

WIRRAL COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

21 JUNE 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

COMPLAINTS AND CUSTOMER FEEDBACK - ANNUAL REPORT 2009/2010

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report is the annual update on performance in dealing with customer feedback. It provides analysis of contacts received over the period 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, highlights trends and describes some of the challenges faced in ensuring all feedback is recorded and responded to consistently. The focus for customer feedback is to 'put things right and learn from it' which recognises that complaints should not be dealt with in isolation and instead should be used to inform future improved service delivery. The report is for noting.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Customer feedback includes the following types of contact:
- Corporate complaints
 - Statutory complaints (Adult Social Services and Children's Social Care)
 - Councillor/MP contacts
 - Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) contacts
 - Contacts made directly with the Chief Executive
 - Customer Suggestions
 - Customer Compliments
- 2.2 Customer feedback is reported quarterly through the corporate performance report to the Cabinet and contributes to performance indicators PI 2004 (annual number of corporate complaints received) and PI 2015a (percentage of corporate complaints resolved within timescale).
- 2.3 Feedback is primarily recorded through the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system although a separate application (Respond) is used to support the distinct statutory complaint process.
- 2.4 Each department has a designated coordinator to record; assign; progress chase and update contacts with resolution details. Coordinators meet regularly to raise issues with escalation to the cross departmental Customer Services Group (CSG) and to Chief Officers as appropriate, to share best practice and to communicate departmental changes. Where feedback is received outside of the generic customer access channels (One Stop Shops; call centre; email and web), the effectiveness of these coordinators is dependent on clear and consistent communication within departments.

- 2.5 To support best practice and promote a consistent approach to how customer feedback is dealt with across the Council, the Customer Care Standards were created and promoted corporately. These guidelines focus on the commitment made to ensuring the expected standards of customer service are met across the Council. It allows customers to clearly identify the minimum level of service expected and measure how their contact experience compares. Intranet guidance supports this and stresses customer service is a responsibility of all staff members, not just staff dealing directly with customers.
- 2.6 The approach to customer feedback has seen a marked improvement since the corporate process was implemented and the customer care guidelines adopted. Departments recognise a standard definition of 'what is a complaint' and commit to a standard process for dealing with customer feedback contacts. Comparison between service areas and departments can be undertaken, providing vital information on what customers are contacting the Council about and identifying best practice. The challenge is to maintain this consistency and drive service improvements.

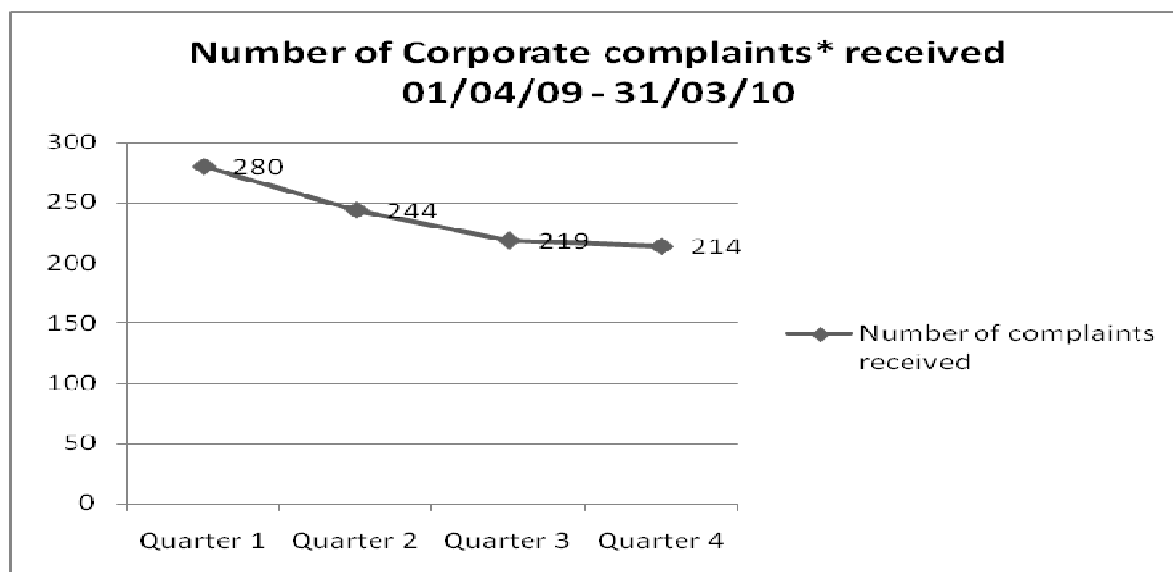
3. PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

3.1 Corporate Complaints

- 3.1.1 The 1,332 corporate complaints received (all stages) in 2009/10 showed minimal change from the figure reported for 2008/09 which was 1,329. The departmental split for 2009/10 is as follows:

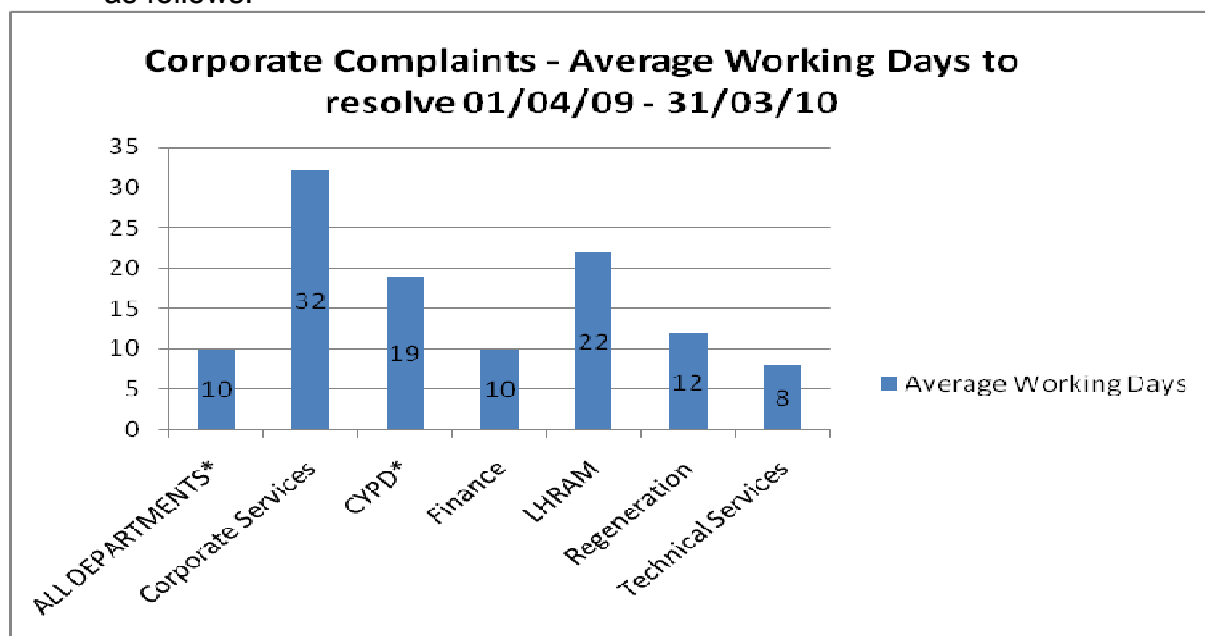
CYPD	10	(78 recorded as statutory complaints)
Corporate Services	7	
DASS	0	(249 recorded as statutory complaints)
Finance	254	
Legal HR & Asset Man	14	
Regeneration	378	
Technical Services	669	

- 3.1.2. Three departments account for nearly all corporate complaints. Technical Services record the largest number. Finance Department complaints mainly focus around Revenues and Benefits (201). Sports and Recreation services dominate Regeneration accounting for 197 complaints with Parks and Open spaces next with 69.
- 3.1.3. As with the Strategic Asset Review in 2008/09, a single issue contributed significantly to complaint volumes in 2009/10 with the adverse weather conditions of January 2010 affecting the delivery of key services by Technical Services. During this period (quarter 4) the refuse collection service recorded 375 complaints (28% of annual total) with 209 complaints received on a single day (18 January 2010). Previously in 2009/10 there was an average of 24 complaints received for this service per quarter and this emphasises the unparalleled disruption caused to key services such as bin collection and the consequent frustration expressed by Wirral residents. Analysis excluding this figure displays a downward trend over the year:



*Excluding refuse collection complaints received in quarter 4

3.1.4. The percentage of complaints resolved within 15 working days improved for the second year in succession from 87% reported in 2008/09 to 89.7% in 2009/10. This compares to the corporate target of 88%. Technical Services department resolved 98% of contacts within 15 working days over the 2009/10 period (compared to 97% in 2008/09), taking on average 8 working days. The improved performance is driven by customer feedback coordinators efforts in progress chasing responses, supported by prioritisation through the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM). The average number of working days to respond to complaints by department is as follows:



*Excluding Statutory complaints received by DASS and Children's Social Care

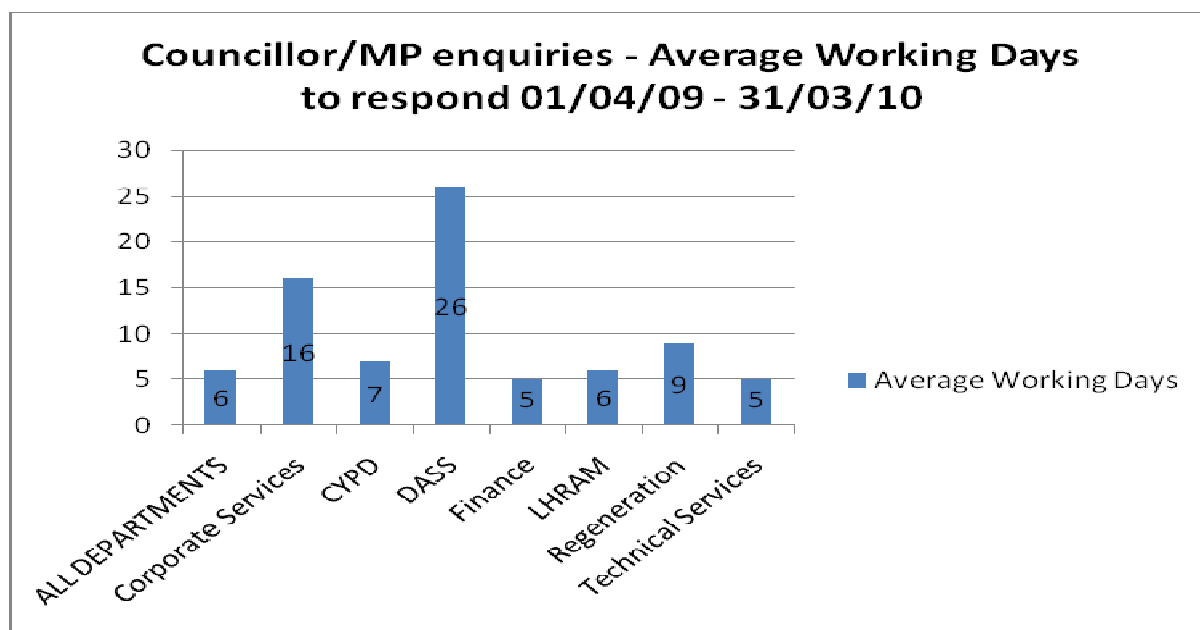
- 3.1.5 Split between the three complaint stages, 90% of stage 1 were resolved within 15 working days, followed by 89.5% for stage 2 and 68% for stage 3. The introduction of an independent review by a Chief Officer of an alternate Department can partly explain the longer time taken to resolve these stage 3 complaints.
- 3.1.6. The corporate complaint process allows customers to progress to stage 2 if 'unhappy with the outcome of the stage 1 complaint'. Only 5.4% of customers required this further review of their complaint (67 in total). This dropped to 2.3% for stage 3 complaints received (28 in total).

3.2 Statutory Complaints

- 3.2.1 Adult Social Services (DASS) and Children's Social Care (part of CYPD) respond to complaints within a statutory framework, outside of the Council process. This limits the opportunity for comparative analysis with corporate complaints received.
- 3.2.2. A total of 327 statutory complaints were received, split between 249 for DASS and 78 for Children's Social Care. Adult Social Services - Access and Assessment issues accounted for the majority of DASS statutory complaints received (58% of total).

3.3 Councillor / MP contacts

- 3.3.1 A total of 3,846 formal Councillor or MP contacts were received in 2009/10, compared to 4,363 contacts for the previous year, an 11.8% decrease. Unlike complaints no single issue dominated councillor/MP contacts although Technical Services continue to receive the highest number of contacts with 75% of the total. This compares with 70.5% of 2008/09 recorded contacts.
- 3.3.2 The corporate standard for resolution of these contacts is 10 working days and the average number of days taken for resolution in 2009/10 was 6 working days. The average number of working days to respond to these contacts by department is as follows:



3.3.3. The number of Councillor and MP contacts by department was as follows;

CYPD	145
Corporate Services	4
DASS	128
Finance	106
Legal HR & Asset Man	2
Regeneration	576
Technical Services	2885

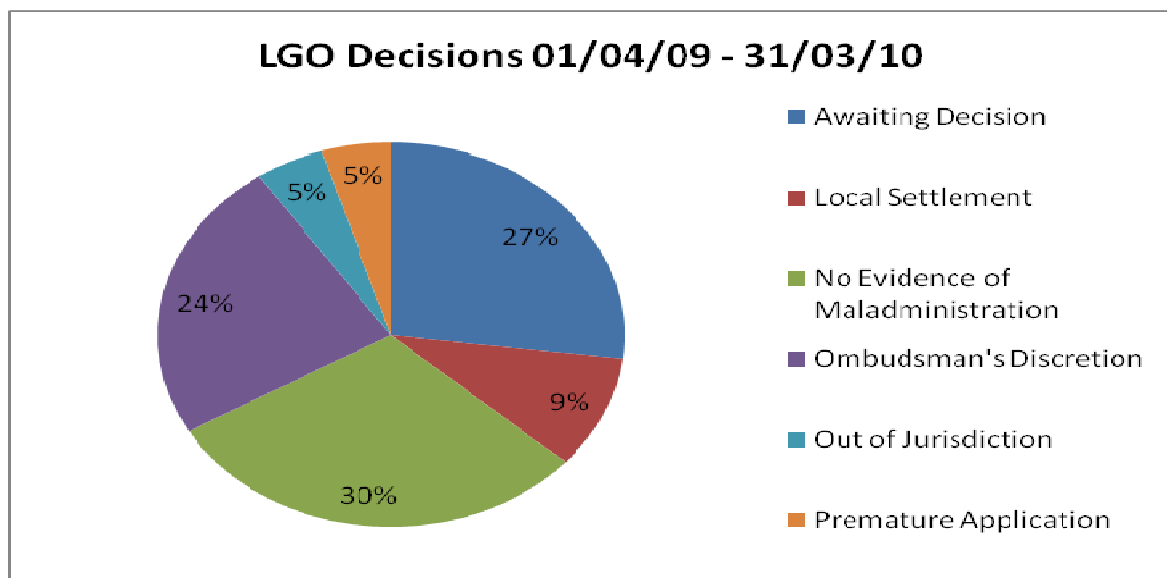
3.3.4. The Council responded to 91% of all Councillor/MP contacts within 10 working days, compared to 79% in 2008/09.

3.3.5. Within the departmental totals the key areas of enquiry were DASS Access and Assessment issues accounting for 81% of DASS enquiries. Benefits and Revenues accounted for 96% of Finance queries. Regeneration Re-Housing Services (169); Parks and Open Spaces (137) and Environmental Health (96) providing the majority (70%) of the departmental contacts. The Community Safety team (anti-social behaviour; alley gates etc) received 54 contacts. Technical Services contacts other than the refuse collection service were road enquiries (402), pavement defects (383) and traffic issues (384).

3.4 Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) contacts

3.4.1 The process for recording LGO contacts and the way in which the LGO investigates complaints changed from 1 April 2009 and so comparison with 2008/09 figures is not meaningful. Changes were made to ensure that all contacts from the LGO were recorded via a single generic email address, coordinated by a team within the Finance Department.

- 3.4.2. The LGO has also changed how it deals with complaints, using a first stage 'triage' service to restrict the number of contacts being passed for consideration by an experienced 'ombudsman'. The 'ombudsmen' are also now far more likely to ask for information, rather than instigate a full investigation to resolve a complaint as happened in previous years.
- 3.4.3 A total of 79 contacts were recorded (55 preliminary requests for information; 21 follow-up enquiries and 3 full investigations) covering 63 individual LGO cases.
- 3.4.4. The 79 complaints received in 2009/10 show a departmental split as follows;
- | | |
|--------------------|----|
| CYPD | 23 |
| DASS | 18 |
| Finance | 11 |
| Regeneration | 5 |
| Technical Services | 22 |
- *Corporate Services and LHRAM did not receive any LGO contacts in 2009/10
- 3.4.5. Schools appeals dominated the CYPD figures, accounting for 70% of all LGO contacts received. Care Services received 94% of DASS LGO contacts. Finance contacts all concerned the Benefits service. In Regeneration the Licensing service accounted for 60% of all contacts with the remaining enquiries being for Sports and Recreation and Re-Housing services. The Planning Service accounted for 86% of Technical Services contacts received.
- 3.4.6 The LGO provides a decision category on all cases considered and the breakdown for 2009/10 is as follows:



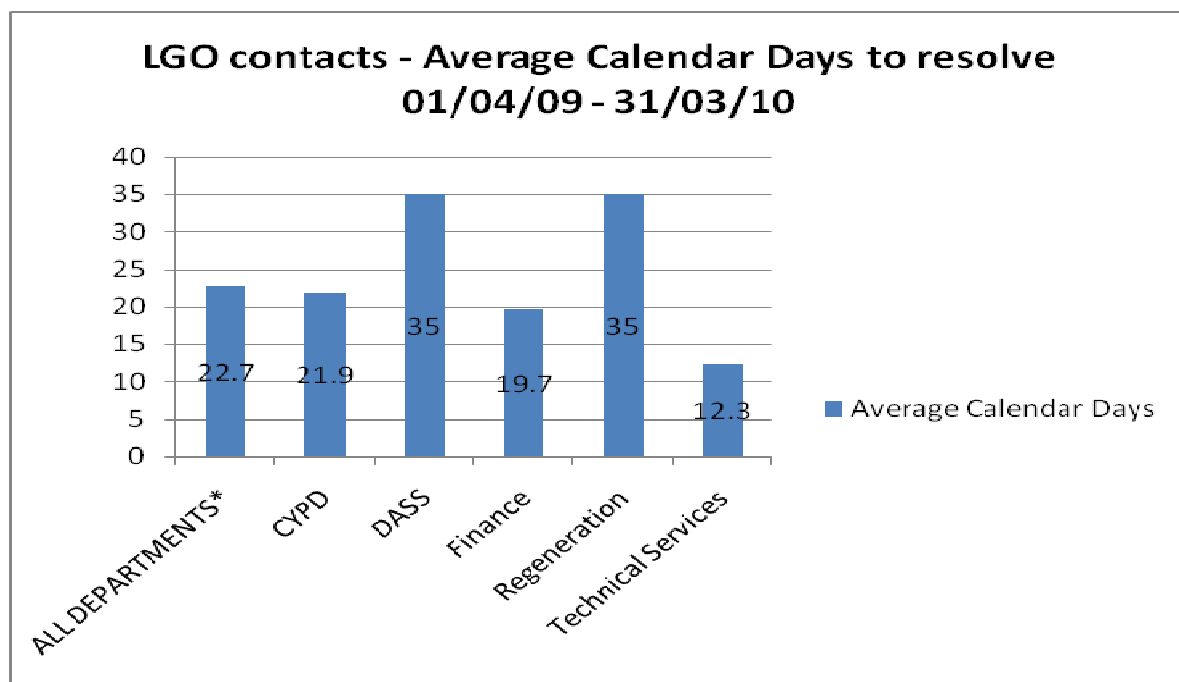
- Awaiting Decision: enquiry responded to and awaiting evaluation from LGO
- Local Settlement: the Council has come to a satisfactory arrangement with the complainant to resolve issue(s)
- No Evidence of Maladministration: LGO can find no evidence of wrong-doing

- Ombudsman's Discretion: LGO has decided not to investigate further, usually due to insufficient evidence of injustice caused
- Out of Jurisdiction: case is outside the LGO's remit to investigate
- Premature Application: Council has not had the opportunity to investigate the complaint fully before referral to the LGO; reconsidered as corporate/statutory complaint

3.4.7 The standard by which the Council is measured is 28 calendar days to respond to LGO contacts, excluding complaints about schools (14 calendar days) or if the LGO provides specific target dates. Across the contacts recorded the Council responded on average in 22.7 calendar days for 2009/10.

3.4.8 The LGO are currently preparing their formal annual performance report for all councils in England which has a provisional figure of 26.8 calendar days for Wirral. The disparity is due to differences in the method of calculation used between the Council and the LGO. A meeting is to be arranged with the LGO so that monitoring of performance in 2010/11 can be aligned more effectively with the LGO's interpretation. The LGO's reported figure would still place Wirral in the top 53% of Metropolitan Authorities with an average of 28 calendar days or less. A formal response will be provided to the LGO's annual letter to Wirral once received from the LGO and will subsequently be reported to this Committee.

3.4.6 The average number of calendar days to respond to LGO contacts by departments who received LGO contacts is as follows:



- 3.4.9. There are pressures on resources to effectively respond to LGO contacts, particularly when enquiries can be complex in nature, requesting significant (possibly historic) information which can require research by a number of Council officers. The Council investigation can be in response to a number of separate LGO contacts requesting different information over a wide time frame. As an example one case commenced by the LGO on 20 March 2009 and a decision was communicated on 12 March 2010 after three separate contacts were responded to in the intervening period. The LGO tends to use these individual contacts to provide a cumulative total of days taken to respond whereas the Council records these as self-contained enquiries, which produces some disparity in the analysis of response times.
- 3.4.10 Constructive discussions with the LGO have identified a number of specific issues about how the LGO contacts the Council and how in turn the Council responds to requests for information under the new investigation regime. A meeting has been arranged for June 2010 with the Assistant Ombudsman to clarify reporting techniques and promote best practice for future performance.

3.5 Other feedback

- 3.5.1 There were 88 contacts recorded via the Chief Executive's Office with Technical Services enquiries accounting for 94% of this total. Contacts regarding Highway maintenance (15%); Planning (14%) and Footway/carriageway issues (11%) featured prominently.
- 3.5.2 Customer feedback coordinators recorded 68 customer suggestions, with the Regeneration department contributing 88% of these contacts. Sports and Recreation was most popular with 62% of all suggestions received. The majority of suggestions within this service area relate to the availability of activities and classes; standard of facilities and opening times.
- 3.5.3 The Council officially recorded 370 compliments in 2009/10, although the expectation is that many more expressions of satisfaction with services provided were received in the numerous interactions with customers across all departments and delivery channels. Typical comments include "excellent service received"; "praise for officers involved"; "appreciation of the level of service provided"; "extremely impressed with work" and a "pleasure to deal with the Council".

4. DEVELOPMENTS FOR 2010/11

4.1 Improved Reporting

- 4.1.1 From 1 April 2010 all customer feedback recorded on the CRM computer system is entered in a consistent format to support more effective analysis in 2010/11. A new range of reporting tools has been provided for departmental coordinators to both scrutinise trends in feedback and to assist progress chasing throughout the reporting period. The intention is to improve response times in areas identified as "previously performing poorly" in relation to the corporate standards.

- 4.1.2 New analysis will include the identification of complaints resulting in changes to process or procedure i.e. the focus of '*putting things right and learning from it*'. Since 1 April 2010 there have already been 47 complaints identified by coordinators as instigating some positive action to minimise similar expressions of dissatisfaction in the future.
- 4.1.3 Changes have included ensuring Streetscene email responses are free of jargon/abbreviations; Council building alterations in Birkenhead to improve disabled access; review of working hours for Council contractors to minimise disturbance to local residents; improvements in access for the refuse collection service; improved changing facilities at a leisure centre and additional fitness classes provided for customers.
- 4.1.4 The drive to raise the profile of customer feedback as a positive tool for change and a catalyst for service improvement will continue into 2010/11, supported by regular liaison between customer feedback coordinators and escalation of issues to the cross department Customer Service Group (CSG).

4.2. Customer Satisfaction Surveys

- 4.2.1 From Quarter 1 in 2010/11 a proportion of complainants will be asked for their opinions on the complaint process itself, focusing on timeliness; quality of response and confidence in an impartial review undertaken of the issue. Results will be reported from Quarter 2 onwards and reviewed in the annual report for 2010/11.

4.3 Customer Care Standards Review

- 4.3.1 Launched in 2008, these standards set out the Council commitment to delivering high quality services across all departments in a consistent and measurable manner, clearly defined for both staff and customers.
- 4.3.2 In 2010 an independent review will be taking place using dedicated resources to benchmark customer service across alternate departments to ensure the standards are being consistently applied in all service areas. Supplementing this is a rolling exercise of mystery shopping across departments which focuses on the customer care standards.

4.4 Customer Focus

- 4.4.1 This area of work underpins the Customer Access Strategy (CAS) and incorporates customer feedback; customer care standards and liaison with the LGO. In addition there are the following on-going projects which aim to promote customer access to Council services. Improved customer consultation is being achieved through focus groups (customer service focus group held January 2010), questionnaires, exit surveys and feedback analysis.

4.5 Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests

- 4.5.1 The intention is to incorporate FOI requests into the CRM customer feedback module during 2010/11, recognising the potential for greater insight into what customers are contacting the Council for and identifying what measures can be taken to make such information more accessible.

4.6. Performance Objectives 2010/11

- 4.6.1 Key aims will be to recognise organisational changes made in response to customer feedback; improve consistency between departments; address anomalies in reporting LGO contacts; incorporate FOI requests into customer feedback and objectively measure the customer experience of contacting the Council. All of the above supports the aspiration for greater customer insight to shape future delivery of services and create an Excellent Council.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

6. STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. There are none arising out of this report.

7. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

8. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

9. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

10. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

11. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

12. LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. There are no implications for specific Members or wards arising out of this report.

13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

13.1. No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

14. RECOMMENDATION

14.1. That the report be noted.

IAN COLEMAN
DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

FNCE/96/10