

Putting our
customers first

Customer Feedback Report

Complaints,
compliments and
suggestions

Quarter 3
2015/16

Altogether better



Background information

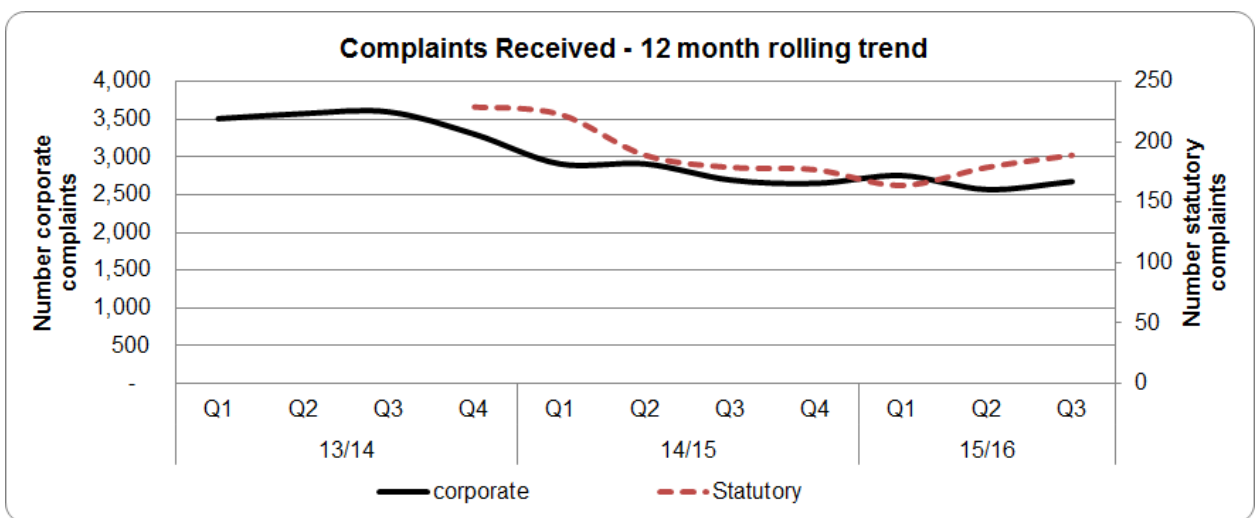
1. Customer feedback is a valuable tool. It not only helps us understand what is important to service users and what we are doing well, it can also indicate widespread issues and offer us the opportunity to put things right and improve our services.
2. This report provides a breakdown of all complaints, compliments and suggestions received by the Council during quarter 3, 15/16 (1 October 2015 to 31 December 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.
4. The new process for handling corporate complaints was fully implemented in September 2015 following a programme of training and system development to enable better capture of information and a more streamlined approach. Services are now wholly dealing with 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 new Customer Feedback Team, set up within Customer Services to undergo independent review. The Customer Feedback Team is also working more closely with services to identify trends and opportunities for service improvement; capturing learning outcomes more effectively. Independent review of statutory complaints is arranged by the Complaints Team within Children and Adults Services, who commission independent investigators in line with the statutory regulations.

Summary

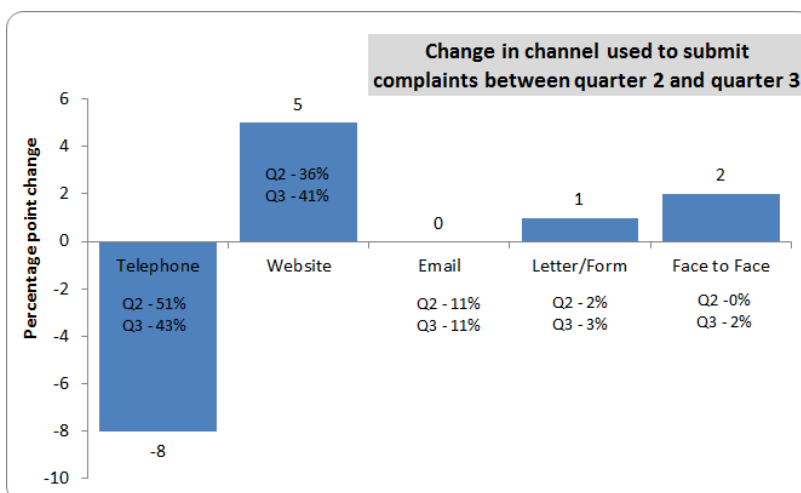
6. During quarter 3, we received 641 complaints, 43 statutory complaints and 598 corporate complaints.

	During Q3	Change since					
		Q2			Q3 last year		
number received	641	↓ -17%	-131	↑ 22%	115		
- Statutory complaints	43	↓ -23%	-13	↑ 30%	10		
- corporate complaints	598	↓ -16%	-118	↑ 21%	105		







7. For the last 2 years, the number of complaints received has been showing a downward trend. However, this has recently reversed slightly, as shown in the graph below.



8. The upward movement of corporate complaints is mainly attributable to 2 events during quarter 3; the period of heavy snowfall toward the end of December which led to a surge of complaints in relation to snow clearance and gritting, and the traffic census during November which resulted in complaints focussing on lack of notification and delays. If these complaints were to be removed from the overall count, the downward trend experienced over the last 2 years would be seen to continue.
9. Analysis has been carried out to identify the channels used to report complaints during quarter 3. In relation to corporate complaints there has been a shift from telephone to website, as shown in the graph below:



10. Process improvements continue to positively impact the way our corporate complaints are handled. The average time for services to close a complaint has reduced by 2 days and the number handled within their agreed timescale has increased by 47%. 100% of independent investigations are being handled within the agreed timescale and the average days to close has reduced by 27 days.
11. All statutory complaints received during quarter 3 were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt and 79% were resolved within the relevant statutory timescale, which although lower than quarter 2 (81%), is equal to quarter 3 last year.
12. Of the complaints handled during quarter 3, approximately half were upheld (partially or fully).

	During Q3	Change since	
		Q2	Q3 last year
% upheld (fully or part)	50%	 Up from 49%	 Up from 47%
- Statutory complaints	42%	 Up from 38%	 Down from 54%
- corporate complaints	52%	 Up from 50%	 Up from 46%

13. Following investigation by service areas, 46 complainants remained dissatisfied and requested their complaint progress to independent review. Investigations have been completed into 35 complaints; these were all corporate complaints and 23% (8) were upheld (partly or fully). Independent review is continuing into the remaining 11 complaints, of which 4 are statutory.
14. During quarter 3, the Local Government Ombudsman delivered decisions into 27 matters. Of the 8 subject to full investigation, 3 were upheld.
15. In addition to complaints, we also received 368 compliments and 270 suggestions during quarter 3.

Statutory Complaints

16. During quarter 3, we received 43 statutory complaints, 65% related to Children's Services and the remaining 35% to Adult Services.

Children's Services

17. 28 statutory complaints were received by Children's Services during quarter 3, an 18% decrease (6 fewer) compared to quarter 2 and a 40% increase (8 more) on the same period last year. All 28 complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt.

18. 2 of the 28 complaints progressed directly to independent review, along with 2 complaints from previous quarters; all four are in the process of being investigated.
19. Of the 26 complaints investigated by the service area, 85% were resolved during the quarter. Of the 22 resolved complaints, 16 were resolved within the prescribed timescale of 20 working days and 6 were not. Investigations into the remaining 4 complaints are continuing, all within target timescale.
20. Of the 22 resolved complaints, 13 (59%) were not upheld, 4 were upheld (18%) and 5 partly upheld (23%).
21. 5 complaints were declined during quarter 3; two complaints about the same case were declined on the grounds that the case was in care proceedings and the issues needed to be raised within the court process, one because the case was subject to private law proceedings, one because the issues needed to be pursued through a legal process, and one due to the complainants stating their intention to take the Council to court; this is in line with statutory regulations.
22. A number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including;
 - Reviewing the procedures for allegations against foster carers, in liaison with Durham Local Safeguarding Children Board.
 - Reviewing the procedures relating to the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO).

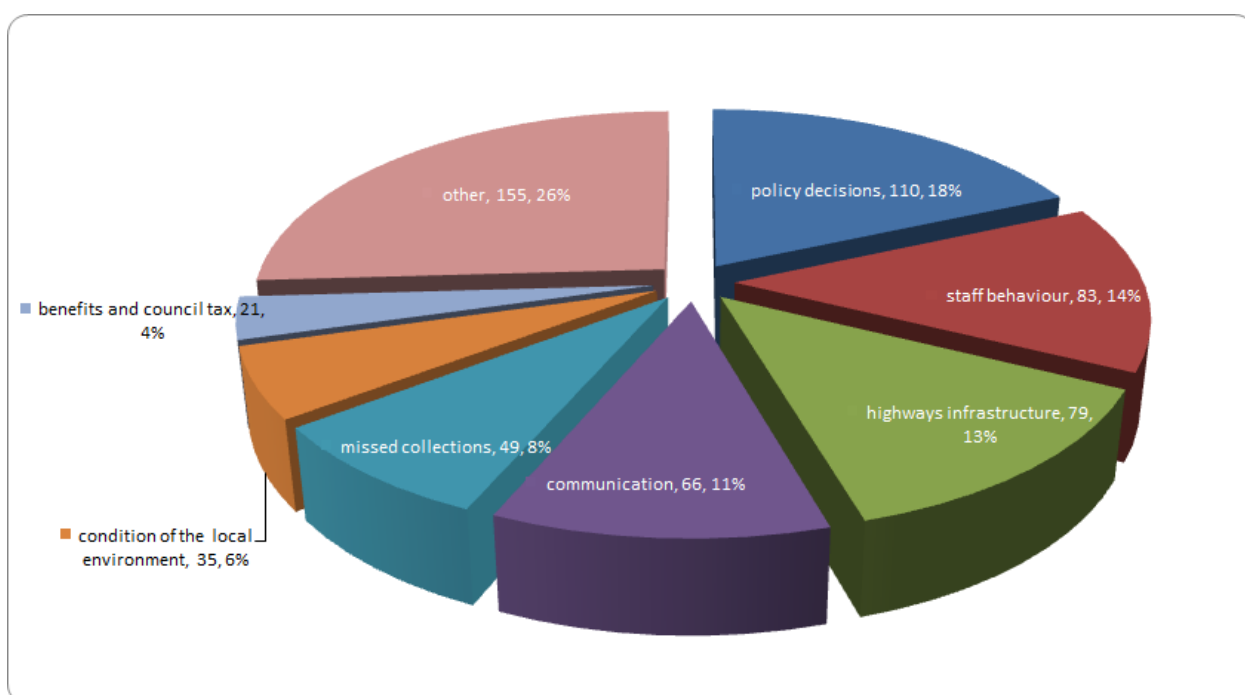
Adult Care Services

23. 15 statutory complaints were received by Adult Services during quarter 3, a 32% decrease (7 fewer) compared to quarter 2 and a 15% increase (2 more) on the same period last year. All 15 complaints were acknowledged within 2 working days of receipt.
24. Of the 15 complaints investigated by the service area, 73% were resolved during the quarter. Of the 11 resolved complaints, 10 were resolved within the agreed timescale. Investigations are continuing into the remaining 4 complaints.
25. Of the 11 resolved complaints, 3 (27%) were not upheld, 5 were upheld (45%) and 3 partly upheld (27%).
26. 5 complaints were declined during quarter 3: two complaints on the basis that they were outside the one year timeframe, one because it concerned a report for court and should have been raised through the legal process, one because it related directly to a care home and the contract between the Council and the care home states that the home must investigate the complaint in the first instance, one because the complainant did not have the service user's authorisation to make the complaint.

27. A number of actions were taken in response to complaints received during quarter 3, including;
- Reviewing the best interest procedures and process for involving an Independent Mental Capacity Advocate (IMCA).
 - Carrying out a re-assessment and changing a care package as a result.

Corporate Complaints

28. Analysis of the 598 corporate complaints received during quarter 3 has highlighted 7 key topics which collectively make up 74% of all complaints received.



Actions linked to our policies and procedures

29. Our service provision is reflected in our policies and procedures, and during quarter 3 we received 110 complaints as a direct consequence of carrying out actions in line with those policies and procedures. This equates to 18% of the total received.
30. 75 of these complaints (68%) related to our refuse and recycling policies, mostly from residents unhappy that their household recycling bins had not been emptied or had been removed due to contamination (35 complaints). Complaints were also received following refusal of refunds for special collections (5 complaints), non-collection of side waste (5 complaints) and charging for replacement bins (5 complaints). We also received complaints from 22 residents who felt October was too early to end the Garden Waste Collection Scheme; following this, and other feedback, the scheme has been extended for 2016.

31. The Street Lighting Energy Reduction Project (SLERP) to upgrade more than 55,000 street lights with the latest Light Emitting Diode (LED) light fittings is continuing and almost 30,000 lights have been completed to date. The new lights concentrate light on the road and footpath areas and reduce light pollution to surrounding areas. During quarter 3, 13 residents complained about the SLERP as they were unhappy that light is not covering as wide an area as previously and felt that this change will lead to more crime. A recent study has shown there is no evidence of any link between reduced street lighting and increased crime or road traffic collisions at night, which is in line with previous work commissioned by the Department of Transport.
32. Our planning department received 9 complaints relating to their policies and procedures during quarter 3, mainly due to disagreements as to how planning applications should be dealt with and the amount of support that should be provided.
33. In October 2015, Cabinet agreed a new approach to the way in which the DLI collection is displayed, stored and made available to the public. There will be a range of exhibitions in the city, the first opening at Palace Green Library in July 2016, and we will work with schools to educate about the DLI regiment. However, the existing DLI museum will be closed. During quarter 3, 5 objections to this approach were received through the complaints system.
34. Our policy is that all unoccupied properties are subject to 100% of council tax for the first 2 years and up to 150% of council tax after 2 years. 2 residents complained about this policy during quarter 3. In addition there were 3 complaints about the housing benefit regulations and 2 complaints about the enforcement regulations.

Staff Behaviour

35. 83 complaints were received in relation to the behaviour of our staff, 14% of all complaints received during quarter 3. 73 related to directly employed DCC staff and the remaining 10 related to staff employed by our contractors.
36. The most frequent cause for complaint (46 instances) was the attitude of our staff, most of which was general unhelpfulness but a small number related to staff being rude, abusive or swearing. 4 complaints concerned staff driving (3 speeding and 1 using a mobile phone whilst driving) and 1 objected to inappropriate staff parking. 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.
37. 26 complaints were received about the actions of our refuse and recycling crews, 17 residents objected that bins were not being returned to their collection point, 7 complained crews did not clear up dropped refuse / recycling from roads and pavements as they completed their collection rounds and 2 were unhappy crews did not close gates.

38. In addition, we received 11 complaints alleging damage caused by our highway maintenance (4), refuse and recycling (4) and Clean and Green (3) teams.

Highways infrastructure

39. During quarter 3, 79 complaints (13% of all complaints received during quarter 3) were received in relation to our highways infrastructure. 77% (61 complaints) related to highway maintenance and 23% (18 complaints) to street lighting.
40. Almost 40% of highway infrastructure complaints (24) were as a result of residents believing that we were taking too long to repair faults / complete schemes, 21 were unhappy with our winter maintenance service following the heavy snowfall at the end of December, 6 complaints related to the condition of our footpaths and the remaining 10 were based on a number of disparate reasons, for example, highway obstruction, drainage work, road safety.

Communication

41. 66 complaints were received in relation to communication, 11% of all complaints received during quarter 3. The reasons for complaint were lack of communication (39) and being given insufficient, inaccurate or unclear information (27).
42. Most complaints citing 'lack of communication' related to temporary traffic management measures, e.g. road closures, lane restrictions, traffic lights, which the complainant felt had not been communicated. Across the County, at any point in time, there are between 150 and 200 traffic management systems in place, one quarter of which the Council will be directly responsible for, the remainder being the responsibility of utility companies, house builders or other private companies. As a minimum and as far as we are able, we ensure the information is included on our website. Depending on the size and duration of a scheme / road closure, we also communicate any disruption or diversion through a mix of channels, including social media, press releases, leaflets, posters, electronic Variable Message Signage (static and mobile), traffic management / on street signage.
43. 13 complaints were received following the Traffic Census carried out in November to gather more data for the County Durham Plan. All complainants were unhappy about the lack of communication highlighting this was to take place and by the delays caused to travellers through Durham. Unfortunately, it was not possible to forewarn that this was to take place in case residents changed their routes to avoid the census which would reduce the validity of the data.
44. 27 residents complained our communications were insufficient, inaccurate or unclear.
- 7 related to benefit notification letters which residents felt were difficult to understand. We appreciate that these letters can be complex and although the information is

prescribed by legislation, we are reviewing the notification letters to make them easier to understand whilst ensuring we meet legislative requirements.

- 6 complaints related to being given incorrect or unclear information at the initial point of contact. When considering the volume of complaints it is important to take into account the size of service provision as during quarter 3 our customer services team dealt with more than 300,000 enquiries. To ensure all staff have access to the latest training materials and are kept up to date with legislative and process changes, regular liaison meetings are held between Revenues and Benefits and Customer Services.
- During quarter 3, we concluded our e-bill take up campaign which encourages Direct Debit payers to move to paperless bills. We received several complaints that the wording in the take up letter suggested this was mandatory. These comments have been acknowledged and will be considered when determining the wording of future canvass letters.
- A complaint was received which highlighted that the public transport map was showing incorrect information. This has now been corrected.

Missed Refuse and Recycling Collections

45. 49 complaints, 8% of the total received, related to missed collections; 30 kerbside refuse and recycling, 15 garden waste and 4 bulky collections. This is fewer than both quarter 1 (-60%) and the same period last year (-16%). When considering the number of complaints it is important to note that, during quarter 3, our crews completed more than 3.2 million refuse and recycling collections, 400,000 garden waste collections and 8,000 bulky collections.

Condition of the local environment

46. During quarter 3, our Clean and Green Service received 35 complaints (accounting for 6% of all complaints). The majority (13) related to environmental issues including fly-tipping, litter and dog fouling, and most involved residents highlighting an issue rather than complaining about our processes. 10 complaints related to grounds maintenance, the main theme being grass cutting including not clearing away grass cuttings as well as requests to cut back overgrown vegetation / trees.

Benefits and Council Tax

47. 21 complaints, 4% of the total received, related to incorrect decisions made on benefit claims or inconsistencies in data recorded within our benefits and council tax systems. The administration of council tax, housing benefit and council tax reduction is complex, subject to frequent change and highly regulated. More than 67,000 new claims and

changes of circumstances, as well as 48,000 work items, are processed each quarter. Occasionally there are omissions which impact the calculation of claims. To mitigate the risk of error and ensure information is as accurate as possible, employees undergo a robust training programme, receive regular updates and are subject to a robust quality assurance process. In addition, we work closely with software suppliers to seek opportunities to automate processes to further minimise the risk of error.

48. The remaining 26% of corporate complaints related to a wide variety of issues received in smaller volumes.

Corporate complaints subjected to independent review

49. During quarter 3, 42 complaints were subjected to independent review by the Customer Feedback Team and of the 35 fully investigated, 23% (8) were upheld (partially or fully). A summary of the upheld complaints are set out in the following table;

Complaint	Learning outcome / action to be taken
Bin causing an obstruction due to not being returned to its collection point (upheld)	Service standard fell short of requirements. Action has been taken to remedy the issues and will be monitored in the future
Ongoing issue of bin not being emptied properly and lid left open so bin collects water (upheld)	Service standard fell short of requirements. Action has been taken to remedy the issues and will be monitored in the future
Delays in receiving garden waste bin (upheld)	Service standard fell short of requirements. Action has been taken to remedy the issue.
Crews not clearing up broken glass (upheld)	Service standard fell short of requirements. Crews reminded that spillages must be cleaned up
Was not informed that a charge to collect garden waste was in place (partially upheld)	The correct procedure was not followed. Action has been taken to remedy the issue
Delay in responding to complaint (partially upheld)	The correct procedure was not followed. Action has been taken to remedy the issue
Issues arising from a competition we hosted on behalf of a third party (partially upheld)	Social media team has amended their procedures when a third party is involved
Staff behaviour (partially upheld)	Service standard fell short of requirements. Action is being taken through our HR policies and procedures.

Complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

50. During quarter 3, the LGO delivered decisions in relation to 27 complaints, 8 of which had been subject to full investigation.
51. Of those 19 matters not subject to full investigation, conclusions were reached based on details supplied by complainants and supplemented in some instances with contextual information from Council officers. The 19 investigations related to a number of service areas including planning, adult care, and children’s services. 5 were found to be outside the LGO’s jurisdiction, 9 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.
52. The LGO also delivered decisions on 8 matters which had been subject to full investigation. In 5 of these cases the LGO found no fault on the part of the Council and 3 complaints were upheld as detailed in the table below;

Service	Complaint	Decision	Action to be taken
Land Purchase	Council’s failure to rent an area of land, billing in error for rent and failure to properly investigate	Maladministration and Injustice	Financial settlement of £100 and an apology
Adult care	Failure to respond adequately to concerns about a care provider and failure to meet needs in a care home	Maladministration no Injustice	Council had already taken action to remedy the issues before the LGO’s decision and to the LGO’s satisfaction
Children’s Services	Failure to follow proper procedures before arranging a Child Protection Conference, then failure to deal appropriately with their complaints and provide adequate remedy	Maladministration and Injustice	Council made a time and trouble payment of £350 and agreed to place a statement on file outlining the key failings in the child protection inquiry

Suggestions

53. We believe suggestions are essential to the ongoing development and improvement of our services, and carefully consider all received.
54. During quarter 3, we received 255 suggestions, which is significantly higher than the usual quarterly average of 80. Almost 70% of the 255, and the cause of the increase, suggested that the garden waste scheme be extended into November. This has been considered by the service area and the scheme has been extended to 17 collections from 2016. The remaining 83 suggestions covered a wide range of topics.

55. There were a number of suggestions relating to communicating via our website, for example, adding the option of a 'nothing has changed' button when renewing blue badges, allowing the congestion charge to be paid via our website, reporting envirocrime using interactive maps. The possibility of implementing all of these suggestions is being investigated as part of a wider programme linked to the development of the new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. In response to a suggestion, we have looked into increasing the volume of our automated messages but it is currently not possible at the moment.
56. One resident suggested that improvements should be made to Millennium Place which coincides with the commissioning of an urban design study which could bring changes to this area following the Council's accommodation review and the marketing of the buildings around the area.
57. Suggestions are frequently received suggesting changes to our road system. However, if implemented, many would have knock on effects to the traffic flows elsewhere. For example, during quarter 3, one suggestion was to introduce a right only turn at traffic lights in Chester-le-Street. Although there is logic to this suggestion, making such a change would slow down rush hour traffic. Another suggestion was to remove parking charges at Chester-le-Street Leisure Centre and although this was also considered, we were unable to implement as the charges not only discourage long stay parking by commuters but also cover the cost of the car park which otherwise would need to be paid by the taxpayer.
58. There were a number of suggestions relating to our Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs), including a suggestion to e-mail waste permits so they are received quickly and postage costs are saved. The foil hologram on the current waste permit prevents photocopies being used fraudulently but we are considering electronic permits with unique barcodes that could be scanned at HWRCs. There was also a suggestion specific to Potterhouse Lane HWRC, proposing that during periods of temporary closure a container is placed at the gates as a legitimate means of waste disposal. However, this was not possible as there is insufficient space for a container and for cars to pull over and residents to get out safely.
59. It was also suggested to repeat our wildflower planting scheme during 2016. The 2016 programme will include the seven sites planted in 2015; Chester-le-Street Riverside, West Auckland Bypass, Town Recreation Ground, Bishop Auckland, Pity Me roundabout (A167), Sniperley Park roundabout, Sniperley roundabout (A167) and Wykes Close, Sedgefield (in partnership with Sedgefield in Bloom), in addition to 10 additional meadows. Sites across the county are currently being assessed to be sown during 2016.

Compliments

60. We also 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.
61. During quarter 3, we received 368 compliments, 98 in relation to social services and 270 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 (83%) related to satisfaction with service provision but 63 compliments conveyed thanks to specific individuals. As far as we are able, we have passed these thanks onto the individual concerned.
62. The new Customer Feedback Team is currently working with services to determine how compliments and suggestions can be better used to influence our learning, service improvement and organisational development plans. Information on the outcome of this work will be provided in a future report.