

Scrutiny Sub-Committee for Corporate Management Issues

22 November 2004

Complaints Handling



Report of Andrew North, Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services)

Purpose of Report

1. To share with the Sub-Committee details of complaints handling within the Council for the first six months of 2004/05 as part of the performance management process.

Background

2. The Standards Committee has responsibility for oversight of complaints handling and Local Government Ombudsman investigations within the Council. However, this Sub-Committee has a legitimate interest to know where, why and how many complaints arise as part of the broader picture on performance management.

2004/05 Analysis (April to September)

3. Attached as an Appendix is a brief analysis of numbers and types of complaint received during the period in question.
4. Complaints received averaged 29 per month (this compares with an average of between 27 and 28 per month for the three previous years).
5. All complaints were acknowledged and received full responses or progress reports within the Council's performance targets. 45% of complainants were either satisfied with the outcome of their complaint or did not pursue the matter beyond Stage 1. There is every expectation that this figure will increase significantly when the complaints still under the investigation at the time of reporting are complete.
6. Almost 80% of all complaints received were in Social Care and Health, a position also consistent with previous years. However, Members will appreciate this is a Service often personal and sometimes interventionist in nature, with a Statutory Representations Procedure we are obliged to promote.
7. Poor service (42%) and staff conduct (23%) continued to represent by far the two largest single types of complaint.

Reporting on Complaints

8. Information on complaints handling is now presented to the Standards Committee on a quarterly basis and in addition to the type of analysis exemplified above, services are now required to provide more detail where appropriate on any trends and problem areas being identified, lessons being learned, remedial action taken to prevent re-occurrence and any implications for future service planning and delivery. Members of the Committee also now examine on each occasion a random sample of completed complaints files to satisfy themselves on the process which has been followed. All of this represents a much more detailed and regular focus on the Council's complaints handling regime.

Local Government Ombudsman

9. The Local Government Ombudsman is an independent service set up by the Government to investigate complaints about most Council matters.
10. In 2003/04 the Ombudsman received 35 complaints against the County Council, compared with 43 and 57 in the two previous years. There was no findings of maladministration against the Council in 2003/04.
11. The Ombudsman also reported that the character of complaints received in 2003/04 revealed no serious areas for concern or evidence of rising trends to cause any alarm. The Ombudsman was generally happy with the quality of information we provide in response to enquiries and the Council was found to be co-operative and generally willing to settle complaints when some fault had been identified. On response times to Ombudsman enquiries, the Council's performance was found to be highly commendable for which credit was due.

Comparative Information

12. Other than the very limited analysis provided in the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Report, there is little available at present in terms of comparative information on complaints handling amongst local authorities. Our own efforts to obtain such information from principal authorities in the North of England for corporate complaints (ie excluding Social Care and Health) have proved difficult. Initial research commissioned by the National Complaints Group for Social Care and Health indicated that the County Council performed reasonably well in comparison to other similar authorities. The intention is to try and further develop this comparative analysis in Social Care and Health, both nationally and regionally.

Compliments

13. In order to present a balanced picture, the Standards Committee has also instigated the formal recording and reporting of compliments which are received from service users. During the first six months of 2004/05 a total of 404 evidenced compliments were received - more than twice the number of complaints.

ICT Support

14. The Council's new Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) is now being developed to enhance recording, management, analysis and subsequent reporting on complaints. To begin with this will deal with corporate complaints, but efforts are also being made with the CRM provider to determine how the Council's requirements for the Social Care and Health Representations Procedure can be met.

Conclusion

15. The Standards Committee has put in place a package of measures designed to improve both our handling of complaints and, just as importantly, to learn from that experience as part of a continuous improvement cycle of service delivery.
16. The effectiveness of these measures are reviewed as an on-going process, the results of which will continue to be shared with the Sub-Committee.
17. Perhaps the main issues to be drawn to the attention of this Sub-Committee are:
 - the trend in terms of numbers of complaints continues to be reasonably static;
 - a majority of complaints relate to poor service (generally the quality and level of service). This applies particularly in Social Care and Health;
 - there are also consistent issues in relation to most Services about staff conduct, with Social Care and Health having the greatest number.

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Appendix

Complaints Received April to September 2004

Service	No of Complaints Received	Complaints by Type				
		Poor Service	Delay	Staff Conduct	Equalities	Other
Chief Executive	2	-	-	1	-	1
Corporate Services	5	3	-	1	-	1
Culture & Leisure	5	4	-	2	-	1
Customer Services	-	-	-	-	-	-
Education	3	-	1	1	-	1
Environment	7	4	1	1	-	1
Service Direct	16	10	3	1	-	2
Social Care & Health	135	51	1	33	-	50
Treasurer	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	173	72	6	40	-	57

NB: A complaint might have more than one type.