



Stafford Borough Council
Customer Care Framework

Index

	Page Nos
1 Purpose of Framework	1
2 Our Vision	1
3 Key Aims	1
4 Customer Care Values	1
5 Implementation of Framework	2
6 Our Corporate Customer Promise	2 - 4
7 Comments, Compliments and Complaints	4 - 6
8 Complaints Procedure	6 - 7
9 Handling Complaints	7 - 9
10 Unacceptable Actions by Complainants	9
11 Freedom of Information	9
12 Customer Engagement and Consultation	10
13 Treating People Fairly and with Respect	10
14 Contact Details	11
Action Plan	12 - 14

Section One – Customer Care Framework

1 Purpose of the Framework

The purpose of this document is to set out the Borough Council's Framework for Customer Services which is aimed at putting the customer at the heart of everything that we do, understanding our customers and raising the levels of customer satisfaction across our service delivery areas and channels.

2 Our Vision

Our vision is to be a Customer First Organisation, putting our customers at the centre of everything we do; committed to providing high quality services and delivering high standards of Customer Service.

3 Key Aims

The framework is based on a number of key aims.

- We will design our services from the customer's perspective. With their help we can understand what is a valued excellent service and deliver this as far as possible within the bounds of current legislation and resources.
- We will work in partnership to ensure that our services reflect the needs of our community
- We will ensure that our services are joined up in a way that makes sense to the customer and reduces to need for multiple approaches to us.
- We will ensure that our services are generally accessible at times and places that are convenient to customers offering more choices of channels whether it be through the contact centre, in person, by telephone or through the internet.
- We will measure our performance (both internal and external) and publish this in our annual report and web site.

4 Customer Care Values

The Borough Council's 'Our Values' Statement referred to customer care as follows:-

- Focus on Customers
 - listen to people and treat them with respect
 - ensure that people understand what is happening
 - treat people consistently, courteously leaving them with a good impression

5 Implementation of Framework

This Corporate Framework shall be maintained, monitored and reviewed by the Customer Service Manager within the Policy and Improvement Service.

The Framework contains our Corporate Customer Promise which will act as a minimum standard upon which individual services will base their own specific standards. The complaints procedure together with the methodology of handling these complaints will be consistent across the Authority.

This Framework will be agreed by the Leadership Team of the Authority and conveyed to service managers through the Corporate Forum. New employees to the Authority will be made aware of the Customer Care Framework via induction training and any subsequent training. A customer training programme will be determined each year by the Customer Services Manager and the Head of human Resources. An analysis of corporate complaints will be undertaken by the Leadership Team on a quarterly basis as procedures are introduced to capture this data across service areas.

Initially, the Equalities Network will also constitute a number of customer champions for the Authority. This will be received with twelve months of operation. In addition, the Authority's programme in customer service will be assessed by engaging ***** sharers on a regular basis.

During the next 12 months the Customer Service Manager will liaise with Cannock Chase District Council in respect of ascertaining whether a common framework can be adopted across both authorities and whether they can be applied to either shared or outsourced services.

The Head of Policy and Improvement will report on progress in respect of the Action Plan via In Pursuit of Success.

The Customer Care Framework will be reviewed by the Leadership Team on a three yearly basis to ensure that it is still fit for purpose.

6 Our Corporate Customer Promise

This section sets out our Customer Promise which shall be made available for our customers.

Our Promise

To show you how serious we are, we have adopted the following three corporate standards:

- When dealing with you we aim to get it right first time

- When you contact the Council we aim as best we can to deliver on our Promises and Service Specific Standards
- We are here to help. If you do not feel we have helped you please let us know and we will respond to your comments, compliments and complaints.

Hello, how can I help you?

When you call us, here's the service you can expect

- Direct or transfer calls through to the right person
- Offer you the option of being either transferred or organise someone to call you back if the correct person isn't available
- Make sure phones are not left unanswered

Just visiting? Be our guest

We'll make sure you receive a valued service when you visit us

- We won't be late if you have an appointment or let you know why if we are late
- We will give you the information you asked for, and if that's not possible tell you why
- We will provide communication support such as a hearing loop or interpreter (with notice) if needed
- If you have a matter you want to talk about in confidence, we'll arrange to see you in private.
- We'll make sure our offices are accessible, have clear signage, and are welcoming
- We'll tell you our first names, be respectful and professional

Dear Customer....

When you write to us, email, fax or use a web form we will....

- Reply to you within five working days excluding complaints and if we cannot do that acknowledge your contact and give you a time scale for our response or service delivery
- Tell you the details of who is dealing with your enquiry
- If you have requested an action/service form as that may take some time to deliver we will keep you informed of progress.
- We won't baffle you with jargon when we reply, we'll tell you the facts in plain English

Promises, promises...

If you think we've broken our promises, or you feel we've made a mistake, we take that very seriously

- We'll make sure you know how to make your voice heard through our complaints procedure
- Ensure staff know how to deal with your complaint
- Acknowledge your complaint within five working days
- Investigate your complaint confidentially and be fair to all concerned
- Let you know the progress of your complaint

- Apologise when we've made a mistake, and quickly take steps to solve the problem
- Learn lessons from where we've gone wrong to make sure we don't make the same mistakes in the future
- If possible, we will try and resolve your complaint when you first get in touch with us.
- If you are not satisfied with our response the appropriate Head of Service will investigate and respond to you within twenty days.
- If you still remain dissatisfied with our response your complaint can be considered by the Chief Executive within fifteen days.
- If you still remain unhappy with our response you can refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman.

**Every good turn deserves another
Now we need your help**

- Let us know all the information about your enquiry so we can deal with it effectively and quickly
- Please contact us if you need to cancel or rearrange an appointment
- Let us know if you need communication support such as an interpreter
- We do not tolerate rude and aggressive behaviour. We are polite and respectful to you, and expect the same from our customers
- If you are unhappy with a service tell us as soon as possible
- Do you have any suggestions about how we can improve our services? If so, email us at info@staffordbc.gov.uk

7 Comments, Compliments and Complaints

The Council has a Customer Comments, Compliments and Complaints procedure to help customers to comment on our services and give guidance to staff on how to deal with customer contacts. This includes customers:-

- Making comments on a service or facility
- Passing compliments on a service or facility
- Making complaints about a service or facility

The Council has adopted a procedure for dealing with each of these situations.

Capturing feedback from our customers is a positive way to establish how well we are doing and will help us develop and improve our services in the future.

(a) Comments

We will try to deal with comments at the first point of contact. Many comments will be statements or points of information and may not require a response. If they do require a response we will ensure it is dealt with quickly within the Customer Care Guidelines and normal service procedures. We will thank the customer for their

comment. If, upon considering the comment, an action is agreed, we will ensure it is implemented and actioned quickly and, if possible, give appropriate credit.

(b) Compliments

Satisfied customers who take the trouble to compliment the Council on its service should receive an acknowledgement and an indication that thanks and appreciation has been passed on to the staff who provided the service concerned.

(c) Complaints

What do we mean by a complaint?

The Council's formal definition of a complaint is:

"A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the Council or its employees affecting an individual customer or group of customers"

A complaint does not include:-

- Requests for service
- Requests for information or explanation of Council policy or practice
- Complaints about "third parties", who are not working on behalf of the council"
- Matters for which there is a right of appeal or legal remedy (either within the Council or to an independent tribunal) – see below

Some complaints cannot be dealt with under this procedure as they are covered by statutory or legal limitations such as:

- A Town and County Planning appeal against refusal of planning permission
- A complaint that has already been heard by a court or tribunal
- Statutory notices served about housing issues or homelessness applications, all of which contain full details of the appeals process to be followed for that type of notice
- A complaint about the issue of a penalty charge notice that is within the remit of the National Parking Adjudication Service
- Employment related issues, including appointments, dismissals, pay, pensions and discipline

The Service should not involve customers in concerns about whether or not an issue is a legitimate complaint. If there is doubt, it will be processed as a complaint.

There are some issues that customers might speak to employees about that are definitely not complaints – but some will be. We want to make sure that our customers feel that they can complain whenever they are dissatisfied with our services – and that we will do all we can to deal with their complaint satisfactorily, openly and fairly.

If the complaint is for another agency, then we will try and guide the customer to the correct contact in that agency.

Matters raised anonymously will be considered and appropriate action taken by the Head of Service concerned, although these complaints are more difficult to deal with fairly. Therefore, any action taken will be outside this procedure.

8 Complaints Procedure

The Council's Complaint Procedure has four stages. Regular quarterly monitoring reports will be prepared for information of Leadership Team and Cabinet who will determine any appropriate action if this has not already been undertaken.

Stage 1- At the point of service delivery

The relevant service will deal with the initial approach from the customer and will try to resolve the customer's concerns to the best of its ability and to the satisfaction of the customer.

Front line staff will pass any issues raised persistently to their line management.

The Council provides a huge range of services and from time to time mistakes will be made. Equally, there will be times when a complaint is unfair. The important thing is that we respond properly, fairly and consistently when a complaint is made.

When a complaint has been dealt with quickly and fairly, the customer feels they have been listened to and understood. Just as importantly, knowing how and why things have gone wrong is valuable information in helping us to improve our services, and make best use of our resources.

Remember - when a customer complains they are giving us another chance to get it right.

Stage 2 - Relevant Head of Service

Services should aim to settle complaints quickly and amicably. However, customers who are still not satisfied should be encouraged to write, email, use the telephone or to visit the Head of Service who is handling the matter to ask for it to be investigated further.

The complaint will then be investigated fully and objectively by the relevant Head of Service or an appropriate person nominated by them. The customer should receive an acknowledgement letter within five working day of receipt of their complaint, informing them of the officer dealing with the complaint and the timescale for replying to the complaint. A maximum of twenty working days is allowed to respond at this stage. If the complaint is likely to take longer than twenty working days to resolve the customer must be kept informed of timescales. The reply to the complainant must inform the customer of the availability of the third stage of the procedure and of how to refer the complaint again. This timescale may vary if additional information is required from the complainant. If this is the case the customer must be informed of

the required information as soon as possible. Where appropriate a complainant will be kept informed of the progress on the issue he/she has raised.

Stage 3 - by the Chief Executive

If the customer remains dissatisfied with the Council's responses at stages 1 and 2, they can ask that the complaint be considered by the Chief Executive. The Chief Executive or an appropriate person nominated by the Chief Executive, will consider the complaint and gather any information they require in order that they can review the handling of the complaint. The customer should receive an acknowledgement letter within five working days and a full response within fifteen working days. Where there are unavoidable delays (ie staff holidays, sickness etc.) the customer must be informed of these and of the revised timetable. This timescale may vary if additional information is required from the complainant.

The customer will be made aware of the Ombudsman service should they not be satisfied with the outcome.

Stage 4 - Local Government Ombudsman

This is the final stage of the Council process when the customer can refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman. The customer has the right to do this at any stage of the process, but if they have not tried to resolve the matter through the Council's Customer Care procedure, the Ombudsman is likely to point them in that direction first. If this happens and we don't follow our own procedures it could be found to be maladministration.

In all cases...

When a customer has made a written complaint to the Council, he or she must be informed of the outcome in writing.

A customer may ring (rather than write) if they have learning difficulties but the complaint may require a detailed response/investigation. How is this dealt with?

9 Handling Complaints

(a) Nine golden rules to remember

- Treat all complaints seriously, don't take the complaint or criticism personally
- Make your first response positive. Don't rush onto the defensive
- Try to resolve the complaint as your first objective
- Avoid using jargon that the customer might not understand
- Be prepared to take responsibility for other people's mistakes - We are all "the Council"
- Take the initiative with suggestions to put things right and offer choices
- Try to make amends - but don't make promises we can't keep

- If the customer is wrong, don't embarrass them if you need to point it out
- Learn from mistakes

(b) **Complaints Involving More than one Department**

In cases involving more than one Service, the "Lead Service" will usually be the one determined by the Customer Services Manager after applying a weighting of responsibility to the issue. In this situation, the Lead Service should take responsibility for co-ordinating the response to the customer, and ensure that the procedure and time scale are fulfilled. Where there is uncertainty as to the Head of Service for a particular complaint the matter must be referred to the Chief Executive, who will determine the Lead Service.

(c) **The Role of the Elected Member**

At any stage customers may seek the advice and/or support of their Local Member or MP in dealing with a complaint against the Council. Elected Members should make their constituent aware of this procedure, and that complaints passed on by them will be processed in accordance with it.

(d) **Monitoring Customer Feedback, Complaints and Compliments**

All verbal, electronic or written complaints, and their outcomes, must be recorded. Records should enable the following information to be produced:-

- number and nature of complaints relating to each service
- number of complaints dealt with at stages one, two, three and four
- performance in meeting the timescale set out for each stage of the procedure
- outcome of complaints at each stage, ie upheld, unresolved
- any long term action undertaken as a result of complaints eg changed procedure

This information will be reported on a quarterly basis to Leadership Team and Cabinet.

(e) **Special Cases**

Complaints relating to individual Heads of Service will be referred directly to the Chief Executive and investigated in accordance with the timescales set out in Stage 3 of our procedure. Any complaint about the Chief Executive will be directed to the Council's Monitoring Officer.

Heads of Service will refer complaints involving allegations of financial impropriety to the attention of the Council Deputy Chief Executive and/or Internal Audit Section.

Some complaints may invoke the Council's disciplinary procedures. So far as is possible, such action should not frustrate the resolution of the customer's complaint. Where delay is unavoidable, the customer must be informed of the position.

If a customer has a complaint against an Elected Member, this should always be referred to the Chief Executive immediately, who will deal with it under the agreed codes of conduct for dealing with complaints against Councillors.

(f) **Remedies**

If a complaint has been found to be justified, the Council's objective should then be, as far as possible, to put the customer in the position he or she would have been in had things not gone wrong. Depending on circumstances, this will usually be achieved by:-

- apologising to the customer and explaining what went wrong
- providing the service the customer required
- changing procedures so that the cause of the complaint is not repeated

There may be circumstances where the complainant feels justified in seeking financial compensation from the Council for the loss incurred. Other than in situations where there is a clear Council Policy, all such cases should be referred to the Head of Service concerned. The customer must be kept informed of progress. Staff should never admit any potential financial liability of the Council at any stage as this could compromise the Council's insurers.

10 Unacceptable Actions by Complainants

A small minority of customers make complaints that are vexatious or unreasonably persistent. Examples include ;

- Making excessive demands on the time and resources of staff whilst a complaint is being looked into by, for example, excessive telephoning or sending emails to numerous council staff, writing lengthy, complex letters every few days and expecting immediate responses
- Being abusive to staff
- Refusing to accept the decision - repeatedly arguing the point and complaining about the decision.

In these instances such customers will be dealt with in accordance with the "Unacceptable Actions by Complainants Policy."

11 Freedom of Information

The Freedom of Information Act gives a general right of access to all types of recorded information held by public authorities. It sets out exemptions from that right and places a number of obligations on public authorities.

Any person who makes a request to a public authority for information must be informed whether the public authority holds that information, and subject to exemptions, must be supplied with the information.

Freedom of Information requests will be dealt with by the Freedom of Information Officer of the relevant Service Area. This can be in writing or by sending an email to:-

Head of Law and Administration
Stafford Borough Council
Civic Centre
Riverside
Stafford
ST16 3AQ
Email: legalservices@staffordbc.gov.uk

12 Customer Engagement and Consultation

Regular consultation and engagement with customers will capture their views on the services they receive and the way they are treated. Services should not be based on assumptions of what we think the customer wants.

Customer research can take on many forms. At its simplest level, it implies service deliverers “keeping an ear to the ground” and acting on suggestions and comments received. Customer comment cards and customer panels, for example, which are relatively inexpensive to implement. More extensive research can involve commissioning quantitative surveys and conducting work of a more qualitative nature (eg focus groups, in-depth interviews).

The Council will use the Police Liaison Panel for Stafford Borough as its main form of corporate consultation three times per year. The Lead Officer for Corporate Engagement will be the Customer Service Manager.

13 Treating People Fairly and with Respect

We all need to work together to positively reinforce the benefit from having diverse communities that helps not only enhance the services that we deliver but also our reputation. This is why equalities and diversity is a critical part of this Framework. We understand delivering services to our communities that are based upon local need is crucial. So it is important that we not only raise the awareness of diversity in our communities but also promote equality in the delivery of all our services. We need to make sure that we collect information and data about our communities to help us to do this. Using this information will enable us to deliver more efficient services. We will use our Single Equality Scheme to monitor our progress in this area.

14 Contact Details

If you would like to know more about the information in this document please contact:-

Sue Pote - Customer Services Manager

Telephone: 01785 619293

Email: spote@staffordbc.gov.uk

If you would like this information in large print, Braille, other language or audio cassette please contact info@staffordbc.gov.uk

Corporate Action Plan

Measures	Outcomes	Responsible Officer/s	Target	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
1 Customer Framework approved by Council.	Greater awareness of customer care, including promise targets, dealing with complaints and consultation issues.	Head of Policy and Improvement.	Approved by April 2011.	Customer Care Framework approved and initiatives within Action Plan implemented. Display our Corporate Customer Promise.	Framework received. Ongoing implementation of Framework with progress reports to Leadership Team and Cabinet. Although instigating customer analysis	Framework revised. Customer Care Framework and Action Plan reviewed and refreshed. Although instigating customer analysis
2 Complaint Management.	Improving delivery of service. A reduction in avoidable contact. Learning from the complaint therefore ensuring it is not repeated which in turn will bring	Leadership Team.	Quarterly monitoring of complaints across the Authority (stages 1, 2 and 3).	Introduce quarterly reports to Leadership Team. Monitoring of all complaints undertaken for each Service. EDRM procedure introduced in services which have this	Framework received. To ensure that all complaints and lessons learnt across the Authority including (shared services) reported to Leadership Team and Members.	Complaints procedure to be reviewed and refreshed.

Measures	Outcomes	Responsible Officer/s	Target	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
	efficiencies. Customer satisfaction.			application.		
3 Corporate consultation via the Police.	Regular customer feedback across a range of issues. Target resources and money where the public feel is necessary. Build good relationships and trust with the community.	Head of Policy and Improvement.	Inclusion in surveys three times per year.	Participation in 3 surveys one of which will relate specifically satisfaction to with services.	Participation in 3 surveys one of which will relate specifically satisfaction to with services.	Review shared service Agreement with Staffordshire Police.

Measure	Outcomes	Responsible Officer/s	Target	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
4 Services to adopt their own service specific standards to include the three Corporate Standards.	<p>Customers and staff are fully aware of what level of service to expect.</p> <p>Staff are fully aware of the standards they are working to.</p> <p>Customer Satisfaction.</p> <p>Customer Service Standards for shared services.</p>	Individual Heads of Service	<p>Targets and outcomes adopted and reported to relevant Scrutiny Committees.</p> <p>Common standards agreed with partner authorities.</p>	<p>Standards to be determined by each service and examined at Performance Clinic Meetings.</p> <p>Programme of requiring service standards for shared services.</p>	Service standards to continue to be applied by individual services and reported via in pursuit of success.	Standards to be reviewed.
5 Diversity and EIA's.	<p>All services are inclusive and everyone treated fairly.</p> <p>Consideration is given to all members of our community.</p>	Head of Policy and Improvement/ Leadership Team.	Ensuring that EIAs are applied to principle policies and SVC to ensure "access for all".	Equality Champions ensure that a programme of 20 EIAs be undertaken across the Authority and progress discussed at Performance Clinics.	Equalities Assessment programme completed.	Equality Champion group to determine the next 3 year timetable of Assessments.