

Putting our Customers first

Customer Feedback Report

Complaints, compliments and suggestions

Quarter 2, 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 2, 2017/18 (1 July 2017 to 30 September 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 2, 2017/18, we received 567 complaints: 52 statutory complaints and 515 corporate complaints.

	Q2 2016/17	Q2 2017/18	change		
number received	500	567	67		13%
- Statutory complaints	50	52	2		4%
- corporate complaints	450	515	65		14%

6. We received almost half of these complaints 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	Q2 2015/16	Q2 2016/17	Q2 2017/18	Change over last 2 years
Website	37%	43%	48%	11pp
Face to Face	1%	2%	2%	1pp
Telephone	43%	45%	41%	-2pp
Letter / Form / Fax	3%	3%	3%	0pp
E-mail	16%	7%	5%	-11pp

7. We have completed initial investigations into 409 of the 515 complaints received (79%). Of these, almost 62% were upheld (partially or fully).

	Q2 2016/17	Q2 2017/18	change
% upheld (fully or partially)			
- Statutory complaints	35%	35%	↔ 0pp
- corporate complaints (service response)	56%	62%	↑ 6pp
- corporate complaints (independent investigation)	23%	3%	↓ -20pp

8. In addition, during quarter 2 and following initial investigation by service areas, 42 complainants remained dissatisfied and requested their complaint progress to independent review. We have completed independent reviews of 31 corporate complaints, of which one (3%) was partially upheld.
9. During quarter 2, the Ombudsman delivered decisions into 21 matters. Five complaints were upheld.
10. In addition to complaints, we also received 298 compliments, 143 suggestions and 33 comments in relation to our policies and procedures.

Statutory Complaints: Children's Social Care Services

11. During quarter 2, 2017/18, Children's Social Care Services received 24 statutory complaints, 8% fewer (-2) than quarter 2, 2016/17. One complaint received in quarter 1 progressed in quarter 2 to independent investigation.

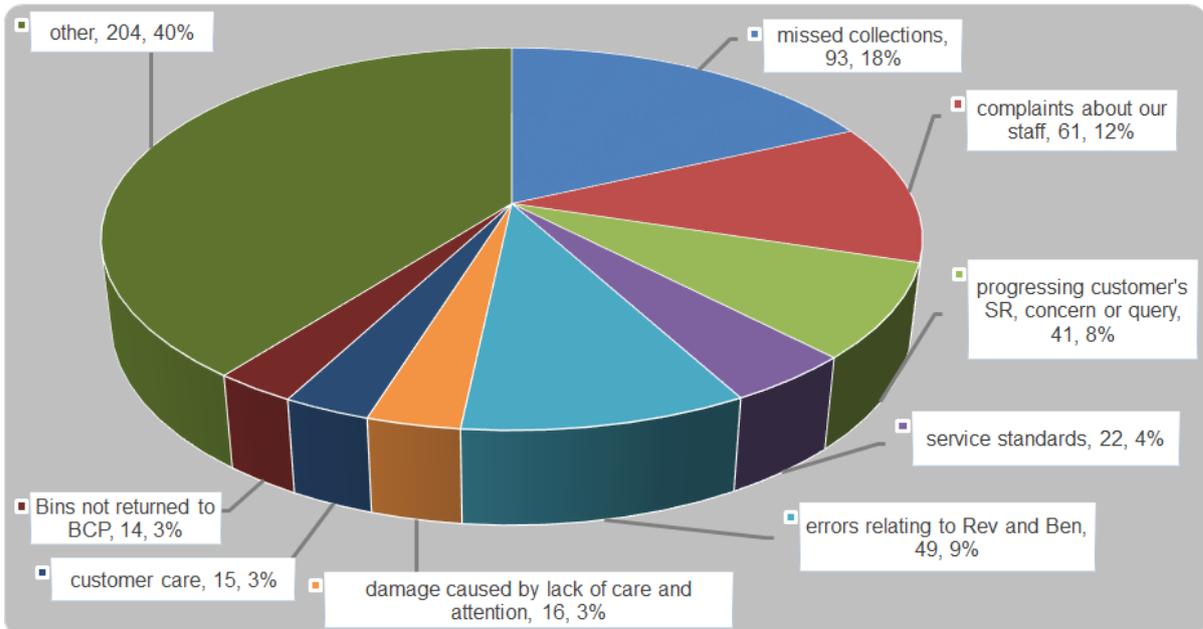
12. Of the 23 completed complaints, 21 were resolved within their prescribed timescale (91%) and two outside their prescribed timescale (9%). Of the 23 complaints: 15 were not upheld (65%), three were upheld (13%) and five partially upheld (22%).
13. 6 complaints were declined; 4 due to the complainant being ineligible to act on the child's behalf, and 2 due to concurrent criminal investigations.
14. During quarter 2, a number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including:
 - Ensuring transition processes (when a new social worker takes over a case) are discussed at the social worker's supervision meetings, including timescales for the process.
 - Reminding managers and staff that a supervision / handover meeting must take place to discuss all the cases of any social worker who is intending to leave, thereby recording vital information in preparation for when the case is re-allocated.
 - Reminding staff to share the notes of supervised contact sessions with parents in a timely manner.

Statutory Complaints: Adult Social Care Services

15. During quarter 2, 2017/18, Adult Social Care Services received 28 statutory complaints, 17% more (+4) than quarter 2, 2016/17.
16. Nearly a third of these complaints related to Older People / Physical Disabilities / Sensory Impairment (9) with Finance being the second most complained about service area (6). The most common reason for complaint was a disputed decision where a service user disagrees with an explanation or decision.
17. 25 complaints were resolved during quarter 2, 2017/18, all within their agreed timescale. Of the 25 resolved complaints: 16 were not upheld (64%), two were upheld (8%) and seven partially upheld (28%). Three were still being investigated at the time of writing this report.
18. During quarter 2, a number of actions were taken in response to complaints, including:
 - Reminding staff to obtain medical information to inform clinical decisions before making recommendations.
 - Reminding staff to seek clarification with service users and their families as to their preferred method of communication.
 - Reminding staff to raise any excessive delays in equipment provision with the Commissioning Service so it can be addressed with the provider.

Corporate Complaints

19. During quarter 2, 2017/18, we received 515 corporate complaints, 65 more than the same quarter last year. Of the 409 complaints investigated during quarter 2, almost 62% were upheld (fully or partially).
20. Further analysis has identified eight topics that collectively account for 60% of complaints.



Missed Collections

21. In line with previous reports, missed collections remains the most frequent cause of complaint across the council, although during quarter 2, 2017/18, we received 93 complaints, which is a 36% decrease (53 fewer) when compared to the same quarter last year.
22. Of the 93 complaints, 42 related to kerbside refuse and recycling, 39 to garden waste, 10 to bulky collections, 1 to trade waste and 1 to clinical waste.
23. Investigations have been completed into 86 complaints and 84% were upheld (62 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 2, 2017/18, we received 61 complaints about our staff: a slight decrease on the 64 received during the same period in 2016/17. There were four main causes of complaint.
26. Nineteen complainants witnessed our staff driving council vehicles, mainly vans / trucks (9) but also refuse wagons (5), grass cutters (4) and road sweepers (1) in a dangerous manner. Eight of the complaints concerned near misses, five were due to speeding, three involved mobile phones, one driving on a footpath and two involved tailgating. Investigations have been completed into seven complaints and six were upheld (four fully and two partially).
27. Seventeen customers felt staff behaved toward them in an aggressive or intimidating way, often using foul, obscene or insulting language. The majority (11 complaints) involved our refuse and recycling service, both kerbside collection and Household Waste Recycling Centres. Investigations have been completed into 13 complaints and eight were upheld (five fully and three partially).
28. Ten 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 nine complaints and three were upheld (two fully and one partially).
29. Two customers complained our staff were deliberately unhelpful, obstructive or unreasonable. One related to waste permits and the other to Household Waste Recycling Centres. Investigations have been completed into both complaints and both were upheld (one fully and one partially).
30. The remaining complaints included refuse and recycling staff not closing bin lids, throwing / kicking recycling boxes or starting work at inappropriate times (e.g. early morning or weekend).
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 quarter, we process in the region of 7,000 new claims and 70,000 changes 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 2, we received 49 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 all of these complaints and 53% were upheld.

33. In all cases, we refer the error or omission 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. We use any identified trends and patterns 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 2, 2017/18, we received 41 complaints from customers unhappy that there had been no action in response to their request, concern or query. This is broadly in line with the 39 received during the same period in 2016/17. We have completed investigations into 33 complaints and 48% were upheld (11 fully and five partially).
35. Analysis of the data shows that there were two main areas of complaint.
36. 11 complainants were unhappy we had not actioned their report of an enviro-crime: four related to fly-tipping, three to littering, two to an abandoned vehicle, one to dog fouling and one to graffiti. We have completed investigations into eight of these complaints and four were upheld (two fully and two partially). Every quarter we respond to around 2,000 reports of enviro-crime.
37. A further 11 complainants believed we failed to action their service request relating to grounds maintenance, mainly overgrown trees and hedges. We have completed investigations into eight of these complaints and three were fully upheld.
38. The remaining complaints included customers unhappy that we had not repaired or replaced their bin, repaired a street lighting fault, permanently removed their garden waste bin, resolved their drainage issue, carried out a highway repair or processed a refund.

Service Standards

39. We received 22 complaints from people who felt the standard of our work was inadequate. Sixteen related to the standard of work and the remaining six related to leaving the area in an unacceptable condition after we had completed the work.
40. We have completed investigations into 19 complaints and 63% were upheld (seven fully and five partially).

41. More than half of these complaints related to grass cutting (13 complaints). The remaining complaints related to the following service areas in small numbers: street lighting, street cleansing and refuse and recycling.

Damage to property

42. The basis of 16 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 a decrease on the 30 complaints received during the same period in 2016/17.
43. Nearly all of the complaints involved our frontline refuse and recycling, grounds maintenance and highways teams.
44. The most frequent causes for complaint were damage caused to grassed areas or lawns (6), cars (3) and walls, fences or paving (3). The remaining complaints related to trees, headstones and recycling bins.
45. Investigations have been completed into 13 complaints and ten were upheld (eight fully and two partially).

Bins not returned to Bin Collection Point

46. We received 14 complaints objecting that our refuse and recycling crews were not returning bins to their collection point. We have completed investigations into 12 complaints and all were fully upheld.

Other

47. The remaining 43% of corporate complaints related to a wide variety of issues in smaller volumes.

Corporate complaints subjected to independent investigation

48. During quarter 2, 2017/18, 42 complainants requested that we escalate their complaint to the next stage. We agreed it would be appropriate that 36 complaints be subject to an independent investigation by the Customer Feedback Team. We based this decision 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 declined to conduct an independent investigation, we informed the customer that their next step would be to seek advice from the Ombudsman.
49. During the same period, we completed investigations into 31 complaints. Of these, one was partially upheld, as shown in the table below:

Outcome	Complaint	Action to be taken
Partially upheld	We did not collect a bulky collection from the back garden as agreed. We did not return telephone calls from the customer who was trying to resolve the issue.	The Council apologised and returned to collect the bulky waste. The Council has also revised the customer's Bin Collection Point.

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

50. During quarter 2, 2017/18, the Ombudsman delivered decisions in relation to 21 complaints. Conclusions were reached based on details supplied by complainants and supplemented in some instances with contextual information from Council officers.
51. The 21 complaints related to a number of service areas including environmental health, licensing, revenues and benefits, adult care services and planning. Of these complaints, no further action was proposed in 16 cases. The Ombudsman upheld five complaints as detailed in the following table:

Ombudsman's final decision	Action to be taken
The Council was wrong to include the value of the joint home the complainant shares with her daughter and son-in-law in its assessment of the contributions she would need to pay if admitted to a care home.	The Council has now revised that decision, agreed to apologise, review its procedures and pay the family £500 for the distress at the prospect of having to sell their home.
The Council was not at fault when it made the complainant's wife the sole liable person for Council Tax after she moved into the complainant's rented property. The Council was at fault for not discussing the account with the complainant when the matter escalated to court action against his wife for the unpaid bill.	The Council has agreed to pay £100.
The Council was at fault because Care Connect did not have a proper process in place for accessing the property of the complainant's mother. There was a delay in contacting the emergency services and the operator placed the complainant's mother on hold without telling her why. Care Connect also failed to update the complainant's contact details.	The Council has agreed to pay the complainant £350 in recognition of the distress caused and a further £350 in recognition of the uncertainty caused. The Council has also changed some of its procedures.

Ombudsman's final decision	Action to be taken
<p>There was fault in the way the Council communicated decisions regarding changes to the care service provided to the complainant's son.</p> <p>Although the Council was entitled to decide that service provision should change, it should have discussed this significant change before implementing it.</p>	<p>The Council has agreed to pay the complainant £150 in recognition of the shock and distress caused.</p> <p>The Council will offer to meet with the complainant and his son to discuss the change to service provision and determine whether a different configuration would be more appropriate to their needs.</p>
<p>The Council assessed the social needs of the complainant's father each time he was discharged from hospital. It also considered the professional judgement of those involved with his medical care when planning his social care.</p> <p>However, there is no evidence to show the Council explained residential care charges to the complainant, who made an uninformed decision and incurred avoidable top-up fees.</p>	<p>The Council has agreed to apologise, remind officers of the importance of providing notice to families and service users about meetings and to reimburse the top up fees incurred.</p> <p>The Council has also agreed to inform the Ombudsman of the measures it has in place – or intends to put in place – to ensure service users and their families are given clear advice about social care funding to enable them to make well informed decisions.</p>

52. During quarter 1, the Ombudsman delivered two decisions relating to Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG). The Council has since implemented service improvements to prevent any future issues. All clients now receive a flowchart of the DFG process at their first visit. This flowchart sets out timescales and the service area responsible at each stage. We have made this information publically available on the Council's website. We have also reviewed all procedures and timescales within the DFG process to ensure there are no undue time delays for clients. Team leaders across the service areas, with particular focus within the Home Improvement Agency, are monitoring the impact of these improvements.

Compliments

53. 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.
54. During quarter 2, 2017/18, we received 298 compliments, 52 in relation to social care services and 246 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.
55. Customers were particularly complimentary about our frontline staff and service provision, the most common themes being standard of work and prompt service. Our

Clean and Green Team received the most compliments, almost 31% of all received, with customers appreciating our efforts to keep their local environment clean and tidy. Thirteen compliments praised the wildflower planting on roundabouts and grass verges.

- 56. Other frontline services that received customer recognition were our refuse and recycling service, both the household collection service and the Household Waste Recycling Centres, our Highway Maintenance Team, Neighbourhood Wardens and Care Connect.
- 57. Customers were also complimentary about the Durham County Record Office, praising both the staff and the service, particularly in relation to a quick response to queries, helpfulness and efficiency service provision.
- 58. Many of the compliments received were from customers who wished to express their gratitude where staff have gone the extra mile. As far as we are able, we have passed these thanks onto the individuals concerned.
- 59. A small sample of extracts are included in the table below

Customer's Comments
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.
Thank you to our bin men. They do a great job and are so friendly. They wave and speak to my children every week.
How professional the officer was in his work ethic to treating pests for resident, very polite and done a fantastic job.
Credit to the park attendant in Chester-le-Street Riverside Park. He is one of the most polite friendly young men we have met in a long time. He does his work with pride and always has a friendly chat as he does so.
Thanks to Street Cleansing for doing a fantastic job of cleaning the play area this morning. They spent a great deal of time and managed to retrieve several bin liners full of rubbish that had been discarded once again thanks for a first class job at Glenholme Park.
Customer called to thank staff for the recent repairs done on road outside her house, said workmen were great.
Thanks to the street cleaner who does a fantastic job of clearing litter along the main road (full length) through Coundon.
To thank the local grass cutter for helping her this morning when her shopping fell out of her bag - lady got off her grass-cutting machine and helped the lady up with the shopping and is very grateful and wish everyone was as nice as the DCC employee.

The officer was extremely helpful and professional, she explained the procedure to me and supported me through the whole process. Even though I was anxious and had to get in touch several times, she was helpful, professional and supportive. I would like to make express my gratitude towards this person and the rest of her team.

The family would like to thank Care Connect for their care and kindness looking after their mother.

The query was complicated but the officer made light work of this and explained fully so the customer understood exactly what was going on. The officer kept the customer informed of what she was looking at on the system and there were no long silences. The officer was very polite and professional and would like us to be aware of this member of staff positive attitude towards her work - and how she treats customers and makes them feel valued.

Feedback relating to our policies and procedures

60. Our service provision is reflected in our policies and procedures, and during quarter 2, 2017/18, we received 33 items of feedback as a direct consequence of carrying out actions in line with those policies and procedures.
61. Two key areas accounted for half of this feedback: our household waste policies and procedures (11 contacts) and our fees and charges (six contacts).
62. The most frequent cause for feedback in relation to our household waste policies and procedures (four instances) was our policy of only providing residents with an additional refuse bin if the household has six or more people permanently living there. A further three contacts related to not emptying or permanently removing bins due to contamination. Contacts relating to contamination continue to decline, 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. The remaining contacts related to procedures at our Household Waste Recycling Centres and our policy for collecting refuse and recycling bins from properties situated on private un-adopted lanes and farm tracks.
63. Six contacts related to our fees and charges, which we review annually and allow us to provide local services that might not otherwise be possible. Five of the six cited dissatisfaction with the £20 administration and delivery charge to replace a bin lost, stolen or damaged beyond repair. The remaining contact objected to the garden waste charge.
64. The remaining contacts covered a wide range of areas in small numbers including our policy that all unoccupied properties are subject to 100% council tax for the first two years, and then 150% if they remain unfurnished, care connect transportation, our pest control procedure, and our refusal to cut down healthy trees.

Suggestions

65. We believe suggestions are essential to the ongoing development and improvement of our services, and carefully consider all received. During quarter 2, 2017/18, we received 143 suggestions.
66. Many of the suggestions received related to our waste collection and disposal service. Several people suggested simplifying the process for issuing waste permits for use at our Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) to reduce application and waiting times, as well as increasing the number customers can request in each application. We are currently developing a new project to look at the options around digitising waste permits.
67. Two residents suggested that we increase the number of recycling points, one countywide and one within Durham City. We have 12 fixed HWRCs geographically spread across the county, a mobile service in Weardale and around 45 bring sites located around the county including bottle and textile banks. We have trialled street recycling in the past but experienced very high levels of contamination as people used them more as general litter bins so unfortunately the bins were removed.
68. One customer suggested we updated the Bin It Right information, as it was unclear. We are about to refresh the campaign and this suggestion will be included within the review. Another suggestion was for us to provide stickers for refuse and recycling bins so we can return them to their rightful owner if stolen. We do encourage residents to mark their own bins with their house number / street name as a way to identify their bins after collection. Those residents who have done this have found it to be successful.
69. Another resident suggested using the wheeled bins for glass collection rather than recycling boxes as these tend to disappear in windy conditions. However, this is not viable as our wheeled bins are 240 litres in size and if filled with glass, they would be too heavy for the lifting mechanism on our vehicles.
70. Some customers would like us to introduce a collection and recycling service for food waste from homes. We are currently reviewing whether the collection of segregated food waste is feasible and would be cost effective within the County. We are working on this project with a national organisation called WRAP (Waste Resources Action Programme) which is the national advisory body on waste and recycling and is providing the funding for this research.
71. Another waste suggestion was to educate schoolchildren about waste recycling and disposal through schools. During 2017, we delivered 86 recycling talks in the community and worked with 45 schools. We also have an open offer to schools, which we advertise on the extranet system, for waste and recycling assemblies where we run interactive sessions. There is an online resource for teachers that includes lesson plans, worksheets and resources based around the national curriculum, which will allow teachers to deliver their recycling messages in the classroom. In addition, we offer advice and guidance

directly to the schools about their internal waste management and recycling practices. Recycling collection services are also available for schools to take up if they wish.

72. Suggestions are frequently received which propose changes to our road system. However, when looked at in the context of countywide traffic flows, many would have knock on effects to the traffic flows elsewhere if they were to be implemented. During quarter 2, we received five suggestions that involved installing traffic lights or traffic calming measures.
73. Within the Revenues and Benefits service, one customer suggested that we round up Council Tax payments for those who can afford slightly more in order to support council services that might otherwise be cut. However, as Council Tax is governed by legislation, it is not possible to implement this suggestion.
74. Another customer suggested that letters refusing to back date second adult rebates should be tailored toward the recipient rather than being generic. The letters we issue must comply with complex housing benefit legislation and contain full details of the regulations under which we made the decision. We make decisions on an individual basis and the letters provide detailed reasons for refusal. We regularly review the content of letters to ensure they continue to comply with legislation and remain relevant.
75. We received a suggestion in relation to the annual review of student properties, which allows the Awards Team to apply the relevant discounts and exemptions to properties solely occupied by students. We issue initial requests for information to property owners in June and reminders in July and again in August. The suggestion was that as it is not always possible to confirm student ID before the letting begins in July, we issue the first reminder too early and could save resources by only issuing at the later dates. We will implement this suggestion for future student reviews.
76. We have also updated our web form so customers can report nuisance bonfires causing public health issues following a suggestion from a member of the public.