



Bassetlaw
DISTRICT COUNCIL
— North Nottinghamshire —

Complaints: Annual Report 2021-22

Summary of Formal Complaints to Bassetlaw District Council – to year ended 31/3/22

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 2021 and 31 March 2022. It also details the level of adherence to the Council's timescales for dealing with complaints and shows the method of how 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 and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) or Housing Ombudsman (HO).

2.2 Responding to stage 1 complaints within 15 working days is measured as a Local Corporate Performance Indicator (PI) with a target for 2021-22 of 80% of all stage 1 complaints to be responded to within 15 working days. The PI was achieved with 86% of all stage 1 complaints being responded to within 15 working days for the financial year.

3. Summary of complaints

3.1 During the period 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, there were 220 complaints received. This is an increase of 71 complaints, up from 149 for 2020-21. Providing Council services throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic have been maintained with as little disruption as possible. However, some delays have inevitably occurred due to staff illness, self-isolation and the requirement for social distancing and subsequent restrictions, in conjunction with Government Guidance. The Local Government Ombudsman 'Unprecedented Pressure' Report states, "*the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented pressures for local authorities and care providers, requiring them to re-prioritise and re-design existing services whilst at the same time adopting new duties to support residents and local businesses through a time of national crisis*" (Ombudsman, Mick King Feb 2021).

3.2 Of the formal complaints received in 2021-22, 90% were made digitally by on-line form submission or by e-mail.

3.3 The breakdown figures for each service area are detailed below (2020-21 figures are included for comparison).

Service Area	2021-22	Service Area	2020-21
Finance & Property	36	Finance & Property	33
Corporate Services	17	Corporate Services	5
Regeneration	27	Regeneration	23
Neighbourhoods	45	Neighbourhoods	41
Housing	95	Housing	47
TOTAL	220	TOTAL	149

3.4 Customers may complain in a variety of ways to enable accessibility to all. The financial year analysis shows us that 90% of customers' preferred way of getting in touch to make a complaint is by utilising the digital approach, the vast majority using the Council's web-site on-line form submission or by e-mail.

3.5 The remainder chose to telephone in or write a letter to the CEO office or direct to the service.

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 the Head of Service/Service Manager, during 2021-22, 189 out of the 220 complaints were responded to within 15 working day, ie, 86% of all complaints.

3.8 Stage 2 complaints: review and response by the Council's Chief Executive, there were 18 stage 2 complaints, compared to 14 for the year 2020-21. Out of the 18 complaints reviewed, all but one were responded to within 15 working days. The outcomes of these complaints at stage 2 are: 7 not upheld, 7 partially upheld and 4 upheld.

4. Outcomes

4.1 Overall out of the 220 complaints received, 54% were either upheld or partially upheld with 46% not upheld.

5. Categories

5.1 Categories of complaints for 2021-22 are shown below, with 2020-21 included for comparison:

Category	2021-22	2020-21
Communication (delays) or lack of communication	13	4
Officer (decision)	10	8
Advice (officer)	2	5
Service delivery (lack of action)	49	36
Service delivery (delay)	21	9
Conduct (officer)	7	10
Standard of work /quality (officer)	8	19

Standard of work (contractor)	4	5
Dissatisfied (general) <i>(This can be where there is more than one reason for complaint)</i>	61	24
Lack of response/response delay	33	25
Conduct(external agent/contractor)	1	-
Officer (attitude)	9	3

6. Local Government Ombudsman (LGSCO) and Housing Ombudsman

6.1 Once the Council's 2-step internal process is exhausted, a complainant may exercise their right to seek further advice and refer the matter to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) or Housing Ombudsman. On publication of the Annual Review Letter to the Council, it was shown that the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's office had received 6 complaints and enquiries about the Council during 2021-22, again a consistent decrease from the 12 complaints received in 2020-21.

6.2 There were 6 decisions made by the LGSCO during this financial year; 1 referred back for local resolution, 2 cases closed after initial enquiries, 1 incomplete/invalid, 2 advice given. There were no investigations.

6.3 There was 1 Housing Ombudsman case investigated during this period which was upheld with appropriate recommendations made which have been fully agreed and complied with.

7. Learning from Complaints

7.1 One of the benefits of having a recognised Complaints Procedure in place is to identify service improvements where appropriate to do so as a result of complaints being made that can bring benefits to both customers and to the organisation going forward.

7.2 Throughout 2021/22 a number of wide-ranging improvements were identified by Service Managers as a result of complaints made, which included revised administrative/processes being implemented, staff reminders and refresher training, and the recognition that closer cross-service working should be undertaken where appropriate to do so whereby complex complaints involve more than one service area.

8. Equality Opportunities monitoring and developments

8.1 The Council is committed in ensuring we provide good service to all parts of the community, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, marital status or disability.

8.2 Data collated historically 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 and developments

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 accessible to all. The formal complaints process formed part of the Digital by Default Phase (I) Project, enabling optimum usage and accessibility in terms of customer feedback. In addition, making 'reasonable adjustments' for customers where appropriate to do so is included within the policy.

9.2 Following on from a report to the Council's Cabinet in April 2016: '*Digital First - Customer Programme*', and the objective to '*facilitate as many customers as possible to access our*

services through digital channels', the Complaints Policy was refreshed to both encourage and support the drive towards digital for those customers wishing to complain. Whilst the procedure itself remains unchanged, more emphasis was given within the Policy towards the digital process and the help and guidance that is available for those that may require it in order to encourage optimum use of the on-line facility.

9.3 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman guidance states that they will treat any complaint about a service provided by a third party on behalf of the Council as being *'against the Council'*. The Council's policy is explicitly clear about the definition of a complaint as *'An expression of dissatisfaction about a council service (whether that service is provided by the council or by a contractor or partner on behalf of the Council) that requires a response'*.

9.4 General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR): any personal details or information obtained in order to appropriately process formal complaints in line with the procedure will be stored securely and will only be used for the purposes as intended in conjunction with the GDPR principles.

9.5 The Council brought the Housing Services 'ALMO', (Formerly, 'A1 Housing Bassetlaw Ltd') back 'in-house' in October 2018. As part of the process, Formal Complaints for the Housing Service have been considered in line with all other Council Services, ie in conjunction with the Council's formal complaints procedure with effect from 1st April 2019. As a result of this, the Council's formal complaints procedure was adapted to incorporate appropriate and relevant information concerning the 'Designated Persons' process and the Housing Ombudsman Service effective from 1st April 2019.

9.6 The Housing Ombudsman introduced a "Complaint Handling Code" in July 2020 and all Local Authorities were required to 'self-assess' against the code and publish the results of the self-assessment by December 31st 2020. The purpose of the code is to enable the Council *'to resolve complaints raised by their residents quickly and to use the learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and residents.'* It should be noted that the Housing Ombudsman has made further changes to the code effective from 1st April 2022 and the Council has acted on these requirements. A self-assessment is required by 1st October 2022.

9.7 In response to the further requirements, a Housing Complaint Monitoring Panel is being convened during 2022. The purpose of the panel is to drive change across the Housing Service and raise standards for tenants and customers. The Panel will achieve this by undertaking quality checks on all aspects of complaint handling and performance, analysing and understanding themes for complaints and spotlighting areas for further scrutiny.

10. Future developments

10.1 The sound working relationship between the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman with the Council continues. Through the ongoing Ombudsman liaison and feedback, we will continue to learn how best to handle the most complex and challenging complaints in the most effective way possible utilising the Ombudsman standards and best practice guidance.