

Putting our
customers first

Customer Feedback Report

Complaints,
compliments and
suggestions.

Quarter 2
2015/16

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 provides a breakdown of all complaints, compliments and suggestions received by the Council during quarter 2, 15/16 (1 July 2015 to 30 September 2015). It summarises the Council's performance in dealing with complaints, explores the themes across customer feedback and identifies the action we will take to not only put things right for an individual but to improve wider service provision. The report also includes an overview of complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO).
3. Two types of complaint are included within this document. Statutory complaints which arise from our duties as a local social services authority and corporate complaints which cover all other complaints. As each complaint type is subject to its own processes and policy, they are reported separately

Summary

4. The following key points should be noted as of particular interest for quarter 2:
 - 56 complaints were received in relation to our statutory services, 11 more (24% increase) than quarter 1 and 15 more than the same period last year (36% increase).
 - 716 corporate complaints were received, a 0.7% reduction on the previous quarter (5 fewer), a 20% decrease on the same period last year (182 fewer) and a continuation of the downward trend that has been experienced over the last 2 years.
 - Our customers' preferred channel for reporting complaints continues to be the telephone. However, we have seen a decrease from 50% of all complaints reported via the telephone to 43% during quarter 2. There was a corresponding increase in the use of web forms and email.
 - 2 statutory and 50 corporate complaints were escalated during quarter 2. Investigations into the 2 statutory complaints and 9 corporate complaints are continuing. Of the 41 corporate complaints fully investigated 9 were justified (22%) and 32 not justified (78%).
 - The Local Government Ombudsman delivered decisions into 36 matters. Of the 18 subject to full investigation, 7 were justified.

Statutory Complaints and Compliments

5. During quarter 2, Children and Adult Services received 56 complaints and 97 compliments in relation to their statutory services.
6. With regard to the 56 statutory complaints, this was 11 more than quarter 1 (24% increase) and 15 more than the same period last year (36% increase). 61% of the complaints were about Children's Services and the remaining 39% about Adult Services.

Children's Services

7. 34 statutory complaints were received by Children's Services during quarter 2, a 17% increase (5 more) compared to quarter 1 and a 62% increase (13 more) on the same period last year. 2 complaints progressed to Stage 2 and are in the process of being investigated. 79 compliments were received, 5 more than the previous quarter.
8. All 34 complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt and 65% were resolved during the quarter. Of the 22 resolved complaints, 15 were resolved within the prescribed timescale of 20 working days and 7 were not. Investigations into the remaining 12 complaints are continuing, although 6 are outside the agreed timescale.
9. Of the 22 resolved complaints, 18 (82%) were not justified, 2 were justified (9%) and 2 partially justified (9%).
10. 5 complaints were declined during quarter 2; two due to concurrent criminal proceedings against the complainants, one because it had occurred more than a year ago and had already been considered as part of court proceedings, one as the complainant did not have parental responsibility so the complaint could not be considered and one due to being based on opinion with no evidence to enable an investigation to be conducted.
11. A number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including;
 - Putting in place personalised contact arrangements to ensure social worker and service user maintain good communications.
 - Utilising the supervision and appraisal processes to remind staff of their professional responsibilities when engaging with families and young people.
 - Circulating more widely, via the recently reviewed introductory packs for families, information on how to make a complaint
 - Reminding staff of the importance of checking factual information with families before completing reports.

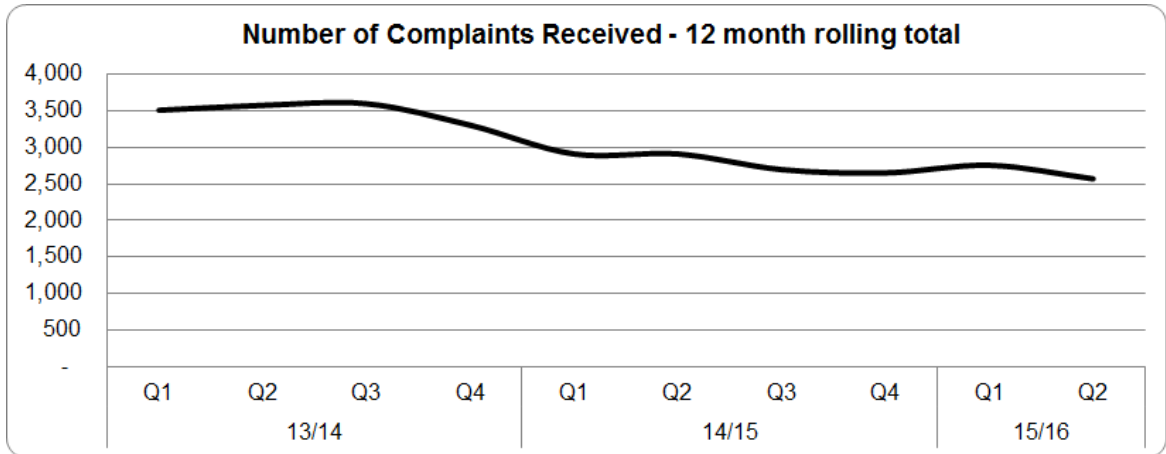
12. During quarter 2, the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) delivered decisions in relation to 4 cases within children's social care services: three were closed for to a variety of reasons and one was referred back to the Council to deal with under our complaints procedure as it was reported prematurely to the LGO.

Adult Care Services

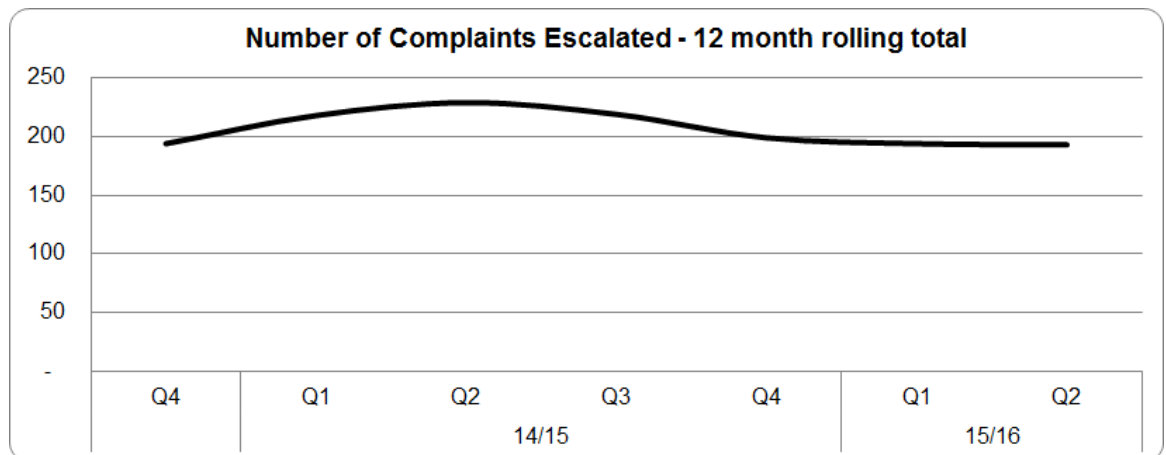
13. 22 statutory complaints were received by Adult Services during quarter 2, a 37% increase (6 more) compared to quarter 1 and a 10% increase (2 more) on the same period last year. 18 compliments were received, 8 fewer than the previous quarter.
14. All 22 complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt and 68% were resolved during the quarter. All of the 15 resolved complaints were resolved within the prescribed timescale. Investigations are continuing into the remaining 7 complaints.
15. Of the 15 resolved complaints, 5 (33%) were not justified, 5 were justified (33%) and 5 partially justified (33%).
16. 2 complaints were declined during quarter 2: one because it related directly to a care home and the contract between DCC and the care home states that the home must investigate the complaint in the first instance, and one on the basis that it was outside the one year timeframe.
17. A number of actions were taken in response to complaints received during quarter 2, including;
 - Reminding staff to clearly communicate the criteria for the Intermediate Care Plus Service, particularly when service users are admitted to hospital during the period of service provision, and ensuring that the service user and their family understand that the service is based on assessed need and is for *up to* 6 weeks.
 - The procedure for issuing invoices was reviewed to make it more robust.
18. During quarter 2, the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) delivered decisions in relation to 7 cases within adult social care services. Maladministration and injustice was found in one case but the case was closed as the Council had remedied the injustice. Of the remaining 6 cases, the LGO found no evidence of fault in 2 cases, closed 3 cases and issued one premature notice thereby giving the Council the opportunity to complete its process (this complaint was found to be not justified following the subsequent investigation).

Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions

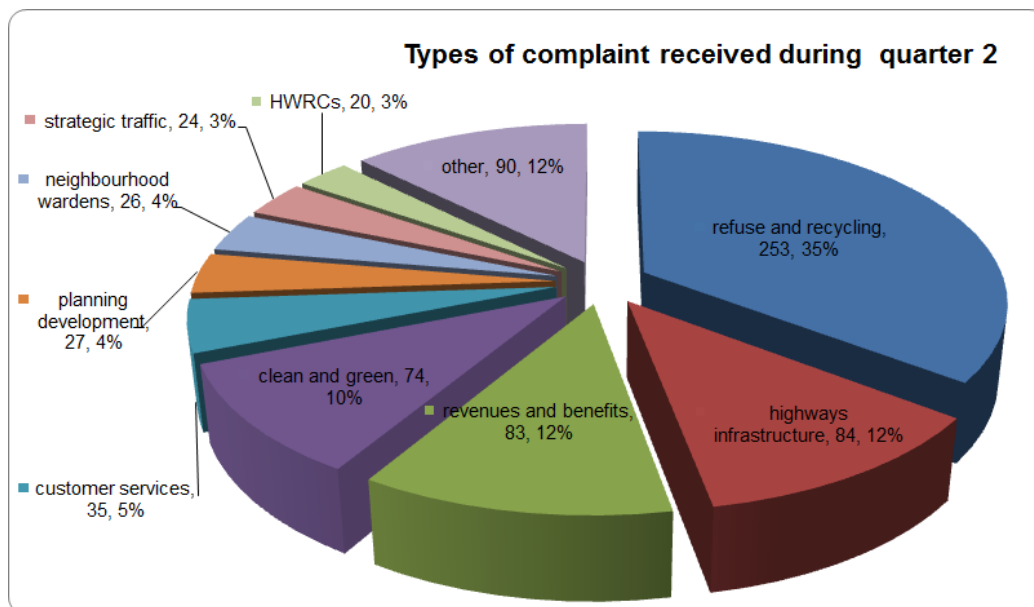
19. 716 corporate complaints, 379 compliments and 80 suggestions were received across DCC services during quarter 2.
20. In relation to complaints, this is a 0.7% reduction on the previous quarter, a 20% decrease on the same period last year and a continuation of the downward trend that has been experienced over the last 2 years.



21. Overall response times have also decreased and complaints are being concluded more swiftly. Whilst the initial acknowledgement is taking proportionately longer this has had no detrimental effect on the overall satisfaction. 54% of all acknowledgements are now completed by telephone which gives the customer confidence and the opportunity to discuss their complaints.
22. Investigations have been completed into 655 (91%) of the complaints received during quarter 2 and of these, 329 (approximately half) were justified (partly or fully).
23. 50 complaints were escalated to the next stage and of the 41 which have been fully investigated 22% (9) were justified.



24. Analysis of the 716 corporate complaints received during quarter 2 has highlighted 4 key topics which collectively make up 69% of all complaints received.



25. 35% (253) of all complaints were received by our **Refuse and Recycling Service**, a 33% reduction on the previous quarter and a 70% decrease on the same period last year, although 128 complaints were due to industrial action in July 2014.

26. 39 objections to the garden waste collection charge were submitted through the complaints system during quarter 2 last year, whereas none were received during quarter 2 this year. More than 64,000 residents signed up to the new garden waste scheme which began in March 2015 and during quarter 1 we received 200 complaints. Embedding the new collection rounds, eliminating those one off issues associated with the implementation of a new service and changing our processes and systems successfully reduced garden waste complaints by 62% between quarter 1 and quarter 2.

27. Almost all of the 253 complaints received by the refuse and recycling service related to household waste collection from the kerbside;

- 121 due to missed collections (48%),
- 38 general objections to our policies and procedures (15%),
- 26 staff behaviour issues (10%), and
- 19 occasions whereby crews did not return containers to their initial collection point (7%).

The remaining 17% arose from a variety of causes.

28. 121 complaints were received in relation to missed collections during quarter 2; 63 garden waste, 47 kerbside refuse and recycling and 11 bulky waste. This is fewer than quarter 1 and in line with the 123 received during the same period last year (excluding those relating to industrial action). When considering the volume of complaints it is important to take into account the size of service provision and during quarter 2, our

refuse and recycling crews completed more than 3.2 million refuse and recycling collections, 400,000 Garden Waste collections and 8,000 bulky collections.

29. There were, during quarter 2, 26 complaints about the behaviour of the refuse and recycling crews, 2 fewer than the previous quarter. Exactly half of the complaints related to staff being rude, abusive or swearing. The remaining 13 concerned crews dropping or not clearing up refuse / recycling from roads and pavements as they completed their collection rounds.
30. As we continue to make service changes, we continue to receive objections to our refuse and recycling policies through the complaints system. During quarter 2, 38 were received (9% of all refuse and recycling complaints);
- Side Waste: 4 residents complained that we do not collect residual waste put out next to full bins on collection day,
 - Contamination: 15 residents protested their recycling bins were not emptied due to contamination they did not cause,
 - Replacement Bin Charge: 16 residents objected to the £20 replacement bin charge mainly as they felt the loss of their bin was not their fault and so payment was unfair, and
 - Garden Waste Scheme: 3 residents were unhappy that this scheme only consists of 16 collections and feel that it should continue beyond October. In addition to these complaints, we also received 6 suggestions during quarter 2 and a further 100 when the scheme ended during October, requesting more collections. Following this feedback, it has been agreed that the 2016/17 scheme will be extended to 17 collections.
31. 7 complaints involving our Refuse and Recycling Service were escalated during quarter 2, less than half the number escalated at quarter 1 (19). 4 were in connection to repeated missed collections, 1 objected to our policy on side waste, 1 was in response to crews repeatedly leaving a resident's gate open and 1 suggested the Council is not doing enough to discourage people from leaving bins on the pavement. 6 complaints have been fully investigated and 3 were justified; 2 were with regard to non-collection of garden waste and one concerning crews not closing resident's gate following an assisted bin collection.
32. During quarter 2, 84 complaints (12% of all complaints received during quarter 2) were received in relation to our **highways infrastructure**. 57% (48 complaints) related to highway maintenance and 43% (36 complaints) to street lighting. This is an increase of 127% compared to quarter 1 (47 more) and occurred when ornate lamp posts were unintentionally replaced with standard lamp posts. Although the mistake was quickly rectified, some residents recorded their dissatisfaction through the complaints system. The replacement was part of the Street Lighting Energy Replacement Programme (SLERP) which to date has replaced / retrofitted almost 28,000 street lights across the County.

33. 8 complaints were escalated to Stage 2 and these concerned the standard of work (2) drainage issues (2), objections to changes to the highway (1), staff attitude (1) and miscellaneous (2). All of these complaints have been fully investigated and none were justified.
34. The **Revenues and Benefits Services** received 83 complaints during quarter 2, accounting for 12% of all complaints. This is consistent with the 85 received during quarter 1 and represents a 20% reduction compared to the same period last year
35. 28 of these complaints (34%) were received by the Assessment Team which is responsible for the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction claims. 6 of the 28 complaints (21%) were deemed to be justified and these related to inappropriate data processing, payments being made directly to the customer rather than the landlord as requested and customers being provided with inaccurate telephone advice. The remaining complaints mainly related to dissatisfaction with benefit calculations; in these cases, employees had followed correct processes and procedures.
36. 31 complaints (37%) were received by the Awards Team which is responsible for administering Council Tax accounts. 6 of the 31 complaints (19%) were considered to be justified, four were due to employees failing to follow agreed processes or procedures and two due to identified delays in processing. The remaining complaints related to disputed Council tax liabilities, exemptions and discounts, including 3 complaints about the Council's policy to charge Council Tax on empty properties.
37. 21 complaints (25%) were received by the Collections Team who are responsible for the recovery of outstanding Council Tax, Business Rates, Housing Benefit overpayments and Sundry debt. 4 complaints (19%) were found to be justified. 3 related to the issuing of summons; investigations revealed that a summons should not have been issued as the customers had either made a payment or a review of their liability was still ongoing. In one case, a debt had been written-off as part of the Council's Debt Management Strategy but the customer had not been notified. The remaining complaints related to various aspects of recovery action. There were several instances where customers complained following receipt of a summons (after which the complainants set up a repayment arrangement). In all recovery cases, consideration is given to the Council's Debt Management Strategy and, where appropriate, customers are sign-posted to free support agencies.
38. 5 complaints received in response to our handling of council tax and housing benefit were escalated to Stage 2. 4 of these complaints have now been fully investigated and none have been justified.
39. Our **Clean and Green Service** received 74 complaints (accounting for 10% of all complaints) during quarter 2, which is slightly higher than the 66 received during quarter 1. Of these 74 complaints, 40 related to grounds maintenance, 16 to environmental

issues such as litter and dog fouling, 1 to street cleansing and the remainder (17) to a variety of causes.

40. There were 2 key themes linked to grounds maintenance complaints; overgrown vegetation and excessive / inappropriate use of weed killer. In those instances whereby we are responsible for the land, the overgrown vegetation was strimmed and weed killed as appropriate once we became aware of the problem. In some cases, e.g. a complaint related to a roadside verge where the overgrown vegetation was affecting traffic sight lines, processes were changed to ensure the verge was cut more frequently to prevent the problem reoccurring. Staff have also been reminded to take more care when applying weed killer.
41. The remaining 31% of complaints (222) relate to a wide variety of topics, including;
- 35 complaints (5%) were received from residents unhappy with **customer services**, with most claiming to have been given insufficient or incorrect information in relation to a variety of topics including benefits, council tax and collection dates. During this period, customer services received just over 161,000 telephone enquiries, 41,000 visits to CAPs, 4,500 web requests and 17,000 emails.
 - 4% of the complaints received (27) related to **planning development** mainly in connection to planning decisions and building control, 22% higher than the same period last year. 11 complaints escalated to Stage 2 and related to a variety of issues including granting of planning permission (6) and staff attitude (3). Seven of these complaints have been fully investigated and none were justified.
 - 26 complaints (4%) concerned our **Neighbourhood Warden Service**. However, most of the complaints related to outcomes of issues the service was involved with. For example, during quarter 2, seven complainants were unhappy that enforcement action is being taken against them (compared to one during the same period last year); there were six complaints citing lack of action (compared to two last year) and three residents thought their issue was poorly handled (compared to one last year). The majority of these cases (69%) were found to be not justified as staff had acted appropriately in line with procedures.
 - 24 complaints (3%) were received in relation to **Strategic Traffic**, mostly on the subject of residential parking and pathway matters, Although, only 3% higher than quarter 1, it is twice the number received in the same period last year.
 - 20 complaints (3%) concerned our **Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC)** and other strategic waste issues. This is broadly in line with the 19 received during quarter 1. The complaints are a combination of staff attitude and a result of tighter controls being put in place at the 13 HWRCs across the county (one mobile and 12 permanent). All of these complaints have been raised with the company which manages our HWRCs on our behalf.

Complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

42. During quarter 2, the LGO delivered decisions in relation to 36 complaints, half of which had been subject to full investigation.
43. In relation to those 18 matters not subject to full investigation, conclusions were reached based on details supplied by complainants which were supplemented, in some instances, with contextual information from Council officers. The 18 investigations related to a number of service areas including planning, adult care, highways and benefits. 7 were found to be outside the LGO's jurisdiction, 6 were no fault by the council and 5 were reported prematurely to the LGO so were referred back to the council to deal with under our complaints procedure.
44. The LGO also delivered decisions on 18 matters which had been subject to full investigation. In 10 of these cases the LGO found no fault on the part of the Council, 1 case was closed on the basis that it was made to the LGO prematurely and 7 complaints were justified as detailed in the table below;

Service	Complaint	Decision	Action to be taken
Adult Care	Failure to deal with late father's move from one care home to another	Maladministration and Injustice	Council had already taken action to remedy the issues before the LGO's decision and to the LGO's satisfaction
Planning	Failure to pass an employee planning application to a planning committee for consideration	Maladministration and Injustice	Council had already taken action to remedy the issues before LGO's decision and to LGO's satisfaction
Highways	Fault by the Council in the way it dealt with a complaint about street lighting	Maladministration and Injustice	Financial remedy of £150 and a formal written apology
Council Tax	Failure by the Council to correctly transfer a council tax payment the complainant made on a previous property to current address	Maladministration and Injustice	Financial remedy of £75 in recognition of time and trouble
Planning	How the Council dealt with a planning application and construction work for a new school	Maladministration	No remedies recommended. Though some fault was identified, it has not caused the complainant any injustice
Benefits	Council at fault in omitting to check on a change of circumstances affecting the complainant's housing benefit claim	Maladministration	Council had already taken action to remedy the issues before the LGO's decision and to the LGO's satisfaction
Staff Conduct	Inaccurate information given to complainant about the process the Council would use for a staff conduct complaint	Maladministration	Council had already taken action to remedy the issues before the LGO's decision and to the LGO's satisfaction

Review of the Complaints Policy and Process

45. The staggered approach to implementation has allowed each Service Area to receive the support and training to allow them to pick up the mantle of handling their own complaints. This, partnered with feedback, housekeeping exercises and focused side by side training has contributed to the overall success of this service provision realignment.
46. Service areas have embraced the new process and although customers are initially waiting a little longer for their acknowledgements they are receiving their responses quicker with 41% of responses now being delivered by telephone.
47. In terms of the overall customer journey there has been no detriment to the overall satisfaction results which has remained at 31%. 83% of customers are satisfied with the ease of making a complaint

Compliments and Suggestions

48. We receive many positive comments about our staff and the services we provide, and we believe that understanding what is working well and appreciated is as important as knowing what is not working as well. Suggestions are essential to the ongoing development and improvement of the service, and all suggestions are carefully considered by the relevant service area.
49. During quarter 2, we received 379 compliments which recognised not only the motivation, dedication and hard-work of our staff but also the high standard and value of the services we provide, as well as 80 suggestions.
50. 31% (116) of all compliments received during quarter 2 related to the appearance of the local environment. More than half of these, equating to 17% of total compliments received, specifically related to the wildflower meadows we have planted on roundabouts and verges as part of our wildflower planting scheme. In addition to these 64 compliments, the wildflower meadows also drew attention on our social media sites. More than 170,000 people viewed our post highlighting the roadside wild floral displays with 4,038 likes and 1,027 comments.
51. 19 compliments were received in relation to the major improvement works recently undertaken at Sunderland Bridge and Milburngate Bridge. The severe delays expected throughout the seven weeks of major improvement works to Milburngate Bridge did not materialise due to a combination of our proactive approach, a hardworking and dedicated workforce and public support. In addition to the compliments recorded on the CRM, our post on social media reached nearly 53,000 people, attracting 640 likes and more than 80 comments. The majority of the comments congratulated us for finishing the job early.
52. 13 compliments were received thanking Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) for their support and for grants to help community projects.