

ITEM 10

Annual Review - Complaints

Report of the Chief Executive

(Portfolio: Corporate)

Recommended:

1. That the annual report on complaints handling be noted.

SUMMARY:

- The Chief Executive and Services together dealt with 267 complaints under the Council's formal procedure, in the year 2014/15
- The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) made preliminary enquiries about 5 complaints relating to TVBC for the year ended 31 March 2015.

1 Background

To facilitate the periodic monitoring of complaints and review by this Committee each year, Services are required to prepare an annual summary of complaints dealt with under the Council's formalised procedure (the year runs from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015).

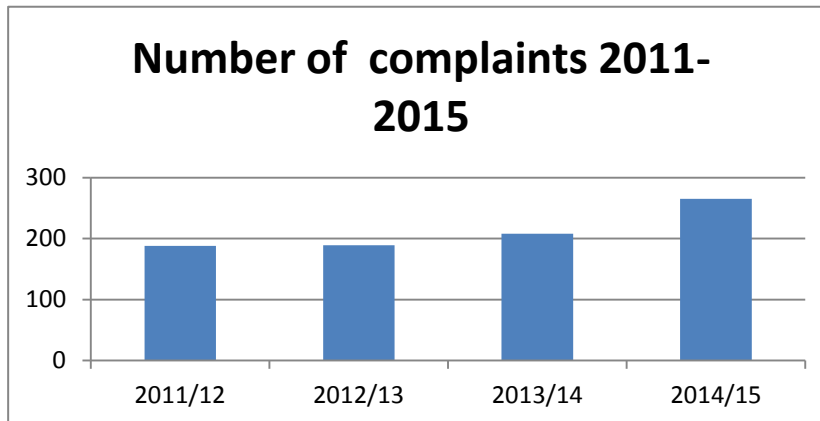
- 1.1 A complaint is defined within the Council as: "*an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, action or lack of action by the Council, or its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers.*"

Complaints recorded under the formal procedure (and dealt with in this summary report) do not include those 'first time' representations which were effectively requests for a service and dealt with as such. Accordingly, a new report of a missed bin, or a broken swing, for example, would not be registered and dealt with as a complaint, but as a request for action. Of course, in the event that we failed to respond to the 'request' appropriately, then that may generate a complaint.

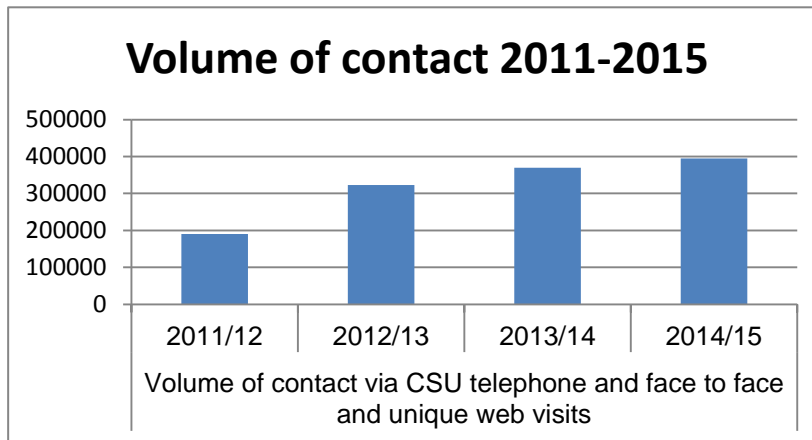
2 Complaints 2014/15

- 2.1 In the year 2014/15 there were 267 service level complaints (those dealt with by more than one service at the same time, and those cases where multiple people complained about the same subject, are counted as one complaint). From these 267 complaints 13 were escalated to the Chief Executive and 5 were the subject of LGO enquiries.

This year sees a small rise in the number of complaints received, an increase of 57 from the previous year (208 in 2013/14).



Customer Service unit figures for the year indicate that they received over 140,000 telephone calls and more than 20,000 face to face contacts. In addition to this the website received just over 235,000 unique visitors for 2014/15. All of these figures represent a rise in contacts for 2014/15 from the previous year: 370,000 in 2013/14 to 395,000 in 2014/15. This is a rise of 25,000 contacts and can be attributed to the growth in population in the borough, as well as the increasing ease of contacting the council electronically and therefore at times to suit the customer.



The number of complaints continues to account for significantly less than 1% of overall transactions, and falls well within accepted customer service industry standards.

Stage of complaints process	Number of complaints
Service level	267
Chief Executive escalations	13 (from the 267 above)
Members' Panel	0
Local Government Ombudsman	5 (from the 267 above)

- 2.2 The annual complaints logs contain personal information that should not be published. This corresponds with the Ombudsman’s view that it is neither necessary, nor desirable, for the Council to make such details public. As a result the information provided in this report is largely statistical in nature. Councillors should refer to the Complaints and Communications Officer if they require more details about a specific case.
- 2.3 The number of complaints and compliments received can be broken down across the services as follows:

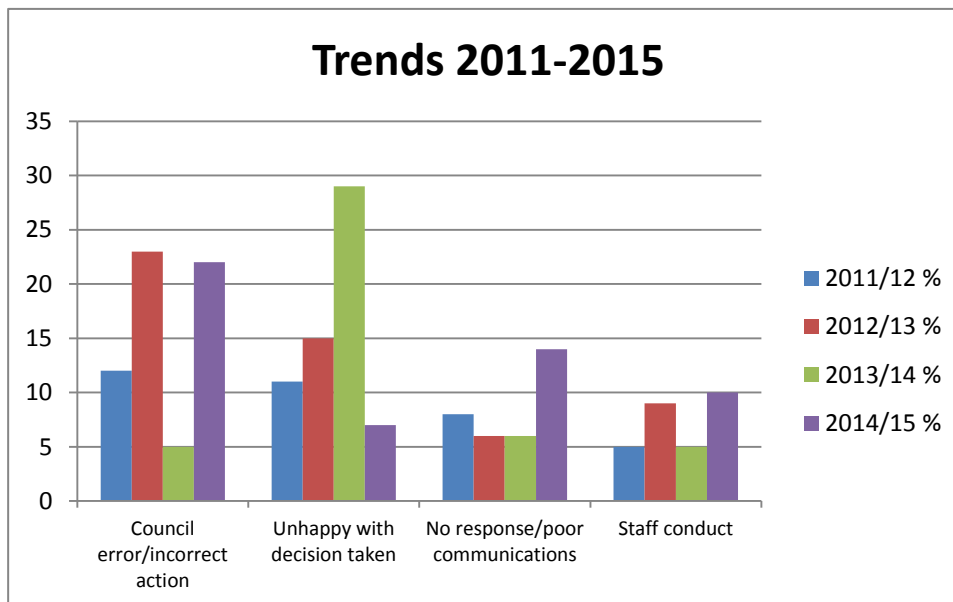
Service	Number of complaints	As a % overall	Compliments
Communities & Leisure	7	3	65
Environmental Services	173	65	150
Estates & Economic Development	2	1	Not recorded
Housing & Environmental Health	14	5	65
Legal & Democratic	4	1	Not recorded
Planning & Building	20	7	Not recorded
Planning Policy & Transport	23	9	41
Revenues (incl CSU)	24	9	30
CEX escalations from the 267 service level complaints	13	5	n/a

It should be noted that the number of complaints per service does not necessarily provide a direct correlation with the standard of customer service provided, and that these overall results cannot be treated in isolation.

Each of these service results are heavily influenced by the type of business transacted by that service, for example, the number of customer facing transactions carried out, the public profile of the actions carried out by that service, and whether the customer has alternative formal routes for redress or appeal.

- 2.4 An analysis of the root cause of complaints received has shown that the majority of complaints can be categorised into four main types:

Type of complaint	Percentage
Unhappy with decision taken by Council	7
Staff conduct	10
No response received/poor communication	14
Council error/incorrect action	22



There are no clear trends identifiable for any of the four recorded categories. Results for the past four years show that there is a variance across all types of complaints received.

2.5 Learning points

The volume of complaints is not always as important as the nature and content of the complaint received. Each complaint can be an opportunity to make changes or service improvements on a small or greater scale. Sometime the smallest change can result in the greatest increase in customer satisfaction. Likewise, a complaint is often of crucial importance to an individual and may require a high investment in terms of the time taken to resolve it, but might only achieve a small return in terms of improvements in the wider environment.

A complaint is not only valuable in terms of service improvements, but also in terms of public relations and general public perception of, and satisfaction with, the organisation.

Examples of some of the learning points and improvements made as a result of complaints during 2014/15 include:

- Complaints examples used as training in team meetings
- A review of how correspondence/contact is tracked and logged as a business process within a service area
- One to one training carried out to improve service levels as a result of a complaint
- Hard copies of large development plans in the south of the borough will now automatically be held in Romsey CSU, rather than on request only
- Procedure for council tax discount review amended, and associated correspondence that is sent with the revised bill
- Changes made to RingGo booking system to allow customers to book from 0500 daily
- Changes to checks made prior to issuing S106 invoices
- Amendments made to website to provide more information about the role of Community Wardens

Annexes 2-10 give further information about specific learning points within individual services.

2.6 Time taken to respond

The Council's service standard is to respond in full to a complaint within 10 working days of receipt, or if this is not possible within that time (for example, because of the complexity of the complaint; the number of third parties involved or awaiting additional information), a holding response is sent to the customer. Against that target, the overall average length of time taken to respond to the customer at service level was 6 days. No services exceeded the 10 day average response time.

When a complaint is escalated to stage 2, the Chief Executive has 15 days to respond. Against that target, the overall average length of time taken to respond to the customer was 12 days.

2.7 Unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants.

There are currently no complainants determined as vexatious, and no new vexatious complainants have been determined during 2014/15.

3 The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

3.1 Since 2012 the LGO has undergone a series of organisational and procedural changes. New ways of working have been phased in over the past three years, and the terminology used to describe decisions has changed. The annual letter from the Ombudsman is attached as annex 1.

The new Government has committed to a review of all public service Ombudsmen during their term, including the possibility of merging them into one body. The LGO is part of that review, so may be subject to changes in the future.

3.2 During the year 2014/15 5 initial complaint enquiries were received from the LGO. None of these were taken forward as a formal investigation necessitating a report, however 2 of the enquiries resulted in findings of maladministration – one causing injustice and one without injustice. The Council made representations to the Ombudsman challenging the severity of the terminology used, as both faults identified were minor. This is not accurately reflected in the terminology of 'maladministration'. The Council asked the LGO to review the matter. The Ombudsman acknowledged the point made, but advised that the categories available to them are restricted and there is no leeway. The results are shown below:

Date	Subject Matter	Action Taken	LGO outcome
30-Jun-2014	Complaint about issues relating to an overhanging tree on the boundary of complainant's park home	Provided clarification as to issues raised that fall outside of the remit of the council and clarification as to why no action is appropriate for issues that fall within the remit of the council.	<p>Decision: Maladministration with injustice (no report)</p> <p>Learning point: LGO asked the council to commission a Council tree report rather than relying on one from a third party – Council complied and findings and outcome of the matter remained the same.</p>
29-Sep-2014	Homelessness complaint – long running complaint going back several years and continuing after complainant was housed.	Provided information and case history relating to assessment of housing need and homelessness issues.	<p>Decision: Maladministration with no injustice (no report)</p> <p>Maladministration found because the Council did not have a record of a visit that the complainant claimed was made, but that the Council disputes occurred. The LGO found on balance in favour of the complainant's word. This would not have affected the outcome of the situation, therefore no injustice was found.</p>
12-Dec-2014	Complainant wishes a reassessment of benefit over the past 12 months and is unhappy that the council cannot take this step. Long running complaint since 2011 and has previously been through a Benefits review and the LGO	Ombudsman made a preliminary enquiry. Provided them with explanation and guidelines and regulations and what complainant can do to assist his claim.	<p>Decision: Not upheld – No maladministration</p>

02-Mar-2015	Complaint about dispute over council tax arrears	Ombudsman made enquiries and wrote to customer to advise they will not pursue.	Decision: not to investigate
11-Mar-2015	Complaint about Council's refusal to award discretionary housing payment	Ombudsman decided that there was insufficient evidence of fault to warrant an investigation.	Decision: not to investigate

4 Other matters

- 4.1 The reporting of complaints is embedded in the Council's performance management process, giving further opportunity for issues to be raised throughout the year, and for wider corporate trends to be identified should they arise.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Complaints at service level have remained largely static over the past three years, with the largest increase recorded in 2014/15. When compared to the rise in the number of contacts (25,000) made with the council, this rise is small. The number of complaints escalated to the Chief Executive has remained relatively low, with the number of complaints escalated to the LGO also remaining in single figures.
- 5.2 Electronic 'chatter' and complaints raised via alternative technologies such as Twitter and Facebook have been monitored by the Communications Team over the past two years, and will continue to be so, allowing us to continually assess whether more formal reporting constructs need to be put in place for the future. Currently the number of complaints and negative feedback remains very low so no procedural change is required. CSU respond to Twitter enquiries and the Communications Team monitor Facebook messages.
- 5.3 The consistency of complaints reporting, in conjunction with the feedback received from the LGO for 2014/15, suggests that the complaints process continues to work effectively; although obviously there is never room for complacency.
- 5.4 The Committee is requested to consider the annual complaints report for 2014/15, and to endorse the corporate complaints procedure.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
<u>Confidentiality</u> It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	10		
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File Ref:			
Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Date:	22 July 2015