

## **BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**FROM: Head of Corporate Services and Head of  
Customer Services**

**REPORT NUMBER     **G150****

**TO: Overview and Scrutiny ( Stewardship)  
Overview and Scrutiny (Community Services)**

**DATE OF MEETING: 27 November and 4  
December 2007**

### **CUSTOMER CARE AND INFORMAL COMPLAINTS HANDLING – PROGRESS REPORT**

#### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 At their meetings on 29 August and 4 September 2007 the Overview and Scrutiny Committees considered the results of four separate satisfaction surveys undertaken by the Council in 2006/7. The General User Satisfaction survey revealed low levels of satisfaction with complaint handling (BV4). Members, therefore, agreed that complaints handling be focused on as a priority for improvement and requested that officers prepare a report for their November meeting. This report updates members on the progress made to date.
- 1.2 Although satisfaction with complaints handling increased by 1% since the last survey in 2003/4, a level of 28% represents poor comparative performance; the best performing districts scoring about 20% higher. The Council needs to understand why this indicator is so low and also to identify the approach and processes used by the top performing authorities to see what can be learnt and possibly adapted for Babergh.

#### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That the Committees note the findings of research undertaken to understand Babergh's low performance on customer satisfaction with complaint handling.
- 2.2 That the Committees agree the next steps outlined in paragraph 5.7 to address the issue of customer care and informal complaint handling.

The Committees are able to resolve these matters.

#### **3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1 There are no additional cost implications of this report.

#### **4. RISK MANAGEMENT**

- 4.1 There are links with strategic business risk 9 – Management of major change programmes and projects

#### **5. KEY INFORMATION**

- 5.1 Since the Committees discussed the findings of the BVPI satisfaction surveys at their August and September meetings, Policy section and the Head of Customer Services have taken a number of steps to progress our understanding of the complaints handling results, including:

- Further detailed analysis of Babergh’s survey results
- Linking of survey findings into the CAST review programme
- Development of a new customer satisfaction indicator (based on monthly survey) to monitor progress
- Research into complaints handling best practice through case study analysis of four high performing district authorities.

5.2 The Council needs to understand what the data behind BV4 is actually telling us about our customers. It should be emphasised that low performance on this indicator is not a judgement on the Council’s *formal* complaints procedure as the way the survey respondents interpret making a complaint is much wider than complaints triggering the formal procedure. Complaints related to a wide variety of issues. However, amongst those residents that were *dissatisfied* with the handling of their complaint the top three problem areas were refuse collection, planning issues and anti-social behaviour.

5.3 There is a clear pattern to Babergh’s results. Performance is low in both actual and relative terms and has effectively plateaued since 2003/4. In comparison a number of other district authorities with similar results in 2003/4 have made significant improvements. Table 1 ranks the highest performing district authorities in 2006/07 and shows the improvement in satisfaction since the previous survey. Authorities highlighted in bold are highest performing and most improved. Statistically significant changes are indicated with an (s). Babergh and St. Edmundsbury (the highest performing district in Suffolk) are included for reference only.

BV4 Score 2006/07 (%)	District Authority	BV4 Score 2003/4 (%)	Improvement in satisfaction (%)	Confidence Interval (+/-)	
				2003/04	2006/07
49	Bedford Borough Council	43	+6	5.0	5.4
48	<b>Canterbury City Council</b>	33	+15 (s)	4.4	4.3
	<b>North Dorset District Council</b>	26	+22 (s)	7.2	7.0
	<b>Swale Borough Council</b>	25	+23 (s)	5.8	4.9
46	New Forest District Council	39	+7	6.7	7.1
	Newark and Sherwood District Council	40	+6	6.4	7.2
	Stafford Borough Council	35	+11	5.8	6.9
45	<b>Melton Borough Council</b>	35	+10 (s)	4.2	4.4
	Wychavon District Council	43	+2	5.1	6.4
44	<b>Castle Morpeth Borough Council</b>	24	+20 (s)	6.2	5.3
	Congleton Borough Council	33	+11	5.6	6.8
	<b>District of Easington</b>	28	+16 (s)	5.5	6.2
	East Dorset District Council	33	+11	7.1	7.4
	Rushmoor Borough Council	35	+9	6.4	6.5
	St. Albans City & District Council	34	+10	5.8	6.1
43	Alnwick District Council	39	+4	7.3	6.7
40	<i>St Edmundsbury</i>	32	+8%	6.2	6.0
28	<i>Babergh</i>	27	+1%	5.0	6.0

**TABLE 1**

- 5.4 Based on the results in Table 1, **four** of the highest performing districts who also made *significant* improvements between 2003 and 2006 were contacted for an informal discussion on best practice. Officers at three of the four case study authorities attributed their improvement to a switch-over to a centralised contact centre. However, further analysis suggests that it may not be the change to a contact centre business model *per se* which accounts for the improvements, but the way these authorities' staff are now dealing with customer enquiries. This focus is important in pinpointing areas for targeted improvement at Babergh.
- 5.5 For example, staff at Swale District Council's customer service centre operate a fixed system for logging an enquiry and when this should be escalated to become a complaint. They also undertake a 'mystery shopper' programme with neighbouring Canterbury City Council to test their systems from the customer perspective. Currently around 70% of enquiries are dealt with at the first point of contact.
- 5.6 Initial findings to date have identified the following as issues for further investigation:

#### Generic Issues

The following all impact – to a varying extent – upon an authorities' ability to deal quickly and effectively with enquiries at the front end, and hence on customer satisfaction:

- The maturity of the front office/back office arrangement
- Systems capacity
- The information systems available to customer service team (front office) staff
- Empowering customer service team staff to be proactive and deliver at the point of contact
- The level of staff training and expertise
- Distinguishing complaints from requests for service, queries, advise, enforcement issues...etc
- The nature of the enquiry/complaint
- The way in which enquiries are followed up
- Effective divisional self analysis
- Unrealistic expectations (some residents may have too high an expectation of the level of service that can be provided or associate responsibilities to the Council which are not within its direct control)

#### Issues specific to Babergh

- Evidence of a mix of direct and indirect service failures. Direct failures being occasions where customers were expecting a predetermined response or service which didn't materialise (e.g. missed bin); indirect failures being *perceptions* that a problem or issue should not exist (e.g. the general presence of litter in a locality)
- Need to develop a mechanism for identifying service failures and ensure timely feedback of information to service owners/managers
- Currently there is no clear definition of what constitutes a complaint, nor is there a formal mechanism for logging when an enquiry should be escalated to a complaint.
- Front and back office staff need to be clear as to the procedures/standards in place for managing customer enquiries. Are standardised procedures to common enquiries widely known or promoted amongst staff?
- Is there sufficient discretion in the current arrangements to allow overriding of procedure with common sense solutions when this is appropriate?

- There is a need for ongoing monitoring of complaints activity. Customer satisfaction levels have not been surveyed nationally since the CAST business model came into effect in April 2007 so any progress made since the switch over will not be reflected in the BVPI data.
- There may be a specific issue with regard to waste (e.g. bin collection) enquiries – as many of these calls are currently transferred into the CSD queue adding to customer waiting times.
- With telephone the primary method of contacting the council (60% enquiries overall, but much higher for some services) the importance of communicating the streamlined set of contact numbers to customers and staff is clear.

### **Next Steps**

5.7 The next step is to explore the issues identified in this report through further research. The findings of this research will then form the evidence base for a detailed proposal to be brought back to the Overview and Scrutiny (Stewardship) Committee at its meeting on 29 January 2008 and the Overview and Scrutiny (Community Services) Committee at its meeting on 5 February 2008. This proposal will set out the measures, resources and timescales Babergh will take to address the customer satisfaction issues raised from the BVPI Survey results.

5.8 From Quarter 3, monthly satisfaction surveys of customers calling into the contact centre will be undertaken to monitor changes in satisfaction levels. The same questions will be used as in the BVPI General User Satisfaction Survey for consistency, though the method will differ. A new local performance indicator for customer service satisfaction has already been agreed for inclusion in the basket of key performance indicators that are reported quarterly to both Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

### **6 APPENDICES**

None

### **7 BACKGROUND PAPERS REFERRED TO:**

None.

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