

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – RESOURCES 21 SEPTEMBER 2011

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 2010/11 and provides an update on changes to the complaints management system.

2. BACKGROUND

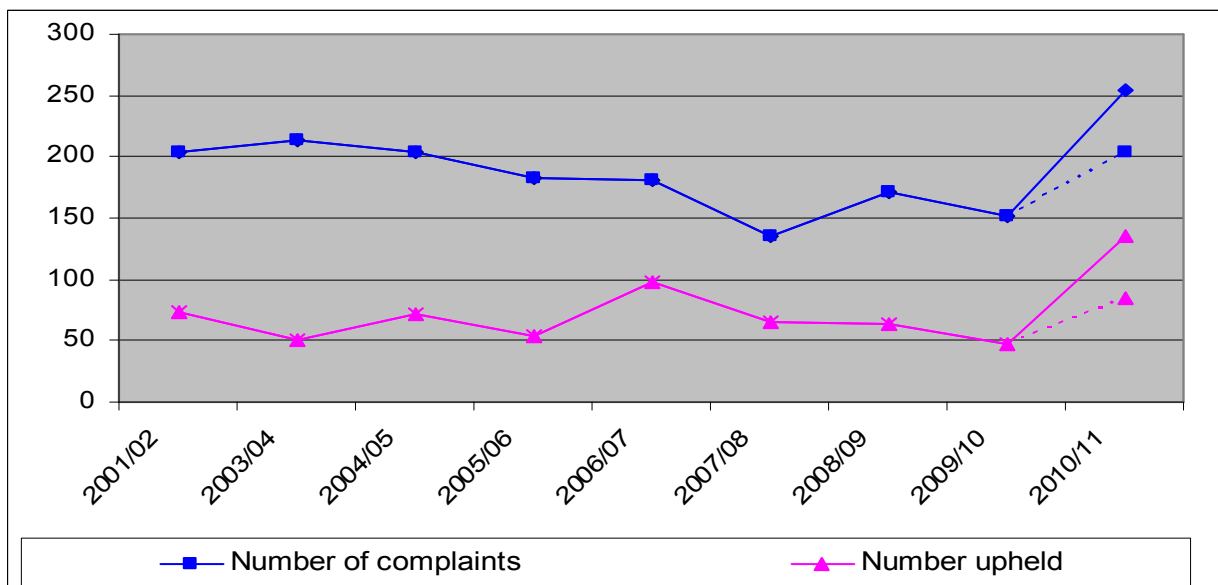
- 2.1 As part of the corporate complaints procedure each directorate records the number and type of complaint received for each service, what stage in the process the complaint reaches, and the outcome of that complaint.
- 2.2 Corporate complaints are those where the customer is complaining about dissatisfaction with a service rather than a request for service. For example, if a customer complains about a fly tipping incident this would be considered as 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 considered as a corporate complaint about the level of service we have provided.
- 2.3 In April 2011, following a review, the Council agreed to start recording other types of feedback in order to provide a better and more useful picture of customers concerns. Up until now there has been no consistent recording and reporting of general comments and 'grumbles'. Some services do record these but they are not shared across the council and others are dealt with on an individual basis.
- 2.4 A consistent approach to recording and analysing other types of feedback will give the Council a broader picture of the issues of concern to customers and:
- provide a guide to those areas where improvements to service delivery need to be made
 - highlight areas where customer expectation and perception could be better managed
 - support the systems review work that the Council is undertaking supported by Vanguard
- 2.5 Representatives from each directorate attend the Complaints Monitoring Group, facilitated by the Policy Unit, twice a year. This group identifies and discusses trends in complaints, to improve both the process and the results, and to learn lessons to develop service delivery.
- 2.6 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. However there are areas for improvement identified in the way complaints are handled by the Council. These are discussed in more detail in section 4.

3. RESULTS

Total Number of Complaints Received and Number Upheld

3.1 During 2010/11, a total of 255 complaints were received under the Council's corporate complaints procedure. This is an increase of 69% on 2009/10 when 151 complaints were received.

Figure 1: Total complaints and number upheld by year



3.2 At the same time the percentage upheld also increased from 31% in 2009/10 to 53% in 2010/11.

3.3 This increase is largely accounted for by Planning where 52 complaints were received about the same issue namely the proposed Gypsy and Traveller site. However if this case is removed from the overall figures the total stands at 203. Although still a 34% increase on 2009/10, with 42% of these found to be justified or part justified, this figure is well within the normal range that would be expected. The chart above shows both scenarios with the dotted line representing the total without the Gypsy and Traveller site complaints.

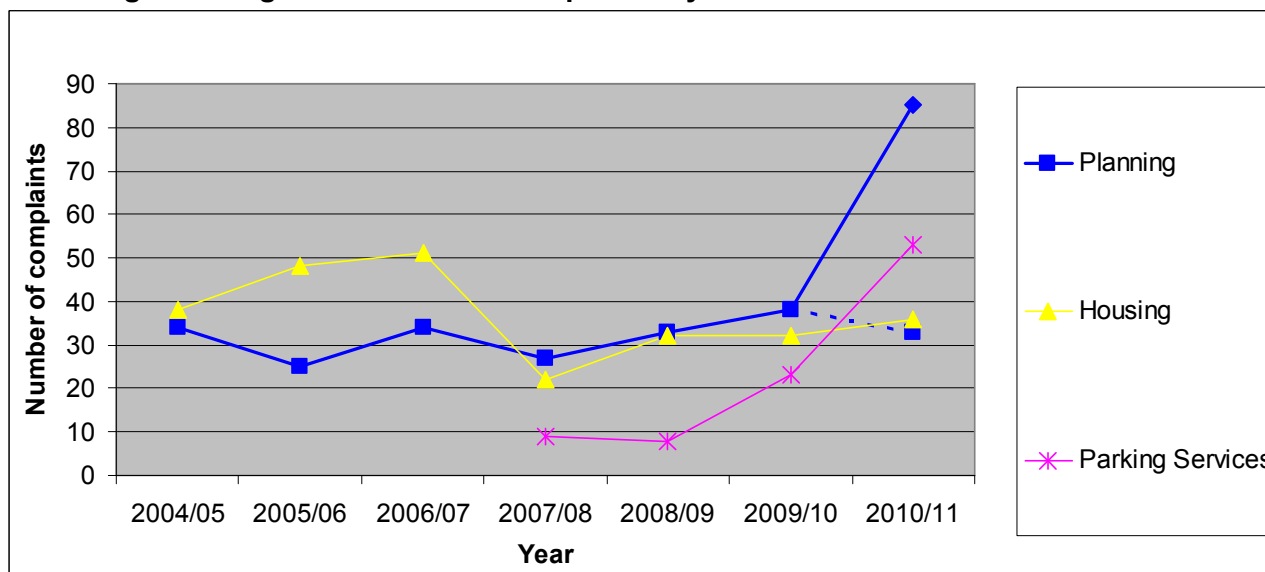
Breakdown by Service

3.4 Parking, Transport, River and Canal Services received 53 complaints during 2010/11, the highest figure for the year. Of these 30% were found to be justified or part-justified and 26% indeterminate. 21 of the complaints related to the perceived attitude of the Parking Civil Enforcement Officers. Other reasons include dissatisfaction with Penalty Charge Notice appeals, car park signage, malfunctioning car park machines and car park conditions.

3.5 The Service that received the third highest number of complaints during 2010/11 was Housing with 36. This is a 6% increase on 2009/10 when the service received 34 complaints. The majority of these related to the standard or of service received but they cut across a number of functions within Housing and no particular themes have emerged.

3.6 Figure 2 below shows the year on year comparison for these services with the dotted line representing the Planning complaints with those related to the Gypsy and Traveller site removed.

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



3.7 Other services which experienced an increase in complaints include Benefits which went up from 4 to 10, although this number still only represents 0.08% of the service’s caseload..

3.8 The number of complaints dealt with by the Customer Service Centre doubled from 6 in 2009/10 to 12 in 2010/11. Many of these cut across a number of services including Council Tax, IT, Grants and Accounts but because the initial cause for complaint was about the CSC the Head of Customer Services lead on the response to the customer. The issues raised regarding the CSC were generally about staff attitude and quality of signage and where appropriate have been rectified.

3.9 The number of complaints received by Economy & Tourism rose from zero in 2009/10 to 15 in 2010/11. 14 of these were made to the Visitor Information Centre about quality and lack of signage.

Ombudsman

3.10 In 2010/11, the Local Government Ombudsman investigated 17 complaints compared to 18 during 2009/10. None of these was upheld.

Improvements to Services

3.11 The majority of complaints have required only minor adjustments or improvements to be made to services. Examples include:

- Council Tax have responded to complaints related to communication issues by reminding staff of correct internal procedures and in some cases their attitude towards customers and ensuring that the website is updated more frequently. A review of the Council Tax telephony procedure was also undertaken to improve call handling processes and paperless Direct Debits are soon to be implemented.
- Where there have been issues with the refuse collection and litter left behind, the Operations manager has spoken to the crews in question to remind them of the need to

take care with split bags and to clear up or arrange for the cleaning of any spillage. Procedures have also been reviewed and staff briefed.

- Following complaints to the Visitor Information Centre, improvements were made to signage in the city centre.

Complainant Satisfaction and Equalities Monitoring

3.12 During 2010/11 figures for complainant satisfaction and equalities monitoring returns were too small to make any useful analysis as they account for less than 10% of complaints.

Response Rate

3.13 Table three 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. It is not always possible to respond in this timescale where the issue is complex or specialist advice or comment is required. However, in these circumstances the complainant should be advised that an extended timescale is required.

3.14 Each directorate shows an improved acknowledgment rate with Community & Environment achieving 100%.

3.15 Corporate Services' full response rate at 89% is an improvement on 83% for 2009/10. In this case the delay occurred because a specialist response was required and the manager was on holiday. When this happens the customer is given an interim response and a reason for the delay.

3.16 Economy & Development's full response rate dropped from 86% in 2009/10 to 62% in 2010/11. This is accounted for by the complaints regarding the proposed Gypsy and Traveller site as these all went to Stage 2 and took a longer time to investigate and respond to.

Figure 3: Acknowledgment of Complaints

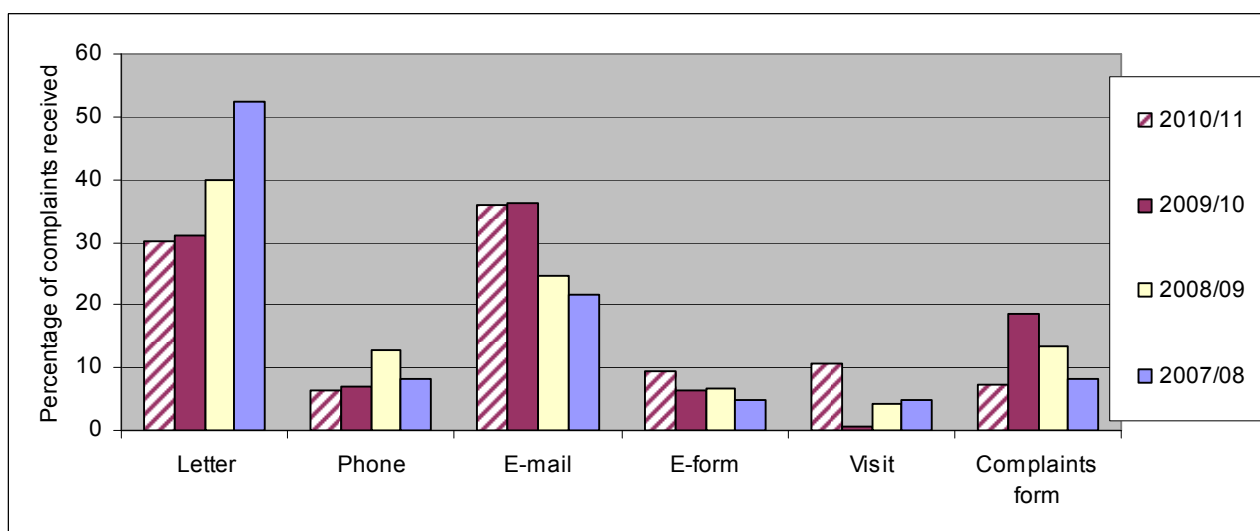
	2010/11		2009/10		2008/09	
	% acknowledged within standard	% sent full reply within standard	% acknowledged within standard	% sent full reply within standard	% acknowledged within standard	% sent full reply within standard
Community & Environment	100%	94%	91%	98%	95%	91%
Corporate Services	96%	89%	83%	85%	88%	83%
Economy & Development	91%	62%	86%	91%	88%	86%
Chief Executive's Department	*100%	*100%	*100%	50%	*100%	*100%

*only 1 complaint received

Method of Receipt

- 3.17 During 2010/11, 36% of new complaints were lodged via e-mail, while 30% were received by letter. The rise in the number of visits to council offices appears to be accounted for by a number of complaints by tourists about the quality of city centre signage.
- 3.18 The chart below shows the methods by which the Council has received complaints over the last four years.

Figure 4: Method of Receipt



Contractors

- 3.19 Complaints made about services provided by contractors are generally dealt with in the first instance by the organisation providing the service. If this cannot be resolved then it will be escalated to the Council's Corporate Complaint System.
- 3.20 Parkwood Leisure are required to provide monthly information on any complaints they have received. The Council monitors the complaints and looks to identify any persistent issues that customers may be raising at any of the facilities. Overall, since the start of the contract in September 2010, there have been 77 complaints made all of which were dealt with through the management of the contract. These were mainly about:
- Cold showers at the Riverside Leisure Centre following which Parkwood Leisure replaced the hot water system.
 - Complaints about the closure of the changing rooms at Exeter Arena. This was due to poor water biological results on the shower system and Parkwood responded by upgrading the number of mixer units to showers.
 - The other main complaint across a number of centres was related to customers being unable to get into workout classes due to their popularity and restrictions on numbers due to the size of the rooms. Parkwood responded by arranging extra classes.
- 3.21 Minor complaints regarding repairs to Council Housing are initially dealt with as contract failures which require a quick resolution for the tenant. As such they do not enter the formal corporate complaint procedures. Any more persistent or significant failures are entered into the corporate system. The number of complaints received is monitored on a monthly basis. Since the current contract started in November 2010, 335 complaints regarding this service have been received, which have all been related to the standard of repairs carried out or

missed appointments. To put this figure in context, during the same period there were 12,894 work orders for repairs.

4 CHANGES TO THE COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

- 4.1 In July 2010 the Complaints Monitoring Officers (CMO) Group began a review and revision of the Complaints Management System with the aim “To ensure the Council’s arrangements for complaints management are sufficient to provide information on customer needs and satisfaction with our services, in order to drive improvement.”
- 4.2 Evidence from a number of different sources including focus groups with customers and staff, had identified inefficiencies due to:
- Inconsistent use of electronic and paper copy paper processes across different services
 - Inconsistency in the quality of responses to complainants
 - Lack of information on lessons learnt and consequent improvements to service delivery
 - Lack of information about customer satisfaction and demographics
 - Inconsistent recording of feedback from customers that is not marked as a ‘corporate complaint’.
- 4.3 In co-operation with other stakeholders across the council including IT, the Consultation Officer and Heads of Service, the CMO group have now been able to put in place a number of amendments to the way complaints are handled across the Council.

Recording of complaints

- 4.4 IT Services have developed a database which considerably speeds up the process of dealing with complaints and is also capable of producing sophisticated analysis reports. An e-form has also been developed that is available for all staff, customers and councillors to complete and is automatically linked to the database.

Developing good practice

- 4.5 A good practice guide to investigating complaints has been produced and is available on the intranet. This is based on advice from the Local Government Ombudsman and includes hints and tips to helping an investigation process to run smoothly. Where appropriate, the CMOs are also producing standard documents and paragraphs to improve the quality and consistency of responses across the council.

Stages

- 4.6 Following a pilot in Economy & Development, the number of stages in the council’s complaints process has reduced from 3 to 2. All Stage 1 complaints must be responded to by a Head of Service. Investigations may continue to be carried out by other officers and they may draft a response on behalf of the Head of Service but the emphasis is on the Head of Service to review and sign off the investigation. Stage 2 complaints are responded to by the Chief Executive, who may enlist the help of Directors to collate the information required for a further review.
- 4.7 Figures for April to July 2011 already appear to show that the previous 3 stage process was unnecessary with 18% of the 57 complaints so far received, progressing to Stage 2. This compares with 2009/10 when, having already gone through Stage 2, 19% of complaints went to Stage 3 and 2010/11 when 30% of all complaints progressed to Stage 3.

Complaint Form

- 4.8 To reflect these changes a new paper copy leaflet called “We’re Listening” has been produced. This is available in the Customer Service Centre and Visitor Information Centres. The new form is much shorter and cheaper to print and although the emphasis is on encouraging customers to use the e-form, it is felt that a paper copy form still helps to promote the service.

Customer Satisfaction

- 4.9 Following research into how other councils gather this information, a survey has been developed which is automatically sent out to all complainants two weeks after the closure of the case. The responses are analysed by the Policy Unit to help make further improvements and will be published as part of the annual report to committee.
- 4.10 The survey also includes equality and diversity questions which is hoped will provide a better idea as to whether the complaints system is being used by all sections of the city. Previously the only method for collecting this information was via the previous paper copy complaints form which resulted in a less than 10% return rate.

Learning from complaints

- 4.11 The new database makes provision for recording the outcome of complaints. CMOs check with investigating officers what, if any, improvements have been made as a result of the complaint. This information will be included in the annual analysis report to committee as well as being published on the website in a similar way to Govmetric, so that customers can see what the council has done as a result of their feedback.

Incorporating Comments, Grumbles and general Feedback

- 4.12 General feedback such as comments, compliments and informal complaints can tell us a lot about how a service is being delivered without requiring the customer to commit to a lengthy complaint investigation. There may be a number of reasons why a customer does not want to make what they consider to be a formal complaint. Perhaps they think they will be getting staff into trouble or perhaps they are not really sure that what they are telling us is serious enough to warrant an investigation. It may be that the individual incident is quite minor but if a lot of similar comments are made across one particular service there would be a benefit in addressing it.
- 4.13 The new system for dealing with complaints also incorporates the ability to record general feedback. This means that when a service receives feedback they simply pass this on to the CMO as they would a complaint and this can be logged. Feedback is not subject to a full investigation but customers will receive a response, should they request one.
- 4.14 Where a high volume of informal complaints are received in a short space of time it may only be possible to record an overview of the situation and provide a general response to the public. Any information that we can collect about how services are being delivered and how our customers perceive the council will be useful in helping us understand where improvements need to be made. Results from the feedback database are analysed and reported to relevant services on a regular basis, having the potential to provide an early warning system on where issues may arise in the future. Results will also be included in future editions of this annual report to committee and will form part of the evidence gathered for the systems review work undertaken by the Council with support from Vanguard.

4.15 The Complaints Monitoring Group will continue to develop an analysis of the Council's corporate complaints and feedback. 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.