

Report of Chief Executive
To: Standards Committee
Date: 2nd October 2009 **Item No:**
Title of Report: Complaints Monitoring – 2008/2009

Summary and Recommendations

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

Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Oscar van Nooijen

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 5th September 2008, Committee resolved that it would like to continue to receive Complaints Monitoring reports every six months, notwithstanding the possibility that information comparable over time still might not be possible in six months' time.
2. It also agreed that in order to resolve difficulties of comparison (because of the management restructure) and to safeguard the position for the future, to ask the Chief Executive to consider monitoring of complaints taking place on a work area or some other basis smaller than whole Department level because this would not be likely to change if further restructures took place.

3. At its meeting on 5th December 2008, the Committee received a report that provided an analysis of Stage 3 complaints (those considered by the Chief Executive and Directors) and cases referred to the Local Government Ombudsman for the first six months of 2008/2009.
4. An analysis of Stage 1 and 2 complaints (those investigated and determined at Service Area level) for the same period was reported to Committee at its meeting on 6th March 2009.
5. This report provides an analysis of the year 2008/2009 as a whole, subject to the limitations on the availability of comparable information.

Production of Statistical Information

6. Appendix 1a provides a breakdown of the number of complaints received in each of the Service Areas (Stages 1 and 2). Some Service Areas are monitoring complaints on a work area basis, rather than at Service Area level, thereby according with Committee's request at its meeting on 5th September 2008.
7. A detailed breakdown of the nature of the complaint, whether it is about staff behaviour, a dispute with the Council, a service delivery issue or a policy matter was not possible for all Service Areas but Appendix 1b contains this type of information, where it is available.
8. A detailed analysis of all justified Stage 1 and 2 complaints has not been possible. However, Appendix 1c provides a breakdown for Oxford City Homes, Environmental Development, Housing Benefits (part of Customer Services), Planning (part of City Development) and Community Housing and Community Development. The commentary from Service Heads below gives an indication of City Works' response to complaints it receives and the action taken, where required.
9. An analysis of Stage 3 complaints and cases referred to the Local Government Ombudsman for determination is included in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 respectively. Some comparative data from previous years is included where possible.

General Commentary on Complaints

10. As previously, the highest numbers of complaints received are about the frontline services most used by members of the public. As has been reported to Committee before, the number of complaints received needs to be viewed in context and set against the numbers using (or potentially using) the particular service, and the number of complaints that are considered justified.
11. Complaints continue to be welcomed as a method of feedback. Trends that are apparent can be used to make service improvements and inform policy decisions. As Committee is aware, a new complaints

leaflet has been introduced and ongoing changes are taking place to handle feedback in advance of the introduction of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system across the Council.

Stages 1 and 2 Commentary

12. The following trends and comments have been reported by Service Areas:

i) Oxford City Homes

The 400 complaints received in the second half of the year needs to be compared with the 17,931 responsive repair jobs that were undertaken by Oxford City Homes during that period and the 8,000 tenancies it manages. Of the 400, 54 of which were claims for compensation, 153 relate to responsive repairs and 73 were in respect of Tenancy Services. The others were not as specific and they involved several teams within Oxford City Homes and the Council as a whole (e.g. Parks or Cleansing).

Not surprisingly, many of the complaints continue to relate to service delivery, which includes missed appointments, failure to follow up on previous repairs, recalls on the quality of work undertaken, recalls because of material failure, jobs beyond target date and the failure to keep the tenant informed of progress. The number of complaints relating to service delivery has continued to reduce, but the increase in the number of complaints that are related to a dispute or disagreement (mainly because the tenant disagrees with the initial decision that has been made) has been maintained.

Overall, during this period, the number of complaints have increased compared to the same period last year (289 complaints were received during the same period last year, 48 of which were claims). However, it should be noted that during this period Oxford City Homes took over the management of the Street Scene Service.

Oxford City Homes has received more feedback from its tenants in general, not just complaints. 1,153 compliments were received for the same period.

Oxford City Homes' management team monitors the complaints on a monthly basis to detect trends. However, it considers that no clear trends have emerged, but continual analysis of data will highlight specific issues that need to be addressed as and where they occur.

In terms of action taken, where appropriate, tenants receive an apology, compensation is paid, remedial work is undertaken or an explanation given.

ii) City Works

The complaints received for each month in the first half of the year were sorted on a recurrence and trends basis. They were then analysed and discussed at the regular monthly managers' meeting. No trends were apparent but several individual issues were identified and requisite action taken by the Area Manager concerned.

Committee should note that the City Works complaints system is audited on a regular basis as part of the ISO 9002 accreditation. The most recent external Audit (May) was very positive.

A rise in complaints in November 2008 was due to the implementation of the rounds review. It was possible to deal with and resolve the additional complaints as part of routine service delivery.

iii) Leisure

A number of complaints were received in the second half of the year that related to the cleanliness of leisure facilities. This has been addressed following the appointment of contract cleaners by Fusion Leisure, which manages the Council's leisure centres.

iv) Community Housing and Development

No trends were apparent from the very limited number of complaints received.

v) Customer Services (Housing Benefit)

There were several reasons for complaints received in the period 1st October 2008 to 31st March 2009 being determined as justified. In one instance deductions for overpayment continued to be taken from Housing Benefit for a case that was in dispute. This was an oversight on the part of the officer who logged the appeal. All appeals team members should be aware that deductions should be stopped when an overpayment is in dispute.

Delays in dealing with reconsiderations and appeals continue to generate complaints. To address this, a temporary member of staff has been appointed and additional assessment officers have been trained to deal with reconsideration requests. Changes are planned to the structure of the quality and appeals team.

Justified complaints were also due to administration errors that resulted in the wrong person being paid, documents being returned to the wrong person (a case that was referred to the Chief Executive), rent arrears being wrongly calculated and a customer was recorded as having died when that was not the case (also the subject of a Stage 3

complaint). The latter mistake was due to incorrect information being obtained from the Pension Service.

vi) Environmental Development

No trends were apparent from the very limited number of justified complaints.

vii) City Development (Planning)

No significant trends were apparent during the second half of the year or for 2008/2009 as a whole.

Commentary on Stage 3 Complaints and Ombudsman Cases

13. The number of complaints referred to the Chief Executive and Directors remained low throughout the year, although there was an increase in the number of cases that were determined as being justified in the second half of the year. However, the total figure for the whole year was less than in previous years and is perhaps evidence of a downward trend.

14. Justified complaints still appear to be one-off problems rather than clear evidence of a pattern or trend. One of the justified complaints in City Works related to an inadequate response to an insurance claim in respect of a damaged car. A without prejudice offer of just under £600 was made (and accepted) in full and final settlement of the claim.

The two justified complaints in Oxford City Homes were in respect of wrongly notifying the tenant's son that his mother (the tenant) had died, and the late service of notice, which resulted in the late tenant's estate being liable for more rent. In respect of resolution of the former complaint, an apology was given and the property was cleared without charge as gesture of goodwill. The mistake was made because of erroneous information received from Customer Services (which also received a complaint – see Stages 1 and 2 Commentary). With regard to the latter justified complaint, the outstanding amount was written off.

The justified complaints about Customer Services determined during the second half of the year were in respect of the payment of Housing Benefit in error and the loss of a customer's documents when they were sent to the incorrect address (as mentioned above, also a Stage 1/2 complaint). Procedural changes were put in place to deal with both matters.

In general, most complaints received at Stage 3 level are because the complainants do not like a decision the Council has taken rather than because of a service failure.

15. The number of decisions by the Local Government Ombudsman where there have been findings against the Council has remained very low. The four local settlements resulted in compensation payments of £500, £500 and £200 being paid by the Council to the respective complainants (as reported to the Committee in December) and arranging for an independent medical assessment to be carried out (in respect of an application for a concessionary bus pass).

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Background papers: None