

REPORT TO THE CABINET

10 June, 2014.

Cabinet Member : Councillor Ioan Thomas (Customer Care)

Subject : The Complaints Procedure

Contact officers : Dilys Phillips and Gwenan Parry.

Decision sought

To adopt a new complaints procedure for the Council, as detailed in the Appendix.

Local member's views

Not a local matter.

Introduction

1. The Cabinet is requested to adopt a new Complaints Procedure in accordance with the policy as set out in the Appendix.
2. The characteristics of the new procedure are:-
 - 2.1. An emphasis on resolving complaints, and doing so swiftly. To promote this, the new procedure is a two-step process, comprising of an informal resolution and a formal investigation.
 - 2.2. The use of Galw Gwynedd as a central contact point for all formal complaints. This will allow consistency in receiving and recording complaints, assisting complainants and monitoring responses.
 - 2.3. Establishing a complaints coordination team with responsibility for the administration of the procedure. The team will include a specific post within Galw Gwynedd responsible for assisting the complainant, grading the complaint, seeking a swift resolution and monitoring the progress of formal investigations. The team will also include one of the Solicitors, with responsibility for the oversight of more complex investigations.
 - 2.4. The ability to learn lessons from complaints by means of overview reports to be submitted to the Corporate Management Team and the Cabinet Member and, occasionally and as required, to the Cabinet, in order to ensure continuous improvement.

Reasons for recommending the decision

3. Adopting the new procedure will bring specific benefits to the citizen by focusing on the resolution rather than the process. It will allow for complaints to be dealt with more swiftly, by abolishing one step of the current process which is fairly labour-intensive and lengthy.
4. The new procedure will allow complaints which involve more than one department to be better coordinated, and will enable the coordination of complaints which involve external agencies or partners.
5. By establishing a central, comprehensive database, it will be possible to keep an overview of the pattern of complaints and to learn lessons as an organisation. Currently, the valuable information contained in complaints tends to be lost.
6. It is anticipated that the procedure will be better aligned with the Council's new culture of empowering staff to make decisions and to deliver one of the work streams of the "Gwynedd Way" project.

Relevant considerations

7. Establishing the new procedure will incur a one-off initial cost of around £90,000. This cost is to employ a specific officer within Galw Gwynedd for a period of up to three years to allow the new arrangements to embed. Following this initial period, it is expected that the arrangements to deal with new complaints will be incorporated within the day-to-day work of the departments. If the Cabinet adopted the new procedure, the one-off cost of around £90,000 could be met by utilising an element of 2013/14 underspends on corporate budgets.
8. This new procedure is in accordance with the model concerns and complaints policy published by the Welsh Government, and produced under the guidance of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. This is advantageous as it is consistent with the complaint procedures of other public bodies, making the submission of a complaint easier for members of the public across public bodies.
9. With the exception of receiving reports about lessons to be learnt, councillors, and Cabinet members in particular, have no specific role in dealing with complaints. The Ombudsman is of the view that it is not appropriate for the Cabinet to participate in investigations into individual complaints. The Council's internal arrangements allow any councillor who is unhappy with the operation of a specific department to bring the concern to the attention of the relevant Cabinet member. The intention is for this arrangement to continue in relation to the resolution of councillors' concerns, but care must be taken that a Cabinet member does not step into the role of investigating specific complaints by members of the public.

Next steps and timetable

10. If the Cabinet adopts the new procedure, it is anticipated that a period of staff training and introduction will be required before giving more publicity to the new arrangements that will come into force in the autumn.
11. Regardless of this, if some aspects could be implemented immediately e.g. abolishing the third step of a Complaints Panel, this will be done where it is practicable to do so.

Views of the statutory officers :

Chief Executive:

An effective complaints procedure is vital for any public body and the proposals in this report, which have been agreed internally, offer a distinct improvement on the present arrangements. It is obvious that there is need for a short term investment to implement on this and there is a way to ensure that investment. I suggest therefore that the Cabinet accept the proposals.

Monitoring Officer:

I have contributed to the development of the new arrangements and am satisfied with them as regards propriety.

Head of Finance Department:

I can confirm the accuracy of the content of paragraph 7 of the 'Complaints Procedure' report, that £90,000 is a sufficient budget to establish a specific post within Galw Gwynedd to administer the new complaints procedure for a period of 3 years (and to establish a central, comprehensive database to enable complaints to be dealt with more quickly for the citizen's benefit)

Furthermore, I can confirm that if the Cabinet decides to adopt the procedure as is recommended here, that this one-off cost can be met by allocating an element of underspend on corporate budgets in closing the accounts (note that there is a relevant recommendation in the '2013/14 Outturn' report which is also on this Cabinet meeting's agenda

Appendices:

Gwynedd Council Concerns and Complaints Policy