

Standards Committee
14 June 2010

Standard's Committee concerns about Highways complaints

Purpose of the report: To answer the questions raised by the Committee's Chairman, in his letter dated 20 October to the Head of Customer Services, about how the Council responds to complaints about highways.

Introduction:

- 1 Last September Simon Rutter met with Simon Pollock, Head of Customer Services, Stephen Child, Area Highways Manager and Nigel Bartlett-Twivey, Customer Service Improvement Manager to discuss the Committee's concerns regarding highway complaints. Following that meeting Simon Pollock produced a formal response to the Committee (Letter dated 14 September attached **Appendix 1**) in which he explained the purpose of the complaints procedure and the role of the Standards Committee as set out in the Constitution of the Council.
- 2 The Chairman of the Committee noted the response but reiterated the Committee's role in "ensuring that the Council's complaints procedures operate effectively..." and in that regard raised concerns about the public perception of logging enquiries/complaints and their expectations. In his letter dated 20 October (attached **Appendix 2**) to Simon Pollock he asked for the following questions to be answered:-
 - How does the system properly identify and differentiate between reports from the public and complaints by them and is it doing so in practice?
 - How does the system engage with the public to manage their expectations of what can, and cannot be done to action their report/complaint?

Response to Chairman's Questions

- 3 **How does the system properly identify and differentiate between reports from the public and complaints by them and is it doing so in practice?**

- 3.1 Customer Services recognise and understand that members of the public are often very dissatisfied and frustrated about the poor condition of roads when they report highway defects particularly potholes. However, the emotive language of the caller “complaining” about the pothole does not dictate how the report is handled.
- 3.2 If the pothole report is made via a call to the Contact Centre the operator will ask for information regarding its location and severity. The operator will then interrogate “Confirm” (Highways reporting system) to establish whether the pothole has been previously reported. If it has not then it will be logged as an enquiry on ‘Confirm for action by Highways’ and be processed in accordance with their own policies and procedures. The caller is allocated a ‘Confirm reference number’ and asked whether they would like to be kept updated (call back or email).
- 3.3 If when interrogating ‘Confirm’ the operator establishes that the pothole has already been identified and logged they will either:
- Update the customer with any information already logged on Confirm. For example the pothole may already have been assessed and not met the criteria for intervention by the Council.
 - Send a chaser request for action to the Highway Service and get back to the customer with an update
 - Raise a formal complaint - if a chaser has already been sent and no action has been taken.
- 3.4 The creation of a formal complaint ensures that potential failures on the part of the Council are identified and responded to within the Council’s complaint response time standards (currently 10 working days. All complaints are logged on the corporate complaints database and it is the handling of these that is reported to the Committee.
- 3.5 Potholes reported via the website are routed directly to the relevant highway service area (East or West) who will undertake the same assessment. Customers receive an automatic acknowledgement of their report.

4. How does the system engage with the public to manage their expectations of what can, and cannot be done to action their report/complaint?

- 4.1 If the Contact Centre receives a new pothole report they inform the caller that the repair of potholes is prioritised according to the likely risk to the travelling public and priority is based on both the size of the pothole and its location in the highway. The caller is informed that the Council would normally make a pothole safe or repair it in up to 28 days.

- 4.2 However, if the pothole is later assessed by Highways as not meeting their minimum criteria for repair the customer is not routinely informed. The customer is generally only contacted by Highways if they have specifically requested an update, and even then this is not always provided because of the large volume of requests for service received.
- 4.3 This failure to keep customers routinely informed, albeit just to let them know that the Council does not intend to repair the pothole, generates unnecessary chaser calls to the Contact Centre and complaints. There is a need to better manage public expectation around what the Council will do with pothole reports, which includes improved communications on the website.

Conclusions:

- 5 Customer Services is satisfied that the system properly identifies and differentiates between reports from the public and complaints by them and is doing so in practice.
6. However, there is a need for Surrey Highways and Customer Services to provide greater public information to better manage customer expectations around their levels of service delivery and to improve the end- to-end defect reporting process to ensure customers are routinely updated.
- 7 The Contact Centre has a service requirement to reduce the high number of Highways chaser calls to the Contact Centre. Customers need to be able to report defects, such as streetlights or potholes, on online maps. They also need to be able to see which defects have already been reported and know when work is planned. However, the Council's current IT systems are not robust enough to make this happen yet and considerable investment may be required to enable this.
- 8 It has been agreed that the most appropriate vehicle for this specific customer service request will now be through the Customer Services Public Value Review (PVR). Recommendations and actions from the PVR will guide the approach specifically for a 2-way location based information system for customers to use for defect reporting
9. However, these are service delivery issues and therefore fall outside of the Standards Committee's remit, scrutiny of these issues is the responsibility of the Transport Select Committee and Safer and Stronger Select Committee.

Recommendation:

The Standards Committee to consider report conclusions and take appropriate action, which may include:

- Consider outcome and impact of Customer Services PVR when complete.
- Consider sharing operational issues identified with Transport Select Committee and Safer and Stronger Select Committee.

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Sources/background papers –

Letter dated 14/09/09 from Simon Pollock, Head of Customer Service.

Letter dated 20/10/09 from Simon Edge, Chairman of Standards Committee

APPENDIX 1

Phone 020 8541 7848
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Mr Simon Edge
9 Vincent Close
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Surrey
KT22 9PB

Customer Services
Conquest House
Wood Street
Kingston upon Thames
KT1 1AB

14 September 2009

Dear Mr Edge

Standards Committee concerns about responses to complaints

I recently met with Mr Simon Rutter, Stephen Child, Area Highways Manager, and Nigel Bartlett-Twivey, Customer Service Improvement Manager, to address your committee's concerns about the response from Jenny Isaac, Head of Highways and myself to Mr Rutter's letter dated 5 May 2009. May I apologise if you found the response was unhelpful.

It was based on our understanding of the role of the Standards Committee as laid out in the Constitution of the Council, which we have set out below to clarify our position.

9.04 (h) ensuring that the Council's complaints procedures operate effectively and receiving reports upon them, and upon findings of maladministration by the Local Government Ombudsman, and including the power to make payments.

To us, this would include looking at what the complaints procedures are, for example, the stages, response times etc., and how we are performing against them. It would also include being able to look at any reports we have on how the procedures are working and whether Services are adhering to them. We would anticipate that the committee would look at whether the procedures are robust enough, for example, challenging whether the response time within the procedures is right and suggest changes to that. We would not consider that it is the role of the Standards Committee to comment on or scrutinize aspects of the day to day delivery of the Council's core services.

Standards Committee may in their investigations come across concerns about service delivery, but this appears to fall outside their remit. If the committee feels strongly about an issue affecting service delivery, the Chairman could write to the

Chairman of the appropriate Select Committee and suggest it as an area for scrutiny. This would accord with the terms of reference of Select Committees under the Constitution –

7.01 (b) Specific Role

(iii) Performance Management

- **Reviewing and commenting on draft service delivery plans and budgets including priorities, targets and performance indicators.**
- **Undertaking quarterly in-depth performance reviews with the relevant Executive Member, Strategic Director and Heads of Service.**
- **Monitoring service risk management measures and identifying to the Leader, Deputy Leader or Executive Members significant risks and concerns;**
- **Anticipating and advising the Leader/Executive or Council on areas of performance which give rise to concern.**

Or they could raise the concerns with the portfolio holder in a similar way.

At our meeting we concluded that it might help the committee if we were to offer some clarity around the nature of complaints about Highways.

Highways receive hundreds of contacts from the public each week, many of which are about highway defects. Like the caller who “wants to complain about a pothole”, the vast majority of these are in fact, requests for service. Highways are able to satisfy many of those requests, but not all. Those that are not satisfied may lead to complaints. These are a very small proportion of the contacts received and it is the handling of these alone that is reported upon to your committee.

To enable Members to engage with Highways officers on issues arising from the public, they have in place various points of contact, including a dedicated telephone line to the contact centre - 0300 200 1014, the Local Highways Manager and a nominated Community Highway Officer for each district, and the generic email addresses for each of the area offices, which are wah@surreycc.gov.uk (for west area) and eastsurreyhighways@surreycc.gov.uk. These arrangements are in place so that Members have easy access to the Service and can raise any issues about service delivery.

I hope this is helpful to you and members of the committee.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Pollock
Head of Customer Service

Appendix 2

To Simon Pollock

*Mr Simon Edge
9 Vincent Close
Fetcham
Surrey
KT22 9PB*

20 October 2009

Dear Mr Pollock

STANDARDS COMMITTEE CONCERNS ABOUT RESPONSES TO COMPLAINTS

Thank you for attending the Standards Committee meeting on 2 October and for providing a detailed account of complaints handling within the Highways Department. Members of the Committee welcomed the opportunity to discuss their concerns with you, and now have a better understanding of the procedures you operate. I trust that you also have a clearer understanding of Member's concerns.

Your letter of 14 September correctly identified the Standards Committees role in relation to complaints handling. The Committee's specific concerns are about the effective operation of the complaints handling system within Highways, as distinct from service delivery which are rightly the responsibility of the Transportation Select Committee. Specifically, the Committee finds that there is an apparent disconnect between Member's day-to-day experience of the public raising a large number of 'complaints' about highways with them, and the figures you present showing low levels of complaint. During your attendance at the Committee it became clear that one possible explanation for this disconnect is how complaints are defined and logged. It may well be that members of the public are being recorded by the system as reporting issues about highways matters when, as far as they are concerned, they are actually making a complaint.

A number of Members were able to relate incidences where members of the public state that they have 'complained' about an issue on a number of occasions, and have been given a series of reference numbers, but without result. While the Committee accepted your explanation that not all requests for action (or complaints) can be resolved in the way the member of the public would necessarily prefer, the volume of these occurrences should be cause for concern. The Committee would, therefore, like you to look again at the system in terms of answering the following questions:

1. How does the system properly identify and differentiate between reports from the public, and complaints by them – and is it doing so in practice?
2. How does the system engage with the public to manage their expectations of what can, and cannot, be done to action their report / complaint?

The Committee would welcome your reporting back on the above questions and attending again, say in six months time, to further discuss matters.

To join the effectiveness of the operation of the system, with the issues of service delivery, I am copying this letter to David Ivison as the Chairman of the Transportation Select Committee.

Thank you once again for your engagement with this issue.

Yours sincerely



Chairman of Standards Committee
Mr Simon Edge

cc Mr David Ivison (Chairman of Transportation Select Committee)