

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

REPORT TO AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting:	24 th September, 2015
Report of:	Compliance and Customer Relations Manager
Subject/Title:	Report on Customer Feedback – Complaints, Compliments and referrals to Local Government Ombudsman 2014-2015

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 Feedback from customers is welcomed and encouraged by Cheshire East Council, in order that the information can be used to drive service improvements. This report summarises the formal feedback received from customers during the course of 2014/15, together with a summary of the cases dealt with by the Local Government Ombudsman. It also reflects on the trends, issues and responses across all council services.
- 1.2 During 2014/15 the Council received 2962 instances of customer feedback - 1346 were compliments, 181 were suggestions and 1435 were complaints. (Details are attached at **Appendices 1a, b and c.**) Complaints have reduced by 35% compared with 2013/14 (2231), although 34% of the complaints received in 2013/14 specifically related to the changes to green waste collections (749 out of 2231).
- 1.3 The number of recorded compliments was 1346, compared with 1140 in 13/14. 50% of these related to Adult Social Care. The Council also recorded 181 suggestions (117 in 2013/14). These are neither complaints nor compliments but often suggested changes to policy or working practice.
- 1.4 In addition, there was a significant reduction in complaints from MP's on behalf of their constituents received by the Chief Executive's office (77 in 2014/15 compared with 188 in 13/14). These are not formally recorded on the Council's corporate feedback system, but are referred directly by the Chief Executive's office to the services to respond.

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the contents of this report and makes any further response it considers appropriate.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 The Terms of Reference for the Audit and Governance Committee include seeking assurance that customer complaint arrangements are robust.

4.0 Wards Affected

4.1 All wards.

5.0 Local Ward Members

5.1 Not applicable.

6.0 Policy Implications

6.1 Adherence to the Corporate Complaints, Suggestions and Complaints Policy, the Children's Social Care Complaints Policy and the Adults Social Care Complaints Policy is key to ensuring that customers have an effective means of feeding back about our services. This is to ensure that we understand what we are doing well and where we may need to improve services we deliver.

7.0 Financial Implications

7.1 If fault causing injustice is found, Cheshire East Council can be asked to pay compensation to a complainant. The Council made three compensation payments in 2014/15 amounting to £4150.

8.0 Legal Implications

8.1 There are no specific legal issues associated with this report.

9.0 Risk Management

9.1 Robust complaint tracking, handling and monitoring arrangements enable the Council to quickly identify potential internal control issues and areas of regulatory, financial and reputational risk. It is important, therefore, that the action the Council takes following the feedback it receives from customers is appropriate, relevant, implemented and promotes wider learning where necessary. In receiving this report, considering the implications in respect of governance, risk management or control, and supporting the development of robust arrangements, the Audit & Governance Committee makes an important contribution to the Council's assurance process.

10.0 Background and Options

10.1 Once a formal complaint has been recorded it is passed to the Service Manager to respond. The customer has a right of appeal (Stage 2) if he/she is not satisfied with the reply. Stage 2 appeals are handled by an officer independent of the service being complained about. With Adults Social Care complaints, customers are encouraged to come back to the Service Manager if they remain unhappy with the response to their initial complaint. All customers have the right to appeal to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) at any stage of the process but the Ombudsman prefers the customer to have exhausted the organisation's complaints procedure first.

10.2 Stage 2 complaints

Corporate – of the 1244 corporate complaints received in 2014/15, 74 (6%) customers requested a Stage 2 investigation and 17 (1%) went straight to Stage 2 (for example in cases where there may have already been lengthy e-mail communications between the service and the customer). This compares with 2013/14, when 50 (2.5%) customers requested a Stage 2 investigation and 11 (0.5%) went straight to Stage 2. However, in 2013/14, there was an exceptionally high number of Stage 1 complaints (22%) relating to green waste collection. The main areas which received requests for Stage 2 investigations were Council Tax and Business Rates, Development Management and Highways.

Children's Social Care – 98 new complaints were received in 2014/15, compared with 79 received in 2013/14. Of the 98 complaints, 4 were ultimately taken to Stage 2.

Adults Social Care – 93 new complaints were received in 2014/15, compared with 107 in 2013/14.

10.3 LGO referrals

All customers are offered the opportunity to appeal to the LGO if they are unhappy with the way in which the Council has handled their complaint. **Appendices 2 and 3** show the number of Decision Notices issued to the Council during 2013/14 (75) and 2014/15 (90). In 2014/15 the LGO closed 133 cases relating to Cheshire East. Of these 133 cases, 43 were not directly referred back to the Council¹, 39 cases were closed after the initial enquiry, 30 were not upheld and 21 were upheld.

10.4 LGO Annual Report 2014/15

Headlines from the LGO's latest Annual Report reveal that, for all local authorities, they experienced a 10% increase in Social Care Complaints, they upheld 46% of all complaints where they carried out a detailed investigation and they received an 11% decrease in complaints about benefits and tax. They report that, as a proportion of their total work, education and children's services remained the most complained about area, but that, overall, the number of local authority complaints and enquiries they received remained largely static to 2013/14. A copy of the report can be accessed via the LGO's website at <http://www.lgo.org.uk/publications/annual-reviews/>. Their classification of outcomes differs slightly to that of Cheshire East, in that the Council records the number of Decision Notices received and the outcomes contained within these, whereas the LGO do not detail their outcomes in terms of Decision Notices, but in terms of number of 'detailed investigations'.

Comparisons with other local authorities

Cheshire East Council has the 14th largest population of the 325 local authorities compared in the LGO report and ranked 28th highest for

¹ In these cases, the complainant is given advice, referred back for local resolution or advised that the complaint is incomplete or invalid.

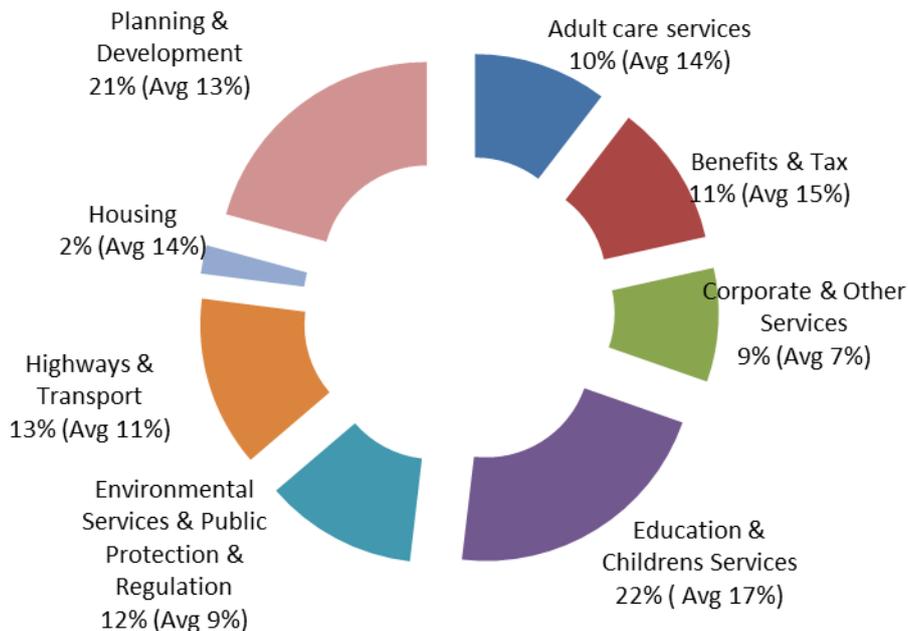
complaints/enquiries to the LGO in 2014-15. (In 2013-14 the Council had the 13th largest population and ranked 27th highest.)

	2014-15 Cheshire East	2014-15 Other LA's	2013-14 Cheshire East	2013-14 Other LA's
Complaints/enquiries to LGO per 10000 population	3.6	2.9	3.5	3.1
Ranking	48th		50th	

In 2014/15 the highest number of referrals related to Education and Children's services (29) and Planning and Development (28), ranked 11th and 3rd respectively. (In 2013/14 the highest was Planning and Development with 38 referrals.)

The chart below shows the distribution of referrals to the LGO in 2014-15 relating to Cheshire East, compared with those for other local authorities.

Distribution of referrals to LGO relating to Cheshire East Council - averages for other local authorities in brackets



10.5 Frequent Complaints

The most frequent complaints received by the Council in 2014/15 are as follows:

Service Area	Most frequent cause for complaint	%age change from 2013/14
Waste and Recycling (Ansa)	Inconsistent collections. Bin replacement/delivery. Attitude/actions of waste operatives.	-15% (excluding green waste complaints in 2013/14)
Highways Operations	Lack of contact/action following report.	-22%
Council Tax, Business Rates and Billing	Recovery/bailiff action. Level of service delivered. Account processing.	+34% (50% of the increase related to complaints about bailiff action. Changes to enforcement legislation in April 2014 resulted in more Council taxpayers being subject to costs not previously charged. Improvements are also being made to the handling of telephone enquiries, which should improve customer service significantly.)
Development Management	Lack of contact/response from Case Officer. Level of service delivered (delays in processing applications). Disagreement with decision.	+37% (2014/15 was a particularly challenging year for Development Management with high levels of planning applications and also an unprecedented number of planning appeals. This, coupled with difficulties with staff retention and recruitment, resulted in high staff caseloads. Currently there is a significant push on improving communication with customers and additional resource has been allocated to the teams. A wider review of customer service and how the customer interacts with Development Management is due to take place before the end of 2015/16.)

Adults Social Care	Charging. Lack of communication. Direct payments (in 2014/15, 51% of complaints concerned these issues compared with 43% in 2013/14).	-13%
Children's Social Care	Inaccuracies and delays in minutes, reports and assessments. Lack of information and updates. Lack of notice about meetings.	+24% (Whilst complaints have increased, there has also been a significant increase in compliments, reflecting improved customer satisfaction. Only 4 of the complaints were not resolved at Stage 1, demonstrating that the service is listening to customers. Children in need plans are now completed at meetings and copies provided to attendees. The service has also invested in a new business support process to deliver enhanced logistical support.)

10.6 MP's complaints

Responses to complaints from MP's on behalf of their constituents are coordinated by the Chief Executive's Office. The table below details the MP's complaints received during 2014/15 compared with 2013/14:

Service	2014/2015	2013/2014
Highways and Transport	19	74
Other	13	11
Planning	9	18
Children's Services	6	9
Environmental Health, Licensing and Trading Standards	6	15
Adults Services	5	7
Compliance	5	0
ANSA/Waste	3	18
Council Tax and Business Rates	3	10
Communities	2	0
Housing/Housing Benefit	2	13
Assets	1	1
Orbitas	1	6
Regeneration	1	0

Parking	1	0
Development Management	0	2
Legal and Democratic Services	0	2
Leisure	0	2
Total	77	188

10.7 Training and benchmarking

Three one-day training sessions on Effective Complaints Handling have been delivered by the LGO this year to managers, Stage 2 investigators and Complaints Coordinators across the organisation. These were very well received and further training days are planned during the remainder of 2015/16.

External benchmarking is also undertaken and members of the Customer Relations and Compliance team meet with their counterparts in other authorities to ensure that the Council is learning from best practice elsewhere. Regular meetings take place with senior management teams to discuss feedback and agree learning points, actions and follow up of these actions.

11.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting:

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