

Standards Committee

23 May 2006

Complaints Handling for the Period January to March 2006



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

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide details of complaints handling in the Council during the period in question.

Background

2. The Committee previously agreed that information on complaints handling should in future be presented on a quarterly basis.
3. Attached at Appendix 1 is a summary of complaints received for the period 1 January to 31 March 2006 which for comparative purposes also contains a summary for the period January to March 2005.

Summary Analysis and Comparison

4. In the final quarter of 2005/06, 85 complaints were received averaging 28 per month, compared with 31 per month in the period January to March 2005. This brings the total number of complaints received during 2005/2006 to 299 compared with 338 complaints received during 2004/2005.
5. All complaints in this latest quarter were acknowledged and received full responses or progress reports within the Council's performance targets.
6. 40 complainants were either satisfied as to how their complaint was handled or did not pursue their complaint further beyond Stage 1 - and these numbers might well increase considerably when the significant number of complaints still under investigation are complete.
7. In this quarter, poor service was the largest single category of complaint at 44% compared with 53% in the same period in 2005. Staff conduct represented 38% of complaints received in the final quarter of this year compared with 26% in the comparison period.

Additional Background

8. Individual Services have provided the following additional information on the nature and outcome of complaints received during this final quarter of 2005/06.

Chief Executive's Office

9. Two complaints were submitted during the quarter. One related to the delivery of the Countywide newspaper to a home address. The complainant was satisfied with the prompt response he received from a member of staff.
10. The second complaint arose as a consequence of Benefits advice supplied during 2003/04 by the Welfare Rights Team resulting in a benefit deficiency for clients. This matter is being pursued by Welfare Rights with the Inland Revenue and the complainants are being kept apprised of developments.

Corporate Services

11. In this quarter 3 complaints related to School Meals provision for which Corporate Services has responsibility for contract monitoring. They centred around lack of menu choice and kitchen hygiene standards. As is the practice Contract staff responded rapidly to the complaints, arranged remedial action and provided parents with explanations.
12. One complaint related to the delay in arranging an examination of repair needed at two County Council owned properties. This was submitted on the tenants' behalf by Age Concern. An investigation revealed that a partial survey of the properties had been carried out. However, this had not been completed subsequently because of a breakdown in communication between the relevant personnel. An apology was offered for the delay and the matter was expedited. Remedial measures have been put in place to prevent a recurrence of the situation.
13. A complainant raised objections to the conditions surrounding the sale of a County Council property on conservation and highway safety grounds and requested that the property be withdrawn from the market pending resolution of the complaint. The property was not withdrawn from the market and the complainant was provided with a response detailing the existing mechanisms available to address any issues of conservation and highway safety.
14. The final complaint related to an alleged failure to respond to a Freedom of Information request and advice issued about the procedural aspects of handling a complaint about an Elected Member. Each aspect of the complaint was investigated, however, the complaint was not substantiated. The complainant was not satisfied with this outcome. The matter was referred to the Deputy Chief Executive (Policy and Improvement) who conducted a file review and further investigations and reached the conclusion that the complaint was not substantiated.
15. 57 compliments were received during the quarter.

Culture and Leisure

16. A visitor to the DLI Museum and Art Gallery complained about the lack of parking spaces for the disabled near to the front entrance of the Museum. It appeared however that there had been a misunderstanding about the location of the main entrance. A letter of explanation was provided with an offer of a free visit to the DLI as a goodwill gesture.
17. One complainant expressed disappointment about the withdrawal of the Trailer Library Service at Blackhill. A detailed response explaining the background to the decision to withdraw the service was provided to the complainant.
18. One compliment was received during the quarter.

Environment

19. Nine complaints were received during the period in question.
20. A complainant had raised objections to a proposed traffic calming scheme which were set aside by the Highways Committee, however, the scheme which was subsequently installed had been modified. The Scheme Engineer replied to explain that the modification was installed to accommodate the issues raised by the complainant. The matter has been referred to the Ombudsman by the complainant.
21. One complaint related to the attitude of a member of staff at a public meeting. The Head of Service was unable to find any evidence to substantiate the allegations and informed the complainant accordingly. To date there has been no further communication on this matter.
22. A local resident complained about the removal of a bus service and received an explanation that this was one of the measures introduced to address an overspend on the Public Transport Budget.
23. One complainant expressed concern about the level of investment required to finance the improvement scheme carried out in Crook Town Centre in comparison to the lack of similar investment in Newfield. It was explained that Crook was one of four market towns to benefit from funding of £1m from One North East and also from the Urban and Rural Renaissance Neighbourhood Fund (U&RRNF.) It was indicated that over £200,000 had been spent on the Millennium Green in Newfield and further opportunities for investment in the village through U&RRNF would be explored.
24. A Solicitor complained on his client's behalf that the County Council had not undertaken as agreed drainage works following completion of a road widening scheme. An explanation has been offered outlining the proposals to rectify the situation.

25. A complaint arose as a consequence of delay in addressing a parking/fencing problem on a grass verge identified by the complainant. An explanation and apology was offered for the delay and the complainant advised of the date the required works would be undertaken.
26. A customer of Trading Standards complained about the advice the Service provided in relation to his dispute with a local trader. The complainant subsequently refused to accept the response from Environment Service which reiterated the original advice offered by the Trading Standards officer.
27. A member of the public complained about the attitude of a member of staff at a site meeting convened to discuss a problem of overhanging shrubbery on the highway verge. The Area Engineer visited the complainant with the staff member concerned to apologise for the previous unsatisfactory outcome and agree a resolution to the situation. The complainant has been supplied with written confirmation of the works to be undertaken.
28. The final complaint related to the standard of road patching completed on an estate road. However it was explained that this was the first part of a two stage process and surface dressing of the entire road would follow.
29. 20 compliments were received during the quarter.

Service Direct

30. 11 complaints have been received during the period in question 6 of which related to poor service and 5 to staff conduct.

Poor Service

31. One complaint arose following a vehicle service and MOT test carried out by Fleet Management Services which failed to identify certain faults. When these faults subsequently came to light the cost of the MOT, service and parts were reimbursed to the complainant.
32. In two instances residents complained of damage to their driveways caused when pavement repairs were undertaken. Remedial action was taken to resolve the complaints and staff have been issued with advice to prevent recurrence.
33. Three of the 'poor service' complaints related to work undertaken in 3 County schools as follows - repeated delays in completing work resulted in a lack of heating in a school classroom - Service Direct workmen arrived to undertake work without prior notice at the second location, the room was not cleared and consequently the furniture and area was left in an unsatisfactory condition – at the third site water damage was caused to rooms following the installation of a flue for the heating system. Additional resources were directed to resolve the first issue and in the latter instances the Schools were reimbursed full cleaning costs.

34. The five remaining complaints all related to the driver behaviour of Service Direct employees. 3 complaints concerned standards of driving and 2 related to parking issues. In all instances staff have been issued with appropriate advice and instruction with regard to the required standards of driving.
35. This quarter's statistics will be considered by the Service Direct Senior Management Team in May and particular emphasis will be placed upon the 'driver behaviour' issue.
36. Service Direct received a total of 21 compliments during the quarter.

Social Care and Health

37. Social Care and Health received a total of 53 complaints, which were entered at Stage 1 of the Complaints Procedure. The breakdown of these complaints was as follows:

Children's Services	17
Adult Services	36

38. Examples of some of the Staff Conduct and Poor Service complaints were as follows:

Adult Services

Complaint (Stage 1): "Conduct of member of staff".

Outcome: Concerns discussed; letter subsequently received from the user's representative saying that matters have been resolved and that there was no need to take further steps in the matter.

Complaint (Stage 1): "A complaint against one of our employees regarding passing on confidential information".

Outcome: Senior Manager decided that complaint should not be dealt with under the Complaints Procedure, but be pursued as a disciplinary matter.

Complaint (Stage 1): User complained about being cut off when ringing Travel Response Centre.

Outcome: Inquiries indicated that the problem arose on a Monday morning, and it was arranged to have more staff at that time to deal with inquiries.

Complaint (Stage 1): "Lack of Service from Social Care & Health".

Outcome: Commissioning Manager wrote to GP; all parties satisfied with outcome.

Complaint (Stage 2): The complaint concerned circumstances surrounding the suspension of a Day Centre to a user in a full-time residential placement, and delay in dealing with her complaint about this matter. The complaint was initially dealt with at Stage 1, then at Stage 2.

Action taken: The complainant was seen; the staff involved and relevant Managers were interviewed; documents were examined, and a report compiled. The report and the response, by a senior manager were then sent to the complainant/service user. The senior manager later met her; she was able to resolve her outstanding concerns and the matter has been closed.

Children's Services

Complaint (Stage 1):The client's parent made a complaint around the services provided. She was refused funding for dancing lessons for the child and put in a claim for lessons for the past year.

Outcome: Monies were granted for the last 3 months of the lessons and the claimant was satisfied.

Complaint (Stage 1):A child in residential care complained about his fellow residents and their treatment of him. He felt intimidated.

Outcome: The child was moved to another care home.

Complaint (Stage 1): A complaint was made by a child in care against his social worker who had allegedly dropped him off at his Mothers house without her consent.

Outcome: When the investigation took place the social worker had left the service. An apology was made by the team manager and the client was satisfied.

Complaint (Stage 2): The complaint related to the assessment of prospective foster carers whose application was refused.

Action taken: The complainants, staff involved and the team manager were all interviewed by an investigating officer. Documents relating to the case were examined and all paper work surrounding the case scrutinised by the independent officer. This case is ongoing and follow up action has not yet been established.

39. Social Care and Health received 90 compliments during the period.

Compliments

40. Members will recall that in order to present a more balanced picture, details are now included of evidenced compliments/expressions of appreciation that are received.

41. During this final quarter of 2005/06, a total of 188 compliments were received. For 2005/06 as a whole, a total of 890 compliments were received compared with a total of 299 complaints during the year. (For 2004/05 as a whole, a total of 797 compliments were received. This compares with 338 complaints for the same year).

Review of Completed Complaints

42. In Part B of the meeting (closed session) Members of the Committee will be invited to review completed complaints files in order to satisfy themselves on the robustness of the process followed.

Conclusion

43. When the current reporting regime for complaints handling was introduced it was on the understanding that refinements/further development would take place as a continuing process. The views of Members as part of this process are always welcome.

Background Papers

Correspondence from Departments.

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