<b>Equalities</b> (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	Not applicable
<b>Crime Disorder &amp;</b>	Not applicable

<b>Customer Consideration</b>	As a Council, it is essential that customers can give us their feedback and feel that their views and opinions are fully considered and dealt with appropriately.
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	Not applicable
<b>Wards</b>	All

**Background papers:**

**CUSTOMER CORPORATE COMPLAINTS 2020/21**

**Report sign off.**

***Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:***

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	N/A
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Chief Executive	Daljit Lally
Portfolio Holder(s)	Richard Wearmouth

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