

# SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL



## Individual Cabinet Member Report

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**Report of:** Laraine Manley, Executive Director of Resources

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**Report to:** Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources

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**Date:** 20 February 2014

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**Subject:** Complaints Policy

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**Author of Report:** Julie Bullen, Director of Customer Services

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### Summary:

The Council's current Complaints Policy has been in place since 2009. A review of the approach to complaints management identified the following issues:

- An inconsistent approach to complaint management and recording
- Problems raised by customers being dealt with formally, when there is an opportunity to resolve the problem earlier

As a result, a review of the Complaints Policy has been carried out to ensure a consistent approach, and a focus on early resolution.

The main changes in the updated Complaints Policy are:

1. The one-day period for resolving complaints informally has been extended to a three-day **problem solving** process.
2. The policy emphasises 'personal contact' with the complainant.
3. The new policy introduces a one year cut off for making a complaint.
4. Greater clarity over what is and what is not in scope of the Policy.

A review of the Council's Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy has also been carried out.

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**Reasons for Recommendations:**

A review of the Council's approach to complaints management carried out in 2012 identified a number of issues with the current approach to complaint management, including:

- An inconsistent approach to complaint management and recording
- Problems raised by customers being dealt with formally, when there is an opportunity to resolve the problem earlier)

A review of the Complaints Policy has now concluded, and the Policy has been updated to address these issues.

The updated Policy also takes into account:

1. The recent consultation carried out with Council tenants, as part of the Challenge for Change process
2. Benchmarking against the approach taken by other Local Authorities.

**Recommendations:**

Cabinet Member is asked to:

1. Agree the implementation of the revised Complaints Policy
2. Agree the implementation of the revised Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy

**Appendices:**

- A. Complaints Policy
- B. Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy

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**Background Papers:**

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**Category of Report:** OPEN

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## Statutory and Council Policy Checklist

<b>Financial Implications</b>
NO      Cleared by: Paul Jeffries
<b>Legal Implications</b>
YES      Cleared by: Steve Eccleston
<b>Equality of Opportunity Implications</b>
YES      Cleared by: Adele Robinson
<b>Tackling Health Inequalities Implications</b>
NO
<b>Human rights Implications</b>
NO
<b>Environmental and Sustainability implications</b>
NO
<b>Economic impact</b>
NO
<b>Community safety implications</b>
NO
<b>Human resources implications</b>
NO
<b>Property implications</b>
NO
<b>Area(s) affected</b>
All Wards
<b>Relevant Cabinet Portfolio Leader</b>
Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources
<b>Relevant Scrutiny Committee if decision called in</b>
Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee Scrutiny Policy & Development Committee
<b>Is the item a matter which is reserved for approval by the City Council?</b>
NO
<b>Press release</b>
NO

## Report to the Cabinet for Finance and Resources

### COMPLAINTS POLICY

#### 1.0 SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Council's current Complaints Policy has been in place since 2009.
- 1.2 A review of the Council's approach to complaints management carried out in 2012 identified a number of issues. These include:
- An inconsistent approach to complaint management and recording
  - Problems raised by customers being dealt with formally, when there is an opportunity to resolve the problem earlier
- 1.3 As a result of these findings, a review of the Complaints Policy and procedures has been carried out to ensure a consistent approach to complaints management, and a focus on the early resolution of complaints.
- 1.4 The main changes in the updated Complaints Policy are:
- The one-day period for resolving complaints informally has been extended to a three-day **problem solving** process. This is to give managers an opportunity to work with the customer to resolve the problem or agree a way forward.
  - The policy now clearly states that dealing with complaints through the problem solving approach is our preferred way.
  - The new policy emphasises 'personal contact' with the complainant. This is to encourage managers to phone the customer in order to better understand what their complaint is about, and help find a resolution.
  - The new policy introduces a one year cut off for making a complaint.
  - There is greater clarity over what is and what is not in scope of the Policy

#### 2.0 WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SHEFFIELD PEOPLE

- 2.1 The purpose of the updated Complaints Policy is to ensure that complaints about our services are dealt with effectively, consistently and fairly.
- 2.2 Through the Complaints Policy, our aim is to provide the people of Sheffield and council employees with clarity over the way that complaints about Sheffield City Council will be dealt with.

- 2.3 We also aim to provide clarity over what types problems raised by customers will and will not be dealt with through the Complaints Policy.
- 2.4 The policy clearly states that customers can make a complaint in any way they choose, including through our website, by email, by telephone, in writing or in person.
- 2.5 In implementing the Complaints Policy, our commitment will be to focus on solving the problems that customers raise with us.

### **3.0 OUTCOME AND SUSTAINABILITY**

- 3.1 In reviewing the Complaints Policy, the focus has been on putting in place an approach to complaints management that places the emphasis on resolving problems at or close to point that they occur.
- 3.2 Based on benchmarking with other Local Authorities and consultation carried out with Council Housing tenants, as part of the Challenge for Change process, the evidence is that this approach is welcomed by customers, as it provides early resolution.
- 3.3 This approach is also a more cost effective approach for the Council, as figures from the National Audit Office show that complaints resolved at the point of contact are less expensive to deal with.

### **4.0 MAIN BODY OF THE REPORT**

- 4.1 The current Complaints Policy was adopted by the Council in 2009, following a review of the Council's approach to complaints management.
- 4.2 At the same time, a small central Complaints Team was established in Customer Services to oversee the Complaints Policy, and provide support to managers dealing with complaints.
- 4.3 A review of the effectiveness of the Council's complaints processes commenced in 2012, as part of the Customer First Programme. The review identified a number of issues with the way complaints are managed. These include:
- An inconsistent approach to complaint management and recording across the organisation
  - Problems raised by customer being dealt with formally, when there is an opportunity to resolve the problem earlier
- 4.4 As a result of these findings, it was agreed to review the Complaints Policy and procedures to ensure a consistent approach to complaints management, and a focus on the early resolution of complaints.

- 4.5 The review has now concluded, and an updated Complaints Policy is attached at **Appendix A**.
- 4.6 The main changes to the Complaints Policy are:
- The one-day period for resolving complaints informally has been extended to a three-day **problem solving** process. This is to give managers an opportunity to work with the customer to resolve the problem or agree a way forward.
  - The Policy now clearly states that dealing with complaints through the problem solving approach is our preferred way.
  - The new Policy emphasises 'personal contact' with the complainant. This is to encourage managers to phone the customer in order to better understand what their complaint is about, and help find a resolution.
  - The new policy introduces a one year cut off for making a complaint. However, in exceptional circumstances, a complaint over one year old will be considered. This is in-line with the policy of other Local Authorities.
  - The Policy also introduces a 28-day period for the customer to ask for a review of the complaint investigation. Again, this is in-line with the policy of other Local Authorities.
  - The policy provides greater clarity over what is and what is not in scope of the Council's Complaints Policy. This will help both customers and managers understand which process should apply.
  - The policy states that complaints to the Leader, Cabinet Members, Chief Executive and Executive Directors will be forwarded to the relevant service. This helps manage customer expectations, and provides clarity for senior managers and Members.
  - The policy distinguishes that Member Enquiries and complaints have different processes.
- 4.7 As well as the Complaints Policy, a review of the Council's Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy has also been carried out. The original version was agreed in 2009.
- 4.8 The update (at **Appendix B**) is mainly to provide greater clarity over the purpose, scope and use of the policy. There are no significant changes to the Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy.
- 4.9 Legal implications. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

## **5.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 5.1 In reviewing the Complaints Policy, a cross-Portfolio steering group was established to ensure the views of Portfolios was taken into account. The steering group also included representative of the strategic partners' client teams.
- 5.2 As part of the review, benchmarking activity was carried out with the Core City group to look at their approach to complaints handling. This review identified that our one-day response for informal complaints was not in-line with the policy of many other authorities.
- 5.3 In addition, we have reviewed the complaints policies of a number of other Local Authorities across the country to identify good practice. This has enabled us to pick out areas for improvement, including providing greater clarity over the complaints that are outside the scope of the policy.

## **6.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 6.1 A review of the Council's approach to complaints management carried out in 2012 identified a number of issues with the current approach to complaint management, including:
- An inconsistent approach to complaint management and recording
  - Problems raised by customers being dealt with formally, when there is an opportunity to resolve the problem earlier
- 6.2 A review of the Complaints Policy has now concluded, and the Policy has been updated to address these issues.
- 6.3 The updated Policy takes account of benchmarking with other Local Authorities and the recent consultation carried out with Council tenants, as part of the Challenge for Change process.

## **7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 7.1 Cabinet Member is asked to:
1. Agree the implementation of the revised Complaints Policy
  2. Agree the implementation of the revised Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy

Julie Bullen  
Director of Customer Services