

Complaints Annual Report

Summary of complaints to Bassetlaw District Council during 2013-14

1. Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the report is to present a summary of the number and nature of complaints made to the Council between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014. It also details the level of adherence to the Council's timescales for dealing with complaints and shows the way in which complaints were made to the Council.

2. Information and background

2.1 The Council has a 3-step procedure in place for complaint handling. Stage 1 of the procedure is for the appropriate head of Service/Service Manager to respond to the complaint, escalating the complaint to stage 2 of the procedure ensures a review by the Council's Chief Executive is carried out and stage 3, the final stage, is referral to the Local Government Ombudsman.

2.2 Responding to stage 1 complaints within 15 working days is measured as a Local Performance Indicator (PI) with a target for 2013-14 of 94% of all stage 1 complaints to be responded to within 15 working days. The PI was slightly under achieved with 93% of all stage 1 complaints being responded to within 15 working days.

3. Summary of complaints

3.1 During the period 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014, there were a total of 76 complaints received, equal to that of the previous year. This would suggest that the Council is continuing to successfully resolve complaints at a local (service) level.

3.2 Of the total number of complaints received, 76% were received directly by the Complaints & Engagement Officer or the Chief Executive's Office with the remaining majority received by the Services directly or Customer Services.

3.3 The breakdown figures for each service area are as follows (2012-13 figures also appear below for comparison).

| Service Area | 2013-14 | 2012-13 |
|------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Community Prosperity | 20 | 24 |
| Community Engagement & Performance | 1 | 1 |
| Environment & Housing | 19 | 12 |
| Finance & Property | 8 | 1 |
| Revenue & Customer Services | 27 | 30 |
| Support Services | 1 | 8 |
| Total | 76 | 76 |

3.4 Customers may complain in a variety of ways. The financial year analysis shows us that customers' preferred way of getting in touch to make a complaint is by writing to the Council followed by utilising the on-line form or by telephone.

3.5 A breakdown of the way in which complainants chose to lodge their complaint for 2013-14 is shown below:

| Method of contact | Number |
|---|---------------|
| Written letter to Complaints Officer or Chief Executive | 25 |
| Letter to service/customer service | 15 |
| On-line form submission | 10 |
| E-mail (<i>Speak-up mail box</i>) | 2 |
| Telephone | 21 |
| Face to face | 1 |
| Referred by Ombudsman/other | 2 |

3.6 The agreed timescales for responding to complaints for all three stages of the complaints procedure are set out below with reference to days being "working" days.

3.7 Stage 1 complaints: responded to by Head of Service/Service Manager, during 2013-14, 93% of all complaints were responded to within 15 working days narrowly missing the Performance Indicator Target (94%).

3.8 Stage 2 complaints: review and response by the Council's Chief Executive, during 2013-14, out of the 16 complaints reviewed, 14 were responded to within 15 working days with the remaining 2 being responded to within 18, and 22 days respectively largely due to officer availability and/or complexity of the case. The outcome of these complaints is: 10 not upheld; 1 upheld, 5 partially upheld. Comparatively, there were 14 stage 2 complaint reviews for the previous year (2012-13).

4. Outcomes

4.1 Overall out of the 76 complaints received, 38% were either upheld or partially upheld.

5. Categories

5.1 Categories of complaints for 2013-14 are shown below, with 2012-13 shown for comparison.

| Category | 2013-14 | 2012-13 |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| Communication (delays) or lack of communication | 7 | 9 |
| Officer (decision) | 2 | - |
| Advice (officer) | 2 | 3 |
| Service delivery (lack of action) | 4 | 7 |
| Procedural (delays) | - | 3 |
| Procedure | 1 | 2 |
| Action (delays) | 4 | 4 |
| Conduct (officer) | 6 | 6 |
| Standard of work (officer) | 3 | 3 |
| Standard of work (contractor) | - | 3 |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|----|----|
| Dissatisfied (general) | 22 | 13 |
| Lack of response | 5 | 10 |
| Lack of information | 5 | 2 |
| Conduct (external agent) | 3 | 2 |
| Lack of consultation | 1 | 5 |
| Officer (attitude) | 8 | 6 |
| Straight to stage 2 complaint | 3 | 3 |

6. Local Government Ombudsman

6.1 Once the Council's 2-step internal process is exhausted, a complainant may exercise their right to refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman. On publication of her Annual Review Letter to the Council, it was shown that the Ombudsman's office had received 22 complaints and enquiries about the Council during 2013-14 compared to 24 complaints for 2012-13 and 33 for 2011-12.

6.2 There were 23 LGO decisions made during this financial year; 3 upheld, 4 not upheld, 2 advice given, 8 closed after initial enquiries and 6 referred back for resolution.

7. Learning from Complaints

7.1 One of the benefits of having a recognised Complaints Procedure in place is so we can identify service improvements where appropriate as a result of a complaint being made that can bring long terms benefit to the organisation and to the customer. Here are some examples which illustrate the Council making changes as a result of a complaint received and demonstrates how the Council have responded positively to Customer needs.

7.2 Service Improvement – Debt Recovery

A lady complained that the documentation left by the external bailiff was not clear, as a result of her complaint improvements have been made to the wording on the documentation.

7.3 Service Improvement – Empty Homes

A gentleman complained after receiving letters concerning an empty property. The procedure has now been improved to ensure better communication between departments.

7.4 Service Improvement – Housing Adaptations Grant

Following a complaint concerning confusion about the terms and conditions of a grant repayment, whilst the Council were not at fault, it felt that the production of a new leaflet would be useful. The new leaflet now goes out to every grant recipient whose grant is subject to conditions on an annual basis. Due to the number of differing grants we have dealt with over the years we have tried to cover the main points that apply to the majority of those grants.

8. Equality Opportunities Monitoring

As part of our commitment in ensuring we provide good service to all parts of the community, we routinely ask our customers who have complained to supply information about their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status and disabilities.

8.1 This information is only given where the customer is willing to do so. The majority of customers do not supply this information either in part or in full. However, for those who do provide the information, it can offer useful insight.

8.2 All the complainants can be described as White British, with just over half being male and with three complainants reporting to have a disability.

8.3 Almost half of the complainants were over the age of 65, with no complainants reported to be under the age of 30 years.

8.4 The data collated does not give rise to concern relating to service provision or complaint handling with regard to particular groups, ie ethical or other.

9. Complaint handling

9.1 As part of the Council's continued commitment to good complaint handling, we will continue to ensure that the complaints policy and procedure is fit for purpose and easily accessible to all.

10. Compliments

The Council also likes to hear from customers who have received good service. Here are some examples of the compliments we have received throughout the year:

10.1 A lady wanted to compliment the refuse collection service – she lives outside the area but was visiting her son who lives in Bassetlaw. She says, 'they just get on with the job, and don't have a problem with anything, unlike the authority where I live - keep up the good work they are a credit to you'.

10.2 A lady and gentleman wanted to express their gratitude to Council Tax staff who have helped them with the deferral of Council Tax until after the completion of the sale of their house. They wanted to thank staff for being kind and considerate and understanding their situation.

10.3 A lady wanted to compliment the Customer Service reception staff at Retford – she says the help provided was excellent and dealt with sensitively by the officer.

10.4 A lady wanted to compliment the Council's Anti-social behaviour Team for the way in which they have handled a sensitive issue both promptly and effectively which has reassured her.

10.5 A gentleman wanted to compliment the Planning Conservation Officer. He stated that due to the helpful advice and reliability of the officer he was now able to make a positive step forward regarding his property.

11. Future developments

11.1 We will continue to benchmark our complaint handling by working with our neighbouring authorities' complaints teams to ensure that best practice is on-going.

11.2 Through Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) liaison and feedback we will continue to learn how best to handle the most complex and difficult complaints in the most effective way possible utilising the LGO standards.