

## Complaints Annual Report

### Summary of complaints to Bassetlaw District Council during 2011-12

#### 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 2011 and 31 March 2012. 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 2011-12 of 93% of all stage 1 complaints to be responded to within 15 working days. The PI was 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 2011 and 31 March 2012, there were a total of 101 complaints received, which is an increase on the previous year of 91 complaints received.

3.2 Of the total number of complaints received, 77% were received directly by the Complaints & Consultation 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 (2010-11 figures also appear below for comparison).

Service Area	2011-12	2010-11
Community Prosperity	23	12
Community Engagement & Performance	4	5
Environment & Housing	32	35
Finance & Property	7	2
Revenue & Customer Services	31	34
Support Services	4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>93*</b>

*\*Total complaints is 91 for 10/11 – as some complaints involve more than one service area*

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 e-mail.

3.5 A breakdown of the way in which complainants chose to lodge their complaint for 2011-12 is shown below:

<b>Method of contact</b>	<b>Number</b>
Written letter to Complaints Officer/Chief Executive's office	31
Letter to service/customer service	10
On-line form submission	16
E-mail	10
Telephone	20
Face to face	6
Referred by Ombudsman/other	8

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 2011-12, 93% of all complaints were responded to within 15 working days meeting the Performance Indicator Target (93%).

3.8 Stage 2 complaints: review and response by the Council's Chief Executive, during 2011-12, out of the 20 complaints reviewed, 18 were responded to within 15 working days with the remaining two being responded to within 16 and 25 days respectively largely due to officer availability and/or complexity of the case.

3.9 Stage 3 complaints: The Local Government Ombudsman normally allows the Council to respond to complaints within 28 calendar days. The average number of days taken to respond during 2011-12 was 28.5 days.

#### 4. Outcomes

4.1 Overall out of the 101 complaints received, 51% were either upheld or partially upheld.

#### 5. Categories

5.1 Categories of complaints for 2011-12 are shown below, with 2010-11 shown for comparison.

<b>Category</b>	<b>2011-12</b>	<b>2010-11</b>
Communication (delays)	2	5
Officer (decision)	3	2
Advice (officer)	5	9
Service delivery (lack of action)	9	22
Procedural (delays)	1	3
Condition (infrastructure)	3	1
Procedure	7	5
Action (delays)	2	4
Conduct (officer)	3	2

Standard of work (officer)	9	11
Standard of work (contractor)	3	1
Dissatisfied (general)	19	7
Lack of response	3	4
Lack of information	1	2
Conduct (external agent)	4	2
Lack of communication	15	11
Council Policy	5	-
Officer (attitude)	2	4
Straight to stage 2 complaint	4	-

## 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 provisional statistics to the Council, it was shown that the Ombudsman's office had received 33 complaints during 2011-12 compared to 27 during 2010-11. Of the 33 complaints received 5 were given advice, 9 were classed as 'premature' complaints and 19 were forwarded to the investigative team. 23 Ombudsman decisions were made during 2011-12; 1 no power to investigate, 6 investigation not justified, 7 not enough evidence of fault, 7 no or minor injustice, 2 injustice remedied during enquiries.

## 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 - Housing Grants Works

A gentleman complained that he was dissatisfied with the (grants) works to his property carried out by a contractor in that the works were taking considerably longer than expected and there were also concerns regarding the contractor's approach to the customer.

Whilst the Council was confident that the contractor had carried out a number of grant-funded building works and had the appropriate expertise to do this, their approach to Customer Care was not to the standard that the Council would normally have expected.

As a result of this, a review of the contractor was carried out and a decision was made to cease using this contractor for large scale works.

### 7.3 Service Improvement – Town Hall Bookings

Some complaints were received as a result of a service change over and mis-communication between the teams involved which had caused an element of confusion for our customers making Town Hall bookings.

Revised systems and consistent procedures are now in place to deal with bookings for both the Worksop & Retford Town Halls. Improvements include our aim to enhance the customer experience, with the Council acting as a co-ordinator with other agents for example, detailed arrangements will be recorded and communicated to BPL so that the customer does not

have to contact multi-agencies when making their arrangements. By hiring our venues, the Council will make every effort to ensure the customer receives the best service possible.

#### **7.4 Service Improvement – Street Sweeper**

A couple complained that they were awoken by the street-sweeper vehicle very early in the morning on a bank holiday Monday. In order to ensure fewer disturbances to our residents in residential areas, the street sweeper operation does not now commence before 7.30 am.

#### **7.5 Service Improvement – Housing Benefit**

A lady complained on behalf of her elderly mother-in-law concerning a housing benefit re-payment which had occurred due to an increase in the claimant's Mineworker's Private Pension (MPS). The Mineworker's Private Pension payment increases every September which may affect the income of the claimant – they are responsible for reporting the change to the Council.

The elderly lady had not informed the Council of the change which had resulted in an overpayment occurring and letters were sent out to the claimant which can cause confusion.

Although the Council must process the income change and inform the claimant of any overpayment, they recognise that improvements could be made to the change of circumstances procedure. This is based on a "systems thinking" approach to iron out long processes for repetitive tasks, which can frustrate and confuse customers. These improvements were implemented in 2011/12 including the acceptance of telephone notifications of changes in circumstances in certain cases.

#### **7.6 Service Improvement – Housing Benefit**

Customers do tell us when they contact us that benefit letters which explain entitlement, income used, and overpayments are difficult to follow. It's no use us blaming the computer system even though the information we have to give is prescribed.

We send all our letters and bills out securely using an intelligent mailing house called VMR. They have worked with us to simplify the mailing of bills together with the benefit letter and have done money saving work with landlord benefit notifications. The next step is to move the information around on a benefit letter for plainer presentation and better understanding. This is not straightforward as data from computers has to follow set rules and therefore simplifying benefit letters is a major project. We are currently working with VMR to improve notification letter design which will be implemented by the end of this financial year.

### **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 offers useful insight.

8.2 The majority of complainants can be described typically as White British and Male, with just one complainant reporting to have a disability.

8.3 Complainants for 2011-12 were typically over the age range of 40 years.

## **9. Customer Feedback (Complaint handling)**

As part of the Council's continued commitment to listening to its customers, we routinely seek feedback from each customer that has been through the complaints procedure to ensure the system remains accessible and fit for purpose.

9.1 Key messages have shown us that the majority of respondents found the person handling their complaint to be polite, knowledgeable and professional, and that the procedure remains accessible and timely.

9.2 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.

## **10. Future developments**

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

10.2 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.