



MINUTES OF THE ONE COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE **Tuesday 26 November 2013 at 7.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Ashraf (Chair), Councillor Colwill (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Chohan, Harrison and Long

Apologies for absence were received from: Councillors Lorber, Mitchell Murray and Powney.

1. Declarations of personal and prejudicial interests

None declared.

2. Deputations (if any)

None.

3. Minutes of the last meeting held on 9 October 2013

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 October 2013 be approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

4. Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Complaints Annual Report - 2012/13

Phillip Mears (Corporate Complaints Manager) informed the Committee that the Council had implemented a two stage complaints procedure in April 2012 with 95% of complaints being resolved at the first stage and no deterioration in regard to ombudsmen findings. The Corporate Complaints Manager highlighted the continued trend reduction of complaints received and cited that this may be due to officers being able to address residents concerns prior to the complaint's process being instigated. It was felt that there could be potential for the number of complaints received to increase in future years due to increased pressures and demand for services. Phillip Mears drew members attention to the breakdown of complaints received by each department and highlighted the reduction in complaints received by finance and corporate services, and revenues and benefits. He continued to highlight the rise in neighbourhood services complaints and attributed this to a rise in Parking and parking enforcement related complaints which were consistent across London boroughs. Phillip Mears highlighted the reasons why complaints were submitted with the most common reason for complaint being due to failure or delay in delivering a service. It was noted that this

was the first year of recording reasons for complaints and he hoped to be able to plot trend data in the future.

The Corporate Complaints Manager informed the Committee that there had been a significant increase in complaints being received through electronic methods, with 25% being submitted on-line by the customer. He noted that a significant number of complaints were partially or fully upheld upon investigation and felt that this was a healthy indication that departments were prepared to recognise that mistakes had been made and to learn from them. The Committee were informed that 22% of requests for second stage investigations were refused because the customer had not given a sufficient basis for a further investigation being carried out. He explained that investigating for the sake of it had ceased due to reduced resources which had not resulted in any decisions being overturned.

During discussion it was confirmed that work was being undertaken with Children and Families and Adult Social Care to improve the response rates of complaints. It was clarified that the Borough Plan had set a target of 100% of responses to be on time by December 2014. Cathy Tyson (Operational Director Corporate Policy) highlighted that due to the complexity of some complaints it was not always possible to respond within the time limit and it was felt that the correct answer although over the time limit was more appropriate than sending an incorrect or vague response in a timely manner. Members raised concern that some complaints did not receive an outcome for approximately a year, with many complaints lodged on resident's behalf by Councillors not being addressed.

In response to concerns that officers were not always contactable, Cathy Tyson informed the Committee that there were known telephony issues which prevented the hunt groups working effectively as well as signal issues. She clarified that IT were currently undertaking work to resolve the issue and in teams that received high volumes of calls, desk phones were being made available. In response to concerns that complaints were not being responded to, the Operational Director Corporate Policy informed the Committee that all complaints should be going through the correct procedure and complaints sent directly to officers may not be interpreted as a formal complaint and not addressed correctly. Phillip Mears highlighted that there was not a consistent approach in how Councillors raised complaints and explained that any complaint lodged through the system would be tracked and logged with corporate investigation standards applied.

Phillip Mears informed the Committee of issues faced by the introduction of a new contract offering transport for disabled persons. He highlighted that the complaints received enabled the service to address the issues quickly and to ensure that the contract operated safely for all customers. Members queried the reasons for why the service was changed and it was agreed that the relevant department would be contacted to provide the information. The Corporate Complaints Manger informed members of the priorities for 2013/14 including; improving response times, developing early resolution concept, improving information for managers and the introduction of clearing house.

During discussions members raised concerns regarding discrepancies within the statistics and it was agreed that they would be discussed after the meeting. In response to queries regarding the commencement of the time limit, it was confirmed that as soon as a complaint received, the clock started ticking, regardless

of whether it had been logged on the system or not. Phillip Mears confirmed that the system generated an acknowledgement letter which should contain the deadline, details of the officer responsible and their contact details, and be sent no later than five working days once the complaint had been received. It was clarified that if a complaint was received by email then an email response should be sent and duplication of responses should be avoided. It was confirmed that Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) were not yet using the corporate system but it was hoped to be introduced to them shortly.

Members queried when an early resolution was appropriate and what action was often attributed. Phillip Mears informed the Committee that colleagues were advised that early resolution should only take place when the complaint could be answered fully and properly without an investigation. It was noted that some complaints were not appropriate to receive early resolutions such as complaints regarding staff conduct. An early resolution could include an apology and supplying the service requested. If they were still dissatisfied they had the option to make a formal complaint. In response to queries about data collection, the Corporate Complaints Manager informed the Committee that the system was designed which enabled the data to be captured following the complaint being submitted on the system. A workflow existed to record where early resolutions took place and whether any follow up action was required. In response to queries regarding training provided, Phillip Mears informed members that in addition to eight investigation courses provided through the year, training was also provided on logging and using the system for staff. He continued to explain that the team were keen to develop training further, giving officers the confidence to resolve complaints at an early stage without escalation to the first investigation stage. During discussion, members queried what work was being undertaken to improve the collection of equality and diversity information of complainants. The Corporate Complaints Manager informed the Committee that unfortunately plans to introduce an equalities action plan to address the recording of equality information, training for staff and numerous other actions had not come into force due to staff turnover. He hoped that this work would be picked up shortly with a new equality lead being in post and acknowledged that work was required to encourage customers to provide information on their protected characteristics but felt that it should not be a mandatory requirement on self service complaints as it may dissuade customers from engaging with the Council.

Members reiterated concern over the ability to contact officers particularly in light of the organisational change and telephony difficulties. Cathy Tyson informed the Committee that work would be undertaken into updating the contact directory making it easier to search for a service rather than requiring a named officer. In response to queries Phillip Mears informed the Committee that vexatious complaints were called unreasonable complaints and were moderated through the system. He noted that they often had a reason to keep complaining however the Council was unable to keep investigating the same issue and would advise them to contact the ombudsmen. He informed the Committee that should a new complaint or new information be submitted by the person then it would be considered and not dismissed. Regarding the implications of the Complaints Team being reviewed, the Corporate Complaints Manager explained that it would be difficult but would have to explore ways in working more efficiently with less resources whilst offering a suitable complaints service. He hoped that by enabling front line service such as

Customer Services to resolve issues early this would prevent the need for a lengthy investigation and ensure the customer received an early solution.

RESOLVED:

Members noted the report.

6. Future of Customer Services

This item was deferred to a future meeting of the One Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

7. One Council Overview and Scrutiny work programme

The Chair drew member's attention to the Public Realm item for the next meeting and queried whether members wished to discuss the new waste contract as part of the item. During discussion members noted that performance of the new contract could not yet be measured and agreed that the specifics of the contract should form part of the item. Christopher Young (Policy and Performance Officer) informed the Committee that the Adult Social Care Mutual project had been postponed and an update would therefore not be available.

RESOLVED

- (i) That the Future of Customer Services Update be deferred to March 2014
- (ii) That the Public Realm item include details of the new waste contract

8. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the One Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been scheduled to take place on 22 January 2014.

9. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 8.15 pm

J Ashraf
Chair