

Cabinet Meeting		Agenda Item: 5
Meeting Date	23 August 2016	
Report Title	Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report 2015/16	
Portfolio Holder	Cllr Andrew Bowles, Leader	
SMT Lead	Dave Thomas, Head of Commissioning & Customer Contact	
Head of Service	Dave Thomas, Head of Commissioning & Customer Contact	
Lead Officer	Carol Sargeant, Customer Service Manager	
Key Decision	No	
Classification	Open	
Forward Plan	Reference number:	
Recommendations	1. Members are asked to note the report	

1. Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report presents the annual summary of complaints, compliments and comments received by Swale Borough Council (SBC) during the year from April 2015 to March 2016.

2. Background

- 2.1 This annual report summarises the Complaints, Compliments and Comments (CCC) received by the Council during the ensuing year. Swale's corporate complaints system comprises the following process:
- (i) an initial request for service or enquiry should be made to the service area it relates to in the first instance. A request or enquiry may become a complaint if the council fails to meet our service standards;
 - (ii) Stage 1: this is whereby the complainant is not satisfied with the response (or lack of response) from the service area or the complaint relates to a member of staff. Stage 1 complaints will be responded to within 10 working days by a manager or Head of Service;
 - (iii) Stage 2: the Chief Executive who will investigate and respond direct to the complainant within 10 working days. If the timeframe cannot be met the complainant will be notified and kept informed of progress; and
 - (iv) Local Government Ombudsman: if after following our complaints process customers are still unhappy, they can contact the Local Government Ombudsman, an independent service set up by the Government to investigate complaints about council matters. The Ombudsman will not usually investigate most complaints until they have been through the Council's complaint process.

- 2.2 The current CCC system, which has now been in operation for five full years, is now well established throughout the organisation. It has contributed to a much more robust and transparent approach to the management of CCC, with greater ease of access to the system for our customers.
- 2.3 The system provides monitoring, including weekly summaries to Heads of Service, so we can be assured that all complaints are logged, tracked, and responded to, as well as improved reporting facilities so we can ensure that our response times are meeting the standards we have set and learn from feedback.
- 2.4 The CCC process:
- (i) raises the profile of the importance of CCC to Swale as a customer-centric organisation through managers' meetings, all staff briefings, and individual team meetings;
 - (ii) carries out surveys of all customers who have raised a formal complaint in order to gain feedback from them and seek to improve the process accordingly;
 - (iii) publishes performance reports on the intranet and provide quarterly reports on complaints at service level, which is used to inform the quarterly performance report to the Strategic Management Team; and
 - (iv) publishes this annual report in order to provide accountability and transparency to residents and service users.

Customer Service Excellence

- 2.5 During the past year, the Customer Service Centre, Environment Response Team, Housing Services, and Revenues & Benefits all gained a renewal of the externally verified Customer Service Excellence (CSE) assessment. However, Planning Services did not regain the accreditation. The aim is for Planning Services to undertake a further CSE assessment again in 12 to 15 months, having designed, implemented and evaluated the strategies to support them in their journey.
- 2.6 One of the components of the CSE accreditation process is to examine the complaints procedures within an organisation. Again, during this year's assessments, Swale's CCC system was cited as an example of good practice.
- 2.7 We have continued to make further efforts to make the system more accessible to our customers. There is an established clear link to our complaints procedure on our website at <http://www.swale.gov.uk/comment-complain-and-feedback/>; and we have small cards (credit card sized) on display in reception areas encouraging compliments, complaints and feedback. On the reverse of the card is a QR code¹ which when used takes the user direct to the CCC web page.

¹ A QR Code is a machine-readable code consisting of an array of black and white squares, typically used for storing URLs or other information for reading by the camera on a smartphone.

Complaints Received

2.8 The total number of CCCs received during 2015/16 was 927 compared with 1,104 in 2014/15, a decrease of 16%. The number of complaints decreased by 19%, compliments by 26%, and compliments by 2%. It should be noted that changes to planning and the introduction of food waste contributed to the increase in comments and complaints during 2014/15.

Category	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	Trend against previous year
Complaints received	358	441	356	-19%
Compliments received	344	344	337	-2%
Comments received	264	319	234	-26%
Total	966	1,104	927	-16%

2.9 Further details by service areas for Complaints are on Appendix I.

2.10 During 2015/16, a total of 22 complaints (6%) were escalated to Stage Two (Chief Executive review).

Responding to Complaints

2.11 The CCC system requires that a response to complaints be made (whether justified or otherwise) within a corporate standard of 10 working days. The target for 2015/16 was increased to 90%, which was met - during 2015/16, 94% of complaints, whether or not justified, were responded to within the corporate standard, an improvement on 2014/15.

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Percentage of complaints responded to within 10 working days	89%	89%	94%
Target	85%	87.5%	90%

2.12 The Customer Service Manager regularly monitors performance standards, both corporately and in local areas, and has dialogue with the respective Heads of Service to address any performance issues, which include administrative efficiency improvements as well as seasonal or service-related issues which will inevitably cause occasional peaks in levels of complaints.

Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Complaints

2.13 This year's LGO's Annual Report for Swale for 2015/6 is again disappointing in its lack of detail, which does not allow comparison with data for previous years. The data we have provided below is from a collation of the statistics

from the LGO report, as well as information that we collate from within our own complaints process and CCC system.

- 2.14 The figures from the LGO and our own CC system do not consistently match. Therefore the information provided is based upon the actual correspondence received by the Chief Executive of Swale Borough Council.
- 2.15 In total, the annual data received from the LGO states that in 2015/16 the LGO received 17,975 complaint enquiries against 365 authorities, an average of over 49 per authority. For Swale BC the LGO received 22 enquiries and made 23 decisions (we presume this includes one carried over from 2014/15).
- 2.16 In terms of outcomes, the LGO decisions included 11 referred back for local resolution, of which one was received and reviewed by SBC. Two were investigated by the LGO in the period, and only one complaint upheld out of the 23 decisions made.
- 2.17 The outcomes for the 23 complaints that were formally received by the LGO are set out in the table below.

Ombudsman Action	2014/15	2015/16
Closed after initial enquiry	7	8
Not upheld	2	1
Referred back for local resolution	1	11
Incomplete/invalid	0	2
Upheld	2	1
Total	12	23

- 2.18 The complaint that was upheld related to the Housing Options Service. The Ombudsman found evidence of fault by the Council because it failed to fully explain its decision to the customer. As a result of the investigation the Council sent a detailed decision letter to the complainant.

Feedback on the complaints system

- 2.19 During 2015/16 courtesy telephone calls by Customer Service have been attempted to all complainants. This approach allows a more qualitative discussion to take place, and as such more positive feedback is being received than various methods that have previously been used to seek feedback from complainants. We have learnt that customers still find it difficult to separate the outcome of the complaint (which may not be to their satisfaction), from the way in which their complaint was handled.
- 2.20 Some examples of customers comments from the courtesy calls include:
- (i) "I really appreciate this call and it has made me feel better about your procedures";

- (ii) “I wasn’t told what the complaints procedure involved or made aware of a second stage that I could proceed to”;
- (iii) “The issue has been resolved but I shouldn’t have had to complain in first instance”; and
- (iv) “I’m very happy with the way my complaint was dealt with”.

Reviews and improvements

2.21 One aspect of effective complaint handling is to inform service improvements. Whilst we need to continue to improve the capturing of examples where this has happened, some examples from 2015/16 are as follows:

- (i) contracts have altered schedules accordingly to ensure that freighters are able to access when less vehicles are prevalent and avoiding rush hours;
- (ii) Housing Options are reviewing the wording of their Housing Policy as the wording appears to be ambiguous and confusing for some applicants;
- (iii) Planning Services have made changes to the validation process of major applications; and
- (iv) we have adopted a revised Complaints Policy, and a new Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Complaints Policy which are both published on Swale Borough Council website.

Summary

2.22 In summary, therefore, of the 356 complaints received by Swale Borough Council during 2015/16, 22 (6%) were escalated to the Chief Executive (stage 2), and four (1%) ultimately required responses to the Ombudsman, with only one upheld.

Categories	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Total complaints	358	441	356
Justified complaints*	195	279	202
Non-justified complaints*	156	141	150
Partially justified	4	21	2
Justification not stated	3	0	2
Stage 2 (Chief Executive)	29	18	22
Ombudsman	10	12	4

*Definitions used:

Justified: where it is deemed that the relevant process/procedure has not been followed.

Unjustified: where it is deemed that the relevant process/procedure has been followed.

It should be noted that this criteria is open to the interpretation of the officer and their opinion at the time of completing the complaint.

3 Proposals

3.1 Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

4. Alternatives

4.1 None.

5. Consultation

5.1 There has been no formal consultation relating to this report, as it is a summary of statistics for the year in question. However, the Complaints, Compliments and Comments system is by definition a process by which customers are able to deliver feedback on the current provision of services.

6. Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	Dealing well with Complaints, Compliments and Comments is core to the Corporate Plan priority of being 'A council to be proud of'.
Financial, Resource and Property	None.
Legal and Statutory	None.
Crime and Disorder	None.
Sustainability	None.
Health and wellbeing	None.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	None.
Equality and Diversity	Responding to complaints in a positive and effective manner demonstrates the Council's commitment to ensuring that access to Council services is available to all.

7. Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Complaints by Service Area 2015/16

- Appendix II: Local Government Ombudsman's Summary Review of Swale Borough Council 2015/16

8. Background Papers

8.1 None.

Complaints by Service Area 2015/16

Service Area	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Total 2015/16	Total 2014/15	Responded within 10 working days 2015/16		Responded within 10 working days 2014/15	
							No.	%	No.	%
Chief Executive	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Commercial	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	100%	-	-
Communications	0	0	0	0	0	2	-	-	2	100%
Community Safety	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Contracts (incl.Waste & Street Scene)	37	34	36	39	146	209	144	99%	189	90%
CSC	1	0	0	1	2	2	2	100%	2	100%
Cultural Services	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Democratic Services (Electoral)	5	1	0	0	6	2	5	83%	1	50%
Planning & Development	11	11	12	16	50	75	45	90%	58	77%
Economy & Regeneration	0	0	2	0	2	0	2	100%	-	-
Engineering	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	100%	-	-
ERT	5	11	3	12	31	22	30	97%	17	77%
Grants	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	0	0%
Hackney Carriages	0	0	1	0	1	2	1	100%	1	50%
Housing	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Housing Environmental	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	100%	1	100%
Housing Options	2	4	2	3	11	27	10	91%	25	93%
ICT	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Legal	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Open Spaces	3	6	0	2	11	9	9	82%	7	78%
Parking	19	12	10	8	49	41	43	88%	40	98%
Pollution	1	2	0	0	3	2	2	67%	0	0%
Regeneration	0	2	0	0	2	0	1	50%	-	-
Revenues & Benefits	11	17	6	4	38	39	36	95%	36	92%
Staying Put	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	100%	1	100%

Local Authority Report: Swale Borough Council
For the Period Ending: 31/03/2016

For further information on how to interpret our statistics, please visit our website:
<http://www.lgo.org.uk/information-centre/reports/annual-review-reports/interpreting-local-authority-statistics>

Complaints and enquiries received

Adult Care Services	Benefits and Tax	Corporate and Other Services	Education and Children's Services	Environment Services	Highways and Transport	Housing	Planning and Development	Other	Total
0	0	1	0	5	2	3	10	1	22

Decisions made

				Detailed Investigations			
Incomplete or Invalid	Advice Given	Referred back for Local Resolution	Closed After Initial Enquiries	Not Upheld	Upheld	Uphold Rate	Total
2	0	11	8	1	1	50%	23

Notes

Our uphold rate is calculated in relation to the total number of detailed investigations.

The number of remedied complaints may not equal the number of upheld complaints. This is because, while we may uphold a complaint because we find fault, we may not always find grounds to say that fault caused injustice that ought to be remedied.

The compliance rate is the proportion of remedied complaints where our recommendations are believed to have been implemented.

Complaints Remedied

by LGO	Satisfactorily by Authority before LGO Involvement	Compliance Rate
1	0	100%

