

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Acting Chief Executive & Town Clerk
to
Standards Committee and
Best Value Performance Review Working Party
on

Report prepared by: A Wallace and J Whalley

Complaints Against the Council 1st April 2003 – 31st March 2004

Economic Scrutiny Committee – Executive Councillor – Councillor Lamb
A Part I Public Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide statistics relating to complaints received
- 1.2 To consider what can be learnt from complaints as part of the Council's commitment to "customer care"
- 1.3 To consider the means by which we monitor complaints.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 All Departments note and act on the comments in Paragraphs 6.1 – 6.3
 - To respond to complainants within 10 days
 - Complaints training to be arranged for Contact Centre Staff both internally and by the Ombudsman
- 2.2 Future reports on Complaints concentrate on learning outcomes and incorporate a table showing response times at Stage 2 broken down by Department.

3. Background

- 3.1 The comments contained in this report are based on the information provided in the appendices. Exploration beneath the base statistics by seeking the views of complainants on the Council's approach to customer care will shortly be commenced.
- 3.2 The 2003 Best Value Performance Indicator survey indicated a lower percentage of persons indicating satisfaction with complaints handling than the average for similar

authorities. This was the same result as that obtained in 2000, the last time the survey was carried out. When the Council was in the bottom quartile for complaints handling. As the number of complaints reviewed at the formal stage is very small, it is likely that those responding to the survey were referring to their experiences when telephoning or writing to the Council generally.

The Council records complaints within four broad categories:-

- i) Informal complaints addressed to individual Departments
- ii) Formal complaints made through the Council's Complaints Procedure
- iii) Complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman
- iv) Formal complaints relating to Social Services. There is a statutory process for reviewing these involving, at Stage III, a review panel, chaired by an independent person to consider the matter.

4. Monitoring

- 4.1 All Departments are required to supply the Chief Executive and Town Clerk with details of informal complaints and statistics relating to such informal complaints, these will be included in future reports after detailed analysis, refer to comments in Paragraph 5.1
- 4.2 Complaints made under the Council's formal Complaints Procedure are relatively few in number and details for the period April 2003 to March 2004 are attached at **Appendix 1** together with learning outcomes in the final column.
- 4.3 Details of Complaints made to the Ombudsman (where the Council was asked for a formal response) for the period ending 31st March 2004 are attached at **Appendix 2a**. These are few in number and outcomes as far as the Council is concerned are generally favourable with no cases where maladministration was found. Learning outcomes are dealt with in the final column. The Ombudsman's Annual Letter for 2003/04 is attached at **Appendix 2b** and provides details of all complaints received by the Ombudsman for year ending 31st March 2004 (including cases rejected without reference to the Council). At a recent meeting with the Deputy Ombudsman Southend's performance was stated to be good with a low number of complaints.
- 4.4 Statutory Social Services complaints for the period April 2003 to March 2004 are recorded at **Appendix 3** together with learning outcomes from individual cases.

5. Informal Complaints

- 5.1 Statistics have been compiled on informal complaints but it is clear that they have not been recorded in a consistent manner by Departments and more work needs to be done before a meaningful report may be presented. The Contact Centre should make a positive impact on the numbers of informal complaints received.

6 Learning from Complaints

- 6.1 Single issues which would merit a detailed analysis have not been identified except for one common trend which demonstrates the validity of comments made relating to “Customer Care” generally. If mail was answered faster, telephone calls responded to quicker and people were phoned back when staff say they will, the number of issues which develop into complaints would reduce. The Contact Centre should improve the Council’s performance but it is not a panacea for all our problems. Performance at Stage 2 of the Corporate Complaints procedure, where only 40% were responded to by Departments within 10 days is not good enough. The target is 100% with 95% being regarded as the minimum acceptable figure (the Chief Executive and Town Clerk’s Department does chase responses with varying degrees of success). It is of course appropriate for senior officers to spend time in endeavouring to resolve a complaint, but where they seem to fail is in not telling the complainant that is what they are doing.
- 6.2 Training sessions will be provided for Contact Centre staff on “complaint handling techniques” so that wherever possible resident’s concerns are resolved at an early stage and before they turn into formal complaints. The Ombudsman offers short seminars run by their trainers on this subject. Seminars can be held here and it is intended that they be arranged.
- 6.3 The Contact Standards launch revealed that most of our staff feel they offer good customer care, but the complaints investigated reveal that this is not the impression our customers always receive. Training in this area is vital. Staff must see the training as “developing their skills” not as a criticism.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Formal Complaints
Appendix 2a and Appendix 2b - Ombudsman Complaints
Appendix 3 - Social Care Complaints