

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**  
**13 December 2010**

**Complaints Procedure Improvement Plan**

**Purpose of the report:**

1. To inform the Standards Committee of the removal of Stage 3 of the corporate complaints procedure and the rationale for doing so.
2. To advise and inform the Standards Committee of some general improvements to the corporate complaints process.

**Introduction:**

3. Customer Relations have undertaken a general review of the corporate complaints procedure, taking account of feedback from complainants, advice from the Local Government Ombudsman, and the concerns of officers arising from a recent complex complaint. The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) agreed these changes at its meeting on 8 November 2010.

**Background & Issues**

4. The Council's complaints procedure consists of three stages. Stage 1. Initial response by the service. Stage 2. Full investigation by an independent investigator. Stage 3. Challenge of the Stage 2 investigation. Stage 3 rarely adds value and is time consuming. These are the key points arising:
  - Complainants consider that stage 3 (a review of the stage 2 report, commissioned by the Head of Customer Service) is unhelpful and only delays access to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO);
  - The LGO supports a robust, 2 stage process;
  - With the introduction of full-time complaints investigators, management oversight and quality control, there is no merit in stage 3. Removing it will improve efficiency and bring about quicker closure;
  - More clarity is required when we explain what the public can expect from the complaints process; and
  - Rather than routinely investigating at stage 2, where appropriate, follow a process that seeks alternative routes to a solution.
5. The following improvements to the complaints process are being implemented.
  - The section of the Customer Feedback Procedures regarding 'complaints and objections about policy' will be updated.

- The external website will be updated to make it clearer to customers the purpose of the complaints procedure and what it can and cannot achieve. Alternative routes will be clarified (e.g. legal remedy).
  - All requests to Customer Relations for stage 2 investigations will be subject to a more robust assessment, against formal criteria, to establish whether they are “complex” complaints.
  - A new assessment, against formal criteria, will be developed to establish the level of injustice and where this is insignificant, no investigation will take place unless valuable learning points would be missed.
  - At present only one investigator is assigned to deal with a complaint. In future an investigative team will be pulled together to deal with complex complaints. The team may include Legal Services and independent professional advice as necessary.
  - All officers involved in a stage 2 investigation will be issued with guidance to help address any concerns or issues they might have about the process. The guidance will include what steps to take if they disagree with the findings of the investigation.
  - A formal process for seeking Legal advice will be developed.
  - Complaint Investigators will notify the Monitoring officer if they identify or have any concerns that the Council has not complied with legislation.
  - A targeted training and learning programme will be undertaken to ensure a greater understanding of the corporate complaints procedure across the council. This will include a presentation from the LGO to CPT and CR Network.
6. The recommendations and improvements presented here were agreed at CLT on 8 November 2010.

**Recommendation:**

7. The Standards Committee note the new arrangements and agree to receive a report six months after implementation to examine the impact on performance.

**Next steps:**

- Customer Relations to implement the two-stage complaints procedure from 1 January 2011.
  - Customer Relations to implement all the improvements by end April 2011 and report back to the Standards Committee in October 2011.
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**Sources/background papers:** N/A