

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD



Report subject	The Centralisation of Complaints across BCP Council - Update
Meeting date	13 January 2025
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>Why are we centralising complaints? The centralisation decision was made in 2022, initially as a national Ombudsman recommendation to improve consistency, quality and efficiency in all local authorities' complaints services, with a deadline of April 2026.</p> <p>What will centralisation achieve? Within BCP the centralised service will ensure complaints are dealt with consistently across all departments, reduce costs and enhance accountability and transparency. The centralised complaints service aims to streamline processes, utilising a user-friendly system, along with artificial intelligence technology and staff training to enhance efficiency, facilitate learning and improve customer experience.</p>
Recommendations	<p>It is RECOMMENDED that Overview & Scrutiny:</p> <p>notes the progress made and the future steps required to deliver a more centralised complaints process.</p>
Reason for recommendations	This report is a progress update to O&S.

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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For update

Background

1. The approach to complaint handling within BCP Council has involved managing complaints primarily within individual services, using varied processes and resources that may not always be aligned or consistent. There is no unified oversight of complaints across the organisation, leading to inconsistent handling and challenges in identifying customers who may be experiencing poor outcomes across multiple services.
2. Whilst there are service areas where complaints are handled very thoroughly with the support of dedicated complaints expertise, it is often the case that opportunities for learning are not identified at an organisational level. In some services officers deal with complaints alongside many other tasks they are responsible for. It is also not easy to gain an accurate picture of complaint volumes, which inhibits useful performance reporting. Establishing a more centralised approach to complaints management in BCP aims to address these shortcomings.
3. The greater centralisation of the management and oversight of council complaints aims to achieve the following benefits:
4. Establishing a single, centralised complaints service to streamline processes across the council.
5. To provide a more efficient and user-friendly system for residents to submit their complaints.
6. Ensuring that complaints are handled consistently across all departments (Designated complaints officers)
7. A dedicated team will be assigned to manage and resolve complaints, improving accountability. (Ombudsman criteria), more faults are found by the ombudsman in councils that do not have designated complaints officers.
8. The service will incorporate advanced technology for tracking and managing complaints through a single complaints management database.
9. There will be a standardised process for acknowledging, investigating and responding to complaints.
10. Training programs will be implemented to equip staff with the skills needed to handle complaints effectively.

11. The Council will regularly review and analyse complaint data to identify trends and areas for improvement, through the single case management system.
12. Feedback from residents will be solicited to continually enhance the complaints service, utilising artificial intelligence.
13. The single complaints service aims to increase transparency and trust in the Council's processes and giving a single view of the customer in order to better understand individual concerns and needs.
14. The initiative is part of a broader effort to improve overall customer service and satisfaction within the BCP Council.
15. The centralised complaints process is being coordinated by the Business Support service, within the Customer & Property directorate. Existing staff resources within service areas will continue to respond to complaints about their specific service area, but oversight, guidance and monitoring of responses and overall council performance will be centralised. This will ensure that BCP Council complies with the Ombudsman's recommendation that no single service area is responsible for its own complaints management, with consistent and effective monitoring of complaints across BCP, including standardisation of policies, procedures and processes.

Progress update

16. Complaints charters are in place for the statutory areas of service which experience the highest number of complex complaints, including Childrens and Adults services. A Charter describes the service and support that can be expected from the centralised complaints team, and this is agreed between the service and the complaints service.
17. Services are being supported in distinguishing between complaints and a service requests, in order to ensure that only complaints go through the formal complaints process, whilst simple requests for service can be dealt with and concluded promptly.
18. Development of the requirements for a single complaints management system has been completed, and the build is scheduled to begin in August 2025, with completion by December 2025. A full trial and test of the new system will take place between January 2026 and March 2026. The new system launch is then anticipated to be April 2026. This timescale reflects the significant competing pressures currently being experienced by the ICT service, as they tackle many complex improvement programmes across the Council.
19. Development of a single Complaints Policy for the council is in progress with a view to ensuring it is consistent with the national ombudsman complaints policy (expected to be published between January and March 2025). The team are working in association with the Ombudsman in this regard.
20. A section on Unreasonable and Persistent Complainants (UPC) has now been added to the Complaints Policy. A UPC panel will review each case immediately to address persistent complainants. Criteria for UPC will be included in the database, tracking issues with individual complainants to prevent them from overwhelming the council with complaints.
21. The creation of the centralised complaints function is underway. Progress reflects the legacy approaches to complaints management which vary from department to department, including the resources they have historically

committed to complaints management. This has been more straight forward in Childrens and Adults given their established approaches. In Operations and Corporate services the picture is more varied, nevertheless these services are now referring to the centralised service for guidance and support, and complaints response performance is either being maintained or improved.

22. The progress made so far is moving us forward, but it is anticipated that the most valuable opportunities will come following the implementation of the single complaints management system with the organisational view of complaints management and performance that it will provide.

Ombudsman complaints performance

23. Where complaints escalate beyond the council's internal processes customers may refer their concerns to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). The LGSCO is the final arbitrator of complaints relating to the services provided by BCP council (excluding housing landlord complaints which are handled by the Housing Ombudsman). Data for 2024 shows:
24. The Ombudsman examined 39 complaints about services provided by BCP council. For context, total complaints against BCP in this reporting period was 1349.
25. 2.89% total complaints referred on to the Ombudsman.
26. The LGSCO upheld the council's decision in 32 of the 39 cases giving an 82% uphold rate which is an increase on the upheld rate for previous years and above the national uphold rate for similar authorities of 79%.
27. They observed significant improvement, with most enquiries answered on time. In six out of ten cases where deadlines weren't met, the Council proactively sought extensions. Where the Ombudsman made recommendations, BCP complied in 100% of cases and in five cases where the Ombudsman found fault, they considered that we had already provided a satisfactory remedy.
28. There are currently no overdue responses due to the LGSCO.
29. The council will be collaborating with the Ombudsman to ensure that our new complaints monitoring system for BCP Council fully meets the Ombudsman's requirements and serves as an effective tool for managing and reporting on complaints handling within BCP Council.
30. The Ombudsman's report highlighted the Complaint Handling Code, which outlines a clear process for addressing complaints fairly and effectively. This is in line with the code given to housing authorities and landlords by the Housing Ombudsman, and the LGSCO aims to adopt it promptly. Twenty councils have volunteered to participate in the two-year implementation pilot.
31. The Ombudsman has indicated that decisions will be made based on the new code by Spring 2026. The Council is currently reviewing its complaints handling processes, policies and practices to ensure alignment with the new code.
32. The Ombudsman is reviewing their complaint handling program and plans to introduce new modules for Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care.

Working closely with the LGSCO

33. Initial LGSCO enquiries are received via a central mailbox for BCP complaints, which is currently overseen by the Central Complaints Service within the

Business Support Directorate. These enquiries are recorded in a central log and Service Unit complaints contacts are encouraged to reply directly to the LGSCO.

34. The council's complaints service is working closely with the Ombudsman to ensure our new processes and approaches to complaints management meet the highest standards, and in turn put the council in the best position to see its decisions upheld where complaints are subsequently referred to the Ombudsman.

35. The Ombudsman's new code requires BCP Council to nominate a Lead Member for Complaints. The portfolio holder for Customer, Culture & Communications, Councillor Andy Martin, has agreed to perform this role going forward.

Options Appraisal

36. There are no option appraisals to consider at this stage.

Summary of financial implications

37. There are no financial considerations at this stage, although failure to manage complaints effectively can lead to the Ombudsman recommending financial compensation for affected complainants.

Summary of legal implications

38. There are no legal implications at this stage.

Summary of human resources implications

39. There are no HR implications, as the complaints charters agree limited line management changes as each service merges with the centralised complaints service.

Summary of sustainability impact

40. There are no sustainability impact issues identified at this stage.

Summary of public health implications

41. There are no public health and wellbeing issues identified at this stage.

Summary of risk assessment

42. The main risks associated with this report are likely to emerge where the council does not have a robust approach to complaints management and specifically where it does not meet Ombudsman expectations. These include public dissatisfaction, reputational damage and the requirement to pay financial compensation to affected complainants.

Background papers

There are no background papers.