

Contact: Councillor Mark Bowen
Tel: 020-8583-2261
E-Mail: Mark.Bowen@hounslow.gov.uk

Executive Committee – Tuesday, 27 June 2006
Revision to London Borough of Hounslow
Complaints Management Response Times and Performance Targets

Report by: Councillor Mark Bowen – Deputy Leader
Executive Lead Member for Customer Services & Complaints

SUMMARY

1.0. As part of its commitment to make the Council more responsive to local residents, this report represents the first immediate first step, which is to put forward proposals to revise the response times for dealing with complaints from both Members of the public and elected representatives. This report also introduces clear timescales for dealing with enquiries from both Members of the public and elected representatives.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Executive readopts the previous Complaints Policy of the Council (April, 1992) as outlined in Paragraph 3.7.
- 2.2 That the Executive agrees the targets for performance for 2006/07 as set out in Paragraph 4.3.
- 2.3 That the Executive adopts the timescales for dealing with enquiries from Councillors, MPs and Members of the GLA as laid out in Paragraph 4.4.
- 2.4 That the Executive adopts the timescales for dealing with enquiries from Members of the Public as laid out in Paragraph 4.5.
- 2.5 That the Executive agrees that the Lead Member write to the Chairman of Overview & Scrutiny, inviting the involvement of either the Overview & Scrutiny or Budget & Performance Panel as outlined in Paragraph 4.6.
- 2.6 That every Director be instructed to communicate the outcome of this Report, including the new Executive's strong commitment to the guidance given by the Audit Commission in Paragraph 3.4.

3.0 **BACKGROUND**

3.1 At the 12 July 2005 Executive Meeting, the previous administration amended the Council Complaints policy, to include a significant change to the response times for dealing with customer complaints. The timescales changed to:

- Stage One customer complaints - 15 working days.
- Stage Two customer complaints - 20 working days.
- Stage Three customer complaints - 30 working days.

3.2 This decision was 'called-in' (Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 16 (f)) by the Budget & Performance Scrutiny Panel, though not heard until 6 September 2005. One of the reasons given for the call-in by the three Members who made the request was that the change in policy would make the Council less responsive to those who feel they have the need to complain.

3.3 Further strengthening the case against the increase in the response time was, the Audit Commission's report on Customer Services at Hounslow Council, published in June 2005, which stated, amongst other things, the following:

"In particular the council is in the lowest quartile for complainants satisfied with the handling of their complaints, both nationally, and within London."

"There is a negative perception from service users as to the effort involved to make a complaint and the time taken to follow this up. Members of the public interviewed in the course of the inspection indicated they did not feel that their complaints were quickly actioned by the council, and that they were not kept informed as to the progress made. They felt that a complaint was unlikely to be satisfactorily resolved at the first point of contact. In 2003/04 only 23 per cent of residents surveyed for the best value performance indicator who had made a complaint were then satisfied with the handling of the complaint."

3.4 The same report recommended that the Council needed to:

"Ensure that complaints are viewed positively and routinely used in the improvement of service planning and delivery. Complainants should be kept informed of the progress of their complaint where it is not possible to respond within set deadlines."

3.5 With regards to the issue of dealing with complaints from Members, the report that was considered by the Executive on 12 July 2005 stated that:

"The review had not covered issues relating to Members' casework/enquiries, some of which could, of course, involve pursuing complaints on behalf of constituents. The Executive noted that these issues would be the subject of a separate report which, amongst other things, would explore the relationship between Members' casework/ enquiries and complaints and set timescales for dealing with Members' casework/enquiries."

Unfortunately, the referenced separate report was never considered by the previous administration. This report will therefore consider the timescales for dealing with complaints and enquiries from Councillors, MPs and Members of the GLA.

- 3.6 The Hounslow Conservative Group Manifesto at the 2006 local election included a pledge to ensure that:

“the Council was more responsive to residents, starting by repealing Labour’s ill thought out decision to increase the timescale for responding to complaints and establishing a cross party panel of councillors to adjudicate at the final stage of the complaints procedure.”

- 3.7 The original Complaints Policy had the following response times:

- Stage One and Stage Two customer complaints - 10 working days.
- Stage Three customer complaints - 20 working days.
- Ombudsman enquiries - 28 days.
- Complaints from Council Members and MPs - 7 working days.
- Complaints from the Leader, Deputy Leader, Chairs of Committee and Leader of the Minority Parties - 48 hours (verbally or in writing).

Note: At the time of the original Complaints Policy, the GLA did not exist. Therefore any reference to Council Members and MPs will include Members of the GLA in the future.

- 3.8 This report does not cover complaint issues relating to the Freedom of Information Act, which may be dealt with internally by the relevant department, depending on the nature of the complaint, but ultimately will be determined by the Information Commissioner.

4.0 **WAY FORWARD**

- 4.1 It is proposed that the Executive readopt each of the response times outlined in Paragraph 3.7.

- 4.2 The timescale pertaining to Complaints from Councillors and MPs applies to both Stages One and Two. The timescale at Stage Three will be identical to that for customer complaints at the same stage.

- 4.3 For the purpose of monitoring performance over the next year, the following performance targets are proposed for each of the response times:

- Stage One - 80%
- Stage Two - 80%
- Stage Three - 70%
- Stage Four - 80%
- Councillor Complaints - 80%

This performance information will be reported quarterly to Executive in the regular performance plan.

The lower target for dealing with Stage Three complaints is reflective of the fact that this is the area of greatest complexity and there is a small resource team of two officers who also deals with request from the Ombudsman cases. In addition, this particular target will be the subject of further review given the intention of the Executive to introduce a Members Panel to adjudicate on Stage Three complaints.

- 4.4 The 1992 Report was silent on the matter of Councillor and MP enquiries. It is therefore recommended that the timescale for dealing with these will be identical to that for Complaints from Council Members and MPs as laid out in Paragraph 3.7.
- 4.5 The timescale for dealing with enquiries from Members of the Public will be identical to that for Stage One complaints as laid out in Paragraph 3.7.
- 4.6 In relation to the second part of the pledge as outlined in Paragraph 3.6, it is proposed that before any Member Panel be established to adjudicate on Stage Three complaints that the Lead Member write to the Chairman of Overview & Scrutiny and ask that his Committee offer its opinion on how such a panel should operate. The current intention is that a Report will be taken to the Executive towards the end of the year.

5.0 **COMMENTS OF Director of Finance**

The Director of Finance comments that complaints management forms part of the base work of Departments. The cost therefore falls on existing budgets. However, Stage Three complaints can be complex and may need further resource in the Council. If this is the case a further report addressing the cost may be necessary.

6.0 **COMMENTS OF Director of Legal Service**

The Director has been consulted on this report and his comments are incorporated into the body of the report.

Background papers:

Complaints Procedure Report to Policy Committee April 1992
Amendments to the Complaints Procedure Report to Executive 2005 (12 July 2005)
Audit Commission Inspection report on Customer Services at Hounslow Council - June 2005
Hounslow Conservative Manifesto - 2006 Local Election

This report has been or is due to be considered by:

CMT meeting -
Executive Public Meeting -

This report is relevant to the following wards/areas:

All