



Audit & Governance Committee
26 September 2016

Annual Complaints Performance Report

Purpose of the report:

To give the Audit & Governance Committee an overview of the Council's performance in relation to complaint handling in 2015/16 and how feedback from customers has been used to improve services.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Audit & Governance Committee note the Council's complaint handling performance in 2015/16 and how feedback from customers has been used to improve services.

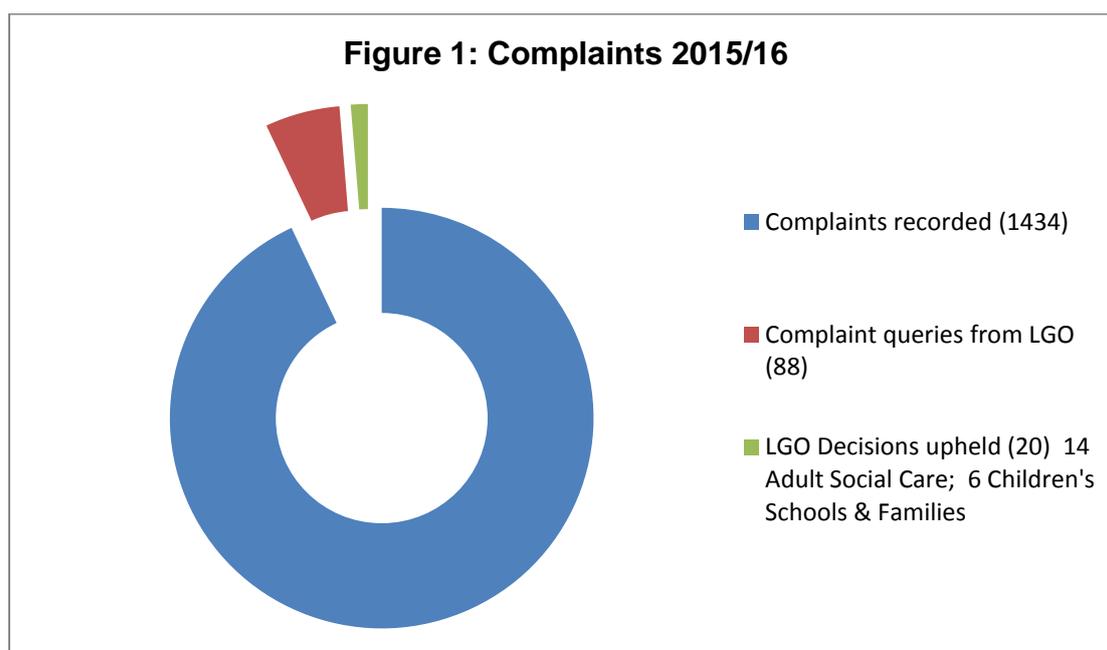
Introduction:

1. The Council recognises that effective complaint handling is critical to delivering good customer service and in keeping the Council's Customer Promise. As well as putting things right for the customer, every complaint presents a potential opportunity to learn and improve.
2. Where fault is found Corrective Action Plans (CAPs) / improvement actions are put in place to resolve the complaint for the customer and improve service. Specific examples are highlighted later in this report.
3. Even if a complaint is not upheld, there is always the opportunity to learn about why the customer has complained and a need to understand their motives and feelings.
4. There are different statutory procedures for dealing with complaints about children's and adults' social work services. Adult Social Care and Children, Schools and Families produce separate annual reports where more detailed information and analysis about the types of complaints received about these services, outcomes and improvement actions can be found.

5. Schools and Learning have other routes that parents are expected to take for resolution of certain types of dispute; such as Special Educational Needs (SEN) tribunals and School Transport appeals panels.
6. The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) is the final point for complaints about councils and some other organisations providing local public services. Customers can refer their complaint to the LGO for independent investigation if they remain unhappy, normally once they have completed the Council's complaints procedure.
7. It is important to capture a balanced view of services and to recognise and learn from good service which is why compliments and comments received by customers are also recorded.

Complaint categories and performance in 2015/16:

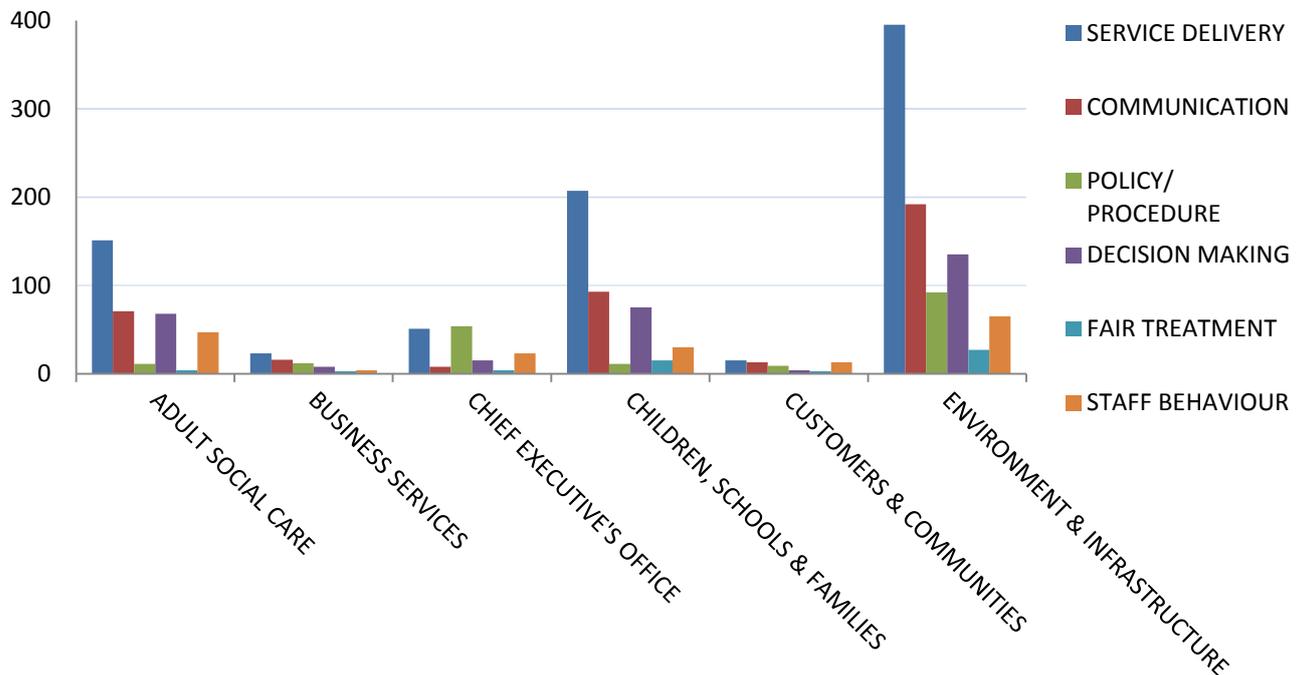
8. During the year 2015/16, Surrey County Council received 1434 complaints, a 6% decrease from the previous year. This represents just 1.3 complaints per 1000 of Surrey's population.
9. 20 complaints were upheld by the LGO following independent investigation. This represents only 1.4% of the total number of complaints received. This suggests that, in the main, complaints are being handled well and that services are correctly following policies and procedures and providing explanations to customers where preferred outcomes cannot be delivered.



10. Given the significant budget pressures facing the public sector and the need to meet this challenge by changing how services are delivered, it is interesting to note that complaints to Surrey County Council decreased in 2015/16 rather than increased as might have been expected.

11. Every complaint is assigned one or more categories which describe the nature of the complaint. Complaints by Directorate and the assigned categories are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Complaints by service and categories in 2015/16



Complaint Trends & Performance

13. A breakdown of complaints received and response times per service compared to 2014/15 can be found in the Annex 1 to this report. The following was noted:
- 6% decrease in total number of complaints;
 - fewer complaints received about Environment & Infrastructure, Customers & Communities, Children's Social Care and Chief Executive's office;
 - similar numbers of complaints received about Adult Social Care; and
 - complaints about Schools & Learning significantly increased when compared to the previous 12 months. Initial analysis of the data shows that, as anticipated, the substantive concerns relate to the change from SEN Statement to Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP).
14. Not unsurprisingly given the high demand on Surrey's roads with around 66% more traffic than the national average on 'A' roads, Environment & Infrastructure continued to receive the highest number of complaints. It should though be highlighted that there was a 15% decrease from 2014/15, reflecting the improvement work Surrey Highways has been undertaking through the Customer Service Excellence programme.

15. The main subjects of complaint for Environment & Infrastructure in 2015/16 were:
- Lack of contact
 - Resurfacing
 - Works (pavements, traffic-calming)
 - Vegetation
 - Road works
 - Flooding
 - Poor utility works
 - Potholes
 - Parking
16. Despite the decrease in the total number of complaints, response times dropped across all services with the exception of Business Services and Schools & Learning. This led to an average of 82% of complaints responded to within timescale, compared to 89% for 2014/15. This may reflect the more complex nature of complaints being received and budget pressures impacting available resources.
17. The complexities of complaints in Children's Services continue to impact on their ability to respond within the statutory timescales.
18. Where the Council is found at fault, compensation can be paid if deemed appropriate. All compensation awards are approved by the relevant Head of Service and, if greater than £1,000, in consultation with the portfolio holder. There was a significant decrease (54%) in the amount of compensation paid in 2015/16 compared to 2014/15, which is positive to note.

Figure 3: Compensation payments 2015/16

COMPENSATION 2015/16		COMPENSATION 2014/15	
Children, Schools & Families	£11,779	Children, Schools & Families	£29,786
Corporate	£276	Corporate	£1,296
Adult Social Care	£3,050	Adult Social Care	£1,750
SCC Total	£15,105	SCC Total	£32,832

19. The top three compensation payments were:
- £3,300 to compensate for the lack of suitable education provision for a child for three terms;
 - £3,000 following a decision by the LGO that the Council failed to take appropriate action to find a school place for a disabled child, provided unsuitable home to school transport for two terms and delayed in completing a statutory assessment of special educational needs; and

- £2,274 to compensate an individual who ended up with housing and Council Tax arrears and was accused of benefit fraud after the Leaving Care Service wrote to the wrong authority to inform them of the person's change of work and did not follow up after the letter was returned.

Complaint Escalation

20. SCC aims to resolve complaints satisfactorily at the earliest opportunity; however customers who remain dissatisfied can escalate their complaint, both to the next stage of the Council's complaints process (where this option applies) and to the LGO for independent investigation.
21. Only 9% of complaints escalated to Stage 2 of the Council's corporate complaints procedure in 2015/16, a decrease from 12% the previous year. This shows an improvement in the quality of complaints handling at service level.
22. The percentage of complaints referred to the LGO for 2015/16 was comparable to 2014/15.
23. In their annual report, the LGO reported that they received 167 complaints and enquiries about Surrey County Council (of which the Council was formally notified of 88). The top three areas were:
 - Adult Social Care (69)
 - Children, Schools & Families (57)
 - Highways & Transport (29)
24. The LGO can close complaints as invalid or incomplete, or after initial enquiries if there is no evidence of maladministration or service failure. Alternatively, complaints can be referred back to the Council for local resolution or progressed by the LGO to detailed investigation. 36 complaints progressed to investigation; 20 were upheld and 16 not upheld.
25. Surrey County Council had a 100% compliance rate in remedying LGO complaints.
26. The number of complaints investigated by the LGO about Adult Social Care remained broadly consistent.

Learning from complaints

27. Every complaint presents an opportunity to put things right for the complainant and also to learn and improve. An individual complaint may result in corrective action being identified that is specific to that complaint, or a number of complaints about the same service may identify a need to review a process or the information provided to customers.

28. Specific examples of learning identified through complaints are listed below:
- a) Following a complaint about transport for an adult with learning disabilities, the transport booking system has been revised. Adult Social Care and Transport managers now meet regularly to review the booking process to ensure it is robust and efficient.
 - b) After receiving a complaint about that a decision to refuse a blue badge was not properly explained, the Blue Badge Team reviewed their decision letters to provide clearer information in line with Department of Transport guidance.
 - c) Following a complaint about overhanging vegetation impeding street lights, a new process was introduced between Skanska (street lighting contractor) and Surrey Highways to improve how reports of overhanging vegetation are managed and resolved, in respect of both the maintenance of street lights and where the amount of light being emitted is impeded by vegetation.
 - d) Following a complaint from prospective adopters SCC guidance regarding spent convictions when completing DBS disclosure applications has been revised
 - e) Following a number of complaints regarding confusion over financial support available to care leavers in apprenticeships and part time education settings, a review of the Care Leavers Finance Policy and Procedures has been completed.
 - f) Following a complaint about an alleged breach of confidentiality, the content of return labels for written letters sent via Royal Mail has been revised, so that correspondence received from the Child Protection Unit is discreetly managed
 - g) Adult Social Care received a complaint about the wording of an assessment for a customer moving into a nursing home. The Department's position was that social work staff should provide sufficient information to support customers in their services while also respecting their confidentiality. The customer's assessment was amended and staff reminded to be rigorous when checking case notes in advance of sharing information.
 - h) Parents were contacting the Council to discuss their child's individual transport needs and were unhappy when they were referred back to the contracted service provider. In order to prevent unnecessary contact, the wording on the letter to parents confirming their child's transport arrangements was changed to make clear it was the service provider they should speak to about individual needs and requirements. Leaflets were also updated with this information.
 - i) After discussions about charging for care, a customer made a complaint that they felt harassed by a joint visit by a social worker and a Finance officer. The Team Manager recognised that this particular

meeting was not held at the right time for the service user and that explaining the need for the conversation and agreeing an appointment for a later date would have been better. This led to a system wide improvement on joint visits by staff.

29. As the case study below shows, there are also occasions where analysing the learning from complaints alongside other information sources can lead to new ways of working.

Case Study 1 – Creation of the Works Communication Team (Surrey Highways)

By analysing complaints data alongside other sources of feedback, Surrey Highways identified that customer communication was an area that needed improvement. As a result, the Works Communication Team was created. This team is responsible for ensuring that residents and other stakeholders are informed about all planned works taking place across the county. 69 complaints about planned works were received in the first six months of the 2015/16 financial year. Following the introduction of the Works Communication Team in October 2015 complaints reduced to 21 for the second half of the year, representing a fall of over 60%.

Since November 2015 compliments for this team have exceeded complaints. This has confirmed the findings from complaints and highlighted to the team how crucial timely and accurate communication is. They are now building on their success and working on ways to increase customer satisfaction further by making improvements to all of their published information.

30. The next case study shows the value a robust complaints process can have in resolving situations for customers and giving them confidence that the Council listens to its customers and seeks to learn from individual experiences to improve its services.

Case Study 2: Using complaints to build public trust and confidence

Mr X made a complaint about the lack of notice of a temporary 8 week closure of a highway and the inconvenience caused to residents as a result. The complaint investigation identified that the Council did not have a robust procedure to ensure that applicants complied with conditions regarding notification and signing prior to a road closure. The investigation also identified errors in the statutory advertising of the Temporary Traffic Regulation Order. As a result, it was recommended that the procedure for processing requests for Temporary Traffic Regulation Orders from private developers be reviewed to ensure;

- *clearly defined responsibilities within Surrey County Council; and*
- *robust monitoring of developers to make sure conditions regarding notifications and signing are fully complied with prior to commencement of Temporary Traffic Regulation Order*

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After receiving the report of investigation and being advised of the recommendations, Mr X commented:

'Your considered investigation has gone a long way to rebuilding my confidence in SCC as an organisation'

Compliments

31. It is important to present a balanced view of services and recognise and learn from good service. Throughout the year Surrey residents and customers have taken the time to contact the Council to compliment the standard of service they have received.
32. In 2015/16 the Council received 2945 compliments about its services, over double the amount of complaints received.
33. Here are some extracts of compliments received:

'I wish other organisations had the same level of customer service as Surrey CC'

'I had to write to commend your team on the prompt way it dealt with our pothole problem. The repair was carried out more or less within a week of my reporting it. Given the workload Surrey Highways must be under, that's as good a reaction as a reasonable person could wish for...Thank you'

'You were very respectful and patient and kept me fully informed and up to date with my support plan'

'You are an absolute pleasure to speak to and nothing is ever too much trouble'

'You really go out of your way to help as much as you are able and you are a genuine caring individual'

'K did some brilliant work with O's mum and this largely contributed to the decision to end the Child Protection plan...K is a credit to the family support worker's in the team; she is really hardworking, thorough, and gives a great deal of thought into how she will undertake direct work with families. O's mum responded very well to K and really took on board the work they did together'

'RK and Mrs M have really gone the extra mile, supporting and advising me regarding my son's bullying problems and provision issues. I won't bore you with details but just seeing my son smiling and being truly excited about attending the new school, the way he hugged me when I told him that Mrs M found him a place and said 'thank you mummy, that would give me a break from bullies' makes everything worthwhile'

'Dear Highways, it's probably rare you get a 'thank you' but your recent 1 day operation resurfacing the High Street slip roads deserves a pat on the back to all! Well done to all from grateful Esher residents!'

'A big thank you for all your staff's hard work and for an excellent library. I'm moving and I hope my new library service is half as good'

Conclusions:

34. What are we doing well?
- a) Ongoing work with services across the Council has improved the quality of complaint responses and increased the resolution of complaints at the earliest stage.
 - b) Improved identification and recording of learning and corrective actions arising from complaints at all stages of the process, and subsequent monitoring to ensure actions are implemented within agreed timescales.
 - c) Adults' Customer Relations team continues to deliver a robust training strategy to support staff through the complaints process which has led to an increased confidence and knowledge in responding to complaints.
 - d) Proactive work with Surrey Highways building on learning from complaints to identify opportunities for service improvements.
 - e) Continued promotion of the Customer Promise has led to a greater awareness and commitment to delivering excellent customer service.
 - f) Re-established the Complaints Lead network to build better working relationships and drive customer service improvement across the Council.
35. What do we need to continue to work on?
- a) Review ways to improve complaint response times in order to provide timely responses while recognising the importance to the customer of securing positive outcomes wherever possible.
 - b) Continue to develop training packages to support the Customer Promise and best practice in complaint handling.
 - c) Continue to review our systems and procedures to make it easier to leave feedback and make a complaint.
 - d) Children's Rights Service to continue to work with Children's Services to promote:
 - clear messages for parents on the reasons for assessments needing to be completed;
 - clear messages for families explaining the reasons for the threshold for intervention being met; and
 - improved management of policies and procedures for Care Leavers

- e) Continue to work collaboratively across Adults' Customer Relations, Corporate Customer Relations and Children's Rights Service to improve the collection, analysis and reporting of complaints information.

Financial and value for money implications

36. Payment of compensation, as outlined in paragraph 18 of this report, is a financial implication of complaint handling. Responding to complaints quickly and getting issues resolved early ensures complaints do not escalate unnecessarily through the process.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

37. Ensuring SCC maintains good complaint handling processes enables services to remain accessible to all.

Risk Management Implications

38. The complaints process does not have any direct risk management implications; however complaints do carry a risk to the Council's reputation if not handled appropriately.

Next steps:

39. The Audit & Governance Committee to receive information on operation of the council's complaints procedures on an annual basis.

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Annex: Annex 1 - Complaint handling performance comparing 2014/15 and 2015/16

Sources/background papers:

- SCC complaints database, Adult Social Care Customer Relations team, Children's Rights Service.