

Item 4

REPORT TO STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10th June 2008

REPORT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Strategic Leadership

ANNUAL REPORT ON COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY CORPORATE COMPLAINTS STAFF

1. SUMMARY

1.1 This Report outlines the complaints/issues received by the Corporate Customer Relations Staff in the Chief Executive's Department in the period 1st April 2007-31st March 2008. Figures are also given for the period 1st April 2006-31st March 2007 to enable comparisons to be made (Appendix 1).

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 That the Annual Report be received and published on the Borough's Website.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Borough adopted a revised Complaints Policy in December 2004, which allows residents and other users of Borough Services the opportunity to comment on/criticise Borough Services or service delivery.
- 3.2 The Policy provides for the publication of a half yearly and an Annual Report on complaints handling. The half yearly report was considered at the meeting of this Committee on 20th November 2007.

4. DETAIL

- 4.1 It is pleasing to note that the number of complaints/issues dealt with by Corporate Complaints Staff has decreased from 679 2006/2007 to 407 in 2007/2008, a decrease of 272 (40%). This is even more pleasing when you look 2005/2006 when 1053 complaints/ issues were dealt with. Service Departments and the Customer Services Centre Staff have been able to deal with substantially more complaints to the customer's satisfaction at the first point of contact and avoided the issue being escalated to my Corporate Complaints Staff.
- 4.2 The main area of complaint (33% of the total) relates to Housing Maintenance, Management and Capital Improvements. However the total number of complaints about these services has fallen from 269 to 137(49%) with justified complaints falling from 34 to 15 (56%).

- 4.3 The number of complaints about the Maintenance Service continues to fall from 147 in 2006/07 to 95 in 2007/08. Similarly the number of justified complaints has decreased from 31 to 12. 32,000 repairs were carried out in 2007/08 and justified complaints represents 0.04% of that total.
- 4.4 The reason for complaints on maintenance relate to repairs not being carried out within timescale. It has to be accepted that, on occasions, resources are simply not available to complete every job within timescale e.g. following high winds.
- 4.5 The Borough provides a comprehensive housing management service to 8,564 properties. Only 27 complaints were received and none were justified which is a credit to the Service.
- 4.6 15 complaints made about Capital Improvements with three being found to be justified. The first involved an external contractor not finishing off some 'pipe boxing' work to a property within a reasonable time. The second was similar in that a contractor did not repair a bath panel which he had damaged within a reasonable time. In both cases work was carried out immediately on being brought to our attention and the contractors have been reminded about their obligations. The final justified complaint related to a letter being addressed to a deceased person which caused upset to the family. This was simple human error and the member of staff has been asked to be more vigilant when addressing letters.
- 4.7 Corporate Complaints Staff continue to offer advice and direct people to Other Agencies e.g. Police, County Council as well as directing service requests to the correct Department (some 42% of the issues raised).
- 4.8 Customer Services had 4 complaints made against the Service with one relating to the telephone system being justified. Problems are still being encountered with the system when incoming calls at high levels. Discussions, however, are being held with the supplier to identify and correct the problem.
- 4.9 21 complaints were made against the Benefits, Council Tax and Business Rates Services with one against Benefits being justified. This involved a document supporting a Council Tax benefit application being lost internally. It has not been possible to identify what happened although it is possible that the document has been filed with the papers for another application. An apology was given to the complainant and the application processed as quickly as possible. Viewed against the transactions carried out over the period the performance of these services is very good.
- 4.10 2 complaints were received about the Borough's Coalfield Communities Regeneration Policy. One complaint has been classed as justified as a householder was given incorrect information about how the Policy may be applied. An apology has been given and staff reminded of how the Policy is to be applied.
- 4.11 Six complaints were made about the Carelink Service with one being justified. Carelink provides the contact point for the out of hours housing maintenance service and the correct procedure was not followed when taking a call regarding the loss of heating and hot water to a property. This led to a tenant

being left without heating and hot water for a further 24 hours in the middle of January. The member of staff involved has been given additional instruction/training to ensure that the correct procedures are followed in the future.

- 4.12 There were 15 complaints about Development Control with two being found to be justified. Both involved delays in responding to enquiries and staff have been reminded to respond to enquiries within a reasonable time.
- 4.13 The number of complaints made against the Street Cleansing, Horticulture, and Environmental Health Services continue to fall with none of the complaints being justified which is a credit to these Services.
- 4.14 There has been a rise in complaints about the Taxi Licensing Service but none of the complaints were justified. 5 of the complaints were actually from one complainant.
- 4.15 Refuse Collection has seen a fall in the number of complaints received from 59 to 20(66% reduction) with only one complaint being justified (a missed collection). Viewed against the 2 million domestic collections carried out each year there is not any cause for concern.
- 4.16 Only 3 complaints were made against Leisure Services with none being justified.
- 4.17 An apology is given whenever the Borough has been at fault.
- 4.18 As mentioned in para 4.1, the number of complaints reaching the Corporate Complaints Staff continues to fall from a peak of 1053 in 2005/2006. Departments have been encouraged to resolve complaints at the first point of contact whenever possible and have responded well to this. Also Customer Service Centre Staff have built up a tremendous skill base in dealing with various front line services e.g. housing maintenance, refuse and are frequently able to resolve issues at the first point of contact and avoid the escalation of many complaints.
- 4.19 The Corporate Complaints Staff aim to respond to 100% of complaints and enquiries within 10 Working days and achieved 98.9% in 2007/2008 compared with 98.5% in 2006/2007.
- 4.20 If complainants are still not satisfied after they have exhausted the Borough's Complaints Procedure they are advised that they have the right to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman. Where the Borough has been at fault, however, Staff do try to reach a settlement so that complainants do not feel it necessary to approach the Ombudsman. When attempting to reach a settlement Staff do refer to the Ombudsman's Guidance on remedies.
- 4.21 In 2006/2007 21 cases were investigated and decided by the Ombudsman. The Borough was not found guilty of maladministration in any of these cases and in three cases reached a local settlement to the Ombudsman's satisfaction. In 2007/08 22 cases were investigated and decided. The Borough was not found guilty of maladministration in any of these cases and in 5 cases reached a local settlement to her satisfaction.

- 4.22 The Ombudsman has recently notified us of some changes to their Service following the passing of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.
- 4.23 Previously a complaint to the Ombudsman had to be made in writing but from 1st April 2008 complaints can also be made by telephone, e-mail or text.
- 4.24 The second change is that the Ombudsman can investigate a matter where, during the course of an investigation, a third party member of the public appears to have suffered injustice. An example of this would be where a parent had complained about the application of an Education Authority's schools admissions policy. If, during the course of the investigation, the Ombudsman found evidence to suggest that other parents had not been dealt with in accordance with the admissions policy then she could either investigate this issue further (even though complaints had not been made by the other parents) or ask the authority to investigate through its normal procedures.
- 4.25 The third change is that there is the potential for complaints to be made to the Ombudsman about the process, administration and decision making of an Authority's Standards Committee. The Ombudsman is to have discussions with the Standards Board and Monitoring Officers and will write again with further information.
- 4.26 It is pleasing to note that there were no complaints made relating to any of the six strands of the Equity and Diversity Standard for Local Government i.e. race, disability, age, religion and philosophical belief, gender or sexual orientation. Any complaints of this nature which are received will be discussed with the Borough's Equity and Diversity Staff and appropriate action taken.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are not any resource implications arising from this Report.

6. CONSULTATIONS

- 6.1 The Report will be available on the Council's website.

7 OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Link to Corporate Objectives/Values

- 7.1 The complaints process is aimed at being open, accessible, equitable, fair and responsive to the public and to speedily resolve any problems. This report is a public document and is available on the Borough's Website. The analysis of complaints received helps drive service improvement through the presentation of regular reports to Departments and Scrutiny Committee.

Risk Management

- 7.2 Systems are in place to provide a Half Yearly Report and an Annual Report on Complaints to ensure that the complaints process informs learning throughout the Council and encourages service improvements. The failure to provide regular reports to Committee could adversely affect our CPA Assessment Score.

Health and Safety

- 7.3 There are no additional Health and Safety implications.

Equality and Diversity

- 7.4 The Complaints Process actively promotes the Borough's commitment to promote equality and diversity. Complaints can be made in any form e.g. in writing, by phone, e-mail and interpreters and signers are available for people requiring such assistance.

Legal and Constitutional

- 7.5 No new implications have been identified.

No other material considerations have been identified.

8. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 A Half Year Report for the period 1st April 2008 – 30th September 2008 will be submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 18th November 2008.

9. LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Complaints/Issues received by Corporate Complaints Staff.

Contact Officer	Andrew Traynor/Chris Ward
Telephone Number	01388 816166 Ext. 4281/4100
E-mail address	atraynor@sedgefield.gov.uk cward@sedgefield.gov.uk

Wards: All

Examination by Statutory Officers

Yes Not Applicable

1. The report has been examined by the Councils
Head of the Paid Service or his representative v

2. The content has been examined by the Councils
S.151 Officer or his representative v

3. The content has been examined by the Council's
Monitoring Officer or his representative v

4. The report has been approved by Management Team v

Appendix 1 – Complaints/Issues received by Corporate Complaints Staff

	2006/07		2007/08	
	Total	No. Justified	Total	No. Justified
Housing Maintenance	147	31	95	12
Housing Management	104	3	27	0
Housing Improvements	18	0	15	3
Advice/Other Agency	128	N/a	79	N/a
Customer Services	6	2	4	3
Freedom of Information	1	0	3	0
Regeneration	1	0	1	0
Benefits	14	0	9	1
Business Rates	1	0	2	0
Council Tax	18	0	10	0
Valuation	1	0	2	0
Coalfield Communities	6	0	2	1
Regeneration Policy				
Anti-social Behaviour	1	0	0	0
Community Safety	2	0	0	0
Neighbourhood Wardens	5	0	1	0
Carelink	2	0	6	1
Development Control	15	2	10	2
Building Control	0	0	2	0
Environmental Health	3	0	1	0
Drainage	0	0	5	0
Licensing	2	0	6	0
Horticulture	12	1	5	0
Street Cleansing	3	0	2	0
Refuse	59	3	20	1
Engineers	0	0	1	0
Leisure	3	0	3	0
Service Requests	127	N/a	96	N/a
Total	679	41	407	24

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