

## Complaints Annual Report

### Summary of complaints to Bassetlaw District Council during 2012-13

#### 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 2012 and 31 March 2013. 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 96% of all stage 1 complaints being responded to within 15 working days.

#### 3. Summary of complaints

3.1 During the period 1 April 2012 and 31 March 2013, there were a total of 76 complaints received, which is a 25% reduction on the previous year of 101 complaints received. This would suggest that the Council is successfully resolving more 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 (2011-12 figures also appear below for comparison).

Service Area	2012-13	2011-12
Community Prosperity	24	23
Community Engagement & Performance	1	4
Environment & Housing	12	32
Finance & Property	1	7
Revenue & Customer Services	30	31
Support Services	8	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>101</b>

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 2012-13 is shown below:

<b>Method of contact</b>	<b>Number</b>
Written letter to Complaints Officer or Chief Executive	20
Letter to service/customer service	13
On-line form submission	16
E-mail ( <i>Speak-up mail box</i> )	3
Completed Speak-up form	3
Telephone	15
Face to face	2
Referred by Ombudsman/other	4

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 2012-13, 96% 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 2012-13, out of the 14 complaints reviewed, 11 were responded to within 15 working days with the remaining three being responded to within 18, 21 and 22 days respectively largely due to officer availability and/or complexity of the case. The outcome of these complaints is: 9 not upheld; 1 upheld, 4 partially upheld. Comparatively, there were 20 stage 2 complaint reviews for the previous year (2011-12)

#### 4. Outcomes

4.1 Overall out of the 76 complaints received, 41% were either upheld or partially upheld.

#### 5. Categories

5.1 Categories of complaints for 2012-13 are shown below, with 2011-12 shown for comparison. (*Note: some complaints can cover more than one category*)

<b>Category</b>	<b>2012-13</b>	<b>2011-12</b>
Communication (delays)	4	2
Officer (decision)	-	3
Advice (officer)	3	5
Service delivery (lack of action)	7	9
Procedural (delays)	3	1
Condition (infrastructure)	-	3
Procedure	2	7
Action (delays)	4	2
Conduct (officer)	6	3
Standard of work (officer)	3	9

Standard of work (contractor)	3	3
Dissatisfied (general)	13	19
Lack of response	10	3
Lack of information	2	1
Conduct (external agent)	2	4
Lack of communication	5	15
Lack of consultation	5	-
Council Policy	-	5
Officer (attitude)	6	2
Straight to stage 2 complaint	3	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 Annual Review Letter to the Council, it was shown that the Ombudsman's office had received 24 complaints about the Council during 2012-13 compared to 33 complaints for 2011-12 and 27 for 2010-11.

6.2 Of the 24 complaints received, 7 were recorded 'Not to initiate an investigation', 14 'To discontinue investigation', 2 were 'Outside jurisdiction', and 1 'Satisfied with Council's actions'.

## 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 Benefit

A lady completing a housing benefit form on behalf of Housing Association tenants found the form to be confusing, in response to this, we have amended the heading on Page 6 of the form to avoid any confusion.

### 7.3 Service Improvement – Council Tax

A gentleman was issued with two bills for outstanding Council Tax, the direct debit form he submitted to the council applied to the open, current account and did not take into account a closed account. Closed accounts are not ordinarily put through the direct debt process as they can be for large amounts that are not always practical for the customer to pay as a one-off collection. Procedures have been strengthened so that officers may consider multiple accounts for direct debit where appropriate to do so.

### 7.4 Service Improvement – Legal

A gentleman complained that the Legal Department had not responded to his further e-mails concerning an on-going enforcement issue. The Council explained that they were unable to respond to every communication, but the approach adopted is to advise relevant parties as and when there were any material changes to the legal situation regarding specific matters. As a result, the Council's web-site has been updated to advise people of the customer standards in this regard in order to manage expectations appropriately.

## **7.5 Service Improvement – Business Rates**

A gentleman received bills for his business rates which he claimed should be exempt as the property was classed as a “listed building”. Bills and reminders are systematically produced, so better information sharing between departments has enabled the team to put the necessary markers on the system to identify these types of properties in the future.

## **7.6 Service Improvement – Planning/Legal**

A complex complaint involving an on-going planning application and legal representation has resulted in the implementation of tighter procedures with regard to the responsibilities required for these types of case files in the future.

## **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 two complainants reporting to have a disability.

8.3 The majority of Complainants for 2012-13 were typically between the age range of 51-60 years with no complainants being under the age of 30 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. This exercise is to gauge the customer experience of the process and not the outcome of the complaint.

9.1 Key messages have shown us that the majority of respondents found the person handling their complaint to be polite, knowledgeable and professional, with just under half finding that the procedure remains easy and accessible.

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. Compliments**

As well as complaints, the Council also likes to hear from customers who have received good service. Here are some of the compliments we have received during this period:

10.1 A lady wanted to compliment the waste collection service and pass on her thanks after she reported her bin had been missed – it was collected straight away the next day.

10.2 A lady and gentleman wrote in and asked for their thanks to be forwarded for the very good customer care they received when visiting the Council offices to seek advice on a

Council Tax matter. They mentioned that their query was resolved with care and understanding and that they left feeling they had achieved something.

10.3 A lady gave a compliment to the reception staff for helping her sort her problem quickly and professionally and for always having a smile and being friendly.

10.4 A lady spoke to an officer in the Housing Benefit department and says she was very helpful and gave extra advice which she appreciated.

10.5 A gentleman wanted to compliment the Parks Department regarding his hedge. He stated that he received excellent service and commented on the tractor driver and the care he took with the job.

## **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.