

Cheltenham Borough Council
Standards Committee – 26 September 2008
Customer Relations – Position Statement
(1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008)
Report of the Policy Officer (Customer Relations and Governance)

1. Summary and recommendation

Cheltenham Borough Council is committed to providing high quality services which meet the needs of our communities. Our customer relations work provides a valuable way of capturing community perceptions of our services which we can use to review and improve them. We have a process that values every complaint, comment and compliment we receive.

As a result of the restructure of the policy and performance teams, customer relations now sits within the Policy and Partnerships team where we hope to better integrate customer relations into the policy and performance management processes of the Council. This will include measuring customer satisfaction, analysing information and interactions, including complaints, with our customers to identify trends, not only to improve the customer experience but to assist the council in reshaping service delivery.

This is the first of what is intended to be at least an annual report to the Standards Committee.

1.1 I therefore recommend that the Committee:

1.1.1 Notes the report detailing the year end position.

1.1.2 Considers the content of the report and advises the Policy Officer (Customer Relations and Governance) what level of detail or additional information would be useful for future reports.

1.1.3 Determines the frequency it would like to receive such reports from the Policy Officer (Customer Relations and Governance)

1.2 Implications – not applicable to this report.

1.3 Statement on Risk

1.3.1 Complaints and Freedom of Information Requests all potentially represent a risk to the council's reputation. Risks are mitigated by following the agreed policies and procedures.

2. Introduction

2.1 The Standards Committee has a role in monitoring the council's approach to customer relations. The Committee considered the last summary report on complaints in September 2007. Following the recent restructuring and relevance of all the areas within Customer Relations, this report has been widened to include other issues which impact on us putting right things that go wrong and understanding the reasons why. Best practice suggests that such reports are considered by the Standards Committee at least annually, but I would suggest the committee might like to consider receiving a report at the half year point as well.

2.2 Ombudsman – 2007/2008

The Ombudsman received 10 complaints about Cheltenham Borough Council broken down against service areas as follows. This is lower than last year's figure of 20 and the lowest number of complaints in the past 3 years.

Benefits	0	
Housing	4	(3 housing allocations/1 repair)
Other	3	(2 anti-social behaviour/1 Misc)
Planning and building control	3	(2 applications/1 trees)
Public finance	0	
	—	
	<u>10</u>	

In 2007/2008 the council took an average of 22.3 days to respond to Ombudsman complaints, this figure is 1.1 day longer than the previous year (21.2 days), still a significant improvement upon where we were in 2005/06 when the average length of time taken for the council to respond to the Ombudsman was reported at 31.3 days.

To put this into context against the performance of other district councils, Cheltenham's response time is within the 57.2% of councils whose average response time is less than 28 days.

A copy of the Local Government Ombudsman Annual Letter 2007/08 from which this information has been extracted is attached for your information at appendix 1

2.3 Freedom of Information

The Council responded to approximately 155 requests for information in 2007/2008 – please refer to the breakdown on the attached table at appendix 2.

2.4 Complaints, comments and compliments

The council logged a total of 188 complaints in 2007/2008, (178 at stage 1, 5 at stage 2 and 5 at stage 3). Across the council 38 comments were logged and 135 compliments.

The complaints and compliments logged are broken down by group and service areas

on the attached table at appendix 3.

The Best Value Customer Satisfaction survey for 2006/07 reported that overall satisfaction with the council (BV3) improved by 3% (from 55% in 2003/04 to 58% in 2006/07).

The same survey also reported that satisfaction with complaints handling (BV4) reduced by 5% (from 31% in 2003/04 to 26% in 2006/07). In response to this the Board of Directors decided that the customer feedback system would be reviewed to identify a more effective corporate approach to dealing with customer complaints (business plan milestone – 2008/09).

2.5 Equality Impact Assessment of the Corporate Customer Feedback policy and procedure, covering complaints

As part of the council's commitment to gain level 3 of the equality standard for local government by next year, it was decided that amongst other service areas, the council's customer relations function should be assessed to ensure it is meeting the diverse needs of our customers.

The review of the corporate feedback policy and procedure which covers complaints, compliments and comments is being carried out in the light of a robust equality impact assessment and recommendations for amending the policy and procedures will be reported to Board. At present an equality impact assessment is being carried out and consultation with council officers at all levels is taking place. This process should also provide a good starting point for gaining, as Varney puts it, 'customer insight' and therefore perhaps better understanding customer satisfaction. Any changes to the current policy and procedures will be reported to the Committee for comment.

2.6 Changes to the Council's website

The Council's new website is due to be up and running from the end of January 2009. This is intended to ensure more information is available to the public more accessibly. It will be interesting to see whether better information more readily accessible to our customers reduces the number of FOI requests and complaints. The new technology should also assist in providing a better channel of communication and hopefully encouraging more feedback. Clearly we need to be mindful of those customers who do not have access to the internet.

Background Papers

Report Author	Karen Watson, Policy Officer (Customer Relations and Governance), telephone 01242 264350, e-mail Karen.watson@cheltenham.gov.uk
Accountability	Councillor Steve Jordan
Scrutiny Function	Economy and Business Improvement