



Report Title: **Annual report for 2008-09 on the handling of customer feedback – complaints, compliments and suggestions - and members’ enquiries**

Report authorised by: **Interim Assistant Chief Executive, Policy, Performance, Partnerships and Communications**

Signed:

Contact Officer: Ian Christie, Feedback and Information Manager
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Wards(s) affected: **All**

Report for: **Non Key Decision**

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 To receive the annual report on the operation of the Council’s handling of customer feedback – complaints, compliments and suggestions – and members’ enquiries.
- 1.2 To seek approval to the introduction of a charge for subject access requests under the Data Protection Act.

2. Introduction by Cabinet Member for Community Cohesion and Involvement

- 2.1 Members are asked to note the continuing improvements made in the Council’s handling of complaints and members enquiries, and the increasing customer satisfaction and numbers of compliments staff have received by staff as part of the WOW! awards. We are also making good progress in dealing with the challenges highlighted by the complaints process.

3. Links with Council Plan priorities

- 3.1 Performance in handling complaints and members’ enquiries is monitored monthly as part of the Council’s customer focus indicators. In addition to addressing the concerns of residents and service users, learning from complaints is an important tool for service improvement. It links to Council priority 5: Delivering excellent, customer focussed, cost effective services

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 That the annual report be received.

- 4.2 That performance and the key achievements in the year be noted.
- 4.3 That the Local Government Ombudsman's annual review and the Council's response be noted. (Appendices 1 and 2 of the attached report.)
- 4.4 That a fee of £10 be introduced for subject access requests under the Data Protection Act. (Paragraph 15.4.)
- 4.5 That Cabinet identify any specific issues relating to customer feedback and members' enquiries that need to be addressed.

5. Reason for recommendations

- 5.1 It is recommended that a fee be charged for subject access requests as it is Council policy to charge wherever there is a power or duty to do so.

6. Summary

Customer feedback and members' enquiries

- 6.1 The annual report on the operation of the Council's corporate feedback and members' enquiries procedures is attached. It details the Council's performance, key achievements and developments in 2008-09.
- 6.2 The report includes the Local Government Ombudsman's annual review, which summarises the complaints that he received against the Council in the year, and any lessons learned. It also includes the Council's response to the issues the Ombudsman raised.

Subject access requests

- 6.3 The Council does not currently charge for processing subject access requests for individuals to access the information we hold about them. The Data Protection Act permits a charge of up to £10, which it is proposed be implemented.

7. Chief Financial Officer Comments

- 7.1 The £10 fee for subject access requests would cover some of the copying and postage costs incurred. Based on the volume of subject access requests received annually the forecast income will be low (circa £2k). However, it is Council policy that wherever there is the power or duty so to do it is council policy to charge. Also, it may well have the effect of discouraging vexatious enquires.

8. Head of Legal Services Comments

- 8.1 The Data Protection Act 1998 gave individuals the statutory right, subject to some exemptions, to access information that organisations hold about them. This applies to CCTV images as well as paper files and computer records. The Legal Service has been consulted about the £10 fee proposal for subject access requests.

9. Equalities and community cohesion comments

9.1 Equalities monitoring data is requested from complainants, but not always supplied. From the data available it appears that disadvantaged groups generally access the complaints procedures in proportion to their numbers in the community. Equalities and community cohesion issues are addressed in detail in section 14 of the attached report.

10. Consultation

10.1 All directorates and Homes for Haringey have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

11. Service financial comments

11.1 The income from a £10 fee for subject access requests would cover some of the copying and postage costs incurred.

12. Use of appendices

12.1 The Annual report is attached. It contains the following appendices:

- Appendix 1: The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Review
- Appendix 2: The Council's response letter to the Ombudsman

13. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

13.1 The following background paper was used in the preparation of this report:

- Annual report for 2007-08 on the Council's handling of customer feedback and members' enquiries: Cabinet – 16 September 2008

14. Corporate feedback and members' enquiries – key achievements

14.1 Key achievements over the last year include:

- Improved performance to timescale at all complaints stages: target achieved for completion of stage 1 and exceeded for stages 2 and 3;
- Improved and above target performance for completion of members' enquiries to timescale
- Fewer new complaints at stage 1 for the second successive year
- A 2% increase in satisfaction with complaint handling compared with 2007-08
- Improvement on already excellent response times to Ombudsman first enquiries
- A 12% increase in the number of compliments to staff from services users
- Receiving one WOW nomination/compliment for good customer service for every 1.4 complaints, a significant improvement on the 1.8 recorded in 2007-08
- Staff winning 165 national WOW! awards, a 211% increase on the 49 won the previous year.

14.2 Key points in the Ombudsman's annual review were:

- Highest numbers of the 235 enquiries and complaints received were Housing, including Homes for Haringey (90), and transport and highways (33 – all but one of which concerned parking)
- There was one finding of maladministration in a homelessness case, and in 53 of 119 investigation decisions (52%), the Council took action in response
- The Council's average of 17.2 days to respond to the Ombudsman's enquiries was 'an improvement on your already excellent response times...' (This was the best in London, the overall average being 31.3 days.)

As in previous years, the Ombudsman would be happy to consider requests for him or a senior colleague to visit the Council to present and discuss the review.

14.3 There were a number of significant improvements made during the year, but the report also highlights some issues that need to be addressed.

15. Subject access requests under the Data Protection Act

15.1 The Council's data protection function lies within the Feedback and Information Team. The Data Protection Act 1998 gave individuals the statutory right, subject to some exemptions, to access information that organisations held about them (this applies to CCTV images as well as paper files and computer records). Last year Haringey processed just over 200 subject access requests (SARs).

15.2 Haringey does not currently charge for processing SARs even though the Data Protection Act specifies that organisations can charge up to £10. We don't know exactly what proportion of local authorities charge for processing SARs. However, seven out of the 10 local authorities we asked did charge £10, including Camden, Islington and Hackney Councils. Organisations such as the Metropolitan Police and NHS also charge £10.

15.3 Processing the £10 fee would be straightforward. It would require a minor adjustment to the SAP financial system so that the income could be assigned to Policy Performance, Partnerships and Communications.

15.4 It is recommended that a £10 for processing SARs be implemented in order to recoup some the postage and copying costs in processing them. This may also deter some of those who submit requests simply because they can or because they have a grievance against the Council.