

Report of: Chief Executive
To: Standards Committee
Date: 9th June 2006 **Item No:**
Title of Report : Quality Improvement System – Analysis of Corporate Complaints 2005-2006

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To provide statistical information and analysis of customer feedback through complaints.

Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Rundle

Scrutiny Responsibility: N/A

Ward(s) affected: All

Report Approved by: William Reed, Democratic Services Manager

Policy Framework: Corporate Governance

Recommendation(s): The Committee is asked to note and comment on the report.

Introduction

1. At its meeting on 28th April, Committee agreed that:
 - i. It received a report on complaints monitoring and overseeing twice-yearly with the first report being presented at its meeting on 9th June 2006;
 - ii. The report contained similar details and analysis as the report previously considered by Community Scrutiny Committee;

- iii. The report was forwarded to Community Scrutiny Committee for information purposes.
2. This report provides statistical information and analysis of complaints received and determined by the Council in the second half of the year 2005/2006 and for the year as a whole. Some comparative data for 2004/2005 is also provided.

Quality Improvement System

3. Committee is reminded that complaint handling is part of a wider quality improvement system, which aims to ensure that feedback received from customers, whether positive or negative, is used to help improve services. As such, the Council welcomes any feedback.
4. Committee is further reminded that the handling of complaints is undertaken either within the business units themselves (Stages 1 and 2) or by the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors (Stage 3).
5. Recording details and monitoring of complaint sat Stages 1 and 2 is the responsibility of the individual Business Managers. They have provided the summary statistical information and the commentary on the significant trends, which they believe have been apparent from the number of complaints received in their respective units, and the action, if any, that has followed.
6. The Chief Executive and Corporate Secretariat Manager meet regularly to analyse and review complaints and other feedback information that is available. At these meetings, where appropriate, they discuss with the relevant Business Managers and Complaints Officers the trends and the actions that have been taken place because of the feedback received.

Analysis of Complaints Received

7. Appendix 1 provides summary details of complaints received at Stages 1 and 2 and the actions taken in respect of justified complaints for the whole year 2005/2006. Comparative data for 2004/2005 was not available when the report was prepared.
8. Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 in Appendix 2 provide an analysis of the complaints handled by the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors in accordance with Stage 3⁽¹⁾ of the Council's complaints procedure. Information is categorized as follows:
 - a. Breakdown by business unit and whether or not the complaint was justified (Table 1);
 - b. The nature of the complaint (Table 2);

- c. The action taken by the Council where the complaint was deemed to be justified (Table 3);
- d. The result of the reply being sent (Table 4).

In addition to the totals for the current year and figures for the two halves of the year, comparative information is provided for the full year 2004/2005.

- 9. Appendix 3 provides information in respect of decisions made by the Local Government Ombudsman for complaints referred to the Council.

General Commentary on Complaints Received

- 10. Committee should continue to be aware that not only are complaints a welcome method of feedback but the number of complaints also needs to be viewed in the wide variety of services the Council provides and the number of decisions it takes on behalf of the citizens of and visitors to Oxford.
- 11. Complaints continue to be received because decisions taken by the Council in its regulatory roles are disputed. Planning, Environmental Health and Housing have each received complaints in this category. If there has been adherence to proper procedures and staff have acted in a proper manner, such complaints are not considered to be justified.

Stages 1 and 2 Commentary

- 12. As in previous reports, the highest numbers of complaints are made against the business units that provide frontline services to most members of the public – City Works, Revenues and Benefits, Leisure and Culture (formerly Leisure and Parks) and Oxford Building Solutions.

- 13. The following trends and comments have been reported by business units:

- i. **Oxford Building Solutions (OBS)**

Complaints for the period 1st October to 31st March showed an increase for the same period in the previous year but were about the same as for the first half of the year 2005/2006. The increased number is largely because OBS now captures complaints from a wider source.

In line with improving the quality of service provided, OBS follow up complaints after responses are sent and matters resolved. Preventative action that can be taken to reduce complaints of a similar nature recurring is established.

Statistics show that the majority of complaints received relate to service delivery (always the highest figure), with quality of work, complaints in respect of policy and disputes remaining low. To try to further improve performance, which nonetheless is good, a new planning team to better co-ordinate workload and achieve completion within the target dates has been introduced.

No policy changes have been deemed necessary.

ii. Housing

No particular trends are apparent from the complaints received. No service changes have been made because of complaints being received. The numbers of complaints about staff behaviour showed a welcome decrease in the second half of the year.

iii. Planning

Complaints continue to relate to decisions to grant or refuse planning permission. The complainant disagrees with the decision and seeks to blame Planning for either recommending approval or refusal. Perceived breaches of the 45 and 25-degree guidelines and a reluctance to accept that the guidelines are just that, not an absolute limit, remain a common cause of complaint.

Some complaints were received about the lack of consultation.

No major changes were made because of the complaints received but Planning officers were reminded of the protocols to be followed in respect of consultation and to maintain proper records of site visits.

The increase in the number of complaints in the second half of the year is attributed to the usual seasonal variation.

iv. Leisure and Culture

Several variations in the number and nature of complaints are apparent. Complaints about grounds maintenance are higher in summer and lead to a higher total number in the first half of the year.

During 2005/2006 several complaints were received that related to the practice of laying down memorials, work that was undertaken on health and safety grounds following the memorials inspection.

v. City Works

No significant trends were apparent. Missed bins continue to be the main cause of complaint but these are usually rectified quickly. The number of justified missed bins is difficult to quantify. The crew may have missed a resident's bin but the resident may not have put out the

bin on time or presented non-domestic waste. City Works' records do not identify the difference.

The number of complaints received also needs to be compared to the extent of the unit's operation. As reported previously, it serves 234,000 properties and about 600,000 customers a month.

Although comparatively few in number, complaints have also been received about the state of Gloucester Green Toilets and rubbish along the ring road. In both cases, measures have been taken to improve matters.

vi. Revenues and Benefits

Trends in Complaints:

- a. Of the 72 complaints received, 39% were justified in whole or part.
- b. 79% of complaints received during period 1st October 2005 to 31st March 2006 have been answered within 14 days of receipt by Oxford City Council.
- c. 84% of complaints received during this period have been answered within seven days of receipt by quality team, despite on going staff shortages and increased workload in other areas.
- d. Most complaints were about errors in claim administration but investigation usually found the claim had been dealt with correctly. A letter of explanation, with further advice where appropriate was sent. There is a case for assessors to customize the system produced letters with a better explanation but the benefits of this have to be off set by longer processing times so is unlikely to happen except in the most complex cases.
- f. There has continued to be a high number of complaints relating the self-employed claims and the procedure used is currently under review.
- g. There were four Stage 2 complaints. Three of these resulted in corrective action. However, this action was already under way before second stage complaint received.
- h. In some cases, it was necessary to request further information before a decision could be taken regarding the justification for the complaint. In these cases, the quality team worked closely with the assessment teams to provide customers with sufficient information to enable them to provide every thing required.
- i. Slightly fewer complaints were received during the second half of the year 2005/2006 with 54% received for the period 1st April to 30th September 2005 and 46% received for the second half of the year.

- j. The number of complaints received for the half year from 1st October 2005 was slightly up on the same period for the previous year. During the same period in 2004/2005 67 complaints were received.

Action taken:

- a. One complaint that related to missing documents led to a change in the procedure for returning documents.
- b. One landlord's complaint in respect of the direct payment of Housing Benefit resulted in compensation being paid.
- c. Councillors have continued to send requests directly to individuals within the quality team and improved relationships have been built.
- d. Work to improve the benefits website is ongoing and it is hoped to have the online calculator available for customers use in the next few weeks.
- e. Standard letters have been updated and re-formatted.
- f. Quality and appeals teams are moving gradually towards more integrated working.

Stage 3 Commentary

14. The number of complaints received at the Stage 3 level increased in 2005/2006 compared to the previous year. The increase was apparent in both the first and second half of the year. The most notable increases related to OBS, which increased from seven in 2004/2005 to 17 in 2005/2006, and Housing where the number doubled from 16 to 32 for the two years. The Housing figure for 2005/2006 was higher because several residents in the same street complained about a nearby property used for multi occupation purposes. These complaints were found not to be justified.
15. Despite the increase in the total number of complaints, the number determined in 2005/2006 that were considered justified showed a decrease of one compared to the previous year.
16. The majority of complaints referred to the Chief Executive continue to relate to disputed decisions (e.g. those in respect of Planning) and service delivery (e.g. those in respect of Housing and OBS). In the latter category complainants usually say that their expectations are not being met. Investigation has shown that, in most instances, the Council has acted properly and that on occasion the customer expectations were unreasonable. Business Managers, though, need to be mindful that they should, wherever possible, make clear the service standards that apply so that expectations are not raised unnecessarily

and explain the reasons why it is not possible for a particular service to be delivered.

17. The highest category of justified complaints has remained dissatisfaction with service delivery. However, the number when analysed at business unit level continues to be small and no particular concerns are apparent. Investigation into the complaints has not revealed any common factors.
18. The number of justified complaints that relate to staff attitude and behaviour has shown a welcome decrease (from six to one when the two years are compared). The total number of complaints about staff attitude has also fallen (by three when comparing the two years). Although the numbers involved are small, the downward trend may be evidence of the investment the Council has made in respect of customer care in recent years.
19. The main way of resolving justified complaints has remained ensuring the work about which the complaint was made is undertaken. Although not shown separately in the apology category, apologies were given in these circumstances, where appropriate.
20. With regard to feedback from complainants after they had received a response to their complaint, as previously, the vast majority made no further contact. The number of cases referred to the Ombudsman has shown a definite increase, although still relatively small compared to the total. A small minority of complainants continue to engage in correspondence to dispute the findings (usually without justification) and it is a concern they take a disproportionate amount of officers' time. Where necessary, the complainant will be informed that the matter is closed as far as the Council is concerned.

Ombudsman Complaints

21. The number of complaints referred to the Ombudsman has remained very low. The number of cases where the Ombudsman issued a decision in 2005/2006 was slightly lower than for the previous year. With the increase in referrals to the Ombudsman referred to in 20 above, it remains to be seen whether this trend will continue for the current year.
22. The number of cases where the Ombudsman found against the Council continues to be low. The three local settlements in 2005/2006 resulted respectively in a Business Rates debt being written off, an apology being given and a £2,000 compensation being paid.

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Background papers: None

Appendix 1

Summary details of complaints received at Stages 1 and 2

Business Unit	Staff Behaviour			Dispute			Service Delivery			Policy			Total
	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	
Built Environment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	2
Business Systems	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
City Works	See separate table (circulated separately)												
Customer Services	5	0	5	3	0	3	0	3	3	0	0	0	11
Environmental Health	2	1	3	2	0	2	6	1	7	2	0	2	14
Facilities Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Finance & Asset Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	7	0	0	0	7
Housing Services	22	4	26	3	1	4	12	7	19	1	1	2	51
Human Resources	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Legal & Democratic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Leisure & Culture	11	2	13	26	5	31	43	14	57	3	0	3	104
Neighbourhood Renewal	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	5	5	0	1	1	7
Oxford Building Solutions	14	5	19	0	6	6	51	50	101	0	1	1	127
Planning	0	0	0	18	46	64	3	0	3	0	0	0	67
Revenues & Benefits	1	1	2	28	0	28	44	61	105	7	27	34	169
Strategy & Review	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transport & Parking	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Total	57	14	71	80	58	138	166	143	309	13	30	43	

Response to Justified Complaints (NB - * Figures include where more than one response made to individual complaint and includes data of complaints from previous year determined in the current year and considered justified)

Business Unit	Apology			Compensation			Work Undertaken			Service Review			Policy Review			Total
	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	
Built Environment	11	1	12	1	0	1	2	0	2	2	1	3	0	0	0	18
Business Systems	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	No complaints received
Customer Services	8	1	9	0	0	0	0	2	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	12
City Works	See separate table (circulated separately)															
Environmental Health	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	5
Facilities Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	No complaints received
Finance & Asset Management	Information circulated separately															
Housing Services	10	3	13	2	0	2	26	7	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	48
Human Resources	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	No complaints received
Legal & Democratic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	No complaints received
Leisure & Culture	18	6	24	1	1	2	30	11	41	4	0	4	1	0	1	72
Neighbourhood Renewal	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Oxford Building Solutions*	37	54	91	1	0	1	40	4	44	0	0	0	0	0	0	136
Planning	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	No justified complaints
Revenues & Benefits	5	11	16	0	0	0	20	84	104	0	1	1	0	0	0	121
Strategy & Review	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	No complaints received
Transport & Parking	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	No justified complaints
Total	70	74	154	4	2	6	116	107	223	4	1	5	1	0	1	

Appendix 2

Responses from the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors (Stage 3)

1. Analysis by Business Unit

	Complaints Received				Complaints Determined			
					Justified			
	2004/05	2005/06			2004/05	2005/06		
Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	
Planning	13	8	7	15	1	2	2	4
Housing	16	12	20	32	4	2	1	3
Environmental Health	4	5	2	7	1	0	0	0
Finance & Asset Management	9	7	1	8	3	0	0	0
Human Resources	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Revenues & Benefits	5	1	4	5	2	0	0	0
City Works	7	5	5	10	4	2	4	6
Leisure & Culture (ex Leisure & Parks)	2	3	4	7	1	0	2	2
Transport & Parking	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Legal & Democratic	7	3	2	5	2	1	2	3
OBS	7	10	7	17	2	5	1	6
Chief Executive's	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
Business Systems	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total	86	59	54	113	25	12	12	24

2. Nature of Complaint

	Complaints Received				Complaints Determined			
					Justified			
	2004/05	2005/06			2004/05	2005/06		
Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total	
Staff Behaviour/Attitude	13	7	3	10	6	1	0	1
Disputed Decision / Disagreement	24	24	29	53	1	1	3	4
Dissatisfaction with Service Delivery	38	28	20	48	18	10	9	19
Related to Policy Decision	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	75	59	52	111	25	12	12	24

3. Action Taken when Complaint Justified

	Complaints Determined			
	2004/05	2005/06		
	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total
Apology/Explanation	13	3	5	8
Compensation Paid	0	0	1	1
Service Change	3	1	1	2
Service Review	0	0	1	1
Policy Review	0	0	0	0
Work Undertaken	6	8	4	12
Total	22	12	12	24

4. Responses from Complainant

	Complaints Determined			
	2004/05	2005/06		
	Total	1.4.05-30.9.05	1.10.05-31.3.06	Total
No Further Response Received	39	26	51	77
Referred to Ombudsman	3	3	9	12
Ongoing	13	7	4	11
Outcome Accepted	3	2	2	4
Complainant Disputed Findings	10	10	5	15
Total	68	48	71	119

Appendix 3

Ombudsman Cases 2005/2006 – Decisions Issued

1. Analysis by Business Unit (excl. premature complaints)

Business Unit	2004/2005	2005/2006
	Total	Total
Housing	6	6
OBS	2	0
Planning	5	8
Revenues & Benefits	3	2
Leisure & Culture	1	2
Built Environment	1	0
Neighbourhood Renewal	1	0
Finance & Asset Management	1	1
City Works	1	0
Human Resources	1	0
Total	22	19

2. Analysis by Business Unit

Category	Number	Breakdown by Business Unit
No Maladministration	9	5 Planning 4 Housing
Local Settlement	3	1 Revenues & Benefits 2 Housing
Ombudsman Discretion	3	2 Leisure & Culture 1 Planning
Ombudsman Jurisdiction	4	1 Revenues & Benefits 1 Finance & Asset Management 2 Planning
Reports	0	
Sub Total	19	
Premature	9	
Total	28	