

Putting our Customers first

Customer Feedback Report

Complaints, compliments and suggestions

Quarter 1
2016/17

Altogether better



Background information

1. Customer feedback is a valuable tool. It not only helps us understand what is important to service users and what we are doing well, it can also indicate widespread issues and offer us the opportunity to put things right and improve our services.
2. This report covers a range of customer feedback received by the Council during quarter one, 2016/17 (1 April 2016 to 30 June 2016). It highlights the main themes throughout quarter one, summarises our performance in dealing with complaints, identifies any lessons learned and states what remedial action we have taken, or plan to take, to put things right and ensure similar mistakes are avoided in the future. As feedback can also highlight opportunities for operational improvement even when the service is delivered properly, the report also includes a selection of resident suggestions and their outcomes, and an overview of comments relating to our policies and procedures.

Complaints

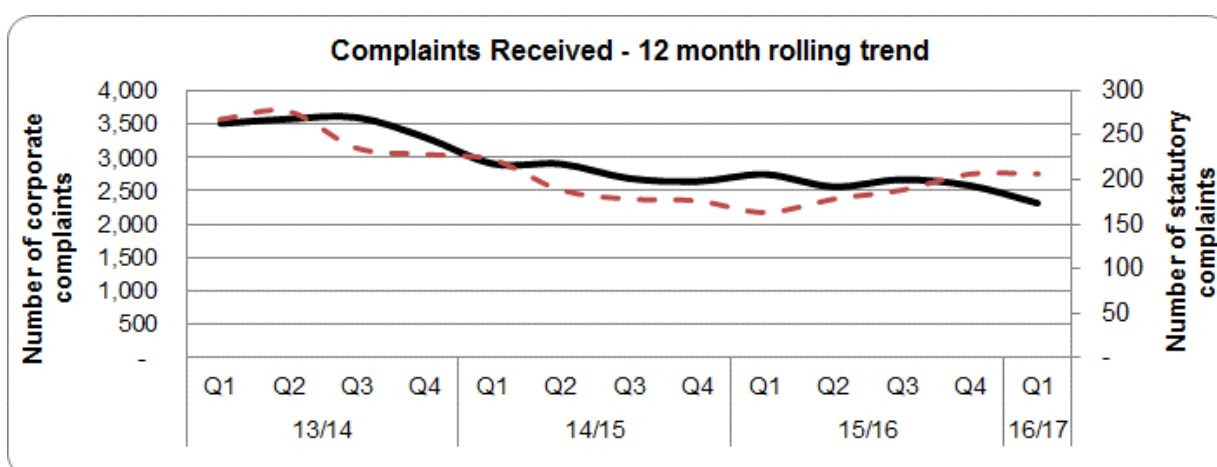
3. Within this document, there are two types of complaint. Complaints which arise from our duties as a provider of social care services and corporate complaints which cover all other complaints. The two complaint types have their own processes, timescales and policy and are therefore reported separately.
4. The responsible service area deals wholly with corporate complaints in the first instance, completing the initial service review and, as far as possible, contacting customers by telephone to ensure a more personal approach.
5. Should the customer remain dissatisfied with the service response to a corporate complaint, the complaint can be forwarded to the Customer Feedback Team, to make an assessment on the escalation of that complaint. If the team feels there is no value in progressing with an independent investigation, the service user is advised to contact the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) should they wish to pursue their complaint.
6. Independent investigation of statutory complaints is arranged by the Complaints Team within the former Children and Adults Services, who commission independent investigators in line with the statutory regulations.
7. Broadly speaking a complaint is an 'expression of dissatisfaction about an organisation's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the organisation'. However, analysis of complaints received over the last 12 months has shown that a proportion of complaints are objecting to a policy, appealing against a decision or requesting a service for the first time. From this point forward, in line with the Corporate Complaints Policy, this type of feedback will be recorded and included within this report; however, it will be identified separately to recorded corporate complaints data.

Summary

8. During quarter 1, we received 504 complaints; 45 statutory complaints and 459 corporate complaints.

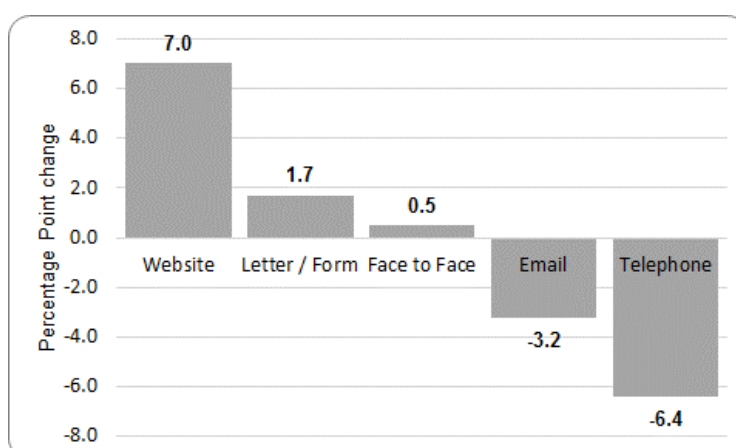
	Q1 15/16	Q1 16/17	Change since Q1 last year	
number received	766	504	↓ -262	-34%
- Statutory complaints	45	45	↔ 0	0%
- corporate complaints	721	459	↓ -262	-36%

9. Analysis of complaints received has shown that although corporate complaints continue to maintain the downward trend of the last three years, this trend has reversed for statutory complaints which are now showing an upward trend.



10. Further analysis has been able to identify the channels used to report complaints during quarter 1. Although the telephone remains the preferred method with almost 44% of complaints reported this way, there has been shift to other channels most noticeably our website, as shown below;

	Proportion of all complaints received	
	Q1 15/16	Q1 16/17
Website	32.5%	39.5%
Letter / Form	2.3%	4.0%
Face to Face	2.9%	3.4%
Email	12.7%	9.5%
Telephone	49.9%	43.5%



11. 96% of statutory complaints received during quarter 1 were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt and 85% were resolved within the agreed timescale.
12. The average time to close a corporate complaint at initial service review is now seven days and 24 days for an independent investigation.
13. Following initial service review, 33 corporate complainants remained dissatisfied and requested their complaint progress to independent investigation. During quarter 1, the Customer Feedback Team completed investigations into 31 complaints, of which 16% (5 complaints) were upheld. Two statutory complaints progressed to independent investigation, both of which are in the process of being investigated
14. Of the complaints handled during quarter 1, approximately half were upheld (partially or fully).

	Q1 15/16	Q1 16/17	Change since Q1 last year
% upheld (fully or part)	64%	52%	↓ -12 pp
- Statutory complaints	52%	47%	↓ -5 pp
- corporate complaints (service response)	65%	52%	↓ -13 pp
- corporate complaints (independent review)	28%	16%	↓ -12 pp

15. During quarter 1, the Local Government Ombudsman delivered decisions into 21 matters. Of these, five were upheld.
16. In addition to complaints, we also received 286 compliments, 88 suggestions and 64 comments on our policies and procedures.

Statutory Complaints

17. During quarter 1, we received 45 statutory complaints; 51% related to Children's Services and 49% to Adult Care.

Children's Services

18. 23 statutory complaints were received by Children's Services during quarter 1, a 46% decrease (20 fewer) compared to quarter 4 and a 21% decrease (six fewer) on the same period last year. 22 of the 23 complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt.
19. In addition, two complaints from previous quarters progressed to independent investigation. Both are in the process of being investigated.

20. 19 of the 23 complaints received (83%) were resolved during the quarter. Of these, six were resolved within 10 working days and a further nine within the prescribed timescale of 20 working days. Four complaints were resolved outside the 20 working day target. Investigations into the remaining four complaints are continuing.
21. Of the 19 resolved complaints, 11 were not upheld (58%), three were upheld (16%) and five partly upheld (26%).
22. 2 complaints were declined during quarter 1; One due to the complainant not providing information which was specific enough for the case to be investigated, and one as the complainant did not have the child's parents' permission to complain and was not deemed to be a person with sufficient interest, given the subject matter of the complaint.
23. A number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including;
- Following a complaint about a Viability Assessment, inaccuracies have been corrected and details entered on the appropriate case file. Issues from the same complaint led to a reminder being sent to managers regarding the importance of a professional approach to email correspondence.
 - Following a complaint where a mother had not received copies of supervised contact reports, she was reassured that she would receive copies of all reports. The complainant subsequently received these.
 - A kinship carer disputed the contents of notes of a Looked After Review meeting and although the Independent Investigating Officer, who chaired the meeting, said the notes were accurate, it was agreed to add the complainant's comments to the case notes (for transparency).
 - Following a complaint about various issues in a case, teams were reminded that information for DBS checks should be thoroughly checked prior to submission; an apology was given regarding a gap in social work visits; staff were informed that if Finance Panels are to be cancelled, they can discuss the potential implications on individual cases with an Operations Manager if necessary; and where a social worker is to be changed, families should be informed in writing and a formal handover process should take place.

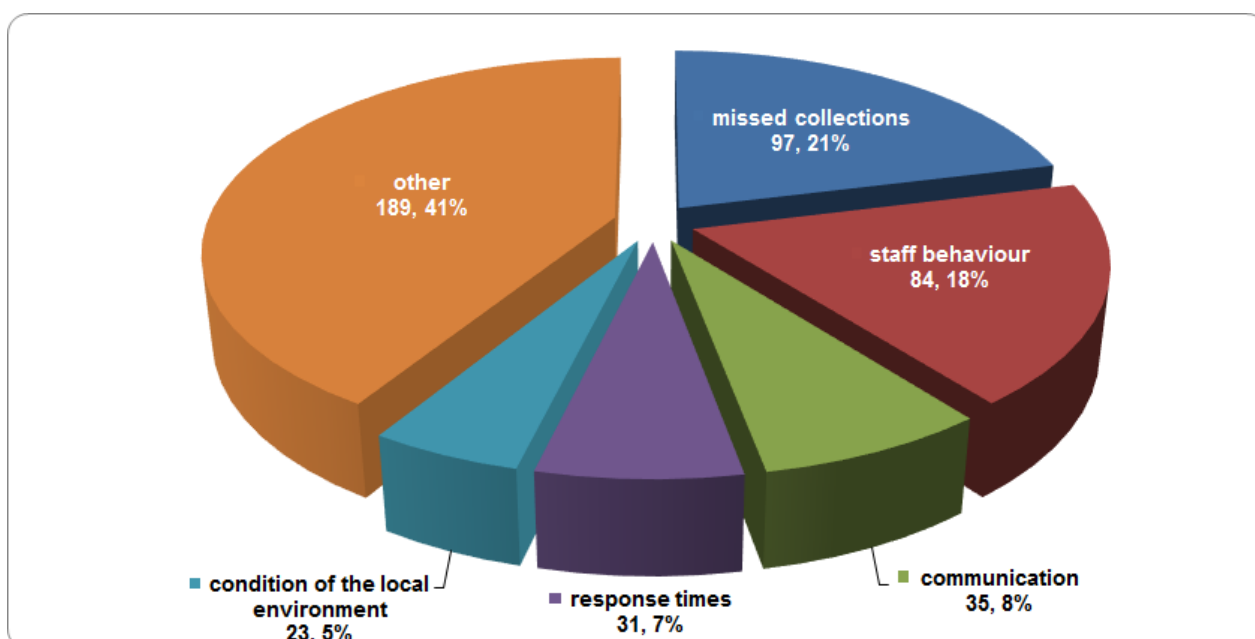
Adult Care Services

24. 22 statutory complaints were received by Adult Services during quarter 1, a 10 % increase (two more) compared to quarter 4 and a 38% increase (six more) on the same period last year. 21 of the 22 complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt.

25. Of the 22 complaints investigated by the service area, 15 (68%) were resolved during the quarter. Of the 15 resolved complaints, 14 were resolved within the agreed timescale. Investigations are continuing into the remaining seven complaints.
26. Of the 15 resolved complaints, seven were not upheld (47%), five were upheld (33%) and three partly upheld (20%).
27. Two complaints were declined during quarter 1; one as it related to events which had occurred more than one year ago (in 2012/13), and one as it related to a care provider who had not been given an opportunity to investigate and respond in the first instance.
28. A number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including;
 - In a case where colleagues of a social worker who was absent did not tell the service user that the worker could be away from work for some time, so messages were left which were then not returned, apologies were given within the complaints response and the new Team Manager has addressed this within her team and given admin staff clear instructions. The Team Manager is reviewing communications practice within the team and making clear the expectations in this regard.
 - Following the annual update of financial assessments, a letter was incorrectly issued advising a service user of revised contribution towards any care services received from April 2016. An apology and full explanation was provided.

Corporate Complaints

29. Analysis of the 459 corporate complaints received during quarter 1 has highlighted five key topics which collectively make up 59% of all complaints received.



Missed Collections

30. 97 complaints, 21% of the total received, related to missed collections; 43 kerbside refuse and recycling, 42 garden waste, eight bulky collections and four trade waste.
31. A cross-service working group, comprising representatives from refuse and recycling, business support and customer services has been established to reduce missed collections by reviewing operational practices, contact handling, software systems, policy and service standards as well as benchmarking.
32. When considering the number of complaints due to missed collections, it is important to note that our crews complete more than 3.2 million refuse and recycling collections, 400,000 garden waste collections and 8,000 bulky collections each quarter.

Staff Behaviour

33. Staff behaviour accounted for 84 complaints, 18% of the total received during quarter 1. The most frequent reason (39 instances) was the attitude of our staff, most of which was general unhelpfulness but some related to staff being rude or abusive.
34. During quarter 1, 19 complaints were received concerning the standard of driving by staff using council vehicles; inconsiderate parking (five alleged instances), speeding (five), driving over lawns (three), using a mobile phone whilst driving (two), colliding with complainant's property / car (three) or driving along a footpath (one). We take these complaints very seriously and drivers are reminded of their responsibilities and the subsequent action that can be taken against any employee who fails to comply with our procedures. In some cases, refresher training is undertaken.
35. 18 complaints were directed at our refuse and recycling crews; 11 objected that crews did not clear up dropped refuse / recycling from roads and pavements as they completed their collection rounds and seven residents were unhappy that their bins were not being returned to their collection point.
36. Six residents complained our staff had damaged their property whilst undertaking their duties; two related to our use of weed killer, two alleged damage to cars (one due to tarmac / road chippings and one due to being hit by a bin), one complained their bin was crushed in a refuse vehicle and one stated we entered their property to remove a contaminated bin and caused damage.
37. The remaining complaints related to staff not clearing sawdust from a grave after removing a tree and a school crossing patrol not accompanying children across the road
38. The Council expects the highest standards from all employees and deals with any alleged shortcomings through our HR policies and procedures. All complaints relating to

non-DCC employees are passed to the appropriate contractor to be dealt with under their procedures. The contractor feeds back the results of their investigations to DCC.

Communication

39. 35 complaints related to communication; 8% of all complaints received in quarter 1.
40. 'Insufficient, inaccurate or unclear information' accounted for the majority of communication complaints (26 instances) and there were 2 main themes: information given at the initial point of contact and the wording of letters.
41. All 18 cases involving 'information given at the initial point of contact' have been investigated, fed back to the relevant team manager and discussed with the team.
42. During quarter 1, the Revenues and Benefits Service sent out more than 30,000 letters in addition to benefit notification letters and council tax bills, and during this same period, we received eight complaints about the quality of those letters. The majority related to the wording but we also received a very small number of complaints about omissions and poor grammar. Any complaint relating to data omissions or poor grammar is discussed with the author, who is reminded of the need for accuracy.
43. 'Lack of communication' accounted for 9 complaints, the majority of which were from residents who had received no response to their concern. Three complaints related to consultation; one resident felt that consultation sessions for a housing development site were not correctly advertised, another felt there had been no meaningful consultation regarding transport and contract services and a third followed notification of an upcoming consultation which wasn't clear that it would not be available until its publication date.

Response Times

44. 31 complaints, 7% of the total received, were from customers who felt that our response times were inadequate. The vast majority (27 instances) complained there had been no response to their request / concern whilst the remaining four instances complained we had taken too long to action their request / resolve their issue.
45. There were 11 instances where there was a perceived lack of action in response to the resident's concern about their local environment, for example, not clearing fly-tips, time taken to cut hedges / trees / grass or resolving anti-social behaviour issues.
46. The second most frequent topic, each with four instances, related to the non-delivery of a new or replacement bin or the sticker for subscription to the garden waste scheme.
47. Other complaints related to time taken to repair street lights, completion of works to the highway, the issuing of bus passes and the receipt of requested documentation.

Condition of the local environment

48. During quarter 1, our Clean and Green Service received 23 complaints (accounting for 5% of all complaints). The majority (18 complaints) related to grounds maintenance, half to the standard of grass cutting and half to overgrown vegetation, hedges and trees. Five complaints related to local environmental cleanliness. The remaining 41% of corporate complaints related to a wide variety of issues received in smaller volumes.

Corporate complaints subjected to independent investigation

49. During quarter 1, 33 complainants requested their complaint be escalated to the next stage. During the same period, we completed investigations into 31 complaints, of which 5 (16%) were upheld (fully or partly). The table provides detail of upheld complaints:

Outcome	Complaint	Action to be taken
Upheld	Council's failure to obtain permission before entering a private property to remove a recycling bin following a third contamination.	The service is reviewing the wording of letters to avoid any confusion in the future. The current procedure used by the service to collect bins after a third contamination has been suspended and a revised policy is being considered.
	Missed collection	The complainant's experience has been brought to the attention of refuse and recycling management to prevent a similar situation re- occurring; issues with the Bin Collection Point should have been explained sooner.
Partly upheld	Council's failure to adequately maintain a pathway and its surrounding area	We have undertaken a number of remedial actions to improve the appearance of this area, including removal of graffiti and replacement of trees. A more regular litter pick has been scheduled and the Clean and Green Team are monitoring the area for further action, e.g. dog fouling, grounds maintenance, footpath maintenance
	Complainant unhappy with service received from our Building Control Team	Although no fault was found with the detail provided to the complainant, the need for a more robust process to manage complaints about builders was acknowledged. In relation to staff attitude, relevant training and development is to be administered.
	Council informed complainant, incorrectly, that temporary closure orders were in place for two unregistered footpaths	Even if temporary closure orders had been in place, the outcome would have remained the same. Council has apologised for the distress and inconvenience caused.

Complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

50. During quarter 1, the LGO delivered decisions in relation to 21 complaints. Conclusions were reached based on details supplied by complainants and supplemented in some instances with contextual information from Council officers.
51. The 21 complaints related to a number of service areas including planning, highways, revenues and benefits, and adult care. Two cases were found to be outside the LGO's jurisdiction, two cases were reported prematurely to the LGO so were referred back to the council to deal with under our complaints procedure and in 12 cases no further action was proposed. The LGO upheld five complaints as detailed in the following table;

Category	Complaint	Action to be taken
Maladministration and Injustice	Council failed to undertake an audit of Direct Payment Account regarding personal contribution towards the cost of care.	Council to apologise and pay £100 in recognition that its failure caused additional unnecessary distress.
	Council's failure to consider the hardship caused by deductions from housing benefit.	Council had already taken action to remedy the issues before the LGO's decision and to the LGO's satisfaction
	Council's failure to inform a community of its intention to remove headstones for health and safety reasons, thereby denying the community the opportunity to take action beforehand	Financial settlement of £100 and various other actions to be taken within three months of the decision
Maladministration. No injustice	Council wrongly advised complainant of council tax charges in relation to a House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) for which the landlord is liable.	Council had already apologised prior to the LGO decision. No further action
	Council's failure to properly consider the impact of approving an application for a double garage in 2011 and its failure to properly investigate and respond to the complainant.	Council to apologise and pay £100 for lack of clarity through the complaint process. Review handling of non-material applications to ensure multiple issues are dealt with thoroughly in the decision notice.

52. In July, the LGO published its review of Local Government complaints for 2015/16. This report highlighted that although the overall number of complaints and enquiries it received during 2015/16 was broadly in line with the number received the previous year, there was a 13% increase in those relating to education and children's services. In addition, the percentage of detailed investigations upheld increased from 46% to 51%. These trends are reflected across DCC; a consistent number of LGO complaints and

enquiries, a 7% increase in those relating to education and children's services, and an increase in the percentage upheld from 31% to 43%

53. The LGO's Annual Review letter is attached as Appendix 1 to this report for information.

Feedback relating to our policies and procedures

54. Our service provision is reflected in our policies and procedures, and during quarter 1 we received 51 comments as a direct consequence of carrying out actions in line with those policies and procedures.
55. Almost a quarter of these comments related to our fees and charges, which are reviewed annually and allow us to provide local services which might not otherwise be possible. Eight were objections to the £20 administration and delivery charge to replace a bin lost, stolen or damaged beyond repair; four to the standard £15 charge for the removal of 6 items of domestic / non-DIY items; one to the £20 subscription for the garden waste collection scheme; one to the standard £40 charge by our pest control service which covers visits and materials; and one to library fees and charges.
56. We received 12 objections to our household waste policies and procedures. The majority (nine) were from residents whose bin had not been emptied / permanently removed due to contamination. Two residents were unhappy with the Garden Waste Collection Scheme, one because they were unable to transfer their subscription to a new property, and one because we would not collect their bin until the soil and rubble it contained was removed. The final comment in relation to household waste policies related to the operational procedures of our Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs).
57. Seven comments were connected to the policies and procedures of our revenues and benefits service; the majority (five) were in relation to housing benefit and enforcement regulations. The remaining comments were objections to having to pay council tax for a property situated on a development not yet complete, and our policy that all unoccupied properties are subject to 100% council tax for the first 2 years, and then 150% of they remain unfurnished. In each instance the policy and/or regulations were correctly followed.
58. Four comments were from residents unhappy that they had received an enforcement notice, e.g. Fixed Penalty Notice or litter clearance notice, from our Neighbourhood Wardens.
59. We also received comments about our street lighting policy, woodland management procedures, street naming and numbering policy, and our decision to close leisure centres on bank holidays. In relation to leisure centres, the service area is considering bank holiday provision and is looking to carry out a pilot during the Easter 2017 holidays.

Suggestions

60. We believe suggestions are essential to the ongoing development and improvement of our services, and carefully consider all received.
61. During quarter 1, we received 88 suggestions which covered a wide range of topics.
62. 5 of these suggestions related to the new library in Stanley's Louisa Centre. The suggestions centred around the library's shelving system which was configured so that the top shelf was a display shelf and the remaining shelves held the books. However, library users found the bottom shelf difficult to access so we have reversed the shelving configuration. Books now occupy the top shelves and the bottom shelf is now the display shelf, a configuration which library users much prefer.
63. Suggestions are frequently received which propose changes to our road system. However, when looked at in the context of countywide traffic flows, many would have knock on effects to the traffic flows elsewhere if they were to be implemented. During quarter 1, we received 16 such suggestions, some of which related to easing congestion through Durham City during current road works.
64. A couple of suggestions were received in relation to parking. One suggested the Council provides additional car parking space for residential streets with limited capacity, thereby enabling residents to park close to their homes. The other suggestion was to remove the parking restrictions associated with Seaham School once the school closes: plans are already in place for the lines within the vicinity of Seaham School to be removed.

Compliments

65. We also receive many positive comments about our staff and the services we provide, and we believe that understanding what is working well and valued is as important as knowing what is not working as well.
66. During quarter 1, we received 286 compliments, 81 in relation to social services and 205 in relation to other services. These compliments recognise not only the motivation, dedication and hard-work of our staff but also the high standard and value of the services we provide. The majority of the compliments related to satisfaction with service provision but a number of compliments conveyed thanks to specific individuals. As far as we are able, we have passed these thanks onto the individuals concerned.