

<b>DECISION-MAKER</b>		STANDARDS AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE	
<b>SUBJECT</b>		CORPORATE COMPLAINTS 2009-10	
<b>DATE OF DECISION</b>		23 SEPTEMBER 2010	
<b>REPORT OF:</b>		HEAD OF CORPORATE POLICY AND PERFORMANCE	
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#### **STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

N/A

#### **SUMMARY**

This report summarises performance and issues arising out of the Council's performance under its Corporate Complaints Procedure from the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010. Reports are also prepared for COMT at the end of each quarter.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

- (i) That the report be noted.

#### **REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. To update Members on performance and any issues arising out of complaints made by the public via to the Corporate Complaints Procedure during 2009-10. Identifying these issues assists the Council in understanding where things have "gone wrong" in the past year in order to improve service delivery.

#### **CONSULTATION**

2. This report is presented to Standards and Governance Committee for consultation purposes.

#### **ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED**

3. N/A

#### **DETAIL**

4. The effective and responsive management of complaints is a vital part of the council's overall approach to customer care. In addition the customer feedback that valid complaints provide can be used to improve service provision, facilitate corporate learning, and demonstrate continuous improvement.

5. The Council operates a three part complaints system:
- Stage 1 complaints are responded to by the relevant service manager
  - Stage 2 complaints are investigated and responded to by with the appropriate Head of Service
  - Stage 3 complaints are investigated by the Corporate Complaints Officer or by a Senior Officer independent from the service area that is being complained about.

A separate process is followed within the Children’s Services and Learning Directorate and the Health and Adult Social Directorate, largely as a result of the statutory complaints procedure which applies in these areas.

6. At the end of a Stage 3 investigation, the customer is advised that if they are still not satisfied with the outcome, they may address their complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman. This in effect represents the fourth and final stage from the customer’s perspective.

**Statistical Information for 2009/10**

7. During 2009/10 1,112 complaints were recorded through the Corporate Complaints procedure this representing a 3.8% increase on the 1,072 complaints received in 2008/09.
8. A detailed breakdown of the complaints received is set out in Appendix 1 to this report.
9. The distribution of complaints is not spread evenly across all divisions. Complaints are concentrated towards a number of customer facing Services. In 2009/10 five divisions accounted for over half of the complaints received. The table below lists the 5 areas with the highest proportion of complaints for 2009/10, and compares this with figures for 2008/09.

2009/10		2008/09	
Local Taxation	19.3%	Leisure & Culture	22.3%
Decent Homes	13.2%	Housing Management	13.1%
Waste & Fleet Transport	9.4%	Decent Homes	10.7%
Leisure & Culture	8.8%	Local Taxation	9.4%
Customer Services	8.3%	Waste & Fleet Transport	9.0%

Prior to 2009/10 complaints statistics were recorded manually, making it difficult to draw direct comparisons between years. The introduction of the new Lagan IT system in 2009 will enable further and more accurate analysis of complaints within divisions, making it possible to identify reasons for changes in the number of complaints received.

10. Complaints received at Stage 1 of the complaints procedure are recorded into one of a number of categories. The table below indicates the percentage of complaints falling into each category and compares this with figures for 2007/08.

Category	2009/10	2008/09
Discrimination	1%	0.8%
Misinformation	4%	3.0%
Charges	4%	8.2%
Speed	5%	4.8%
Behaviour	19%	12.3%
Performance	31%	29.8%
Other	36%	41.1%

The highest proportion of complaints are still showing in the 'other' category. During 2009/10 work was undertaken to tackle this issue. Two new categories have been introduced from April 2010; 'disagree with decision' and 'avoidable contact'.

11. The Standards and Governance Committee has requested a breakdown of this Council's performance in relation to complaints compared to the Council's statistical neighbours. The Corporate Complaints procedure is not a statutory requirement. However failure to have a Corporate Complaints procedure in place would lead to an adverse report from the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). Therefore the systems and processes that individual councils have in place are based on LGO guidance and are tailored to individual council structures and services. Comparison between authorities is therefore difficult. However, comparator information was requested from four authorities within Southampton's Audit Commission statistical neighbours. The responses confirmed that there are *some* similarities in the recording of complaints in these authorities. The following table sets out the overall figures for the number of complaints received.

Authority	Corporate Complaints received 2009/10
Southampton	1,112
Portsmouth	864
Brighton & Hove	1,649
Plymouth	2,152
Bristol	3,607

### Complaints Closed & Resolved During 2009/10

12. The Corporate Complaints Procedure requires that complaints at stage 1 of the process are responded to within 10 working days and complaints at stage 2 and 3, within 20 working days.
13. The following table shows the number of complaints responded to at each stage of the procedure. Those complaints that cannot be responded to within the target period are frequently those that are more complex, and can involve investigating actions across more than one service area or division. Where this situation occurs the complainant will be contacted and a revised completion date agreed.

Stage	Working days taken to close		Total
	≤ 10 days	> 10 days	
Stage 1 2009/10	811 (89%)	104 (11%)	915
	≤ 20 days	>20 days	
Stage 2 2009/10	95 (95%)	5 (5%)	100
Stage 3 2009/10	25 (56%)	20 (44%)	45
Total	931(88%)	129 (12%)	1060

N.B. This table shows the number of complaints *completed* in 2009/10 as opposed to the number of complaints *received*.

### Accessing the complaints process

14. The following table shows the number of complaints made by customers using the online complaint form over the last two years.

	Received online	Percentage of total received	Total received (all mediums)
1 <sup>st</sup> quarter 2007-08	110	38%	288
2 <sup>nd</sup> quarter 2007-08	118	50%	236
3 <sup>rd</sup> quarter 2007-08	104	48%	215
4 <sup>th</sup> quarter 2007-08	154	57%	268
1 <sup>st</sup> quarter 2009-10	155	56%	260
2 <sup>nd</sup> quarter 2009-10	110	37%	297
3 <sup>rd</sup> quarter 2009-10	69	26%	270
4 <sup>th</sup> quarter 2009-10	62	22%	285

It appears that the percentage of complaints received via this method has steadily decreased during 2009/10, the reasons for this are currently unclear. The Lagan IT system, introduced in 2009, now records how each complaint is received. Work is currently underway to capture this information within a report to enable further work to be done on the accessibility of the complaints process.

## **Learning from Complaints**

15. In addition to using the complaints processes to redress customer dissatisfaction, the feedback generated through complaints is an important tool for improving performance and service delivery. In the quarterly complaint monitoring reports submitted to the Chief Officers' Management Team a summary is provided of the lessons learnt from investigations into complaints and changes planned or introduced in response to complaints. This enables problems encountered and learning experiences to be shared across the council, and provides an opportunity for initiatives developed to enhance customer satisfaction in one part of the organisation to be assessed for suitability in other directorates.
16. Appendix 2 includes a number of the initiatives for improvements arising from the consideration of complaints that have been reported to the Chief Officers' Management Team during 2009/10.

## **Developing the Corporate Complaints Process**

17. During 2008/09 the Lagan Customer Relationship Management IT system was developed to record all Compliments, Comments and Corporate Complaints received by the Council. The new system was introduced on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 and helps staff to manage and report on comments, compliments and complaints and automatically collate the monitoring information required by each Division, Directorate and Chief Officers Management Team as well as inform annual reports to this Committee.
18. The Lagan Complaints system has also facilitated the introduction of a rolling programme of customer surveys to complainants which will enable the quality and access to the council's corporate complaints service to be measured. Questionnaires are sent to each complainant, at stage 1 of the process, once the complaint has been closed. The feedback from these surveys will be used to identify areas where improvements are required in the handling of complaints and areas of good practice. In 2009/10 of the 709 questionnaires sent out, 19% (136) were returned. 51% of complainants who feedback described the procedure for making complaints as easy and 24% as difficult. Currently the survey questionnaire does not give the opportunity for complainants to explain which elements of the process they found difficult. Work will be undertaken during 2010/11 to develop the questionnaire to enable identification of specific problem areas so that improvements can be made. Details of the survey results for 2009/10 can be found in Appendix 3.
19. During 2009/10 a half day training programme was developed to be rolled out to Complaints Contact Officers across the authority during 2010/11. The training sessions cover general complaint handling, complaint classification and the importance of recording lessons learnt, as well as looking at effective use of the Lagan system.

20. From the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010 all non-statutory complaints regarding Children Services and Learning and, Health and Adult Social Care have been recorded on Lagan. This has ensured that all complaints which should be dealt with through the Corporate Complaints procedure are recorded and reported in a consistent way. It also provides the Customer Care and Complaints Team in Children's Services and Learning with access to Lagan and therefore improved information about the overall experience of the individual customer.

### **Freedom of Information Complaints**

21. Complaints made about responses to requests for information made under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act are processed outside the corporate complaints procedure. They do not follow the 3 stage process of other complaints, but are reviewed by the Corporate Complaints Officer. Customers are advised that if they still feel aggrieved they may escalate their complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office should they be unhappy with the response provided by the council. In 2009/10, nine FOI complaints were received, compared to eight received in 2008/09. The FOI complaints related to Highways & Parking (2), Planning & Sustainability (1), Childrens Services (2), legal Services (1) Leisure & Culture (1), Adult Services (1) HR (1). The original decision was upheld in 5 cases, further partial disclosure was made in 2 cases and full disclosure was made in 2 cases.

### **Conclusion**

22. The council has continued to promote the opportunity for complaints as a means of addressing customer dissatisfaction and trying to put things right wherever possible. The Corporate Complaints Officer has continued to work with IT to develop the Lagan system to record and report complaints and has been working with Complaints Contact Officers across the authority to ensure a comprehensive and consistent approach to complaints handling.

### **FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Capital**

23. N/A

#### **Revenue**

24. N/A

#### **Property**

25. N/A

#### **Other**

26. N/A

### **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Statutory power to undertake proposals in the report:**

27. Local authority complaints mechanisms are operated under Section 11 Local Government Act 1972

#### **Other Legal Implications:**

28. N/A

## **POLICY FRAMEWORK IMPLICATIONS**

29. The matters set out in this report are consistent with the Council's Constitution and Policy Framework.

## **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

### **Appendices**

1	Complaints received by Service 2009-10
2	Learning from Complaints
3	Results of Complaints Questionnaire 2009-10

### **Documents In Members' Rooms**

1.	None
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### **Background Documents**

Title of Background Paper(s)

Relevant Paragraph of the Access to Information Procedure Rules / Schedule 12A allowing document to be Exempt/Confidential (if applicable)

1.	None	
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**KEY DECISION** No

**WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED:** N/A