

Putting our  
Customers first

Customer Feedback Report

# Complaints, compliments and suggestions

Quarter 1, 2017/18

*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. Covering a range of customer feedback, this report highlights the main themes throughout quarter 1, 2017/18 (1 April 2017 to 30 June 2017), summarises our performance in dealing with complaints, identifies any lessons learned and states what remedial action we have taken, or plan to take, to put things right and ensure similar mistakes are avoided in the future. As feedback can also highlight opportunities for operational improvement even when the service is delivered properly, the report also includes a selection of customer suggestions and their outcomes, and an overview of comments relating to our decision making.

## Complaints

3. Within this document, there are two types of complaint. 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 first stage in the corporate complaints process enables service areas to resolve the issue in the first instance, providing a service response. Should the customer remain dissatisfied with the service response they can escalate to the Customer Feedback Team, who will either progress with an independent investigation, or advise the service user to contact the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (the Ombudsman). Independent investigation of statutory complaints is arranged by the statutory complaint teams.

## Summary:

5. During quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 568 complaints: 56 statutory complaints and 512 corporate complaints.

	Q1 2016/17	Q1 2017/18	change		
<b>number received</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>568</b>	<b>64</b>		<b>13%</b>
- Statutory complaints	45	56	11		24%
- corporate complaints	459	512	53		11%

6. We have analysed the dataset to identify the channels used to report complaints during quarter 1, 2017/18, and although telephony remains the most popular way of giving us

feedback, there appears to have been a shift towards reporting via our website. The following table shows a breakdown of channels used by customers in relation to complaint submission between 2015/16 and 2017/18.

Channel	Q1 2015/16	Q1 2016/17	Q1 2017/18	Change over last 2 years
Website	32.5%	39.5%	40.2%	7.7 pp
Face to Face	2.9%	3.4%	1.4%	-1.5 pp
Telephone	49.9%	43.5%	47.3%	-2.6 pp
Letter / Form / Fax	2.3%	4.0%	4.5%	2.2 pp
E-mail	12.7%	9.5%	6.3%	-6.4 pp

7. Of the complaints handled during quarter 1, 2017/18, more than half were upheld (partially or fully).

	Q1 2016/17	Q1 2017/18	change
<b>% upheld (fully or partially)</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>↑ 8pp</b>
- Statutory complaints	47%	36%	↓ -15pp
- corporate complaints (service response)	52%	68%	↑ 16 pp
- corporate complaints (independent investigation)	16%	7%	↓ -9 pp

8. Following investigation by service areas, 34 complainants remained dissatisfied and requested their complaint progress to independent review. Investigations have been completed into 29 corporate complaints, of which 7% (2) were upheld (partly or fully).
9. During 2017/18, the Ombudsman delivered decisions into 16 matters. Six complaints were upheld.
10. In addition to complaints, we also received 242 compliments, 126 suggestions and 98 comments in relation to our policies and procedures.

## Statutory Complaints: Children’s Social Care Services

11. During quarter 1, 2017/18, Children’s Social Care Services received 28 statutory complaints, 22% more (+5) than quarter 1, 2016/17. No complaints progressed to independent investigation; there were two in quarter 1, 2016/17. During the quarter, one complaint, which had been through Stages 1 and 2, was escalated to Stage 3 (Review Panel), with a final outcome awaited at the time of writing this report.

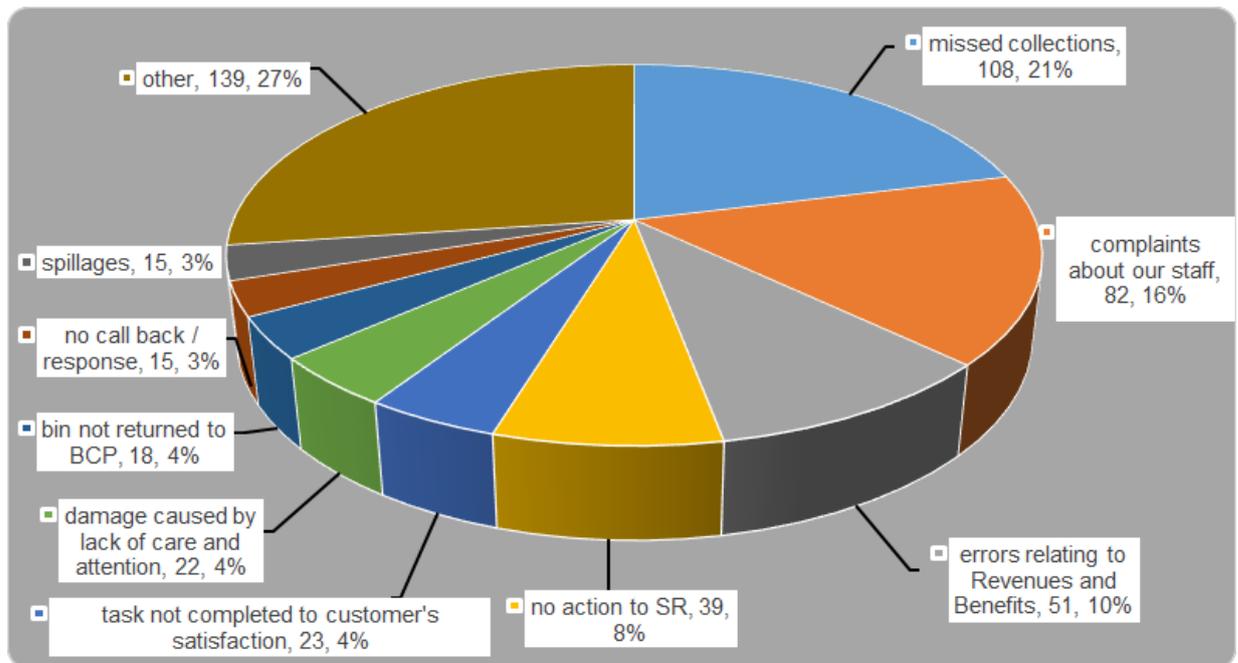
12. Of the 28 complaints, 26 were resolved within their prescribed timescale (93%) and two outside their prescribed timescale (7%). Of the 28 complaints: 18 were not upheld (64%), two were upheld (7%) and 8 partially upheld (29%).
13. Three complaints were declined; two due to the complainant being ineligible to act on the child's behalf, and one due to the events occurring more than one year ago.
14. During quarter 1, a number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including:
  - Reminding fostering social workers to complete assessment forms accurately, being mindful of other ongoing matters in family's lives and to contact people when they promise to do so.
  - Reviewing the training needs of Child Protection social workers to ensure that they have a broad knowledge of children's health needs and appropriate responses.

## **Statutory Complaints: Adult Social Care Services**

15. During quarter 1, 2017/18, Adult Social Care Services received 28 statutory complaints, 27% more (+6) than quarter 1, 2016/17.
16. More than two-thirds of these complaints related to Older People / Physical Disabilities / Sensory Impairment. The most common reason for complaint was a disputed decision where a service user disagrees with an explanation or decision.
17. 22 complaints were resolved during quarter 1, 2017/18, all within their agreed timescale. Of the 22 resolved complaints: 14 were not upheld (64%), two were upheld (9%) and six partially upheld (27%). Six were still being investigated at the time of writing this report.
18. During quarter 1, a number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including:
  - Reminding all staff of the procedure for adding information to Care and Support Review documents.
  - Reminding staff to provide family members with the appropriate information and explanations about the nature of the meetings they are been invited to attend.

## **Corporate Complaints**

19. During quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 512 corporate complaints, 53 more than the same quarter last year. Of those complaints investigated during quarter 1, 68% were upheld (fully or partially).
20. Further analysis has identified nine topics that collectively account for almost three quarters of complaints.



### Missed Collections

21. In line with previous reports, missed collections remains the most frequent cause of complaint across the council. During quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 108 complaints, which is an 11% increase (11 more) when compared to the same quarter last year.
22. Of the 108 complaints, 54 related to kerbside refuse and recycling, 38 to garden waste, 12 to bulky collections, 2 to trade waste and 2 to clinical waste. This quarter's increase was mainly attributable to a slight increase in missed collections relating to kerbside refuse and recycling.
23. Investigations have been completed into 96 complaints and 94% were upheld (80 fully and 10 partially).
24. When considering these complaints, it is important to note that every quarter our refuse and recycling crews complete more than 3 million refuse and recycling collections, 400,000 garden waste collections and 8,000 bulky collections.

### Complaints about our staff

25. During quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 82 complaints about our staff: a slight increase on the 78 received during the same period in 2016/17. There were four main causes of complaint.
26. Nineteen customers felt staff behaved toward them in an aggressive or intimidating way, often using foul, obscene or insulting language. The majority of complaints involved our household refuse and recycling service, both the collection service and the Household

Waste Recycling Centres. Investigations have been completed into 17 complaints and 14 were upheld (10 fully and four partially).

27. Seventeen customers complained our staff were deliberately unhelpful, obstructive or unreasonable. Again, the majority of complaints involved our household refuse and recycling service, both the collection service and the Household Waste Recycling Centres. Investigations have been completed into 14 complaints and eight were upheld (five fully and three partially).
28. Ten complainants witnessed our staff driving in a dangerous manner. This mainly involved our frontline refuse and recycling, highway maintenance and street cleansing teams. Five of the complaints were near misses, three involved mobile phones, one driving on a footpath and one involved driving too close to horses and their riders. Investigations have been completed into seven complaints and six were upheld (two fully and four partially).
29. Nine residents complained our staff were rude, abrupt or dismissive of their issue or query. The complaints related to a wide range of service areas in small numbers. Investigations have been completed into six complaints and five were upheld (two fully and three partially).
30. The remaining complaints included staff parking inappropriately, throwing items from vehicles, starting work at inappropriate times (e.g. early morning or weekend), smoking whilst carrying out their duties or not fulfilling their duties using appropriate health and safety equipment (in the opinion of the complainant).
31. We expect the highest standards from all our employees and we deal with any alleged misconduct through our HR policies and procedures. We pass all complaints relating to non-DCC employees to the appropriate contractor for them to address under their own procedures. The contractor feeds back the results of their investigations to ourselves.

### **Process and Procedure in the Revenues and Benefits Service**

32. Each year, we process in the region of 115,000 work items relating to Council Tax, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction. All of these areas are complex, subject to frequent change and highly legislated. During quarter 1, we received 51 complaints, mainly in relation to staff failing to follow process and procedure or due to human error where manual input was required. We have completed investigations into 48 complaints and 29 were upheld.
33. In all cases, the error or omission is referred back to the responsible member of staff for correction. We also seek to minimise the risk of error by automating processes to reduce manual interventions and carrying out quality assurance interventions. Any identified trends and patterns are used to further develop training plans and inform process reviews.

## **Progressing a customer's request for service, concern or query**

34. Each quarter, we receive more than 425,000 contacts, the majority of which require us to action a request or resolve an issue. During quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 39 complaints from customers unhappy that there had been no action in response to their request, concern or query: a 44% increase on the 27 received during the same period in 2016/17. Analysis of the data shows that there were three main reasons for this type of complaint during quarter 1.
35. Seven customers were unhappy that we had not actioned their service request for a bin repair or delivery of a replacement bin. We have completed investigations into six of these complaints and all were fully upheld. Every quarter we receive in the region of 5,000 requests of this type.
36. A further seven complainants were unhappy we had not actioned their report of an enviro-crime: three related to fly-tipping, three to littering and one to an abandoned vehicle. We have completed investigations into six of these complaints and two were partially upheld. Every quarter we respond to around 2,000 reports of enviro-crime.
37. We received six complaints that we had failed to complete a street lighting repair. Of the three complaints investigated, one was partially upheld. Each quarter we repair around 3,000 streetlights.
38. We also received complaints from customers unhappy that we had not responded to their request or query, for example, to cut back overgrown trees / hedges, issue a waste permit for the Household Waste Recycling Centres, replace their bus pass and cancel their gym membership.
39. Investigations have been completed into 29 complaints and 44% were upheld (eight fully and nine partially).

## **Service Standards**

40. 23 complainants felt the standard of our work was inadequate. More than half of these complaints related to two frontline service areas: grass cutting (nine complaints) and highway maintenance (four complaints). Two thirds of complainants cited the standard of work and the remaining third to us leaving the local environment in an unacceptable condition after we had completed the work.
41. The remaining complaints related to the following service areas in small numbers: street lighting, street cleansing, refuse and recycling, and anti-social behaviour.
42. Investigations have been completed into 18 complaints and 50% were upheld (eight fully and one partially).

## **Damage to property**

43. The basis of 22 complaints was that staff had damaged property, either theirs or the Council's, due to a lack of care and attention whilst undertaking their duties. This is an increase on the six complaints received during the same period in 2016/17.
44. The most frequent cause of these complaints (10 instances) was damage allegedly caused by our refuse and recycling crews. These included damage to: walls, fencing and paving (4), grassed areas / plants (3), refuse and recycling receptacles (2) and drains (1). Investigations have been completed into nine complaints and seven were upheld (six fully and one partially).
45. We received eight complaints about our grounds maintenance service: five related to our use of weed killer, two to damage caused by grass cutters and one to us cutting down privately owned trees. Investigations have been completed into six complaints and five were upheld (four fully and one partially).
46. Three complaints related to our highway maintenance teams, two cited car damage (one by stone chips following road resurfacing and one due to grit) and one to pavement damage during replacement works. Investigations have been completed into two complaints and neither was upheld.
47. The final complaint concerned injury from a litter bin. This complaint was not upheld following investigation.

## **Bins not returned to Bin Collection Point**

48. We received 18 complaints objecting that our refuse and recycling crews were not returning bins to their collection point. We have completed investigations into 17 complaints and fully upheld 16.

## **Customer Care**

49. Fifteen complaints were from customers unhappy not to have received an expected call back or update following their initial contact.
50. Investigations have been completed into 13 complaints and six were upheld (four partially and two fully).

## **Spillages**

51. We received 15 complaints about spillages which we did not clean up. The vast majority related to our household waste collection service and mainly concerned broken glass. All fifteen complaints have been investigated and 12 were upheld (10 fully and two partially).

52. It is important to remember when considering these complaints that our refuse and recycling crews complete 1.5 million recycling collections each quarter. We have reminded refuse and recycling crews to clean up any spillages that occur.

### Other

53. The remaining 27% of corporate complaints related to a wide variety of issues in smaller volumes.

## Corporate complaints subjected to independent investigation

54. During quarter 1, 2017/18, 33 complainants requested that we escalate their complaint to the next stage. It was agreed that 22 complaints should be subject to an independent investigation. Determination is made on whether an independent investigation by the Customer Feedback Team would be appropriate; based on the service response, any remedy already offered and the reasons given by the customer for wanting to take the complaint to the next stage. Where we decline to conduct an independent investigation, we will inform the customer that their next step would be to seek advice from the Ombudsman.
55. During the same period, we completed investigations into 29 complaints. Of these, two were partially upheld, as shown in the table below:

Outcome	Complaint	Action to be taken
Partially upheld	The complainant was not included in a consultation process regarding tree felling.	We have implemented a new practice, which involves an updated consultation list and handover record to the case officer, which will make internal policy more robust and reduce the likelihood of further consultation errors.  Council has apologised for the error.
	The complainant was not included in a planning consultation process	A change from a paper-based system to an electronic system resulted in this oversight. However, this objection would not have affected the planning officer's final decision.  Council has apologised for the error.

## Complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (the Ombudsman)

56. During quarter 1, 2017/18, the Ombudsman delivered decisions in relation to 16 complaints. Conclusions were reached based on details supplied by complainants and supplemented in some instances with contextual information from Council officers.

57. The 16 complaints related to a number of service areas including licensing, refuse and recycling, revenues and benefits, adult care services and planning. Of these complaints, four were found to be outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction, one was referred back to the council to deal with under our complaints procedure, and in five cases no further action was proposed. The Ombudsman upheld six complaints as detailed in the following table:

Ombudsman's final decision	Action to be taken
The Council delayed processing a disabled facilities grant, which resulted in the complainant not having appropriate home adaptations.	The Council is to apologise and pay £2,750 in recognition of the injustice suffered due to the delay and £100 redecoration costs.  The Council is to review procedures relating to Disabled Facilities Grants to avoid other people being similarly affected.
The Council was not at fault when it stopped the complainant's Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). But it unduly delayed recognising their health and care needs could justify further DHPs. This caused financial hardship.	The Council had already taken action to remedy the issues before the Ombudsman's decision and to the Ombudsman's satisfaction.  The Council corrected the DHP error within five days and revised its original decision in relation to the complainant's health conditions.
The Council failed to give the complainant enough information about how to proceed with a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) or the process. This caused delay and confusion.	The Council is to apologise for the delay and a lack of clear, written information about the DFG process, pay £500 for the frustration and uncertainty caused, explain the process to the complainant and immediately progress any application made by the complainant.  The Council is to make its DFG policy, procedures and processes publically available. This should include all stages and timescales, the use of panels, appeal mechanisms and detail of when an enquiry becomes an application (for meeting the legislative timescale of six months).
The Council was at fault due to significant delays in investigating a noise complaint	The Council to apologise for the delay and pay the complainant £150 to acknowledge the frustration and uncertainty caused.
The Council delayed carrying out transition assessments and then withdrew weekly overnight respite sessions for almost three months.	The Council is to apologise for the fault found and pay the complainant £1,000 (£750 for the lost respite care and £250 for time and trouble).  The Council is to review its policies and procedures for responding to requests for transition assessments to ensure they comply fully with statutory guidance.

Ombudsman's final decision	Action to be taken
The Council failed to stop debt recovery letters in a timely manner.	The Council to apologise for the fault and the distress caused.

## Compliments

58. We also receive many positive comments about our staff and the services we provide, and we believe that understanding what is working well and valued is as important as knowing what is not working as well.
59. During quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 242 compliments, 31 in relation to social care services and 211 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 related to satisfaction with service provision but a number of compliments conveyed thanks to specific individuals.
60. As far as we are able, we have passed these thanks onto the individuals concerned. We have recorded or received various compliments where staff have gone the extra mile and customers have taken the time to express their gratitude. Some examples are provided in the following table.

Service Area	Customer's Comments
Neighbourhood Wardens	<p>I recently moved to a new area and had never had a need to call upon the services you provide. However having done so I would like to commend the response I received.</p> <p>Their response was prompt (almost immediate in fact), attentive and comprehensive. They showed genuine understanding and sympathy for the concerns I raised and were able to offer guidance and suggested solutions.</p> <p>I also received regular email contact from all concerned and phone calls too to keep me updated.</p> <p>Too often local authorities and their teams get nothing but a hard time and I think it's important to recognise great service where and when it happens. I recognise the huge financial pressures that the public sector is under which makes the response and service even more commendable.</p>
Clean and Green	<p>I would like to compliment your litter picker. I travel through this area frequently and he always keeps the streets very tidy. I am so pleased this lovely man, who is out in all weathers maintains the tidiness of village. He deserves a compliment and I wanted to pass this on to him. Please thank him as I do not think these hard workers are thanked enough for what they do.</p>
Highway Maintenance	<p>Further to our telephone conversations in recent days, I would just like to thank you for the attention and service afforded me and the other residents in resolving the problem.</p>

	<p>The team that sorted out the problem were two of the most courteous, efficient and helpful men I have come across and nothing seemed to be too much trouble for them. Whilst it didn't really take them that long to resolve the issue (as much as they could) I feel sure that they went beyond what is classed as their normal duty. When they left our street they were going to report the problem to Northumbrian Water as there was clearly some kind of blockage in the surface water main drain system that needed to be attended to by them.</p> <p>That was clearly done immediately as Northumbria Water was on site the same afternoon and confirmed exactly what your team had said. Northumbria Water will be returning with a camera and whatever else they need to permanently fix the problem over the next few days/weeks.</p> <p>Once again, thank you for your time and trouble.</p>
Refuse and recycling	<p>Can you please pass on my appreciation to the refuse collection team. I was out riding my horse and I had alongside me my 4 year old son riding his pony on lead rein. The driver was extremely courteous and made us feel very safe as we were passing.</p> <p>He saw us in good time and pulled into the side as far as he was able and turned off his engine. He then didn't start again until we were well clear. Both my horses are good in traffic but the extra care your crew took was excellent and if I wasn't out with such placid horses their actions will have avoided any hassle or potential for an accident. Thank you again.</p>

## Feedback relating to our policies and procedures

61. Our service provision is reflected in our policies and procedures, and during quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 98 items of feedback as a direct consequence of carrying out actions in line with those policies and procedures.
62. Almost half of this feedback relates to one of two key areas, our household waste policies and procedures (24 contacts) and our fees and charges (21 contacts).
63. The most frequent cause for feedback in relation to our household waste policies and procedures (eight instances) was not emptying or permanently removing bins due to contamination. This type of feedback relating to contamination has been declining, partly due to the decision to remove bins after a third contamination, and partly due to the continuation of our educational programme which includes waste awareness campaigns including Bin it Right, door knocking, roadshows and school educational sessions.
64. Four contacts related to our Garden Waste Collection Scheme: not being able to transfer their subscription to a new property (two instances), retaining the 14-day refund policy for poor service and not providing an assisted collection at empty properties.

65. Five contacts related to our Bulky Waste Collection Scheme: objections to placing items at the designated Bin Collection Point (three) and not being able to add more items (two).
66. All remaining feedback relating to household waste policies and procedures covered a wide range of issues in single numbers. These included; excluding hard plastics from the kerbside recycling scheme; not collecting side waste; only permanently removing wheeled bins which are empty; delays at HWRCs as a result of compacting waste; not collecting recycling in black bags; time to produce a waste permit (48 hours); inability to purchase items directly from a HWRC.
67. 21 contacts related to our fees and charges, which are reviewed annually and allow us to provide local services which might not otherwise be possible. The main reason for dissatisfaction was the £20 administration and delivery charge to replace a bin lost, stolen or damaged beyond repair. Other areas consistent to both years are; the standard £40 charge by our pest control service that covers visits and materials and notice periods for gym cancellations.
68. We received four contacts about our revenues and benefits policies and procedures. All related to our policy that all unoccupied properties are subject to 100% council tax for the first two years, and then 150% if they remain unfurnished.
69. In addition to the three key areas above, the following policies and procedures received feedback during quarter 1, 2017/18: closing schools to use as polling stations; application process for a postal vote; stray dogs; not taking children on term time holidays; highway maintenance; traffic management; speed management installations.

## **Suggestions**

70. We believe suggestions are essential to the ongoing development and improvement of our services, and carefully consider all received. During quarter 1, 2017/18, we received 126 suggestions.
71. A number of suggestions related to our Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs). The most frequent suggestion was to e-mail waste permits to ensure fast delivery and save postage costs. We are currently developing a new project to look at the options around digitising waste permits.
72. A resident suggested that we remove the requirement to list all items to be disposed of when applying for a waste permit as it was too cumbersome. We intend to review this requirement as part of the digitisation project. However, it is important to note that we request the detailed waste description to ensure the customer does not have a wasted journey as not all HWRCs accept all waste types. By knowing what the customer wishes to dispose of, we can direct them to an appropriate site.

73. Another HWRC suggestion was to increase the number of skips available for use at each site, thereby allowing more cars to access the site and make it easier and quicker for residents to dispose of their waste. We know some of our HWRCs can become very busy at peak times and we have worked closely with the contractor who manages the sites to ensure that as many skips as physically possible are placed on site and the compaction and emptying of skips is as efficient as possible. We have processes in place which allow skips to be compacted safely within a cordoned off area whilst customers are on site, this has helped manage traffic congestion and ease the time for residents to dispose of their waste.
74. We frequently receive suggestions that encourage greater use of parking restrictions and, during quarter 1, received several suggestions involving the use of double yellow lines. One suggestion related to South Road near Durham Crematorium where there has been increased parking from students. We are aware of this issue and will consult to determine if a clearway or double yellow lines should be implemented. Another suggestion was to implement double yellow lines at South Road near Howlands Park and Ride to prevent drivers from parking on the road outside the bus entrance. In this case, we are seeking a traffic regulation order to resolve the issue.
75. We also regularly receive suggestions that propose changes to our road system. For example, we received a suggestion, during quarter 1, to remove the bus lane on the A690 towards Gilesgate roundabout to prevent traffic delays experienced in the current single lane arrangement. However, the length of the current two-lane section ensures that the maximum volume of traffic can enter the junction from the A690 whenever a green signal is given. Therefore, even if we removed the entire bus lane, the time taken for motorists to travel from the A1(M) into the city would remain unchanged.