



REPORT OF:	HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICES
AUTHOR:	ANDREW BIRCHER
TELEPHONE:	01737 276334
E-MAIL:	Andrew.Bircher@reigate-banstead.gov.uk
TO:	STANDARDS COMMITTEE
DATE:	2 ND FEBRUARY 2004

AGENDA ITEM NO:		WARD(S) AFFECTED:	N/A
------------------------	--	--------------------------	-----

SUBJECT:	COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE
PURPOSE OF THE REPORT:	TO CONSIDER A NEW COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE FOR CONSULTATION
RECOMMENDATIONS: 1. To consider the new Complaints Procedure and agree that it be used as the basis for consultation; and 2. Subject to the outcome of the consultation exercise the Complaints Procedure be submitted to <i>Executive/Council</i> at the earliest opportunity	

Background

1. The existing Complaints Procedure (called Your Right to Complain), is out of date. There are references in it which need changing as staff / roles have changed, in addition to which it is appropriate to review the way complaints are handled within the Council, and this has lead to the production of a new Complaints Procedure. This Procedure is what is now being presented to the Standards Committee for comment/approval.

Factors for Consideration

2. Greater emphasis needs to be put on the recording, collation, and interpretation of complaints, and the way in which these are handled by the Council. The Council has established, as part of the Change Programme, a project known as "Driven by the Customer", which aims to change the way in which Customer Service is offered by the Council, and complaint handling forms a key part of that project.
3. A starting point is the commitment we make to the customer through the Complaints Procedure and this is what is put before the Standards Committee now. What will then follow, when systems and training procedures have been put in place, will be a Council wide re-launch of complaint handling procedures. This will involve internal procedures, training on the new procedures, a systems launch, and better data collection and reporting. The Standards Committee is not being asked to approve these subsequent arrangements, as they will be internal to ensuring that the Complaint Procedure is adhered to and exploited to the advantage of the customer and the Council.
4. All Heads of Service and the Directors have been consulted on the Procedure. It has been referred to the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services.

There has been consultation with other Councils in Surrey to look at their complaints procedure, and this policy adopts best practice from those sources, as well as reflecting the Local Government Ombudsman's best practice guidance.

5. The branding of the document will change if/when new branding is agreed by the Council. This document will be made available through the internet, from Help Shops or can be posted to customers on request. Although it has a form, which a customer can complete in order to complain, we will, of course, accept complaints made in different ways (over the phone, via e-mail in writing, face to face). However, all complaints, will be treated in accordance with this Procedure.
6. The main changes between this and the old Procedure (attached) are:
 - Recognising the importance of verbal complaints as a source of feedback which we need to take more seriously
 - Clarifying the referral process in the case of stage 2 complaints – these now to come to the Chief Executive's office
 - Provides a definition of a complaint, based on what the Ombudsman suggests
 - Clarification of some of the timescales for dealing with complaints and making them consistent with what is said in other Council wide and service specific charters

Resource Implications

7. At the moment the resource implications for launching the new Procedure are small. In due course, systems, training and internal procedures will be required, which will be relatively staff intensive, but this will be met by the "Driven by the Customer " project and already has part funding in place through the E-Gov programme.

Conclusions

8. Subject to any comments from the Committee it is proposed that the framework be referred to the *Executive*, Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Party Groups represented on the Council for comment.

Reasons

9. The reasons for this are:
 - Greater focus placed on complaints as a source of feedback on how we are doing, including verbal as well as other forms,
 - Clearer definition of what a complaint is,
 - Clearer definition of how we shall treat the customer when dealing with complaint, including timescales,
 - Clearer layout of the stages of complaint handling,
 - More information on who to contact when complaining,
 - Assists with an overall change of culture in the Council to make us more customer focussed.

Background Papers:

Existing (old) Complaints Procedure

New Complaints Procedure