

<b>Cabinet Meeting</b>		<b>Agenda Item: 4</b>
<b>Meeting Date</b>	7 October 2015	
<b>Report Title</b>	Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report 2014/15	
<b>Portfolio Holder</b>	Cllr Andrew Bowles, Leader	
<b>SMT Lead</b>	Dave Thomas, Head of Commissioning & Customer Contact	
<b>Head of Service</b>	Dave Thomas, Head of Commissioning & Customer Contact	
<b>Lead Officer</b>	Carol Sargeant, Customer Service Manager	
<b>Key Decision</b>	No	
<b>Classification</b>	Open	
<b>Forward Plan</b>	Yes	
<b>Recommendations</b>	1. Members are asked to note the report	

## 1. Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report presents the annual summary of complaints, compliments and comments received by Swale Borough Council (SBC) during the year from April 2014 to March 2015.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 This annual report summarises the Complaints, Compliments and Comments (CCC) received by the Council during the ensuing year. Swale's corporate complaints system comprises the following process:
- (i) an initial request for service or enquiry should be made to the service area it relates to in the first instance. A request or enquiry may become a complaint if the council fails to meet our service standards;
  - (ii) Stage 1: this is whereby the complainant is not satisfied with the response (or lack of response) from the service area or the complaint relates to a member of staff. Stage 1 complaints will be responded to within 10 working days by a manager or Head of Service;
  - (iii) Stage 2: the Chief Executive who will investigate and respond direct to the complainant within 10 working days. If the timeframe cannot be met the complainant will be notified and kept informed of progress; and
  - (iv) Local Government Ombudsman: if after following our complaints process customers are still unhappy, they can contact the Local Government Ombudsman, an independent service set up by the Government to investigate complaints about council matters. The Ombudsman will not usually investigate most complaints until they have been through the Council's complaint process.

- 2.2 The current CCC system, which has now been in operation for four full years, is now well established throughout the organisation. It has contributed to a much more robust and transparent approach to the management of CCC, with greater ease of access to the system for our customers.
- 2.3 The system provides monitoring, including weekly summaries to Heads of Service, so we can be assured that all complaints are logged, tracked, and responded to, as well as improved reporting facilities so we can ensure that our response times are meeting the standards we have set and learn from feedback.
- 2.4 In addition to the improvements to the process which we introduced and reported on last year, we have:
- (i) continued to raise the profile of the importance of CCC to Swale as a customer centric organisation through managers' meetings, all staff briefings, and individual team meetings;
  - (ii) carried out further training for all relevant managers and staff on handling complaints and using the CCC system;
  - (iii) published and circulated monthly summary reports for Heads of Service to enable regular monitoring of the progress of complaints in their respective service areas;
  - (iv) continued to provide quarterly reports on complaints at service level, which is used to inform the quarterly performance report to the Strategic Management Team;
  - (v) published the CCC reports on the intranet;
  - (vi) sought from Heads of Service examples of service improvements which have been initiated in response to customer complaints, comments and compliments; and
  - (vii) continued to carry out surveys of all customers who have raised a formal complaint in order to gain feedback from them and seek to improve the process accordingly.

### **Customer Service Excellence**

- 2.5 During the past year, the Customer Service Centre, Environment Response Team, Housing Services, Planning, and Revenues & Benefits all gained a renewal of the externally verified Customer Service Excellence assessment.
- 2.6 One of the components of the CSE accreditation process is to examine the complaints procedures within an organisation. Again, during this year's assessments, Swale's CCC system was cited as an example of good practice.
- 2.7 We have continued to make further efforts to make the system more accessible to our customers. There is an established clear link to our complaints procedure on our website at <http://www.swale.gov.uk/comment-complain-and-feedback/> and we have designed small cards (credit card sized) which are on display in reception areas encouraging compliments, complaints

and feedback. On the reverse of the card is a QR code<sup>1</sup> which when used takes the user direct to the CCC web page.

## Complaints Received

2.8 The total number of CCCs received during 2014/15 was 1,104 compared with 996 in 2013/14, an increase of 12.5%. The number of complaints increased by 18%, compliments by 17%, and compliments were the same amount for both years.

Category	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Trend against previous year
Complaints received	358	358	<b>441</b>	+18%
Compliments received	317	344	<b>344</b>	0%
Comments received	177	264	<b>319</b>	+17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>852</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>1,104</b>	<b>+12.5%</b>

2.9 The increase in overall complaints received was largely driven by the refuse changes of introducing food waste collections in the early part of the period. The volumes and nature of the complaints for other service areas may also differ from previous years, but not to any great degree or for any single overriding reason. In particular, it is noteworthy that despite the issues with Planning Support, numbers of formal complaints in Development Services only rose by 11 compared with the previous year. See Appendix I for further details by service area.

2.10 During 2014/15, a total of 18 complaints (4%) were escalated to Stage Two (Chief Executive).

## Responding to Complaints

2.11 The CCC system requires that a response to all complaints be made (whether justified or otherwise) within a corporate standard of 10 working days. During 2014/15, 89% of complaints, whether or not justified, were responded to within the corporate standard, which equals the performance of the previous year, despite the increase in volume. The target for 2014/15 was increased to 87.5%, up from the previous year, and this was met.

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Percentage of complaints responded to within 10 working days	88%	89%	<b>89%</b>
<b>Target</b>	85%	85%	<b>87.5%</b>

<sup>1</sup> A QR Code is a machine-readable code consisting of an array of black and white squares, typically used for storing URLs or other information for reading by the camera on a smartphone.

- 2.12 Whilst there has been consistency in response rate performance, there still remains room for improvement, and the target for 2015/16 has increased to 90%. More effective monitoring, in particular through the weekly summary reports sent to Heads of Service during the year, will help to achieve this.
- 2.13 The Customer Service Manager regularly monitors performance standards, both corporately and in local areas, and has dialogue with the respective Heads of Service to address any performance issues, which include administrative efficiency improvements as well as seasonal or service-related issues which will inevitably cause occasional peaks in levels of complaints.

### **Ombudsman Complaints**

- 2.14 This year's Ombudsman's Annual Report for Swale for 2014/15 is again disappointing with its lack of detail, which does not allow comparison with data for previous years. The data we have provided below is from a collation of the statistics from the Ombudsman's report, as well as information that we collate within our own complaints process and CCC system.
- 2.15 In total, the annual data received from the Ombudsman states they received 21 enquiries, which included 12 passed to SBC for consideration and decision, however 22 decisions were made. The other 10 were either closed without investigation (for example, because the Ombudsman considered the complaint to be outside of their jurisdiction) or the customer was referred back to SBC for resolution, for example as an enquiry or stage 1 complaint. However, as the Ombudsman does not provide more detailed information, we are unable to ascertain whether specific customers did in fact follow this up.
- 2.16 The outcomes for the 12 complaints that were formally investigated by the Ombudsman are set out in the table below.

<b>Ombudsman Action</b>	<b>2011/12</b>
Closed after initial enquiry	7
Not upheld	2
Referred back for local resolution	1
Upheld	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

- 2.17 Details for the two that were upheld are set out below:
- (a) **Planning and Development:** the Ombudsman did not find any significant fault by the Council, and whilst there was an administrative error, the Ombudsman found that this did not cause Mr P great injustice. The Council offered to reimburse the costs (£500) Mr P incurred in complaining about the substantive matter and about the Council's delay in responding;

- (b) **Housing:** the Ombudsman upheld Mr X's complaint about the way the Council considered his request for housing assistance. The Ombudsman considered that there was fault and that this caused Mr X injustice. The Council agreed to pay Mr X financial redress of £500.

### **Feedback on the complaints system**

- 2.18 During 2014/15 various methods have been used to seek feedback from complainants in relation the complaints process. We have learnt that a written 'survey' approach tends to elicit responses that reflect not only the complaints process, but the outcome itself. In other words, customers find it difficult to separate the outcome of the complaints process, which may not be to their satisfaction, from the way in which their complaint was handled.
- 2.19 Therefore, since October 2014 courtesy telephone calls by Customer Service have been attempted to all complainants, which allows for the process itself to be discussed. This approach both allows a more qualitative discussion to take place, and as such more positive feedback is being received.
- 2.20 Some examples of customers comments from the courtesy calls include:
- (i) It is good to speak to someone about the situation rather than email or letters.
  - (ii) I am thrilled to receive a phone call asking for feedback on the complaints process, as up until now I thought SBC couldn't care less. Speaking to customers about their complaints is the way forward and I am very pleased to get this call.

### **Reviews and improvements**

- 2.21 One aspect of effective complaint handling is to inform service improvements. Whilst we need to continue to improve the capturing of examples where this has happened, some examples from 2014/15 are as follows:
- (i) we have made changes to web content to make information clearer, and added relevant links to other service, procedures and policies;
  - (ii) Housing Register standard letters have been amended following a complaint about the lack of information when a position on the Register was refused;
  - (iii) Housing Benefit notifications to people in temporary accommodation have been reviewed and amended accordingly;
  - (iv) targeted staff training has been arranged; and
  - (v) the way in which ICT work is resourced and prioritised has been amended to speed up customer-facing changes required by services.

## Summary

2.22 In summary, therefore, of the 441 complaints received by the Council during 2014/15, 18 (4%) were escalated to the Chief Executive (stage 2), and 12 (3%) were ultimately referred to the Ombudsman, none of which resulted in finding evidence of maladministration. A total of £1,000 in compensation was paid as a result of two Ombudsman complaints.

Categories	2014/15	2013/14	2012/13
Total complaints	441	358	358
Justified complaints*	279	195	202
Non-justified complaints*	141	156	153
Partially justified	21	4	6
Justification not stated	0	3	1
Stage 2 (Chief Executive)	18	29	19
Ombudsman	12	10	7

\*Definitions used

Justified: where it is deemed that the relevant process/procedure has not been followed.

Unjustified: where it is deemed that the relevant process/procedure has been followed.

It should be noted that this criteria is open to the interpretation of the officer and their opinion at the time of completing the complaint.

## 3 Proposals

3.1 Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

## 4. Alternatives

4.1 None.

## 5. Consultation

5.1 There has been no formal consultation relating to this report, as it is a summary of statistics for the year in question. However, the Complaints, Compliments and Comments system is by definition a process by which customers are able to deliver feedback on the current provision of services.

## 6. Implications

Issue	Implications
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<b>Issue</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Corporate Plan	Dealing well with Complaints, Compliments and Comments is core to the Corporate Plan priority of being 'A council to be proud of'.
Financial, Resource and Property	None.
Legal and Statutory	None.
Crime and Disorder	None.
Sustainability	None.
Health and wellbeing	None.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	None.
Equality and Diversity	Responding to complaints in a positive and effective manner demonstrates the Council's commitment to ensuring that access to Council services is available to all.

## **7. Appendices**

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Complaints by Service Area 2014/15
- Appendix II: Local Government Ombudsman's Summary Review of Swale Borough Council 2014/15.

## **8. Background Papers**

8.1 None.

Appendix I

Complaints by Service Area 2014/15

Complaints by Service Area	Qtr 1 2014/15	Qtr 2 2014/15	Qtr 3 2014/15	Qtr 4 2014/15	Total 2014/15	Total 2013/14	Responded within 10 working days 2014/15		Responded within 10 working days 2013/14	
							No.	%	No.	%
Chief Executive	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	100%	-	-
Commercial	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Communications	0	0	0	2	2	2	2	100%	2	100%
Community Safety	0	0	1	0	1	2	1	100%	1	50%
Contracts (incl.Waste & Street Scene)	89	59	36	25	209	131	189	90%	123	94%
CSC	0	1	0	1	2	2	2	100%	2	100%
CSC (Gateway)	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Cultural Services	0	1	0	0	1	2	1	100%	-	-
Development Services	11	19	20	25	75	64	58	77%	52	81%
Electoral	0	1	0	1	2	1	1	50%	1	100%
Economy & Regeneration	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	1	100%
Engineering	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	0	0%
ERT	5	9	5	3	22	15	17	77%	14	93%
Grants	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0%	1	100%
Hackney Carriages	1	1	0	0	2	3	1	50%	-	-
Housing	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	100%	-	-
Housing Environmental	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	100%	-	-
Housing Options	4	4	8	11	27	12	25	93%	11	92%
Housing Services	0	0	0	0	0	3	-	-	2	67%
ICT	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	100%	-	-
Legal	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	100%	-	-
Licensing	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	0	0%
Open Spaces	2	6	1	0	9	11	7	78%	8	73%
Parking	9	15	9	8	41	67	40	98%	62	93%
Pollution	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	0%	0	0%
Property	0	0	0	0	0	2	-	-	2	100%
Revenues & Benefits	9	11	7	12	39	39	36	92%	38	97%
Staying Put	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	100%	0	-



Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

18 June 2015

*By email*

Swale Borough Council

Dear Mr Kara

**Annual Review Letter 2015**

I am writing with our annual summary of statistics on the complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) about your authority for the year ended 31 March 2015. This year's statistics can be found in the table attached.

The data we have provided shows the complaints and enquiries we have recorded, along with the decisions we have made. We know that these numbers will not necessarily match the complaints data that your authority holds. For example, our numbers include people who we signpost back to the council but who may never contact you. I hope that this information, set alongside the data sets you hold about local complaints, will help you to assess your authority's performance.

We recognise that the total number of complaints will not, by itself, give a clear picture of how well those complaints are being responded to. Over the coming year we will be gathering more comprehensive information about the way complaints are being remedied so that in the future our annual letter focuses less on the total numbers and more on the outcomes of those complaints.

**Supporting local scrutiny**

One of the purposes of the annual letter to councils is to help ensure that learning from complaints informs scrutiny at the local level. Supporting local

scrutiny is one of our key business plan objectives for this year and we will continue to work with elected members in all councils to help them understand how they can contribute to the complaints process.

We have recently worked in partnership with the Local Government Association to produce a workbook for councillors which explains how they can support local people with their complaints and identifies opportunities for using complaints data as part of their scrutiny tool kit. This can be found [here](#) and I would be grateful if you could encourage your elected members to make use of this helpful resource.

Last year we established a new Councillors Forum. This group, which meets three times a year, brings together councillors from across the political spectrum and from all types of local authorities. The aims of the Forum are to help us to better understand the needs of councillors when scrutinising local services and for members to act as champions for learning from complaints in their scrutiny roles. I value this direct engagement with elected members and believe it will further ensure LGO investigations have wider public value.

### **Encouraging effective local complaints handling**

In November 2014, in partnership with the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and Healthwatch England, we published '*My Expectations*' a service standards framework document describing what good outcomes for people look like if complaints are handled well. Following extensive research with users of services, front line complaints handlers and other stakeholders, we have been able to articulate more clearly what people need and want when they raise a complaint.

This framework has been adopted by the Care Quality Commission and will be used as part of their inspection regime for both health and social care. Whilst they were written with those two sectors in mind, the principles of '*My Expectations*' are of relevance to all aspects of local authority complaints. We have shared them with link officers at a series of seminars earlier this year and would encourage chief executives and councillors to review their authority's approach to complaints against this user-led vision. A copy of the report can be found [here](#).

### **Future developments at LGO**

My recent annual letters have highlighted the significant levels of change we have experienced at LGO over the last few years. Following the recent general election I expect further change.

Most significantly, the government published a review of public sector ombudsmen in March of this year. A copy of that report can be found [here](#). That review, along with a related consultation document, has proposed that a single ombudsman scheme should be created for all public services in England mirroring the position in the other nations of the

United Kingdom. We are supportive of this proposal on the basis that it would provide the public with clearer routes to redress in an increasingly complex public service landscape. We will advise that such a scheme should recognise the unique roles and accountabilities of local authorities and should maintain the expertise and understanding of local government that exists at LGO. We will continue to work with government as they bring forward further proposals and would encourage local government to take a keen and active interest in this important area of reform in support of strong local accountability.

The Government has also recently consulted on a proposal to extend the jurisdiction of the LGO to some town and parish councils. We currently await the outcome of the consultation but we are pleased that the Government has recognised that there are some aspects of local service delivery that do not currently offer the public access to an independent ombudsman. We hope that these proposals will be the start of a wider debate about how we can all work together to ensure clear access to redress in an increasingly varied and complex system of local service delivery.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jane Martin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Dr Jane Martin

Local Government Ombudsman Chair, Commission for Local Administration in England

## Local authority report – Swale Borough Council

For the period ending – 31/03/2015

For further information on interpretation of statistics click on this link to go to <http://www.lgo.org.uk/publications/annual-report/note-interpretation-statistics/>

### Complaints and enquiries received

Local Authority	Adult Care Services	Benefits and tax	Corporate and other services	Education and children's services	Environmental services and public protection	Highways and transport	Housing	Planning and development	Total
Swale BC	0	4	3	0	1	0	6	7	21

### Decisions made

Local Authority	<u>Detailed investigations carried out</u>		Advice given	Closed after initial enquiries	Incomplete/Invalid	Referred back for local resolution	Total
	Upheld	Not Upheld					
Swale BC	2	4	0	8	0	8	22