

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – RESOURCES 25 NOVEMBER 2009

CORPORATE COMPLAINTS MONITORING

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report presents a summary of complaints received by the Council from the public during the financial year 2008/09.

2. BACKGROUND

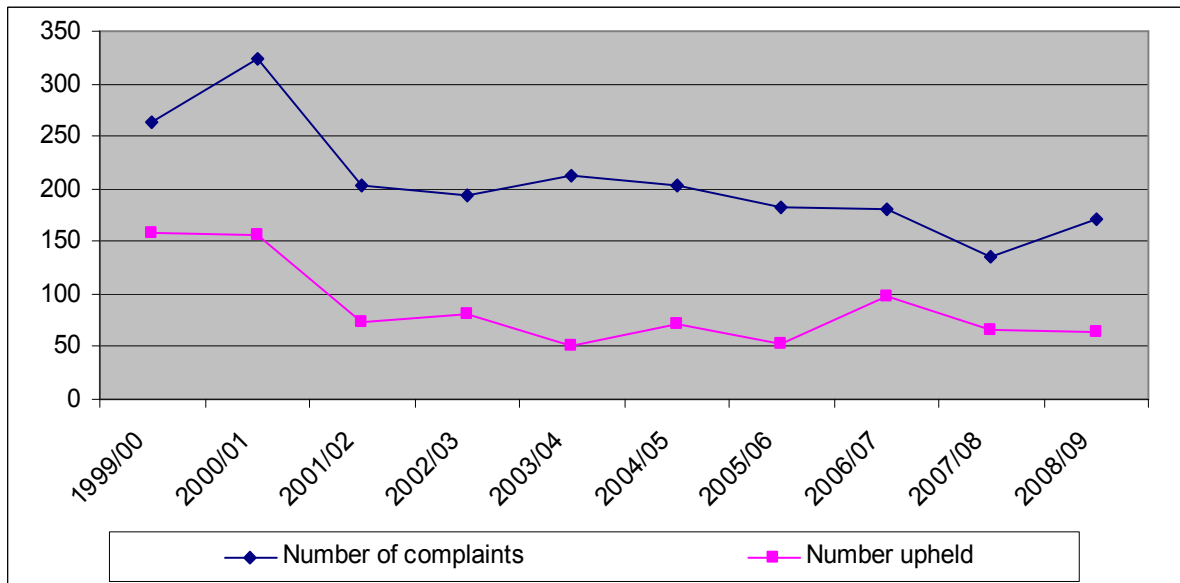
- 2.1 As part of the corporate complaints procedure each directorate records the number and type of complaint received for each service, what stage in the process the complaint reaches, and the outcome of that complaint. Annual reports analysing the results are published on the Council's website (www.exeter.gov.uk/complaints).
- 2.2 Corporate complaints are those where the customer is complaining about dissatisfaction with a service rather than a request for service. For example if a customer complains about a fly tipping incident this would be a request for a service to remove the items. If however the Council failed to remove the items and the customer complained then this would be a corporate complaint about the level of service we have provided.
- 2.3 Complaints are usually investigated in the first instance at Head of Service level. The customer is then sent a reply detailing the findings. The customer is invited to return a reply paid postcard stating whether or not they are happy with the way in which the complaint has been dealt with. If the customer is not satisfied, they may escalate the complaint to a second stage of investigation by a Director and ultimately refer the complaint for a third stage investigation by the Chief Executive if they remain dissatisfied. Should they still be dissatisfied, their recourse is to the Local Government Ombudsman.
- 2.4 Representatives from each directorate and the Policy Unit attend the Complaints Monitoring Group twice a year to discuss trends in complaints, to improve both the process and the results, and to learn lessons to develop service delivery.
- 2.5 In analysing the data from directorates for this report, officers have not identified any issues of concern which would warrant a change in the way services are delivered.

3. RESULTS

Total Number of Complaints Received and Number Upheld

- 3.1 During 2008/09, a total of 172 complaints were received under the Council's corporate complaints procedure. This is an increase of 26% on the 2007/08 when 136 complaints were received and follows a four-year decrease in the number of complaints received. At the same time the number of complaints upheld decreased from 65 (48%) in 2007/08 to 64 (37%) in 2008/09.

Figure 1: Total complaints and number upheld by year



3.2 These differences were across almost all services so it is difficult to identify any underlying reasons for the changes other than those described in paragraphs 3.4 to 3.9 below.

3.3 During 2008/09, 19% of complaints progressed to stage 2 which is a slight increase on 2007/08 (16%) and the percentage of complaints that progressed to stage 3 almost doubled from 7% in 2007/08 to 13% in 2008/09. It is difficult to identify any underlying reason for this increase other than complainants simply not being happy with the outcome of the investigation if the result was not in their favour.

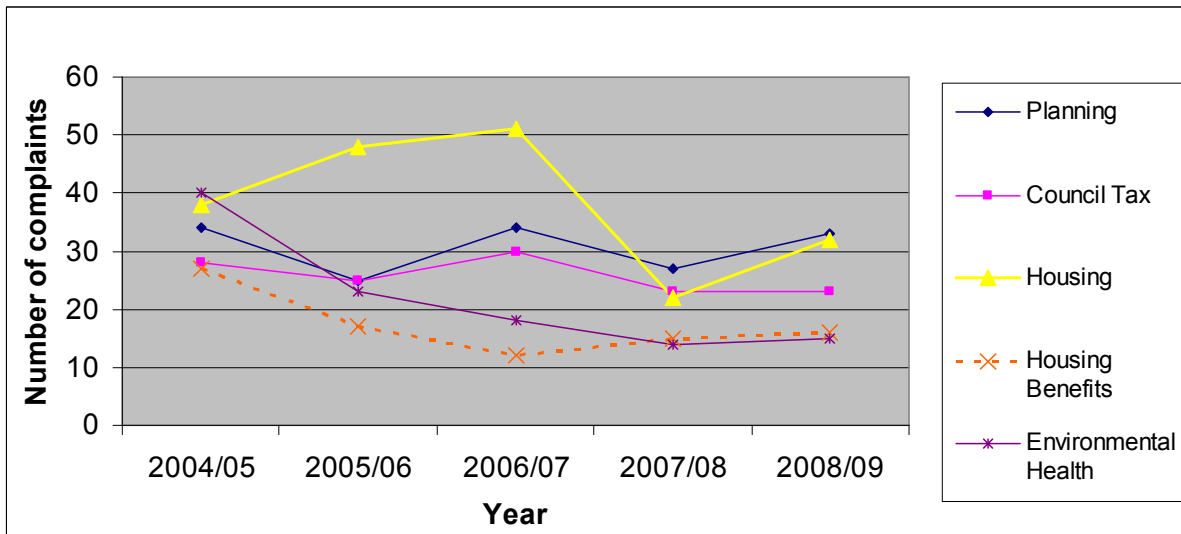
Breakdown by Service

3.4 Figure 2 below shows that Planning continues to receive the highest number of complaints: 37 during 2008/09, including three that went directly to stage 2 and one that went to stage 3. This is a 37% increase on 2007/08, when a total of 27 complaints were received for Planning, however 11 of the complaints related to the same application, an application for student accommodation which was allowed by an Inspector on appeal¹.

3.5 Of the Planning complaints received at Stage 1 in 2008/09, 36% were found to be justified or part justified compared to 32% in 2007/08.

¹ Planning member Working Group 14 April 2009 report [Complaints regarding the Planning and Building Control Unit](#)

Figure 2: Highest Number of Complaints by Service 2004 -2009



- 3.6 During 2007/08, Housing saw a 61% decrease in complaints but in 2008/09, the number of complaints received rose again by 45% from 22 to 32, the second highest figure for the year. This is because previous figures underreported the number of complaints about Housing Repairs. An internal review report at the end of 2007, identified that the service did not have a robust system for logging requests for, and complaints about, repairs. This is now being addressed and has led to an inevitable increase in figures.
- 3.7 Of the 32 Housing complaints received in 2008/09, 34% were found to be justified or part-justified compared to 36% in 2007/08.
- 3.8 Council Tax received 23 complaints during 2008/09, the third highest figure for the year but the same number as was received in 2007/08. 47% of these complaints were found to be justified or part-justified which continues a decrease on the past two years (60% in 2005/06 and 56% in 2006/07). To provide some context for these figures, the Council has over 50,000 Council Tax payers.
- 3.9 Apart from small increases and decreases experienced across services the other significant change was in Leisure and Museums which received nine complaints in 2008/09, including one that went straight to Stage 2, compared to only one complaint in 2007/8. Of the complaints received at Stage 1, 25% were found to be justified or part justified. These complaints are about diverse and unrelated issues and do not appear to be part of a trend.

Ombudsman

- 3.10 The Local Government Ombudsman received 30 complaints and enquiries regarding Exeter City Council during 2008/09. However they are unable to make comparisons between these figures and the previous year as the recording methods they used changed following a restructure.
- 3.11 Only one of the complaints to the Ombudsman was upheld and this was in respect of the means used by the Council to recover a debt of Council Tax arrears from a person who was alleged to have suffered from untreated mental and physical health problems. Procedures have been reviewed as a result, and it was agreed by the Executive in March that the Head of Treasury Services would consult with the Portfolio Holder for Business Transformation and Human Resources prior to commencing bankruptcy proceedings in future cases.

- 3.12 The Ombudsman's annual review states "My investigators have found the Council's responses to enquiries effective and helpful and information provided commendably thorough. We value the constructive approach demonstrated in dealing with complaints made."²

Benchmarking

- 3.13 As reported previously, benchmarking complaints received by the Council is difficult because councils are at different stages of developing their complaints management systems and they also record and categorise complaints in different ways.
- 3.14 Any meaningful benchmarking exercise is likely to require research and will only be feasible as part of a wider review of the complaints handling system.

Improvements to Services

- 3.15 The majority of complaints have required only minor adjustments or improvements to be made to services. Examples include:
- Parking Services have amended the signage in the Cathedral and Quay car park to reflect the current hours of operation of the lift.
 - The majority of Contract and Direct Services and Environmental Health complaints related to staff attitudes and not responding to residents. This issue has been addressed and necessary action taken.
 - As a result of a complaint about the recovery of council tax, the bailiff notice was found to be deficient and this led to a change in the department's internal processes.

Complainant Satisfaction

- 3.16 Figures for complainant satisfaction should be treated with caution as those customers not receiving a positive outcome to their complaint may perceive that the complaint was not dealt with properly. By the same token we cannot assume that if the complainant does not return the card and does not pursue the complaint that they are happy with the way the complaint was handled and processed.
- 3.17 Across the Council satisfaction cards were received from 52 complainants (33%) during 2008/09. This continues a slight year on year increase from 29% in 2007/08 and 27% in 2006/07. Of the cards returned during 2008/09, 48% of complainants said they were happy with the way in which their complaint had been handled. The table below shows the results for the services with the highest number of complaints for the last three years.

² The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Review Exeter City Council for the year ended 31 March 2009, Page 4
<http://www.lgo.org.uk/documents/annualreview/2009/exeter.pdf>

Figure 3: Satisfaction Monitoring

	2008/09		2007/08		2006/07	
	Returns as % of total complaints	% of returns satisfied	Returns as % of total complaints	% of returns satisfied	Returns as % of total complaints	% of returns satisfied
Planning	15% (5)	40%	32% (7)	29%	43% (13)	15%
Housing	35% (8)	63%	9% (2)	100%	31% (16)	33%
Council Tax	41% (13)	31%	35% (8)	63%	50% (15)	87%

Response Rate

3.18 Table 2 below gives figures for the percentage of complaints that were sent an acknowledgement within the standard five working days and the percentage who then received a full reply within the standard three weeks by directorate.

Figure 4: Acknowledgment of Complaints

	2008/09		2007/08		2006/07	
	% sent initial reply within standard	% sent full reply within standard	% sent initial reply within standard	% sent full reply within standard	% sent initial reply within standard	% sent full reply within standard
Community & Environment	98%	94%	87%	87%	93%	94%
Corporate Services	85%	84%	87%	96%	82%	86%
Economy & Development	91%	67%	95%	79%	86%	95%
Chief Executive's Department	50%	0%	*100%	*0%	*100%	*100%

*only 1 complaint received

3.19 The Chief Executive's Department tends to receive complaints that relate to issues across the Council so are often more complex to investigate and take longer to respond to. In addition, these complaints sometimes go to another service initially before it is realised that a corporate response is appropriate and this causes a delay in acknowledging the complaint.

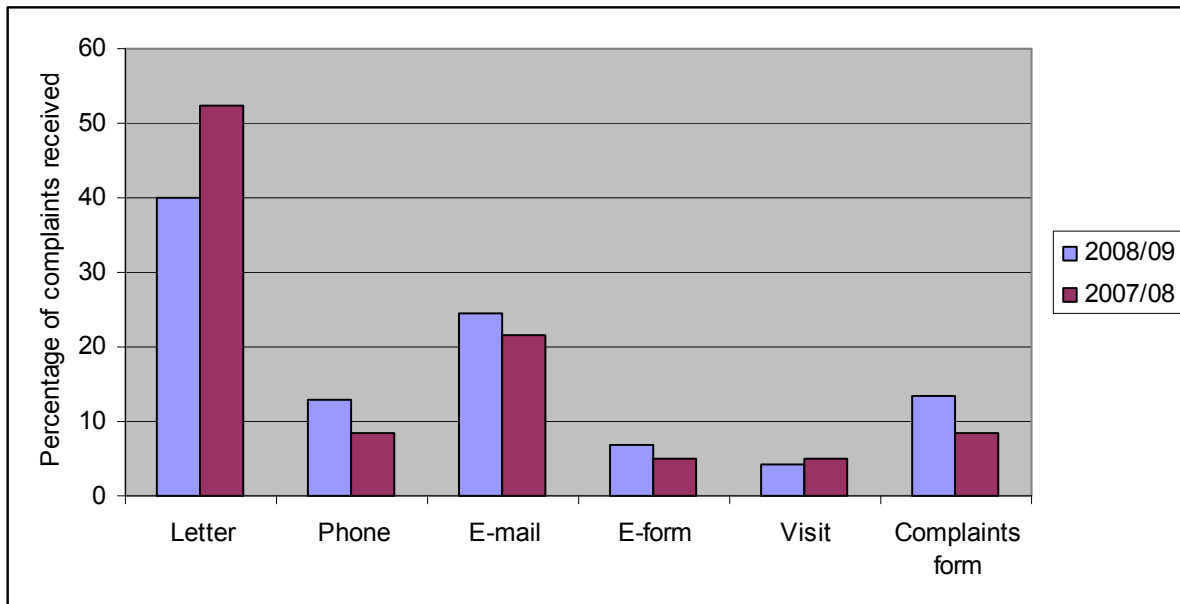
3.20 In the case of the Economy and Development Directorate, a large proportion of the out-of-time responses were to complaints received over a short period in respect of the application for student accommodation referred to in paragraph 3.4. It was necessary to investigate the history of the site, which had been the subject of several applications and appeals, and it was thought desirable to formulate a composite response that could be modified to suit individual complaints. Therefore some of the earlier complaints took longer to respond to than would otherwise have been the case.

- 3.21 The Corporate Services' rate for sending a full response dropped from 96% in 2007/08 to 84% in 2008/09. This appears to be due to a delay in the paperwork being received for investigation. As a result processes for handling correspondence have been tightened up and it is anticipated that figures will improve for next year.
- 3.22 Community and Environment is the only directorate to see an improvement in response rates: from 87% in 2007/08 to 94% for acknowledgments and 98% for full replies in 2008/09.

Method of Receipt

- 3.23 During 2008/09, the majority of customers lodged complaints via a letter (37%) though this is a reduction on 2007/08 (57%). E-mail communication seems to have decreased slightly to 23% in 2008/09, compared to 26% in 2007/08.
- 3.24 The chart below shows the methods by which the Council has received complaints over the last two years.

Figure 5: Method of Receipt



Equalities Monitoring

- 3.25 As previously mentioned, the majority of complaints arrive by letter. As the customer is already unhappy with their relationship with the council and is making a complaint, it is considered inappropriate to go back to them and ask for additional, sensitive monitoring information. Similarly, staff would not ask for this information if a complaint came in by e-mail or over the phone. The best way of collecting equality monitoring information is by electronic complaints forms submitted via the internet site or by hard copy form. For this reason, although the Council has included monitoring information on complaints forms since 2002, it is only in the last two years that any substantial returns have been received.
- 3.26 However 2008/09, saw a substantial decrease in the amount of information received with only 13% of complainants returning equality monitoring forms. With such small figures involved this information carries a health warning and it raises questions about the value of requesting such information.

- 3.27 Any further consideration of the best way to ensure that our complaints system is accessible to all communities might be included as part of a wider review of the complaints handling system.

Figure 5: Complaints Equalities Monitoring

	% of complainants who returned a monitoring form (number)	Percentage of returns from:		
		Women	Black & minority ethnic people	People with disabilities
2008/09	13% (22)	59%	0%	41%
2007/08	30% (41)	41%	7%	12%
2006/07	26% (47)	57%	4%	9%
2005/06	20% (36)	47%	8%	17%

4 FUTURE ACTION

- 4.1 The Complaints Monitoring Group will continue to develop an analysis of the Council's corporate complaints. This will enable a clearer link to be established between complaints and service improvements and in particular will help the Council demonstrate that it learns from, and improves, as a result of complaints.

5. RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 That Scrutiny Committee – Resources note the report and the work being done to improve services as a result of complaints received from our customers.

ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE

CHIEF EXECUTIVE SUPPORT UNIT

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:

None.