

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Scrutiny and Overview Committee 19 June 2008
AUTHOR/S: Chief Executive / Customer Service Project Officer

COMPLAINTS 2007/08

Purpose

1. At this meeting the Committee is reviewing its work programme for 2008/09. The purpose of this report is twofold:
 - a) To provide information about the nature of complaints received by the Council in 2007/08 to enable the Committee to assess whether this indicates services or areas to be included in the work programme for 2008/09.
 - b) At its meeting on 15 March 2007, the Committee considered the new complaints process and asked that a report evaluating the implementation of the new system be brought back to the Committee for review after six months of operation. This report provides an overview of the process to enable the Committee to consider whether it wishes to build a further review of the complaints process into its work programme.
2. Complaints are an essential element of the Council's Corporate Objective to deliver high quality services and the service priority to achieve improved customer satisfaction with our services. There are two main aspects of our approach to complaints:
 - a) To achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction with the complaints process.
 - b) To ensure that the Council learns from complaints and uses that learning to improve services.
3. This is not a key decision, but has been brought to this committee to provide them with information.

Executive Summary

4. The new complaints procedure was introduced in May 2007, with a view to streamlining and simplifying the process by which complaints were made and handled. To this end, the number of stages of the process was reduced from four to three.
5. During 2007/08, 123 complaints were handled at stage one of the new procedure, four of which were escalated for investigation at stage two. Response rates to complaints handled at stages one and two of the procedure were variable.
6. In total, 21 complaints regarding SCDC were made to the Local Government Ombudsman. Determinations were made with regards to 19 of these. A large proportion of the complaints were premature. Of those that the Ombudsman investigated, in one instance a local settlement was agreed, but in all other cases either there was insufficient evidence of maladministration for investigations to be continued, or the Ombudsman discontinued the investigation at his discretion.

Response times to Ombudsman complaints have improved significantly from 66.5 days in 2006/07 to 36.9 days in 2007/08.

7. A number of common themes for complaint have been identified. By far the most common cause for complaint was a lack of response to customer communications.
8. Satisfaction with complaints handling, as measured by BVPI4, has historically been relatively low when compared to national satisfaction levels. The local performance indicator, SX18, shows a relatively strong level of customer satisfaction for 2007/08, although complainants have expressed dissatisfaction with regards to the way that they are kept informed of the progress of their complaint.

Background

9. In May 2007, Cabinet agreed the new, three-stage complaints procedure which replaced the previous four-stage procedure. The purpose of the new procedure was to simplify and streamline the handling of complaints, to ensure that customers received the highest possible level of service, and thereby to increase customer satisfaction with complaint handling.
10. Under the new procedure, stage one complaint investigations are the responsibility of corporate managers, who either investigate the complaint themselves, or nominate an appropriate service manager to do so on their behalf.
11. If, following the conclusion of the stage one investigation, the complainant indicates that they are not satisfied with the outcome of their complaint, they are entitled to escalate their complaint to stage two of the procedure. At stage two, the appropriate chief officer carries out the investigation.
12. Following the completion of the stage two investigation, complainants who are still dissatisfied have the option of referring their complaint to the third stage of the procedure, which is investigation by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). The LGO will not usually investigate complaints that have not passed through the full internal complaints procedure.

Stage one and two complaints received

13. Between 1 April 2007 and 31 March 2008, 123 complaints were received at stage one of the new complaints procedure. Of these complaints, only four were escalated to stage two. Table 1 shows the distribution of complaints and the response performance across the year. The figures in the table include stage one and two complaints.

Table 1 Complaints response rates (2007/08)

Quarter	Total	Responded within deadline		Responded outside deadline		Ongoing	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1	41	26	63%	15	37%	0	0%
2	24	10	42%	13	54%	1	4%
3	22	12	55%	10	45%	0	0%
4	40	23	58%	17	43%	0	0%
2007/08	127	71	56%	55	43%	1	1%

Ombudsman complaints

14. In total 21 complaints were made to the Ombudsman in 2007/08 regarding SCDC. The services to which the complaints referred are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Ombudsman complaints received

Service	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & Building Control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
2005/06	1	1	5	12	0	0	19
2006/07	3	6	3	11	1	1	25
2007/08	2	4	3	10	1	1	21

15. The Ombudsman made determinations regarding 19 of the complaints received, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Ombudsman's determinations

Reason	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Investigation concluded maladministration causing injustice	0	1	0
Local settlement agreed	4	3	1
Investigation concluded maladministration but no injustice	0	0	0
Investigation concluded no maladministration	0	0	0
Insufficient evidence of maladministration to continue investigation	10	7	7
Investigation discontinued at Ombudsman's discretion	4	4	4
Outside Ombudsman's discretion	3	3	0
Premature complaints	3	8	7
Total excluding premature	21	18	12
Total complaints determined	24	26	19

16. Table 3 shows that during 2007/08, none of the complaints made to the Ombudsman resulted in findings of maladministration by SCDC. A large proportion of the complaints received were premature, and were therefore dealt with under the internal complaints procedure.
17. The average response time to the Ombudsman's initial enquiries was 36.9 days. This represents a significant improvement against the 66.5 days recorded in 2006/07. However, the Ombudsman's target response time is within 28 days, indicating that further improvements are required.

Internal complaints common themes

18. Customers are motivated to make complaints for a variety of reasons. Whilst it is undeniable that some complaints are motivated by genuine failings on SCDC's behalf, it should also be noted that customers with whom SCDC is engaged in investigations or long-standing ongoing issues may make formal complaints as an attempt to dissuade or discourage the actions being taken against them.
19. For each of the stage one and stage two complaints received in 2007/08, the main issues forming the subject of the complaints have been identified. In some cases, secondary issues are also identifiable.

20. Table 4 shows the complaints received overall and by each service area broken down into the recurrent themes. It should be noted that a variation in the number of complaints received by the various services is expected. Those services which carry out a large volume of customer transactions each week are likely to receive a greater volume of customer complaints. This should not necessarily be seen as a reflection of the quality of the service delivered.

Table 4 Common themes 2007/08

	Overall		Primary themes					
	Primary theme	Secondary theme	Housing	Environmental Health	ICT	Other	Planning	Revenue & Benefits
Lack of communication	35	0	9	8	0	0	16	2
Lack of promised action	9	0	7	0	0	0	1	1
Standard of driving	9	1	0	9	0	0	0	0
Repeated non-collection of bins	7	2	0	7	0	0	0	0
Lack of consultation	6	0	0	0	0	0	6	0
Poor customer service	6	5	3	2	1	0	0	0
Fraud investigation methods	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Recovery action	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Misinformation	4	1	1	0	2	0	0	1
Housing provision delay	4	1	4	0	0	0	0	0
Staff conduct	4	2	1	2	0	0	0	1
Planning process	4	4	0	0	0	0	4	0
Telephone wait times	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Service delivery failure	3	3	2	0	0	0	1	0
Planning application handling	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Bin delivery	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Non-geographic numbers	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Staff availability	2	1	0	0	0	0	2	0
Trees	2	3	0	0	0	0	2	0
Other	14	0	0	4	0	2	3	5

21. The data in Table 4 shows that the most common cause for formal complaints in 2007/08 was a failure on SCDC's part to communicate with our customers to the level/frequency they expect from us. This could represent a failure to comply with our advertised service standards, or it could show that customer expectations are higher than those reflected in our standards. The Planning service received a significant proportion of the complaints relating to a lack of communication.

Learning from Complaints

22. At present, while services do learn from complaints and make appropriate changes to services, this is not consistently formalised or documented. This is an area to be developed by Service First in the next year.

Complaints handling satisfaction

23. Measures of complaints satisfaction rarely result in high levels of satisfaction, either at SCDC or nationally, as complainants often find it difficult to separate their feelings regarding the issues about which they complained from the way in which their

complaint was handled. This means that whilst the absolute satisfaction levels should be considered in relation to national satisfaction levels, for internal purposes the relative trends are of more importance.

24. SCDC measures customer satisfaction with complaints handling in two ways, via the three-yearly BVPI survey and via a local PI.
25. Table 5 shows satisfaction with SCDC's complaints handling as measured by the BVPI surveys. Nationally, satisfaction with complaints handling declined between 2000/01 and 2003/04 and a small improvement was recorded between 2003/04 and 2006/07. SCDC performance has reflected this change, decreasing significantly between 2000/01 and 2003/04 and showing a slight improvement in 2006/07. However, the two most recent surveys show SCDC to be in the bottom quartiles nationally.

Table 5 BVPI4 - Satisfaction with complaints handling

	2000/01	2003/04	2006/07
SCDC	41%	30%	32%
Bottom quartile	38%	30%	32%
National mean	41%	34%	35%
Top quartile	45%	37%	38%

Data taken from Audit Commission website

26. An internal PI (SX18) is measured via a paper survey sent to all complainants following the conclusion of the investigation into their complaint. The survey asks four questions, and invites complainants to indicate their satisfaction on a scale from very satisfied to very dissatisfied.

Table 6 Customer satisfaction 2007/08

How satisfied were you with:	Satisfaction
The way your complaint was handled?	44%
The way you were kept informed?	27%
The process?	32%
The length of time taken to respond?	44%

27. The satisfaction data shown in Table 6 echoes the most common cause for complaints in that the lowest satisfaction levels were recorded regarding the way in which customers were kept informed about the process of their complaint.

Implications

28. Financial	
Legal	
Staffing	
Risk Management	Poor complaints handling performance could have a negative impact on SCDC's reputation.
Equal Opportunities	

Consultations

29. Initial and subsequent discussions with Service First Project Team.

Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities

30.	<p>Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future</p> <p>-</p>
	<p>Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community</p> <p>Customer complaints provide a rich source of feedback which can be translated into service improvement. Poor complaints response/handling performance can have a negative impact on SCDC's reputation.</p>
	<p>Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work</p> <p>-</p>

Conclusions/Summary

31. A number of common themes are identifiable in relation to complaints received at stages one and two of the complaints process. The most common cause for complaint is a lack of communication with customers, or failure to respond to their communications. Service First will be working to develop ways to ensure that complaints feedback is used to drive and support future improvements.
32. Customer satisfaction with complaints handling echoes this issue, with low levels of satisfaction recorded for the way in which complainants are kept up to date with the progress of their complaint.

Recommendations

33. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee are invited to consider the information regarding complaints outlined in this report to assess whether it indicates services or areas to be included in their work programme for 2008/09.
34. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee are requested to consider including a full review of the complaints procedure in their work programme for 2008/09.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

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