

**Contact:** Melanie Gadd  
**Tel:** 020 8583 2245  
**E-Mail:** [melanie.gadd@hounslow.gov.uk](mailto:melanie.gadd@hounslow.gov.uk)

**CIT – 23 May 2005**  
**CMT - 25 May 2005**  
**Executive Briefing - 14 June 2005**  
**Executive Public – 12 July 2005**

## **REVISED CORPORATE COMPLAINTS POLICY AND PROCEDURES**

**Report by: Councillor Digby Jacks**

### **Summary**

This report sets out a revised Corporate Complaints Policy for Hounslow. It also sets out a number of procedures through which the Policy will be delivered.

#### **1.0 RECOMMENDATION**

- 1.1 That the revised Corporate Complaints Policy, together with the accompanying procedures, be adopted.

#### **2.0 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The current policy governing the way Hounslow handles complaints was agreed by the then Policy Committee in April 1992. A review is therefore due, especially bearing in mind:-
- the result of The Best Value Customer Services Review
  - comments following the audit by KPMG
  - experience with the Local Government Ombudsman
  - good practice adopted by other boroughs that are performing well.
- 2.2 A revised policy resulting from the review is attached. It should be stressed here that the review has concentrated on the way the Council receives and handles complaints from members of the public. The review has not covered issues relating to Members' casework/enquiries, some of which can, of course, involve pursuing complaints on behalf of constituents. These issues will be the subject of a separate report which, amongst other things, will explore the relationship between Members' casework/enquiries and complaints and set timescales for dealing with Members' casework/enquiries.
- 2.3 This report does not cover complaint issues relating to the Freedom of Information Act, this will be the subject of a separate report.

2.4 The major departures from the existing policy and procedures are as follows:-

- Timescales, it is now apparent that the timescales set in 1992 for responding to complaints are unrealistic and the new timescales set are consistent with the views of KPMG and with those adopted by other London Boroughs.
- Remedies and redress, in striving to achieve excellence it is important that the Council accepts that we do sometimes get things wrong and in so doing it is important that there is a process in place which enables Hounslow to make amends and offer redress which could include financial compensation. Seeking to maximize the local settlement of complaints is important as this will have an impact on the number of formal investigations that the Local Government Ombudsman will feel inclined to undertake.
- Freedom of Information, there is a requirement for the authority to deal with complaints received in respect of Freedom of Information issues and this requirement is reflected in the revised procedures.
- Customer monitoring, this will provide Hounslow with invaluable information regarding who is accessing the complaints policy. The data can then be used to identify areas of the community who, for whatever reason, are not using the complaints process. In this connection the Corporate Equality and Community Cohesion Plan, and in particular the Relevance Test, recognised the need to carry out equalities impact assessments in respect of the complaints process.
- Satisfaction Survey, it is important that our customers are given the opportunity to provide feedback in respect of how Hounslow have dealt with their complaint. As such each department will be responsible for carrying out regular surveys in addition to the one that will be carried out corporately.
- Vexatious complainants, this type of complainant is becoming more and more prevalent in the complaints arena and the Council needs to adopt procedures to ensure that complaints progressed by vexatious complainants are investigated in accordance with the complaints process whilst at the same time safeguarding the Council's resources.
- Revised leaflet, the revised leaflet is attached. It now includes a detachable form that can be completed and sent to the Council in order to lodge a complaint.
- Procedures: The revised policy is also accompanied with a set of internal procedures. No apologies are made for the inclusion of these procedures. The procedures through which the current policy has been delivered have evolved over time and have never been properly documented. The review has provided an opportunity to examine these procedures, clarifying them as appropriate, and to document them, thus adding transparency to the complaints process.

2.5 The current policy comprises a three stage process in dealing with complaints and there is no proposal to change this three stage approach. However, during discussion of the draft revised policy at the meeting of Overview and Scrutiny a proposal was again put forward to involve Members at Stage 3 of the process by enabling the complainant to exercise the right to have their complaint investigated by a Panel of Members. This proposal was put forward in recognition of the fact that Members have an important role to play in making representations on behalf of complainants, in accordance with their advocacy role and Article 2.03 (a)(ii) of the Council's Constitution which states:-

"All Councillors will represent their communities and bring their views into the Council's decision-making process, ie. become the advocate of and for their communities."

2.6 Many Councillors do regularly make representations on behalf of their constituents and support them throughout the entire complaints process and this is entirely appropriate. However, the proposal to set up a Panel of Members at Stage 3 of the process is not considered appropriate for a number of reasons.

2.7 It is not Members' role to become involved in the process of determining the outcome of Stage 3 complaints as the role of the Councillor is to determine policy and not involve themselves in operational or process issues. The proper role of Councillors though amongst other things the scrutiny function, is to ensure that the complaints system, including individual investigations, is both robust and adequate to deliver what it is intended to do, ie. a clear and simple means for members of the public to make complaints about Council services and seek redress, if appropriate.

2.8 The Council already has a robust complaints process which has been tried and tested over the past 10 years and the proposed amendments will strengthen the process even further, to the benefit of users. The intention is to seek external accreditation for the quality of our complaints system in the future and Members will be kept informed of progress.

<b>Background Papers:</b>
<b>This report has been or is due to be considered by:</b>
<b>This report is relevant to the following wards/areas:</b>