

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Scrutiny and Overview Committee 24 June 2010
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COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS PERFORMANCE 2009/10

Purpose

1. To report compliments and complaints handling performance during 01 April 2009 – 31 March 2010.
2. To update the committee on the points raised at its meeting of 02 April 2009 regarding complaint handling performance.
3. To provide further information regarding the Council's ability to learn from feedback gained through complaints and compliments.

Options

4. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee may wish to comment on whether the complaints and compliments procedure is effective and the policy is understood by Members and officers of the Council.
5. The Committee may also wish to draw upon the information contained within the report to identify recurring themes or issues for further scrutiny and investigation.

Executive Summary

6. In 2009/10 the Council registered 146 complaints and 129 compliments. The actual number of complainants in 2009/10 was 134.
7. 2009/10 performance in respect of meeting complaint acknowledgement and response targets has improved on that reported in 2008/09.
8. Affordable Homes and Planning & Sustainable Communities continue to generate the highest percentage of complaints, 37% and 25% respectively.
9. Planning & Sustainable Communities and Health & Environmental Services have recorded the highest percentage of compliments, 39% and 27% respectively.
10. The Council has committed to recording lessons learnt and improvements made as a result of customer feedback. Of the 123 complaints, only five learning from complaints forms were completed.
11. The Local Government Ombudsman conducted 22 investigations into complaints made about the Council. Of the 22 investigations, the Ombudsman found no evidence of maladministration.
12. Satisfaction surveys were sent to all complainants registered within 2009/10; but only 16 were returned. Eight respondents were satisfied with every aspect. The completion rate is too low to draw reliable conclusions.

Background

13. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee received a report regarding the complaints handling process on 02 April 2009. [Minute 20](#) shows that the committee agreed to revisit this issue to review progress on the following issues:
- Whether a clearer definition of what constitutes a complaint had been provided
 - Whether Councillors had received a reminder of the Service First training which described the Members' place within the complaints process
 - Whether the Council's complaint handling satisfaction rate had improved

Considerations

Definition of a Complaint

14. The definition of a complaint is now included within the Handling Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy attached as **Appendix 1**.

Training for Members

15. In September 2009 Members received a Complaints, Comments and Compliments Refresher attached as **Appendix 2**. This was emailed and included in the Members' Weekly Bulletin. It provided a summary of the Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy. This policy includes a description of the role of Members.

Complaint Handling Satisfaction

16. Satisfaction surveys were sent to all complainants (a total of 123) registered within 2009/10; but only 16 were returned. Complainants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the following four aspects. The percentage satisfaction rate is detailed below:

Table A – Complainant Satisfaction Rate

Aspects	2008/09	2009/10
1. The way the complaint was handled	24%	50%
2. The way in which we kept you informed	38%	50%
3. The complaints process overall	24%	50%
4. The length of time taken to respond to the complaint	29%	50%

17. Whilst there is an improvement on 2008/09 complainant satisfaction the number of respondents was very low and it is therefore not possible to draw reliable conclusions regarding progress.
18. As a result of the poor response rate in quarters one and two the Customer Service Coordinator drafted an amended survey and cover letter, detailing the benefits and value of responding. This action showed no improvement on the number of completed surveys in quarters three and four.
19. Results indicate that some respondents to the satisfaction survey have been unable to separate their satisfaction of the outcome of the complaint with the satisfaction of complaints process. Networking with other authorities in the eastern region has suggested this is a common issue.
20. The Customer Service Excellence Standard recognises that measuring complainant satisfaction with those whose complaint is not upheld will not provide an accurate picture of satisfaction with the process. The standard states:

'We (the Council) ensure that the outcome of the complaints process for customers (whose complaint is upheld) is satisfactory for them'.

- 21. In 2010/11 the Customer Service Coordinator will be contacting complainants whose complaint was upheld and asking for feedback on the complaint handling process.

22. **Complaints Handling Process**

- 23. There are three stages to the Council's complaints handling process:

Stage one Complaints - All new complaints are logged at stage one. The complaint is passed to the relevant Corporate Manager to respond or nominate an appropriate Service Manager to respond on their behalf. Stage one complaints require a response within 10 working days.

Stage two Complaints - Complainants who are dissatisfied with the outcome of stage one can request that the complaint be passed to the Chief Executive or Executive Director. Stage two complaints require a response within 20 working days.

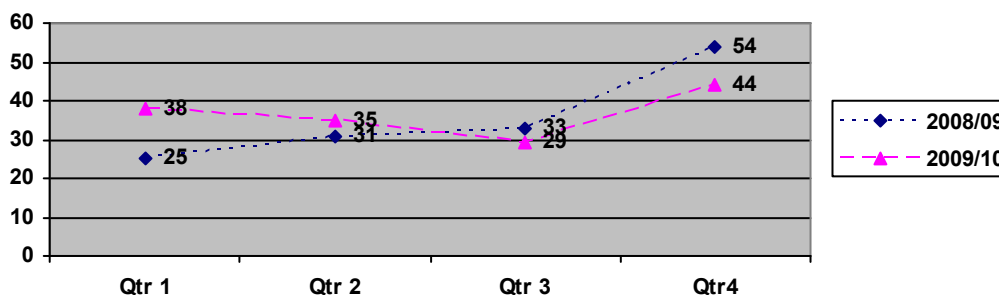
Stage three Complaints - Complainants who remain dissatisfied with outcome of stage two are entitled to complain directly to the Local Government Ombudsman. These complaints are registered at stage 3 of the formal process.

- 24. In some instances a complaint may enter the process at stage two or stage three directly. An example of when this might occur is if the complainant makes formal an issue that they have been trying to resolve outside of the complaints process.
- 25. The Customer Service Coordinator has been working closely with the Service First Steering Group to ensure all formal complaints are captured and processed through the correct procedure. 2009/10 data shows that complaints are now being registered from all areas of the Council suggesting a growing awareness amongst staff.

Complaints Analysis

- 26. During 2009/10 the Council registered 146 complaints, 118 at stage one, 12 at stage two and 16 at stage three. Of the 146 complaints, 23 were escalations of the original complaint, seven to stage two and 16 to stage three. Five complaints entered the system at stage 2 directly. This equates to an actual number of 123 complainants.
- 27. For the purpose of recording each escalation is counted as a new complaint. Chart one details the number of complaints per quarter in comparison to the previous financial year. 146 complaints were registered in 2009/10 the exact same number of complaints as registered in 2008/09.

Chart 1 – No. complaints (stage one, two and three combined) per quarter



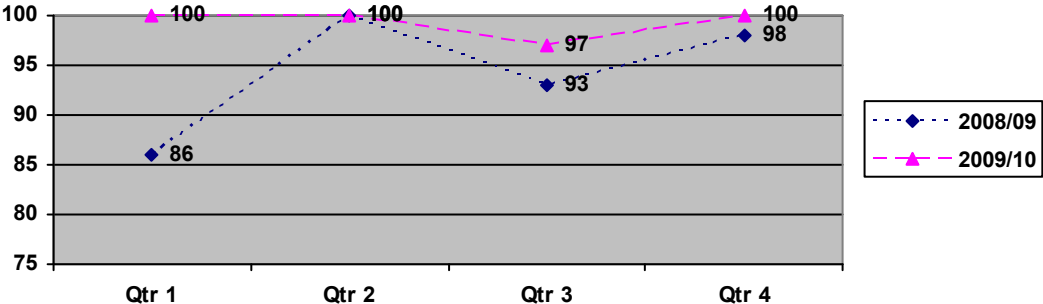
28. Table B details the number and percentage of complaints received by each Corporate Area in comparison to the previous financial year 2008/09. Planning and Sustainable Communities and Affordable Homes continue to generate the highest number of complaints. Networking suggests that this is common throughout many authorities.

Table B – No. & % complaints (stage one, two & three combined) per corporate area

	08-09	08-09 %		09-10	09-10 %
Planning & Sustainable Communities	45	31%		36	25%
Health & Environmental Services	32	22%		24	17%
Affordable Homes	44	30%		54	37%
Corporate Services	23	16%		28	19%
New Communities	0	0%		2	1%
Community & Customer Services	2	1%		2	1%

29. Chart 2 shows the percentage of complaints acknowledged within target.

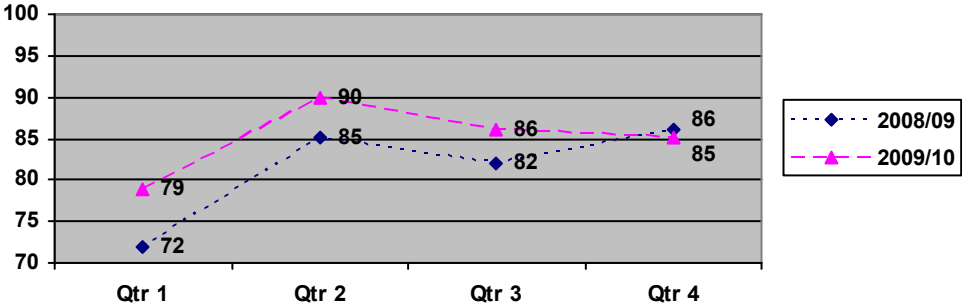
Chart 2 – % complaints (stage one, two & three combined) acknowledged within target



30. During the third quarter 97% of all complaints were acknowledged within three working days. One complaint missed the target and has resulted in a 3% drop in performance.

31. Chart 3 details the percentage of complaints responded to within target. Quarters one to three show an improvement on the previous year’s performance. Quarter four shows a decrease in performance during the same period last year. To make the improvements in 2009/10 the Customer Service Coordinator dedicated a significant amount of time to the chasing of responses. Performance dipped during times when the Customer Service Coordinator was unable to dedicate time to chasing responses.

Chart 3 - % complaints (stage one, two & three combined) responded to within target



32. In 2009/10 123 (85%) responses were made within the Council’s publicised timescales. This is a small improvement on 2008/09 performance (82%). Table C details the percentage of responses meeting target by corporate area.

Table C – Corporate Area performance - Complaints responded to within target

	08-09 No.	08-09 %		09-10 No.	09-10 %
Planning & Sustainable Communities	45	85%		36	72%
Health & Environmental Services	32	96%		24	88%
Affordable Homes	44	83%		54	89%
Corporate Services	23	64%		28	89%
New Communities	0	-		2	100%
Community & Customer Services	2	100%		2	100%

33. Table D details the broad theme of complaints. The predominant themes of complaint remain processes and/or procedures and service delivery. A proportion of these complaints regarding processes and/or procedures are those of which the Council is bound by legislation. A large proportion of complaints regarding service delivery resulted from a failure to manage customer expectations.
34. Table D also shows a decline in the number of complaints resulting from a failure to communicate but also shows an increase in complaints resulting from a failure to act and staff conduct. The Council upheld seven out of 13 complaints relating to a failure to act and five out of 13 complaints relating to staff conduct.

Table D Complaint breakdown by broad theme

Theme	08-09 No.	08-09 %		09-10 No.	09-10 %
Failure to communicate	34	23%		13	8%
Failure to act	4	3%		13	9%
Misinformation	6	4%		7	4%
Council Charges	4	3%		10	6%
Service Delivery	47	32%		35	24%
Staff Issues	7	5%		14	10%
Processes and/or procedures	44	30%		54	39%

35. The Council upheld 45 (30%) of the 146 complaints received in 2009/10. Each complaint upheld received an apology for the mistakes made. Three complainants were compensated. A total of £335.00 was paid in compensation during 2009/10.

Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Complaints

36. The Local Government Ombudsman received a total of 26 complaints regarding the Council in comparison with 27 complaints in the previous year. Of the 26 complaints received four were deemed premature and 22 were investigated.
37. 16 of the 22 investigations were referred to the Council for further information. Table E details the Council's performance against the response target of 28 days.

Table E Average response time for LGO complaints

	08-09	09-10
Average Response Time	37.5 days	29 days

38. The Ombudsman's report shows the Council has made an improvement on 2008/09 performance but missed the target by one day in 2009/10.
39. Responses that were not sent within the required 28 days are detailed in table F. The Customer Service Coordinator monitors response rates and was aware that complaints reference COMP01033, COMP01211 and COMP01030 did not meet the

target. Complaints reference COMP00971 and COMP01230 were sent within the target period but it appears they did not reach the Ombudsman in time.

Table F Responses that failed to meet target

Reference	Service	Days to respond
COMP01033	Planning & Environmental Health	47
COMP01211	Planning & Environmental Health	36
COMP00971	Planning	33
COMP01030	Corporate Services	36
COMP01230	Corporate Services	30

40. Table G provides a breakdown of the 22 complaints by corporate area.

Table G Breakdown of LGO complaints by corporate area

	09-10
Planning & Sustainable Communities	7
Health & Environmental Services	3
Affordable Homes	10
Corporate Services	2
New Communities	0
Community & Customer Services	0
Total	22

41. Of the total 22 investigations from which the Ombudsman did not find evidence of any maladministration. Table H details the conclusions of the Ombudsman.

Table H Ombudsman Conclusions

	09-10
Maladministration causing injustice	0
Local settlement	2
Maladministration causing no injustice	0
No maladministration	0
Discontinued due to lack of evidence	10
Discontinued under Ombudsman discretion	7
Outside jurisdiction	3
Total	22

Learning from complaints

42. Learning from complaints forms continue to accompany complaints when forwarded to officers to respond. Very few completed forms have been returned.
43. In an effort to increase the response rate the Customer Service Coordinator asked Service First representatives to stress the importance of these forms to their teams. The importance of completing the form was also stressed when forwarding complaints to officers via email. These actions had no impact in 2009/10.
44. To resolve this issue in 2010/11 the Senior Management Team have agreed that complaints will remain open until a completed learning from complaints form has been submitted. Performance monitoring in the first quarter of 2010/11 has shown a significant improvement in the completion rate. Table I details completion rate by corporate area for 2009/10.

Table I Completed Learning From Complaints Forms

	No. Complaints	No. Completed Forms
Planning & Sustainable Communities	36	1
Health & Environmental Services	24	1
Affordable Homes	54	1
Corporate Services	28	2
New Communities	2	0
Community & Customer Services	2	0
Total	146	5

45. Using complaints as an opportunity to learn has led to a number of improvements including:
- Improved clarity to the housing equity sharing leaflet and webpage.
 - Improved communication within the Planning Committee to ensure there is an opportunity for all to express their view.
46. It is likely that a number of improvements have been made as a result of customer feedback. The Council is unable to quantify these unless they are formally recorded using the learning from complaints form.

Compliments

47. 129 compliments were registered by the Customer Service Coordinator during 2009/10. Notable comments included:
- “Thank you for the promptness and efficiency of this request”
 “It’s so nice to talk to someone who is so friendly and helpful”
 “I was most impressed with your professionalism”
 “Thank you for the prompt repairs on Christmas Eve”
 “I greatly appreciate the swift and friendly way in which you dealt with my inquiry”
 “Quite possibly the best response I could have received. Thank you so much”
 “Extremely efficient and easy to deal with”
 “Thank you for your positive approach to resolution of this matter “
 “Thanks for the help it has been first class”
 “Your speedy action was much appreciated”
 “The work you have actioned has made a big difference to us”
48. Table J shows the number and percentage of compliments registered in the 2009/10 by Corporate Area. The table shows that whilst the planning service generates a significant proportion of complaints, they continue to register the majority of compliments.

Table J Compliments by Corporate Area

	09-10	
Planning & Sustainable Communities	50	39%
Health & Environmental Services	35	27%
Affordable Homes	20	16%
Corporate Services	9	7%
New Communities	9	7%
Community & Customer Services	5	4%
Other	1	<1%

Implications

49.	Financial	None
	Legal	None
	Staffing	None
	Risk Management	Failure to maintain high standards of complaint handling exposes the Council to the risk of more recourse to the Ombudsman. This brings a reputational risk.
	Equal Opportunities	An Equality Impact Assessment of the Complaints, Comments and Compliments Procedure was completed on 28 October 2010. No adverse impacts were identified.
	Climate Change	None

Consultations

50. SMT received the information contained within this report on 26 May 2010.

Effect on Strategic Aims

51. **Commitment to being a listening council, providing first class services accessible to all.**
The complaints and compliment process provides a vital channel for customers to feedback information relating to their experience of our services. This information should inform service planning and reviews and identify improvements to service delivery that will contribute to proving first class services accessible to all.

Options

52. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee may wish to comment on whether the complaints and compliments procedure is effective and the policy is understood by Members and officers of the Council.
53. The Committee may also wish to draw upon the information contained within the report to identify recurring themes or issues areas for further scrutiny and investigation.

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

Local Government Ombudsman – Provisional Complaint Statistics Report

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