

ITEM 9

Complaints Handling

Report of the Chief Executive (Portfolio: Corporate)

Recommended:

That the annual report on complaints handling be noted.

SUMMARY:

- The Chief Executive and Services together dealt with 260 complaints under the Council's formal procedure, in the year 2015/16.
- The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) made preliminary enquiries about 2 complaints relating to TVBC and began an investigation into one of these for the year ended 31 March 2016.

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 2015 to 31 March 2016).

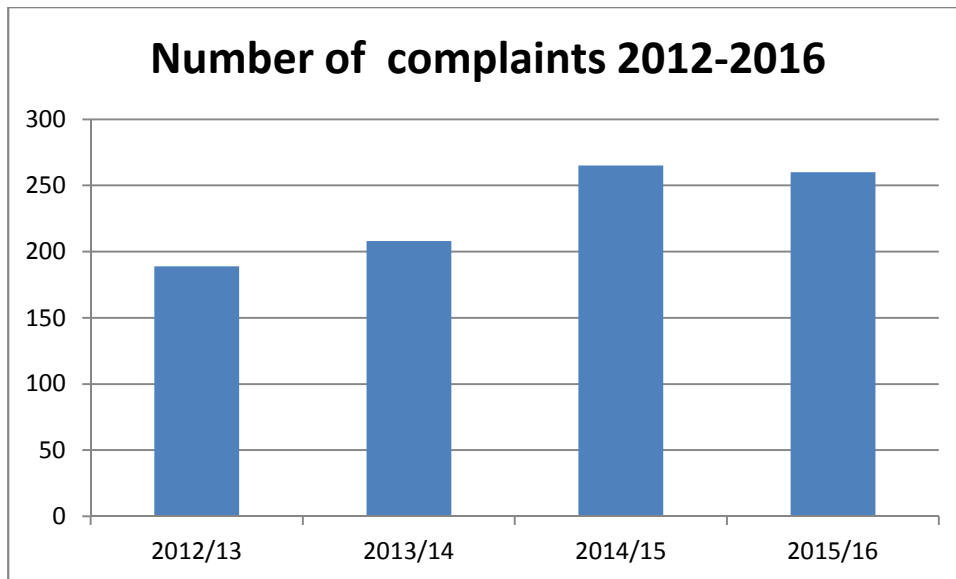
- 1.1 A complaint is defined within the Council as: *"an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, action or lack of action by the Council, or its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers."*

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.

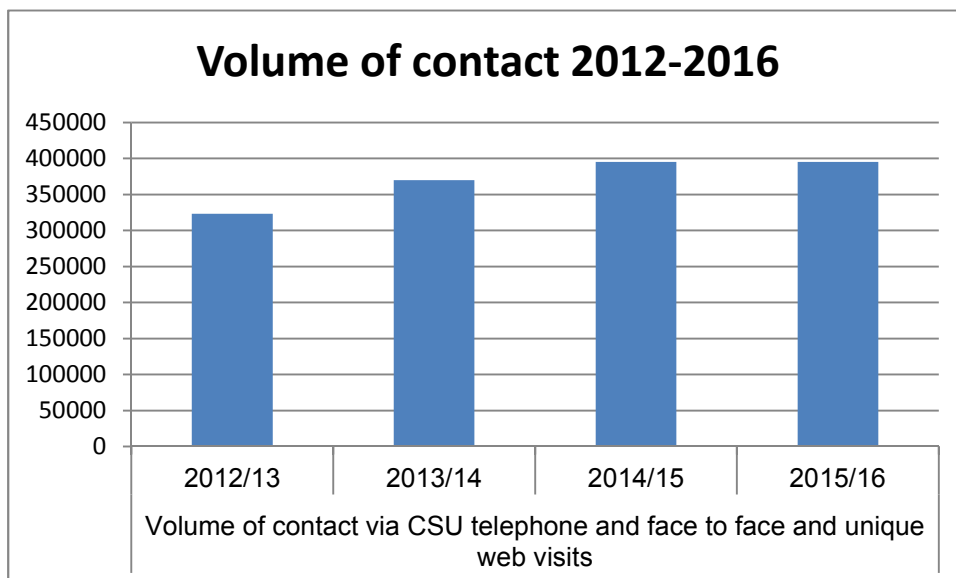
2 Complaints 2015/16

- 2.1 In the year 2015/16 there were 260 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 260 complaints 8 were escalated to the Chief Executive and 2 were the subject of LGO enquiries.

This year sees a small decline in the number of complaints received, a decrease of 7 from the previous year (267 in 2014/15).



Customer Service unit figures for the year indicate that they received over 124,000 telephone calls and just over 20,000 face to face contacts. In addition to this the website received just over 237,000 unique visitors for 2015/16. The number of telephone contacts has significantly decreased from 140,000 in 2014/15. We are also expecting the number of face to face contacts to decrease, due to the new self serve processes being put in place. This is part of the current channel shift that is happening, with customers moving toward contacting the council electronically. Overall, the total number of contacts for 2015/16 has reduced from the previous year: 395,000 in 2014/15 to 381,000 in 2015/16.



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	260
Chief Executive escalations	8 (from the 260 above)
Members' Panel	0
Local Government Ombudsman	2 (from the 260 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:

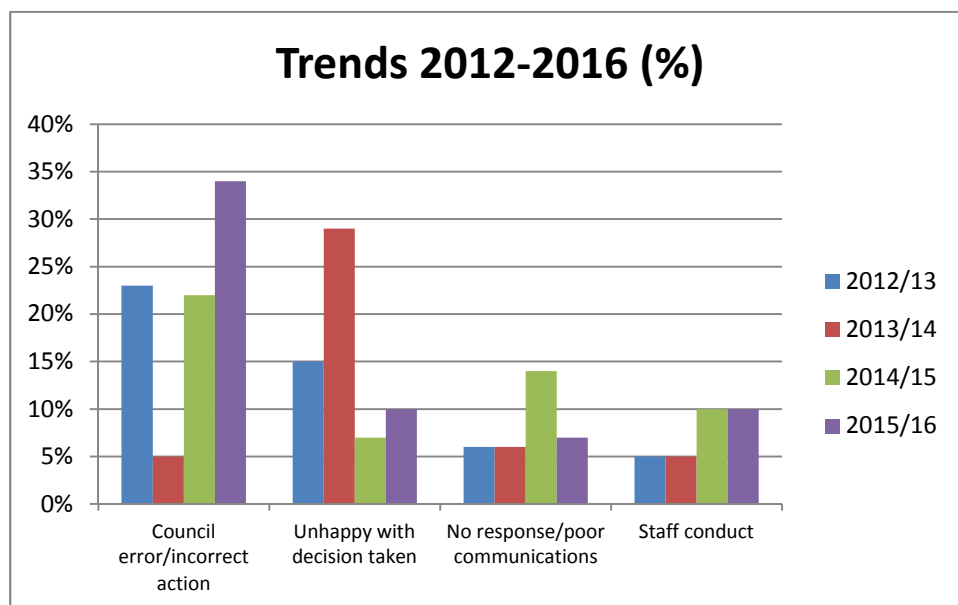
Service	Number of complaints	As a % overall	Compliments
Communities & Leisure	10	3.8	24
Environmental Services	144	55.5	139
Housing & Environmental Health	11	4.2	8
Planning & Building	33	12.6	Not recorded
Planning Policy & Transport	21	8.1	34
Revenues (incl CSU)	32	12.3	17
Cross Service	1	0.4	n/a
CEX escalations from the 260 service level complaints	8	3.1	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	10
Staff conduct	10
No response received/poor communication	7
Council error/incorrect action	34



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.

Sometimes 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 2015/16 include:

- Complaints examples used as training in team meetings.
- One to one training carried out to improve service levels as a result of a complaint.
- As a learning point from one complaint received, a review will be completed of The Lights Theatre box office procedures on sending out tickets to customers.
- A complaint was received that resulted in a review of external pre-enforcement agent procedures to ensure notices are issued correctly.

Annexes 1-7 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 7 days. Two complaints 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 14 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 2015/16.

3 The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

- 3.1 The Local Government Ombudsman produces an annual letter which is attached as annex 1. Since 2012 the LGO has undergone a series of organisational and procedural changes and new ways of working have been phased in over the past two years.

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. It is anticipated that draft legislation will be produced detailing the creation of a single ombudsman for public services in England, and therefore the LGO may be subject to changes in the future.

- 3.2 During the year 2015/16 two initial complaint enquiries were received from the LGO. One of these enquiries was taken forward as a formal investigation which was not completed within this financial year. The outcome of this investigation will be noted in the 2016/17 annual complaints report. The enquiries are shown below:

Date	Subject Matter	Action Taken	LGO outcome
18-Jan-16	Four formal complaints submitted by property owners affected by commercial activity. Concerns were raised regarding lack of response to previous letter. This was a historically complex case with letters previously sent to HoS and responded to.	<p>Apology for delay in response, apology for administrative error and explanation how they have sought legal advice to rectify the situation. The Council decided to serve a Discontinuance Notice in this case in order to try and impose the condition in question.</p> <p>Explanation given to LGO that the referral is premature and the next stage would be to escalate this to the Chief Executive. However the Chief Executive believes that at this current moment in time, there is little to add that would influence the current status of this complaint, whilst waiting for the Discontinuance Notice to be served.</p> <p>NOTE: The Discontinuance Notice was issued and agreed by the Secretary of State. The neighbour was notified and they thanked the Council for this action.</p>	Decision: LGO decision to not investigate because no worthwhile outcome could be achieved at present. Complaint closed.
23-Dec-2015	Complaint regarding lawn maintenance and a footpath installed.	CEX response letter clarifying process of putting in pathway, and confirmation that CEX investigation into complaint showed no inappropriate or unprofessional conduct.	Decision: Investigation was not completed within 2015/16.

Date	Subject Matter	Action Taken	LGO outcome
	Complainant believed footpath was put in without consent and Council Officer showed unprofessional behaviour.	This was escalated to the LGO. Letter received notifying of investigation on 24 February 2016 .	

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

Complaints at service level have remained largely static over the past three years, with a slight decline in complaints recorded in 2015/16. The number of complaints escalated to the Chief Executive has decreased and remains low, with the number of complaints escalated to the LGO also decreasing and remaining in single figures.

- 5.1 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 needs 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.
- 5.2 The consistency of complaints reporting suggests that the complaints process continues to work effectively; although obviously there is never room for complacency.
- 5.3 The Committee is requested to consider the annual complaints report for 2015/16, and to endorse the corporate complaints procedure.

Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)

Confidentiality

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:	8		
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Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Date:	3 August 2016