

Casework Task & Finish Group

Findings of Task and Finish Group
commissioned by Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

September – November 2015



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Preface

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the recommendations of the Casework Task and Finish Group. The review was commissioned by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee after several Councillors had raised concerns regarding issues such as:

- The tracking of casework, from initial submission to resolution;
- Standardisation of responses given, both in terms of substance of the response and the means used to convey the final decision to residents;
- The completion of casework involving externally contracted service providers; and
- The limitations of the existing information technology used for casework, and the potential to upgrade the system.

These are the central aspects addressed in the terms of reference which can be found at the start of the report. Our meetings also discussed the present system, its potential and limitations and the costs involved in any upgrade; our eventual recommendations have been made with this factor in mind, but are also requesting that the possibility of an improved system could be revisited on the basis that its benefits (in terms of improved services and saved officer time) could be justified by the benefits it would give. The further responses of Slough Borough Council officers to these matters has also been included in this report.

The swift, transparent and consistent resolution of casework is of vital importance to local residents, and a central commitment of Slough Borough Council towards the local population. By ensuring that clarity is given at all stages, even where the decision may not have been the one desired by the individual raising the case, we can ensure that the best possible local service is provided and that the Council's reputation is enhanced. Given the Five Year Plan's pledges to use technology to redefine the way customers contact the Council, streamline customer journeys and invest in technology to enable better working for staff, we would hope that the recommendations' potential to support these aims is clear.

The Members of the Task and Finish Group would like to thank the officers who have provided information to the Group. I would also like to thank Councillor Wal Chahal, Councillor Roger Davis, Councillor Fiza Matloob and Councillor Ted Plenty for all their work and support in completing this project.

Councillor Zaffar Ajajib
Chair of the Casework Task and Finish Group



Terms of reference

The following terms of reference were proposed by the Task & Finish Group following a meeting on 7th July 2015, and were agreed by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 10th September 2015.

1. To establish the potential for a more transparent and comprehensive system of tracking casework from initial receipt to completion, with specific reference to the following:
 - 1.1 The capability of the present casework logging system.
 - 1.2 The feasibility of creating a clear log of the progress of cases registered with Slough Borough Council (SBC) for each Councillor.
 - 1.3 Increasing the effectiveness and impact of SBC responses to casework.
 - 1.4 Ensuring that response deadlines (and subsequent undertakings) are adhered to.
 - 1.5 Creating a series of different categorisations to clarify the precise status of individual cases
 - 1.6 Monitoring the performance of different Departments in meeting key performance indicators for casework.
 - 1.7 Clarifying procedures for progressing casework with outsourced service providers.
 - 1.8 The process for escalating cases where the final response has not been to the satisfaction of Councillors.
 - 1.9 Standardised communications for the outcomes of casework to local residents.
2. To make recommendations on the above matters.

Summary of Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group would like to propose the following recommendations based on its investigations:

- 1) That the possibility of a system upgrade be investigated, with the system requiring the following elements to justify its procurement;
 - The ability to act as a central repository for casework, from submission to completion or final decision;
 - The ability to be interrogated by officers, allowing previous cases on the same policy matters to be found and used in decision making;
 - The ability to be accessed via Councillors' iPads; and
 - The ability to be accessed by residents via the Slough Borough Council (SBC) website to track the progress of their cases.
- 2) For any such system to include automated escalation points, whereby inaction by an established deadline would cause responsible officers to receive an alert;
- 3) SBC officers be asked to establish previous decisions made in comparable cases where applicable, in order to avoid any inconsistencies in decisions made, actions taken or advice given to residents;
- 4) SBC officers to ensure that final responses are sent to residents, with the relevant Councillor copied into the response. Councillors are to be made aware that this is the standard procedure and should not act as spokespeople for decisions made by officers; and
- 5) In cases where the decision made or the action taken has an impact across their ward, Councillors are to inform other Councillors in that ward.

1 Background to the Review

1.1 Introduction

The issue was first raised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 17th June 2015. This was in response to concerns raised during the summer recess that casework could be hard to track, with Councillors and / or residents having been unaware of the progress, completion or final decision made in relation to casework raised with Slough Borough Council (SBC). This had caused concerns amongst both Councillors and residents, and was leading to a negative impact on both the service offered to the local community and the reputation of the Council. It had also led to Councillors having to fulfil the role of officers in some instances, informing residents of decisions in the absence of an official response.

As result, the Committee agreed to commission the review and then also adopted its proposed terms of reference (as included at the start of this report).

The Task and Finish Group was chaired by Councillor Zaffar Ajaib and membership comprised Councillor Wal Chahal, Councillor Roger Davis, Councillor Fiza Matloob and Councillor Ted Plenty.

1.2 The Approach

Once the terms of reference had been agreed, the Group held two meetings with SBC officers. The first of these was a demonstration of the existing IT system and its capabilities, provided by Finbar McSweeney (Corporate Complaints Manager). After this, a discussion was held around the questions raised by the terms of reference, with SBC represented by Finbar McSweeney and Tracy Luck (Assistant Director, Strategy and Engagement).

The information provided at that meeting is included in the report; these officers have also been asked to provide initial responses to the final recommendations made on 3rd November 2015. This has also been covered in the report to provide all parties making decisions on the recommendations to have the most accurate evidence to hand in their deliberations.

1.3 Potential financial implications

The Group is aware of the potential budgetary implications of its request, and also the need to apply the relevant procurement procedure for any acquisitions arising from the report. It has also consulted with SBC officers during the process of forming its recommendations,. An initial cost – benefit analysis was requested at the meeting on 3rd November 2015 with this in mind, and has been included in this report in section 2.

In terms of meeting the aims of the Five Year Plan, the following would seem to back the request for an improved casework management system:

- Outcome 8 key action 1: Use technology to redefine the way customers contact the Council.
- Outcome 8 key action 3: Invest in technology to enable staff to work smartly wherever they are located.

By creating a system where residents can access details of casework via the SBC website, pressure on officers would be reduced. Meanwhile, improvements to 'smart working' would accrue from a more centralised, accessible system and would assist with remote reporting of progress by officers working away from SBC offices.

2 Information gathered

2.1 Meetings - 10th and 17th September 2015

The following information was gathered by the Casework Task & Finish Group:

- A demonstration of the current system on 10th September 2015 showed that it could log core data. However, the system was also relatively old and had limitations in terms of user interaction which could restrict its potential to produce summary reports.
- In addition, whilst the process up to the point of referring a case to the relevant department was fairly clear, there were issues with the tracking of the response which had been given. Cases were noted as 'closed' on the system by the logging officer once the responsible officer had been allocated and they had replied to the Councillor and resident, rather than at the point at which the responsible officer had completed work or informed the resident of the final decision.
- The issue of undertakings given not being followed through remained a concern on a small number of cases. Members also reported that, in some cases, although acknowledgements and initial replies had been sent to residents, some Councillors believe it seemed to be left to them to notify residents, whilst this responsibility lay with the officer who had been allocated the case.
- In terms of capacity, the team dealing with casework was small (only one full time member) and had limited resources. They had not previously been asked to produce reports, and the understanding had been that Councillors were responsible for pursuing outstanding actions.
- Councillors had the option of reporting unsatisfactory actions (separate from the complaints process for residents); however, an exercise on such cases had been undertaken in late 2014. This had received only 10 such incidents.
- The recording of such cases was not the responsibility of the casework team; however, when these cases generated complaints from residents or Councillors, these would come through that team. Any trends emerging regarding Council departments or areas of Council work would be raised with the relevant team, but clear evidence was required to make any such observations.
- Quarterly reporting of casework on a Councillor-by-Councillor basis would be possible. This would take a similar format to a response given to a request under the Freedom of Information Act and would be liable to be fairly high level in its content.
- Web interface was also not possible under the present system.
- The system was sufficiently flexible to be amended in some respects; however, this would be highly limited and would also need a feasibility study to assess the potential for useful innovation.
- There was no external helpdesk or similar facility offered by the providers of the current software.
- Whilst it may be possible to highlight cases on the basis of the individual Councillor who had raised it, any further work undertaken on a case-by-case basis could be highly time consuming and impractical.
- The cost of an upgrade to the casework system was unknown, although it could be put forward as a bid against the IT capital programme for which a business case would need to be made.
- Beyond the casework team, only the Leader's office and the housing department had the ability to mark casework as 'closed'.
- Members raised some dissatisfaction with the responses offered to residents. Whilst residents and Councillors were interested in the outcome, sometimes the answers provided were based on policies and not as clear as desired. Members were aware that the answer could be 'no', but required clarity.
- In addition, there had been cases where the answer indicated that action would be taken; however, subsequently when the matter was chased up Councillors had been informed that the budget did not allow for action to be undertaken. Members felt that the public would understand

the budgetary pressures placed on SBC, but that clarity on this and the required prioritisation of services needed to be given at the start of the process.

- In addition, there had been concern over a small number of cases where one officer had been named at the start of the response as responsible, only to claim later that it was not part of their role.
- Reductions in budget were leading to SBC's ability to undertake work facing review. Communicating the reality of the situation, and the amount of work that SBC to commit to, would be vital in relationships with the public.
- Outsourced services were subject to the same key performance indicators as services run directly by SBC. Any records of complaints could be reported as part of any retendering processes and were shared with the service providers concerned. Meetings with account directors could be called.
- Residents had the power to raise level 1, 2 and 3 corporate complaints regarding responses to casework. Councillors did not have this, but could use a separate process where escalations could reach the Head of Service.
- Concerns regarding cases where Councillors received the officer response but residents did not were also raised. It was clarified that this should not be the case, with residents to be the first priority in terms of communicating outcomes.

On the basis of this information, the Task & Finish Group decided that the following matters would be the priorities:

1. Researching the possibility of upgrading the system to improve efficiency.
2. Ensuring that the process used to make decisions and inform residents was standardised and clarified with all parties responsible.
3. Ensuring that the messages conveyed to residents were clear, consistent and (where commitments were given) could be enacted.

As a result, these are the focus of the recommendations made on page 5 of this report.

2.2 Cost – benefit analysis

Should any alterations to the current system be recommended, then a formal procurement process will be required. This will involve the submission of at least three quotations and a full evaluation of their merits. However, to clarify the likely parameters of such systems, some preparation work was undertaken after the final recommendations of the Task & Finish Group were agreed.

The Task & Finish Group requested that some options for any potential upgrade should be researched. One example mentioned was the system used by Fiona Mactaggart MP; however, the current supplier of this does not offer their software to local organisations, and as a result this line of enquiry cannot be not taken any further.

The current supplier has significantly altered their system since SBC's last upgrade. The Respond system on offer is Respond 6.0.1 (SBC currently employs version 3.7) and offers levels of functionality, user interaction and sophisticated case management options which would not be required; either by the recommendations listed on page 5 of the report, or by local residents' inquiries and the processes used by SBC to resolve them. As a result, the costly nature of the product (the company estimated that an initial outlay of £44,720 plus an additional £6,320 per annum would be the price) would render it highly unlikely to be adopted by the Council, whilst in addition the Information Technology systems required to use the system would limit its accessibility for staff. This would run counter to many of the improved accessibility options it provides, further undermining any business case for its adoption.

As a result, should there be an available budget for a new system, the Task & Finish Group would recommend that the formal procurement process should investigate options more in line with the Council's requirements. One such system, researched in conjunction with the Corporate Complaints Team, would have the functionality required by the specifications in Recommendation 1 on page 5, allowing for greater tracking of progress on cases by SBC officers, Councillors and members of the public. In terms of delivering efficiencies beyond the improved service, any such system would need to justify its procurement by being more efficient as the public will be able to enter a reference number into a portal on the SBC website to track the progress of their case, rather than having to contact SBC directly.

The costs of the system outlined above are as follows:

- Initial cost of establishing system - £5,000 for 10 day consultancy session, to frame the system for SBC requirements.
- Annual licence of £8,995 per annum to cover 9 main users (responsible for entering details on to the system and updating on progress).

It should be noted that any new system would also require the approval of arvato both in terms of its purchase and any ongoing support required by arvato for which they may be a cost.

3 Attendance record

	7 th July 15	17 th Sept 15	3 rd Nov 15
Cllr Ajaib	P	P	P
Cllr Chahal	P	P	Ap
Cllr Davis	P	Ap	Ap
Cllr Matloob	P	P	P
Cllr Plenty	P	P	P