

Report of

**THE CUSTOMER SERVICES AND FUTURE
COMPLAINTS POLICY INFORMAL
TASK GROUP**

Please rate your experience

Outstanding

Excellent

Very good

Good

Average

Poor



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Chairman's Foreword

This Task Group came about as a response to difficulties all ward councillors will have experienced when trying to help residents resolve complaints about the work of Lancaster City Council. Complaints often take up much time and on occasion relatively small things expand into seemingly intractable problems. With this in mind I came to the first meetings in some trepidation at the possible sensitivities of officers over the material we were discussing. In fact officers have tackled the issue with an enthusiasm and open-mindedness that has been impressive throughout.

As a task group we benefited from Cllr. John Reynolds bringing in his inspirational colleague, Colin Parker, from Booths who challenged us to do the "one thing" that we could contribute to bringing about change to the situation. Our "one thing" has been to keep a resolute focus on the evidence of what we already do to respond to complaints, recognising what is good and may become excellent, acknowledging the simple need for training in some areas and profiting from the input of officers with particular skills in working with people who make complaints. We have also listened to our residents, through a survey, through samples of letters they have given us and through personal discussion.

Some time was spent on the problems caused by a few complaints that seem intractable. Whilst it was clear that there was little to be done now for these cases, we did profit by understanding some of the reasons why these situations came about. The task group with the support of officers, has made a series of recommendations designed to improve our listening, our response time and the way that problems are investigated if they become more serious.

Overall we recognised that the culture of Lancaster City Council needs to move on from fear of blame to an open acknowledgement that despite our best efforts occasionally we get it wrong. Things are already changing: we hope both the working of the task group and our recommendations make a substantial contribution to that process.

Many thanks to my fellow councillors, especially Cllr. Phillippa Williamson for her input and to all the officers who took part.

**Councillor Caroline Jackson
on behalf of the Task Group**

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Customer Services

- (1) That all complaints to Lancaster City Council be logged, monitored and dealt with, where possible, centrally by the Customer Services Team.
- (2) That each member of staff is responsible for customer service throughout the Council's range of services.
- (3) That the Council should take more responsibility as the 'go to' Council. Where possible avoid making referrals to other agencies and contact other organisations or agencies on behalf of complainants. where appropriate
- (4) That it be recognised across all Council services and teams that the Customer Services Team is the ultimate source of information regarding all complaints where possible.
- (5) That the Task Group notes that the City Council has no officer as part of the complaints handling process who specifically deals with mental health or vulnerable people. The Task Group however, noted that these issues were dealt with positively by officers but recommend that this situation is kept under review.

Recommendation 2 – Customer Service Strategy

- (1) That the Directorate for Communities and the Environment draft a brief statement on the Customer Service Strategy, based on our attitudes and behaviours to customer service.
- (2) To support the Customer Service Strategy that two simple flow charts be produced, one for internal complainants and one for external complainants, outlining in simple, accessible language the basic complaints procedure.



Recommendation 3 – Amendments to the Complaints Policy and Guidance on Handling Complaints

- (1) That the term “Service Users” be replaced with “Customers” throughout both the Complaints Policy and the Guidance on Handling Complaints.
- (2) That the following amendments be made to the Complaints Policy;
 - a. That at Paragraph 5.2, “*complaints*” be replaced with “*problems*”.
 - b. That at Paragraph 9.4, add “*welcome comments, but*” after “*The council...*”
 - c. That at Paragraph 11.5 “Within each Service” be deleted.
- (3) That the following amendments be made to the Guidance on Handling Complaints:
 - a. That wording at paragraph be added at Paragraph 7 to include guidance on how Managers and Supervisors should support frontline staff to resolve problems at the point of service delivery and reference to Line Managers responsibilities.
 - b. At Paragraph 13.1, “complaint” be replaced with “problem”.
 - c. At Paragraph 13.2, add in “find out what the complainant wants/desired outcomes”.
 - d. At Paragraph 13.36, add wording on the tone of response letters to complainants and guidance on the way to respond.
 - e. At Paragraph 14, include further guidance on what should be expected from Stage 1 of the complaints process and that where necessary, after informing the complainant, complaints should be sent back to Stage 1 if the Stage 2 handler feels there is more work to be undertaken to resolve the problem.

Note: A copy of the existing Policy and Guidance is appended to this report.

Recommendation 4 – Training

- (1) Provision of training on complaints handling to be provided to all new Councillors.
- (2) Training to be provided to officers on letter writing, particularly with regard to the handling of complaints.
- (3) That the Task Group recommends the continued positive use of social media by the Council in order to promote the services provided by the Council and to highlight best practice.

Recommendation 5 – Plain English Mark

- (1) The Council explore the possibility of signing up to the Plain English Mark.

Recommendation 6 – Executive Team

- (1) That Complaints be a standing item on all Lancaster City Council Executive Team agenda and that the Team be briefed at each meeting on current complaints and any of the lessons that can be learnt.
- (2) That Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are set for all senior managers on handling of complaints and customer satisfaction in accordance with the Council Plan.
- (3) That the Customer Complaints Survey results from this review be circulated to the Executive Team and other relevant officers.
- (4) That it be noted that a press release has been issued to inform of results and, those persons completing the survey have been thanked.

Recommendation 7 – Persistent Complainants

- (1) That reports to Lancaster City Council's Executive Team on the designation and review of Persistent Complainers be shared with the complainant, with comments sought and taken into consideration prior to being reported to Executive Team.
- (2) Once the Council has gone through the designation process, we will share with the complainant what we will do and what we expect from them.
- (3) The system should separate genuine complaints from vexatious complaints and this process should sit with the Customers Services Team for them to review and manage.
- (4) Once a complainant is designated as "Persistent" further contact should be directed through the Customer Services Team who will, where possible, deal with any genuine service requests and alternative complaints separately to the main complaint for which the designation of Persistent Complainer has been applied.

Recommendation 8 – Stage 2 Complaints

- (1) All possible efforts to be made by Officers to ensure that complaints are resolved at Stage 1 rather than moving to Stage 2. This should include senior officer advice and conflict resolution where appropriate.
- (2) If the Stage 2 officer feels that the matter has not been dealt with thoroughly then the complaint should be referred back to the Stage 1 Officer for further investigation.

Introduction

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee first discussed the creation of an Informal Task Group to consider customer service and future complaints policies in December 2016 when it was referred to the Committee from the Budget and Performance Panel. A scoping document setting the scope, purpose of the Task Group and Terms of Reference for the Group was then agreed at the September 2017 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

1. Role of the Task Group

The Task Group was set up as an opportunity to embed excellent customer services across the Council.

It was hoped that the Task Group would review the Customer Services Strategy and Complaints Policy by considering best practice and stakeholder evidence and make recommendations for a framework from which officers could work up a detailed strategy to present to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2.1 Terms of Reference

The following Terms of Reference for the Task Group were agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. To identify the reasons why the Council should prioritise the development of a formal Customer Services Strategy.
2. To identify the key themes and actions that should be addressed in a Customer Services Strategy – based on examples of best/good practice and evidence from stakeholders.
3. To review the current Complaints Policy to include consideration of best/good practice and evidence gathering and the ways this could be improved upon. To make recommendations to Overview and Scrutiny.

2.2 Membership of the Group

The Task Group comprised of Councillors Caroline Jackson (Chairman), Tracy Brown, John Reynolds, David Whitaker and Philippa Williamson.

The Task Group was supported by Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment, David Brown – Interim Monitoring Officer, Alison McGurk - Customer Services Manager, Mark Cassidy – Planning Manager, Will Griffith – Operations Manager Public Realm, Peter Linsley – Service Support manager, Beth Nortley – Public Realm Supervisor, Stephen Metcalfe - Principal Democratic Support Officer and Sarah Moorghen - Democratic Support Officer.

The Task Group also gratefully acknowledges the contributions and evidence freely given by:

Colin Parker of Booths Supermarket

Participants of the “Help us shape how we deal with Future Complaints” Survey

1.3 Timetable of Meetings

Date of Meeting	Who Gave Evidence?	Issues Scrutinised
22/01/2018	<p>Stephen Metcalfe – Principal Democratic Services Officer</p> <p>Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>Alison McGurk – Customer Services Manager</p>	<p>Terms of Reference and Methodology of Evidence Gathering.</p> <p>The Current Position in the District and the Way Forward.</p>
16/04/2018	<p>Councillor John Reynolds and Colin Parker</p> <p>Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>Alison McGurk – Customer Services Manager</p>	<p>Discussions with Booths Supermarket</p> <p>Consideration of example Policies and Strategies from Local Authorities and Private Companies.</p>
27/04/2018	<p>Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>Alison McGurk – Customer Services Manager</p>	<p>Discussions following the Information provide at the previous meeting (Discussions with Booth Supermarket)</p>
23/05/2018	<p>Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>Alison McGurk – Customer Services Manager</p>	<p>Consideration of complaints information</p>
01/08/2018	<p>Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>Alison McGurk – Customer Services Manager</p>	<p>Survey Results – Help Us Shape How We Deal With Future Complaints</p>

05/09/2018	<p>Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>Alison McGurk – Customer Services Manager</p>	<p>Current Complaints Policies and Guidance</p>
24/09/2018	<p>Mark Davies – Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>Mark Cassidy - Planning Manager</p> <p>Will Griffith – Operations Manager Public Realm</p> <p>Peter Linsley – Service Support Manager</p> <p>Beth Nortley – Public Realm Supervisor</p>	<p>Discussions with Officers</p>
07/11/2018	<p>Mark Davies - Director for Communities and the Environment</p> <p>David Brown – Interim Monitoring Officer</p> <p>Councillor Caroline Jackson - Chairman</p>	<p>Customer Services Strategy</p> <p>Persistent Complainants</p> <p>Conclusions and Recommendations</p>

3. Documentary Evidence Considered

The Task Group considered a range of evidence including best practice examples of strategies and policies, the current complaints policy and guidance, data on the complaints spreadsheet and Ombudsman cases as well as examples of complaints letters. The Task Group also conducted a survey and invited a number of officers to discuss complaints handling in their Service.

4. Status of Report

This report is the work of the Informal Task Group, on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and where opinions are expressed they are not necessarily those of Lancaster City Council.

5. Background and Context

Complaints monitoring is regularly reported to Budget and Performance Panel. At the September 2016 meeting the Panel considered complaints monitoring, the types of complaints received by the Council and how these are recorded. They also discussed the complaints procedure and the Customer Services Strategy and agreed to add this as an item on their Work Programme for further consideration.



One of the Task Group's key aims was to consider a Customer Services Strategy and identify any key issues and reasons why the Council should prioritise the development of a Strategy. It was also to review the current complaints procedure and make recommendations on any improvements that could be made to the accompanying policies and guidance.

It was perceived that there was a need to embed excellent customer service across the whole Council and a need to respond properly and appropriately to changing customer expectations and the changing methods and channels through which customers preferred to contact the Council.

There was a need to look at how best to deal with complaints, which are escalated and to understand the root cause of these complaints and how they could be resolved better at the point of origin to prevent ongoing and/or persistent complainants.

6. Information Gathering

6.1 Evidence

At the first meeting of the Task Group the current position and the way forward was considered. The Group discussed the need to progress away from a process led approach, towards a more outcome led approach to customer services, which empowers staff with more responsibility and flexibility to deal with complaints or service requests at the first point of contact.

The Task Group discussed the methodology for the way forward and decided to obtain evidence from a range of sources including good practice examples of strategies and policies, complaints data, feedback and examples of complaints from members of the public and discussions with officers.



6.2 Discussions with Booths

The Group invited Councillor John Reynolds and Colin Parker from Booths Supermarket to the second meeting.

At the first meeting it was noted that Booths Supermarket was an example of an organisation with strong ideas on customer service and complaints handling. Booths had overhauled their customer services and complaints handling procedures in the last 5 to 10 years and undergone significant cultural change at the same time.

Booths aim is to put the customer experience at the centre of their customer services strategy. Their strategy is based on a clear sense of brand and an action plan which encourages all members of staff to take ownership of customer services by making small changes in how they work. Their aim is to avoid having a large unachievable action plan imposed by senior managers but rather gives all staff the opportunity to engage and make real cultural change through small changes, conversation and ownership.

6.3 Complaints information

The Council's internal monitoring systems have also been considered. This includes the complaints, referred to the Ombudsman since 2014, two Complaints Monitoring Reports presented to the Budget and Performance Panel, and the complaints spreadsheet which listed complaints received by the Council in the 2018/19 municipal year.

It was noted that the complaints spreadsheet is to be filled in by each Service Complaints Officer when a complaint is received. However, it is not a complete record as it is not always completed by officers. The spreadsheet also only contains formal complaints and does not deal with complaints dealt with through alternative routes, or which are resolved prior to a formal complaint being logged.

Also as part of the process Task Group Members also provided anecdotal evidence gathered from complainants both past and present.

6.4 Survey Results

The Group was keen to engage with members of the public and actual complainants. To do this a survey was commissioned titled "Help us shape how we deal with future complaints". The survey was available for all members of the public to complete. This was publicised using a press release, social media and also through Customer Services.

90 Members of the public completed the survey, though many had skipped a number of the questions. There were a wide range of issues complained about. A number of those surveyed said that they had encountered issues which they had not complained about. The reasons people may decide not to pursue complaints, including feeling disillusionment with the Council, were considered. It was noted that the majority of complaints are received via email or Talk Back forms and this reflects the changing way in which the public engage with the Council.



6.5 Current Complaints Policy and Guidance

The Group looked in more detail at the current Complaints Policy and accompanying Guidance.

It was agreed that the Policy and the Guidance are on the whole good but it is felt that sometimes these are not fully applied by staff dealing with complaints throughout the Council. Minor amendments have been recommended to the Policy and Guidance for clarity and consistency. The Group do not feel that a re-write of either document is necessary.

6.6 Discussions with Officers

In order to get a better understanding of the different types of complaints and how they are dealt with across the Council officers from different services were invited to attend a Task Group meeting.

Officers reported on the types of complaints received within the services. The Group then considered the different ways complaints are dealt with across the Council depending on the type and context of the complaint.

Officers reinforced the Task Group's thoughts that the Complaints Policy and Guidance are useful, but probably not widely known about.



6.7 Persistent Complainers

Throughout the Group's work the issue of persistent complainers came up numerous times. The Task Group invited the Monitoring Officer to its November 2018 meeting to discuss the issues surrounding ongoing persistent complainants and the merit of formally designating particularly persistent and vexatious complainers as "Persistent Complainers".

7. Findings

After considering the current complaints procedure and guidance, and the evidence gathered by the Task Group it is the feeling of the Group that the current procedures are adequate and the main issue is how they are applied across the Council.

The Group feel that there is a need for greater awareness and training on the complaints procedure and for staff to feel more empowered to resolve issues at the point of contact and prevent matters becoming complaints in the first place. For this to happen staff must feel supported by their Managers and this may require a cultural shift in how complaints are dealt with across the Council.

The Task Group hopes that by empowering frontline staff to deal with issues as they occur this will reduce the number of formal complaints, prevent those formal complaints resulting in further complaints or becoming protracted, with the aim to ultimately improve customer satisfaction.

8. Recommendations and Notes

Set out below are the recommendations that have emerged from the Task Group's work.

Recommendation 1 – Customer Services Strategy

- (1) That all complaints to Lancaster City Council be logged, monitored and dealt with, where possible, centrally by the Customer Services Team.
- (2) That each member of staff is responsible for customer service throughout the Council's range of services.
- (3) That the Council should take more responsibility as the 'go to' Council. Where possible avoid making referrals to other agencies and contact other organisations or agencies on behalf of complainants where appropriate
- (4) That it be recognised across all Council services and teams that the Customer Services Team is the ultimate source of information regarding all complaints where possible.
- (5) That the Task Group notes that the City Council has no officer as part of the complaints handling process who specifically deals with mental health or vulnerable people. The Task Group however, noted that these issues were dealt with positively by officers but recommend that this situation is kept under review.

The Task Group acknowledges that good customer service is the responsibility of every member of staff. As well as the staff in Customer Services there are a wide range of staff across all Council Services who have regular contact with members of the public and each of these interactions shape people's perceptions of the Council.

It is believed that there is a need for all staff, across the Council, to feel empowered with the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with more issues directly at the point they arise. The Group feel that this will prevent minor issues and services requests developing unnecessarily into complaints.

The Task Group heard that increasingly the City Council is viewed by its residents as the generic "Council" with members of the public often contacting the City Council with a range of issues which actually relate to other Councils/agencies including Lancashire County Council, Parish/Town Councils, the Environment Agency, Lancashire Fire and Rescue, or the Police.



Members feel that referrals to other Councils/agencies were a common source of frustration for members of the public and could lead to unnecessary complaints.

The Group agree that there is need for the City Council to embrace being the 'go-to' agency by, where possible, being more proactive and taking ownership of a broader range of queries.

It was noted that complaints are handled very differently within various City Council Services, including Planning and Salt Ayre who operate their own customer service.

It is also evident that complaints are not logged and monitored consistently across the Council.

The Group recommend that there be a system developed whereby all complaints are coordinated and monitored centrally by Customer Services. More work is required on how exactly this will work but it is hoped that Customer Services can be recognised as the central source of knowledge regarding complaints.

Recommendation 2 – Customer Service Strategy

- (1) That the Directorate for Communities and the Environment draft a brief statement on the Customer Service Strategy, based on our attitudes and behaviour to customer service.
- (2) To support the Customer Service Strategy that two simple flow charts be produced, one for internal complainants and one for external complainants, outlining in simple, accessible language the basic complaints procedure.

The Task Group, having considered examples of Customer Service Strategies, speaking to officers, and considering the Council's currently policies, believes that there is merit in having a written Customer Service Strategy.

The Group feel however, that this should be in the form of a basic and brief statement which focuses on attitudes and behaviours rather than being process and procedure driven. It is hoped that such a strategy will give staff guidance and the confidence to deal with issues their own way.

To supplement this the Group recommend that flow charts showing the key stages of the complaints procedure be produced for both members of the public and employees of the Council.

The Task Group hope that by making available these simplified, user-friendly documents, staff will gain a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to customer service.

Recommendation 3 – Amendments to the Complaints Policy and the Guidance on Handling Complaints

- (1) That the term "Service Users" be replaced with "Customers" throughout both the Complaints Policy and the Guidance on Handling Complaints.
- (2) That the following amendments be made to the Complaints Policy;
 - d. That at Paragraph 5.2, "*complaints*" be replaced with "*problems*".
 - e. That at Paragraph 9.4, add "*welcome comments, but*" after "*The council...*"
 - f. That at Paragraph 11.5 "*Within each Service*" be deleted.
- (3) That the following amendments be made to the Guidance on Handling Complaints:
 - a. That wording at paragraph be added at Paragraph 7 to include guidance on how Managers and Supervisors should support frontline staff to resolve problems at the point of service delivery and reference to Line Managers responsibilities.
 - b. At Paragraph 13.1, "*complaint*" be replaced with "*problem*".

- c. At Paragraph 13.2, add in “find out what the complainant wants/desired outcomes”.
- d. At Paragraph 13.36, add wording on the tone of response letters to complainants and guidance on the way to respond.
- e. At Paragraph 14, include further guidance on what should be expected from Stage 1 of the complaints process and that where necessary, after informing the complainant, complaints should be sent back to Stage 1 if the Stage 2 handler feels there is more work to be undertaken to resolve the problem.

Note: A copy of the existing Policy and Guidance is appended to this report.

The Task Group are of the opinion that, overall both the Complaints Policy and the accompanying Guidance are thorough documents which serve their purpose more than adequately.

Therefore, the Group do not recommend any wholesale changes to either the Policy or the Guidance, but have suggested a few minor amendments aimed at providing some additional clarity and consistency to the documents.

Recommendation 4 – Training

- (1) Provision of training on complaints handling to be provided to all new Councillors.
- (2) Training to be provided to officers on letter writing, particularly with regard to the handling of complaints.
- (3) That the Task Group recommends the continued positive use of social media by the Council in order to promote the services provided by the Council and to highlight best practice.



It is felt that good communication is a vital skill when dealing with complaints. The Group took time to consider examples of complaints letters sent by the Council to complainants and feel that there is a need to avoid using jargon and overly complicated, technical or formal language when responding to complaints.

Members believe that there would be some merit in providing training on complaints handling to staff, particularly with regard to letter writing. This would complement the Values and Behaviour Training which all Council staff have recently received.

From personal experience the Task Group agreed that there is a need to provide Councillors with some degree of training on complaints handling and the use of social media.

Recommendation 5 – Plain English Mark

- (1) The Council explore the possibility of signing up to the Plain English Mark.

Members feel that, on occasion, letters can be too technical and that this can lead to misunderstandings and exacerbate situations unnecessarily. The Group discussed the benefits of simplifying the wording in letters and using plain English as well as being more positive and friendly.

The Task Group believe that it would be beneficial to explore the possibility of signing up to the Plain English Mark and what this would entail. Subject to the outcome of this, the Group would, in principal, support a recommendation that the Council signs up to the Plain English Mark.

Recommendation 6 –Executive Team

- (5) That Complaints be a standing item on all Lancaster City Council Executive Team agenda and that the Team be briefed at each meeting on current complaints and any of the lessons that can be learnt.
- (6) That Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are set for all senior managers on handling of complaints and customer satisfaction in accordance with the Council Plan.
- (7) That the Customer Complaints Survey results from this review be circulated to the Executive Team and other relevant officers.
- (8) That it be noted that a press release has been issued to inform of results and, those persons completing the survey have been thanked.

Any cultural change with regard to customer service and complaints handling needs to come from the top.

The Task Group recommend that one way to do this is to ensure that the Senior Management Team are regularly briefed on complaints and ongoing issues. By doing this it is hoped that complaints will have an increased profile at a strategic level.

Recommendation 7 – Persistent Complainants

- (1) That reports to Lancaster City Council's Executive Team on the designation and review of Persistent Complainers be shared with the complainant, with comments sought and taken into consideration prior to being reported to Executive Team.
- (2) Once the Council has gone through the designation process, we will share with the complainant what we will do and what we expect from them.
- (3) The system should separate genuine complaints from vexatious complaints and this process should sit with the Customers Services Team for them to review and manage.

- (4) Once a complainant is designated as “Persistent” further contact should be directed through the Customer Services Team who will, where possible, deal with any genuine service requests and alternative complaints separately to the main complaint for which the designation of Persistent Complainer has been applied.

The Group considered the issues surrounding persistent complainers. Members feel that the best way to tackle persistent complainers is to prevent them becoming persistent in the first place.

The Council currently has two complainants who are formally designated as “Persistent Complainers” and Members feel that, in certain extreme cases, there is a justifiable and practical need to make such designations.

It is felt that while the designation of “Persistent Complainers” allows the Council to limit communications with complainants, every effort should still be made to resolve ongoing issues and deal with genuine service requests. The Group suggest that reports to Management Team on making the “Persistent Complainant” designation should be shared with the complainant in question. Also with any review of the status the complainant should be given the opportunity to engage with and comment on the report regarding the designation.

Once a member of the public is designated as a “Persistent Complainer” all communication should be directed through a central point at the Council, ideally Customer Services, though some further work will be needed to consider exactly how this would work.

Recommendation 8 – Stage 2 Complaints

- (1) All possible efforts to be made by Officers to ensure that complaints are resolved at Stage 1 rather than moving to Stage 2. This should include senior officer advice and conflict resolution where appropriate.
- (2) If the Stage 2 officer feels that the matter has not been dealt with thoroughly then the complaint should be referred back to the Stage 1 Officer for further investigation.

It is felt that a lot of complaints come from issues to do with process and the transition from a Stage 1 to a Stage 2 complaint. These issues can detract from the original problem.

The Group agree that the focus should be on resolving the issue from which the complaint originated and all possible efforts should be made to resolve the complaint at Stage 1. Officers dealing with Stage 2 complaints should also not hesitate to refer matters back to Stage 1 officers if they feel more could have been done to resolve the issue before progressing the complaint to the next stage.

