

<b>Cabinet Meeting</b>		<b>Agenda Item: 5</b>
<b>Meeting Date</b>	10 September 2014	
<b>Report Title</b>	Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report 2013/14	
<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>	Reference number:	
<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 during the year from April 2013 to March 2014.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 This is the fifth annual report summarising the Complaints, Compliments, and Comments (CCC) received by the Council during the ensuing year.
- 2.2 Swale is an organisation that welcomes and encourages feedback from our customers. We endeavour to deliver our services in ways which best suit the needs of our customers, and one way of ensuring that this is the case is to listen and learn from their feedback, whether it be complaints, compliments, or general comments on the services we provide.

## **3. Proposals**

- 3.1 Members are asked to note the contents of the 2013/14 Annual Complaints Report set out at Appendix I.

## **4. Alternatives**

- 4.1 None.

## 5. Consultation

- 5.1 There has been no formal consultation relating to this report, though the Complaints, Compliments and Comments system is a process by which customers are able to deliver feedback on the current provision of services.

## 6. Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	No direct implications, though better use of customer feedback through the Complaints, Compliments and Comments process will enable the Council to improve its service provision.
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: Swale Borough Council – Annual Complaints Report 2013/14
  - Local Government Ombudsman's Summary Review of Swale Borough Council 2013/14.

## 8. Background Papers

- Swale Borough Council – Annual Complaints Report 2012/13

## Swale Borough Council – Annual Complaints Report 2013/14

### 1. Introduction

This is the fifth annual report summarising the Complaints, Compliments, and Comments (CCC) received by the Council during the ensuing year.

Swale is an organisation that welcomes and encourages feedback from our customers. We endeavour to deliver our services in ways which best suit the needs of our customers, and one way of ensuring that this is the case is to listen and learn from their feedback, whether it be complaints, compliments, or general comments on the services we provide.

Our commitment is evidenced by our ongoing programme of earning Customer Service Excellence accreditation for our main areas of customer service delivery, including the Customer Services Team, Housing, Planning, Revenues and Benefits, and Environmental Response.

### 2. Our approach to complaints

The current CCC system has now been in operation for three full years and as a result is 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.

Swale's complaints system comprises a four stage process:

Stage	Description
Stage 1	This is the first stage whereby a complaint relating to a service should first be made to and be dealt with by the service area it relates to.
Stage 2	This is the first level of escalation, whereby the complainant is not satisfied with the response (or lack of response) from the service area, or the complaint relates to the behaviour of a member of staff.
Stage 3	This next level of escalation, to the Council's Independent Arbitrator, is a discretionary stage to be used where the circumstances suggest that arbitration will result in the successful conclusion of the case. If invoked, the Independent Arbitrator will investigate the complaint and suggest a way forward for all parties to agree to.
Stage 4	The final level of escalation (to the Local Government Ombudsman) is available to the complainant if they are not satisfied with the way in which the Council (and if used the Independent Arbitrator) has dealt with their complaint.

The printed CCC leaflet which is available to all our customers clearly illustrates the process for recording formal complaints, comments and compliments. The leaflet will be reviewed again in the autumn to ensure the information we provide is still current or can be simplified.

The CRM system on which all our CCC are logged provides monitoring, including weekly summaries to Heads of Service, so we can be assured that all complaints are logged, tracked, and responded to and improved reporting facilities so we can learn from feedback and ensure that our response times are meeting the standards we have set.

### **3. Developments during 2013/14**

In addition to the improvements to the process which we introduced and reported on last year (see the 2012/13 Annual Complaints Report), during 2013/14 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 on handling complaints and using the CCC system for all relevant managers and staff;
- (iii) published and circulated monthly summary reports for Heads of Service to enable regular monitoring of progress of complaints in their respective service areas;
- (iv) continued to provide quarterly reports on complaints at service level which are used to inform the quarterly performance report to SMT;
- (v) sought examples from Heads of Service of service improvements which have been initiated in response to customer complaints, comments and compliments;
- (vi) published the CCC reports on the intranet; and
- (vii) introduced surveys of all customers who have raised a formal complaint to gain feedback from them and seek to improve the complaints process accordingly.

In addition to the above we have continued to make further efforts to make the system more accessible to our customers. For example, we have established a clear link to our complaints procedure on our website at <http://www.swale.gov.uk/comment-complain-and-feedback/>.

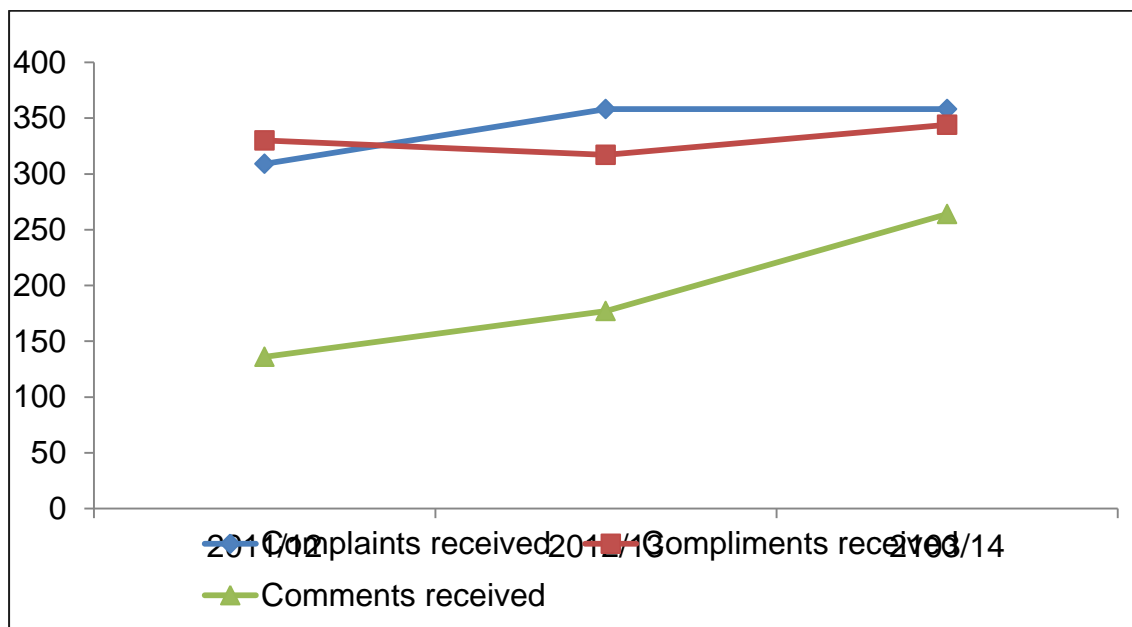
During the year, the Customer Service Centre, Environmental Response Team, Housing Services, and Revenues & Benefits Team all gained a renewal of the externally verified Customer Service Excellence assessment. In addition, Planning gained accreditation for the first time during the autumn of 2013. We are now turning our attention to seeking accreditation for some internal support services also.

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.

### **4. 2013/14 Complaints Performance**

The total number of CCCs received during 2013/14 was 966 compared with 852 in 2012/13; an increase of 12%. The number of complaints was the same and comments increased by 33%. There was also an increase in compliments of 12%.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	Trend against previous year
Complaints received	309	358	<b>358</b>	0%
Compliments received	330	317	<b>344</b>	+8%
Comments received	136	177	<b>264</b>	+33%
<b>Total</b>	775	852	<b>966</b>	+12%



There was no increase in overall complaints received, however the nature of the complaints for the service areas may differ from previous years.

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 2013/14, 89% of all complaints justified, were responded to within the corporate standard of 10 days, which represents a year-on-year improvement – see table below.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	Target
Percentage of complaints responded to within 10 days	83%	88%	<b>89%</b>	<b>85%</b>

The table overleaf provides a breakdown of complaints received, by service area. It is to be expected that the main services, such as Cleansing (including refuse collections), Planning (a small increase), Parking, and Revenues & Benefits (both small decreases) have attracted the highest level of complaints. In particular, there was an anticipated increase in complaints relating to Cleansing during the final quarter of this year, related to the commencement of the new contract, where changes in arrangements did cause confusion for some residents.

Complaints by Service Area	Qtr 1 2013/14	Qtr 2 2013/14	Qtr 3 2013/14	Qtr 4 2103/14	Total 2013/14	Total 2012/13	Total 2011/12	Responded within 10 working days 2013/14		Responded within 10 working days 2012/13		Responded within 10 working days 2011/12	
								No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Chief Executive	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	-	-	1	1
Commercial	0	0	1	0	1	5	1	1	100%	5	100%	1	100%
Communications	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	2	100%	-	-	1	100%
Community Safety	1	1	0	0	2	3	1	1	50%	3	100%	1	100%
Contracts (Cleansing)	25	25	27	54	131	95	81	123	94%	74	78%	69	85%
CSC	1	0	0	1	2	4	5	2	100%	4	100%	5	100%
CSC (Gateway)	0	1	0	0	1	3	3	1	100%	3	100%	3	100%
Cultural Services	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	-	-	-	-	2	100%
Electoral	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	100%	-	-	-	-
Planning	19	20	13	12	64	46	47	52	81%	38	83%	30	64%
Economy & Regeneration	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	1	100%	-	-	1	50%
Engineering	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0%	-	-	-	-
ERT	9	4	1	1	15	10	11	14	93%	10	100%	10	91%
Finance	0	0	0	0	0	0	1			-	-	1	100%
Grants	1	0	0	0	1	2	2	1	100%	2	100%	1	50%
Hackney	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	-	-	2	100%	-	-
Housing Options	6	3	2	1	12	26	30	11	92%	23	88%	21	70%
Housing Services	1	0	0	2	3	4	7	2	67%	2	50%	7	100%
Legal	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	-	-	1	50%	-	-
Leisure/Open Spaces	3	4	2	2	11	12	17	8	73%	10	83%	11	65%
Licensing	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0%	-	-	-	-
Parking	16	18	14	19	67	80	48	62	93%	77	96%	44	92%
Policy	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	-	-	-	0	0%
Pollution	0	1	0	0	1	2	2	0	0%	1	50%	1	50%
Property	0	2	0	0	2	1	3	2	100%	1	100%	1	33%
Revenues & Benefits	11	15	3	10	39	58	38	38	97%	56	97%	35	92%
Staying Put	0	0	0	0	0	3	5	0	-	3	100%	4	80%

The vast majority of complaints (89%) were resolved at the first stage of the process, with 29 having been escalated to Stage Two (Chief Executive), and just 10 having been referred to the Local Government Ombudsman (NB – some complainants self-refer direct to the Ombudsman but these will not be investigated by the LGO unless they have exhausted our own local procedures).

	2011/12	2012/13	<b>2013/14</b>
Total complaints	309	358	<b>358</b>
Justified complaints*	135	202	<b>195</b>
Non justified complaints*	170	153	<b>156</b>
Partially justified	4	6	<b>4</b>
Justification not stated	35	1	<b>3</b>
Escalated to stage 2 (Chief Executive)	12	19	<b>29</b>
Escalated to stage 3 (Local Arbitrator)	3	0	<b>0</b>
Escalated to stage 4 (Ombudsman)	8	7	<b>10</b>

**\*Definitions**

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.*

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.

Whilst there has been a significant improvement in response rate performance, there still remains a degree of room for improvement in particular teams. More effective monitoring and reporting, in particular the weekly summary reports sent to Heads of Service, have contributed to the significant improvement during the year.

**5. Ombudsman Complaints**

This year’s Ombudsman’s Annual Report for 2013/14 is again disappointing with a lack of detail compared with previous years, instead simply stating that the Ombudsman handled ten complaints relating to Swale. It also states that the average number of complaints for a district Council is ten.

Members may recollect that it was not possible to provide the previous full breakdown of LGO complaints for 2012/13. For 2013/14 we have collated data from our own CRM and complaints processes, though it has not been possible to entirely reconcile this figures with the Ombudsman’s much reduced data.

<b>LGO complaints numbers</b>	<b>2011/12</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2013/14</b>
Rejected as being premature	7	No data	<b>3</b>
Investigated	3	No data	<b>6</b>
Not pursued	2	No data	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	14		<b>10</b>

Of the ten complaints that were formally investigated by the Ombudsman none were found to be cases of maladministration, though two were ultimately upheld, and in one case a modest compensatory payment of £200 was made to the complainant by way of compensation under a local settlement.

<b>LGO Complaints outcomes</b>	<b>2011/12</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2013/14</b>
Found to be no maladministration	3	No data	<b>8</b>
Discontinued following local settlement	3	No data	<b>2</b>
Outside of Ombudsman's jurisdiction	0	No data	<b>0</b>
Still in progress	2	No data	<b>0</b>
<b>Total</b>	8		<b>10</b>

We have improved our own system for this year so that we can capture the information that the Ombudsman used to provide as part of their annual report, so the data in next year's annual complaints report will be considerably more reliable and informative.

In summary therefore, of the 358 complaints received by the Council during 2013/14, only 29 (8%) were escalated to the Chief Executive, and 10 (less than 2%) were ultimately referred to the Ombudsman, none of which resulted in finding evidence of maladministration.

## **6. Compliments and Comments**

The number of compliments and comments received during the year have both increased. These are a useful method for passing on positive customer experiences to members of staff, or suggestions for changes to delivery of services too. However, they are relatively "free format" methods of feedback, so it is difficult to categorise them. Where appropriate, these have been passed to the relevant departments for noting and action if relevant.

In next year's annual report it is intended that we provide more information on these areas of feedback, in terms on their nature and any actions that have been taken.

## **7. Reviews and improvements**

Whilst many examples of complaints are caused by individual human errors, or are sometimes used by complainants as quasi-appeals mechanism (eg for planning or for benefits assessments), where patterns are detected they can be used to identify and implement service improvements.



Some examples of this are asset out below:

- (i) enhanced cross-departmental working to implement changes to waste collections, educating residents, and ensuring landowner responsibilities;
- (ii) review of a process in relation to bonfire complaints and documentation following complaint by a service user;
- (iii) the Environment Response Team have introduced 'You said, we did' cards in relation to keep customers informed of progress; and
- (iv) changes made to standard correspondence issued.