

Homeless case review

Report by the Director for Communities

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 At Joint Governance Committee on 22 March 2016 it was reported (JGC/15-16/051) that:

A Member was disappointed to see a complaint that 'the Council failed to assist a complainant when he faced homelessness' and suggested that the Joint Governance Committee take a closer look at this area of work. It was proposed and seconded that a report regarding homelessness be brought to the June meeting of the Joint Governance Committee.

- 1.2 It should be noted that whilst this is a correct account of the discussion, it does not correctly reflect that the household in question was assisted appropriately, that the Local Government Ombudsman found in favour of Worthing Borough Council and that there was no fault identified on the part of the local authority in terms of the decision. However, the complaint was upheld due to delays in responding to the complaint itself.
- 1.3 The Council has apologised to the complainant for the delay in the handling of this complaint and was asked by the Ombudsman to ensure the same errors do not happen again. This was considered to be reasonable resolution.

The Ombudsman's decision contained the following recommendations:

- The Council's complaint handling process should record receipt of a complaint on an IT system. This is to ensure that a full written response to a Stage One complaint is sent to the complainant within correct timescales.
- The Ombudsman said the Council needs to ensure it is providing correct information. In this instance the Council told the Ombudsman in March, that the case had already been dealt with as a Stage One complaint, this was incorrect.
- Finally, the Ombudsman said the Stage One response should have included an apology for the delay.

2.0 Background

2.1 The complainant (Mr A) first approached the Council for housing assistance in October 2014. His representative (Ms B), submitted a complaint to the Council at the beginning of December 2014, setting out how they were dissatisfied with the advice they had been given. This should have been responded to by December 17th 2014. Ms B chased this up in December and again in January 2015.

A response to the complaint was issued on 8th April 2015, after Ms B had contacted the Ombudsman. In the response from the Housing Services Manager, Ms B was invited to make an appointment, and it was pointed out the housing advice given had been correct. The letter also said it was treating the complaint referred by the Ombudsman under the Stage Two complaint process.

On the 29th April 2015 the Stage Two complaint was responded to. It again reiterated the points made in the previous letter about the advice given but also apologised for the distress the delay in a response had caused.

The first response to Mr B's complaint was four months overdue. Worthing and Adur Council's published Customer Feedback leaflet states that a complaint will be acknowledged within five working days, and a full response will be sent within 10 working days (Stage 1) and 15 working days (Stage 2).

3.0 Proposals

3.1 The Housing restructure includes a post of Project's Assistant; this is currently in the process of being recruited to. One of the duties aligned with this role will be to track the progress of complaints and members enquiries. This will ensure the following:

- All complaints, member enquiries, MP enquiries, etc coming into Housing are recorded at first point of contact and allocated to a named officer;
- Once recorded, these are then monitored and tracked for progress, including reminders being sent to the named officer as the deadline approaches and escalation to the relevant manager;
- A quality check in terms of the response that's provided, and identifying any potential need for staff development;
- Identifying common themes and trends that will assist in service improvement;
- Identifying common themes that may relate to individuals circumstances (eg issues around equality);
- Clear accountability, and reallocation in times of unexpected absence.

This will feed into a monthly review within the Management Team.

3.2 A new IT system for handling complaints, compliments and comments on services has been developed within the Councils, and following a period of testing, will be rolled out in early June 2016.

The system will enable the Councils to track complaints to ensure they are responded to within appropriate timescales, and also enable monitoring of the quality of responses to complaints to ensure a high standard is maintained.

4.0 Legal

- 4.1 There are no legislative time scales in regards to complaint response times or in regards to the way they should be handled. However, there is an Ombudsman Best Practice Guidance, published 1996 (updated 2002), which contains a checklist of rules for behaviour of officers. The guidance states that we should deal with people properly without undue delay in accordance with published time limits.

5.0 Financial implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report

6.0 Recommendation

- 6.1 To note the implementation of an internal process with the Project Officer post acting as a central point to coordinate Housing Services complaints and track their progress.

Local Government Act 1972

Background Papers:

Published findings of the Local Government Ombudsman
Ombudsman Best Practice Guidance, published 1996 (updated 2002)

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Schedule of Other Matters

1.0 Council Priority

- 1.1 Ensuring that our core business services are consistently high quality, cost effective and have the necessary capacity delivered with the full understanding of the strategic needs of the organisation

2.0 Specific Action Plans

- 2.1 None

3.0 Sustainability Issues

- 3.1 None

4.0 Equality Issues

- 4.1 Analysis of complaints, member enquiries, MP enquiries, etc will identify where an equality issue arises and lead to service improvement

5.0 Community Safety Issues (Section 17)

- 5.1 Analysis of complaints, member enquiries, MP enquiries, etc will identify where a community safety issue arises and lead to service improvement

6.0 Human Rights Issues

- 6.1 Analysis of complaints, member enquiries, MP enquiries, etc will identify where a human rights issue arises and lead to service improvement

7.0 Reputation

- 7.1 Analysis of complaints, member enquiries, MP enquiries, etc will identify areas for service improvement and hence improve service reputation

8.0 Consultations

- 8.1 None

9.0 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 None

10.0 Health & Safety Issues

- 10.1 Analysis of complaints, member enquiries, MP enquiries, etc will identify where a health and safety issue arises and lead to service improvement

11.0 Procurement Strategy

11.1 None

12.0 Partnership Working

12.1 Analysis of complaints, member enquiries, MP enquiries, etc will identify where partnership working may result in an improved outcome and/or service improvement