

By: Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Communities, Customer Services and Improvement  
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To: Governance and Audit Committee – 30 June 2011

Subject: REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS

Classification : Restricted

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**Summary:** To improve how we deal with all our complaints from the Public and from the Local Government Ombudsman by providing the public with a single address, telephone number and e-mail address contact by reorganising within one team how we log and track complaints.

## FOR INFORMATION

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### 1 Introduction and background

KCC has a desire to learn from what our customers tell us and use it to improve:

- The services we provide
- The policies we develop
- How we behave as an organisation.

1.2 We are committed to operating an effective complaints and customer feedback system that demonstrates to the public that we:

- Are “putting our customers first”
- Listen to what residents have to say
- Are open, honest and transparent
- Are responsive and fair.

1.3 KCC currently advertise 5 different KCC addresses and more than 5 telephone numbers for the public to use to make a complaint depending on what service is being used. Kent.gov.uk has pages of information on all the different contacts to make a complaint. Our own KCC staff are often unsure of who deals with complaints within other services as it is not always obvious from the complaint. As one organisation we now need to make our complaints administration more effective and efficient to make it easier for the public to make a complaint and comment on our services.

1.4 The purpose of a complaints system is to put right what has gone wrong and to learn from it. There is a cost to putting things right. Every stage in our complaints process costs money to put things right. For example the cost of handling a complaint at Chief Executive or Local Government Ombudsman

(LGO) stage will cost somewhere between £300 and £1000<sup>1</sup> in staff time per complaint and we received 114 LGO complaints in the financial year 20011/12. One complaint can be logged many times as it travels within KCC on its way to be answered. This process is time consuming, costly and delays the response.

1.5 The cost of complaint handling within KCC has not been apparent and the time is right to look at a single KCC, more customer focused, cost effective way to provide this service. Steps need be taken to make the KCC complaints process more responsive to customer needs by providing easier access for the public and a unified KCC approach that will still meet the specific requirements (including statutory guidance) of specialist service areas, best practice standards and any foreseeable future requirements that may be made nationally.

## **2. Background**

2.1 In April 2009, KCC phased in a new two step corporate complaint procedure to replace and improve on the former 3 stage procedure in operation since 1991/1992.

- STAGE 1 Problem solving/Local Resolution
- STAGE 2 Formal/Investigative Stage

KCC wide standard times for acknowledging and recording complaints were introduced along with new performance measures. These improvements were deemed a success as there was no increase in complaints to the LGO when the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage was removed.

2.2 At the same time new Local Authority Social Care and NHS complaints regulations were introduced. A one stage single complaints process across health and social care was implemented. The key aim of the new arrangements was to create a consistent approach to complaints handling across both health and social care.

2.3 One of the main changes new Local Authority Social Care and NHS complaints is the expectation that the local authority will respond to the complaint on a proportionate basis depending on the nature of the complaint. This is completely different to the previous procedure, where a complainant could request a formal investigation and even proceed through to a Review Panel if they requested one. Before any course of action is taken, a discussion with and subsequent agreement, is obtained from the complainant and this forms part of the 'complaints plan.'

2.4 The statutory complaint procedures for children still follow a 3 stage process, with a review panel at stage 3.

2.5 The revision of the corporate complaints procedure and the introduction of KCC wide standards was the first part of a developing strategy to transform how we handle complaints.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.complaintsrgreat.com/drupal/content/costs-complaint-handling-public-sector-organisation>

### **3. Why Change?**

#### **3.1 Too many contact telephone numbers and contact addresses**

Kent County Council is an organisation made up of many different services. The way KCC is structured can make it confusing for the Public to make a complaint. The kent.gov web pages list all the different addresses and telephone numbers to make a complaint. As one organisation we should have a single contact point. Feedback from the public on our existing process is that it is not simple to find the right person to make a complaint.

#### **3.2 Duplication of work**

The same complaint can be logged within the Managing Directors Office, the Directors Office, the Corporate Access to Information Coordinator Team and the Adult and Children's Social Services Team. This adds no value for the customer and can delay a response. Complaint letters are sometimes mislaid or delayed within this system and the current system is very staff intensive.

#### **3.3 KCC Policy & Procedures**

As an organisation we are not following our own policy and procedures. We are not consistent in how we settle complaints, the remedies applied and although we are good at making service improvements after a complaint, we are not good at replicating what we have learnt from one service to another across the whole authority.

There are examples this year where we have not paid out agreed compensation following an LGO investigation resulting in another complaint, where we have pre-empted the LGO decision contrary to guidelines and delays in responding to the LGO on complaints that have already been investigated once.

The new team would enable a robust review by someone who has the independence and authority to ask questions, get at the facts and recommend changes in response to complaints. Effective leadership would ensure that the complaints system and learning from it has a high profile across the council and there would be follow-up to ensure any decisions are properly and promptly implemented.

#### **3.4 Staff**

Staff need to know where to refer complaints that are not within their scope. It is too much to expect all staff, to know the limits and extent of responsibility of each department across KCC. The recent restructure has made it difficult for staff to know which Directorate is dealing with complaints. A central team will be better placed to gather the necessary information and assist more customers in gaining satisfaction and will also reduce the number of contacts needed for "lost" customers to have their complaint resolved, to clarify whether the issue is a complaint, what outcome the person is seeking and whether that outcome is achievable.

#### **3.5 Ombudsman Complaints**

We are seeing an increase in Local Settlements after the complaint has been sent to the Ombudsman. KCC should have been able to settle these complaints without the Ombudsman being involved. As stated above it can cost

between £300 -£1000 to reinvestigate a complaint (and this does not include the cost to the public of the Ombudsman Service).

### 3.6 Management Confidence

To give management the confidence that complaints are answered within a reasonable time, in an efficient manner, following KCC procedures and resolving if possible the problem and making service improvements.

### 3.7 Savings

Staff Time can be saved by having one team. The Customer Care teams are currently involved with public involvement and consultation. This work will now be carried out within the new Customer & Communities, Communication, Consultation and Community Engagement Team.

## 4. **Proposed Changes to Complaints Management**

4.1 Corporate Management Team has approved in principle of having a centralised complaints team. A working group is looking at how to make the KCC complaints handling approach more responsive to customer needs. This will include:

- One contact telephone number, address and email
- Information for the public held in one place
- One KCC team:
  - With specialist staff to deal with statutory complaints
  - Meet best practice standards and any foreseeable future requirements that may be made nationally
  - To provide training for staff on complaints handling at various levels
  - Provide all the information and guidance etc. associated with complaints
  - Log and track complaints received by the Leader and Directors
  - Log and track complaints from the Local Government Ombudsman
  - In-depth knowledge of services and be able to facilitate access and ensure complaints are given the right level of priority.
  - The effective handling of alerts for Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults (SVA)
  - Advocacy and independent Adult arrangements
  - Work with the Contact Centre to log complaints.

## **Conclusion**

We are committed to listening to what residents have to say but need to do this in the most cost effective way. A centralised team to deal with complaints will be more responsive to customer needs by providing easier access and will be more efficient and cost less.

## **Recommendations**

Members of the committee are asked to note the report:

**Janice Hill**  
**Performance & Improvement Manager**

**Ex 1981**