

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**8 JUNE 2011**

**REPORT OF THE HEAD OF CHANGE AND SCRUTINY**

**Report prepared by Ellie Kershaw**

**1. REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS JANUARY-MARCH 2011**

1.1 Issue for Decision

1.1.1 To consider the Council's performance in dealing with complaints during January to March 2011 and to note the areas identified for improvement.

1.2 Recommendation of the Head of Change and Scrutiny

1.2.1 That the Standards Committee endorse the recommendations made in this report.

1.2.2 That the broad categories of complaint are noted as well as the service area to enable easier trend analysis.

1.2.3 That staff are reminded of what constitutes a complaint.

1.3 Reasons for Recommendation

1.3.1 In order to ensure that complaints are being answered within corporate timescales and to a high standard it is important that a monitoring mechanism is in place.

1.3.2 Details of the complaints received, broken down by service area, category and performance against the Council's published service agreement is shown in **Appendix A**

1.3.3 A summary of the analysis of the complaints data for the period October to December 2010 is set out below:;

- During the period under review a total of 89 stage one complaints were processed of which 78 (88%) were processed in time;
- Of the 11 complaints processed out of time six related to housing options, two to Council tax or business rates, one to

Community safety, one to Development control and one to Property, procurement and projects;

- This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive quarter that housing has had a poor closure rate;
- During this period the most complaints (19) related to Waste control, the majority of which were policy related. 10 of these concerned the change to fortnightly collections, four the change from using green sacks and one about the bank holiday calendar;
- A further 14 complaints related to Development control, 10 of these concerning the standard of service from the department;
- 12 complaints related to Housing options and covered a number of different issues;
- 14 stage two complaints were processed in this period, 93% (13) of which were processed in time;
- Four of the stage two complaints related to Development control, two to Planning enforcement and one each to eight individual services;

1.3.4 A summary for the same period of 2009/10 is below;

- A total of 79 complaints were processed of which 76 (96%) were processed in time;
- The services with the most complaints were Waste collection (15), Development control (14), Council tax or business rates (10) and Parking enforcement (10)
- Whilst the number of complaints about waste are high in both years, the 2009/10 figure relates mainly to complaints about service during the bad weather;
- Complaints about Development control covered a number of topics;
- 12 stage two complaints were processed, 83% (10) of which were in time;
- The stage two complaints covered a variety of areas;
- There is no clear correlation between complaints over the two years

1.3.5 CMT commented that the number of complaints about a service should be taken in the context of the number of customers receiving the service particularly in areas such as waste management.

1.3.6 There were 47 complaints surveys sent out in Q4, 16 of which were returned. Whilst at 34% this is lower than Q3, it is still a higher return than previous system where surveys were sent out at the end of the quarter rather than monthly.

1.3.7 Of the surveys returned 5 people were satisfied, 5 dissatisfied and 6 very dissatisfied. In 6 instances of dissatisfaction the complaint was

not answered within the correct timescale. A breakdown of the surveys returned can be found at Appendix C.

- 1.3.8 No one service had more than two surveys returned so no trend can be seen here.

#### 1.4 Issues

- 1.4.1 The Head of Housing and Community Safety has commented that the recent economic downturn has resulted in a significant increase in MP enquiries and complaints from users of the service. Not all complaints received by the housing service relate to the actual service provided. There remains a grey area where applicants frustrated by not being able to acquire social housing make a complaint as to how their application has been dealt with. The complaints procedure permits a period of 10 days in which to investigate and respond to complaints of this type. This compares to the 56 days permitted by the statutory framework for reviews of similar matters, acknowledging the complexity of some of the issues involved. Unlike the statutory process the council's complaints procedure does not allow both parties to agree an extension of time. So even where an extension is agreed it appears on the database as being out of time.

Unfortunately the increase in complaints received coincided with a number of important projects being undertaken. These included organisation change, CCTV tendering, the West Kent LIP and review of the capital programme; all of which diverted away resources that would normally have dealt with complaints. The Housing Service has now changed its methodology for recording and responding to complaints, which together with the completion of some of the major projects should result in improvements to the time taken to respond to complaints.

- 1.4.2 The Head of Development Management said that the number of complaints this quarter shows a continuation of a long standing pattern. This relates to some people being dissatisfied with the outcome and complaining about the outcome AND the way the application was considered.

- 1.4.3 The Waste Collection Manager made the following comments;

Fortnightly collections: In January 2011, weekly food waste collections were introduced and the refuse service was changed to fortnightly collections. These changes affected over 55,000 households within the borough. Ten official complaints relating to these changes were received between January and March 2011, which considering the number of properties affected was much lower than anticipated. The complaints were made by residents who had concerns about fitting

their waste into their refuse bin or were not aware of the reasons behind the decision to make these changes. In the majority of cases the complaints were resolved through discussions with the residents about their particular situation and advice about recycling.

Garden waste: In July 2010, it was decided to replace the old style green plastic garden sacks with more sustainable compostable ones. Although this was publicised through the garden sack retailers and the old plastic sacks were removed from sale in September 2010, many residents were not aware of the changes when the plastic sacks were no longer accepted in January 2011. The complaints received highlighted that residents had stockpiled more plastic sacks than originally anticipated and identified the need to extend the exchange process and make arrangements for the plastic sacks to be collected with the refuse service. The extension of the exchange period resolved the complaints which have been received.

- 1.4.4 The out of target complaint assigned to Property, procurement and projects was answered out of target as it was an extremely complex complaint requiring a home visit and further investigation following that visit.
- 1.4.5 Seven of the complaints registered should not have been logged as complaints as one was about a Councillor, one was about Golding Homes and five were requests for service. These have not been included in the figures reported. It is therefore recommended that staff are reminded what constitutes a complaint.
- 1.4.6 The IT Team has now developed a specification for the correspondence system. The next phase of this is for them to meet with stakeholders to ensure the specification meets user need after which development will commence.
- 1.4.7 As a number of complaints were still out of target and the new system will not be functional for some time it is recommended that the policy team flag complaints nearing their target to Heads of Service on a weekly basis.
- 1.5 Alternative action and why not recommended
  - 1.5.1 The Council's complaints management follows the Local Government Ombudsman's best practice. Managing complaints is a key means of ensuring the council's services are delivered to a consistently high standard.
- 1.6 Impact on Corporate Objectives

1.6.1 Customer service is a core value and improving complaints' management is critical to the success of this objective.

1.7 Risk management

1.7.1 Failure to manage complaints represents both a financial and reputational risk to the Council. Regular reports are produced for management and Heads of Service are reminded of their responsibilities. The process is overseen by the Head of Change and Scrutiny and the Head of Legal Services supported by the Policy and Research Officer.

1.8 Other Implications

1.8.1

1. Financial	x
2. Staffing	
3. Legal	
4. Equality Impact Needs Assessment	
5. Environmental/Sustainable Development	
6. Community Safety	
7. Human Rights Act	
8. Procurement	
9. Asset Management	

1.8.2 Compensation in the amount of £30 was paid on one complaint in relation to the late delivery of a concessionary fares permit.

1.9 Relevant Documents

1.9.1 Appendices

Appendix A Breakdown of stage 1 complaints Q4 January to March 2011

Appendix B Breakdown of stage 1 complaints Q4 January to March 2010

Appendix C Complaints surveys returned Q4 January to March 2011

**IS THIS A KEY DECISION REPORT?**

Yes

No

If yes, when did it first appear in the Forward Plan?

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This is a Key Decision because: .....

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Wards/Parishes affected: .....

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APPENDIX A Breakdown of Stage 1 complaints Q4 January-March 2011

Service	Total	On time	Late	Target met	Lack of Info/contact	Time taken	Policy	Discrimination	Service	Staff
Bereavement services	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	0	1	0
Building surveying	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	0	0	1
Community safety	1	0	1	0%	0	0	0	0	0	1
Contact centre	8	8	0	100%	0	0	2	1	3	2
Council tax or business rates	5	3	2	60%	0	0	1	0	4	0
Customer services	2	2	0	100%	0	0	0	0	1	1
Development control	14	13	1	92%	0	0	2	0	10	2
Housing and council tax-benefits issues only	2	2	0	100%	0	0	0	0	1	1
Housing options/private sector housing/housing policy	12	6	6	50%	1	0	4	0	4	3
Parking enforcement	5	5	0	100%	0	0	2	0	3	0
Planning enforcement	6	6	0	100%	0	2	0	1	2	1
Planning policy	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	0	1	0
Pollution (litter enforcement)	7	7	0	100%	0	0	1	0	1	5
Property, procurement and projects	1	0	1	0%	0	0	1	0	0	0
Public toilets	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	0	1	0
Street sweeping	3	3	0	100%	0	0	1	0	1	1
Waste collection	19	19	0	100%	0	0	15	0	4	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>18</b>

Appendix B Breakdown of Stage 1 complaints Q4 January- March 2010

Service	Total	On time	Late	Success	Lack of Info/contact	Time taken	Policy	Discrimination	Service	Staff
Contact centre	6	6	0	100%	0	0	0	1	5	0
Council tax or business rates	10	9	1	90%	0	0	2	0	6	2
Democratic services	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	0	0	1
Development control	14	14	0	100%	4	2	4	0	2	2
Grounds maintenance	1	1	0	100%	0	0	1	0	0	0
Hazlitt Theatre	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	1	0	0
Housing and council tax-benefits issues only	3	2	1	67%	0	0	0	0	2	1
Housing options/private sector housing/housing policy	5	4	1	80%	2	0	1	0	2	0
Legal conveyancing/litigation	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	0	0	1
Leisure	2	2	0	100%	0	0	0	0	2	0
Parking enforcement	10	10	0	100%	0	0	6	0	1	3
Planning enforcement	4	4	0	100%	2	0	2	0	0	0
Planning policy	2	2	0	100%	0	0	1	0	1	0
Pollution	3	3	0	100%	0	0	0	0	2	1
Street sweeping	1	1	0	100%	0	0	0	0	1	0
Waste collection	15	15	0	100%	0	0	0	0	13	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>13</b>



Appendix C Complaints surveys returned Q4 January-March 2011

<b>Service</b>	<b>Very satisfied</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Very dissatisfied</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Community safety</b>	0	0	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Contact centre</b>	0	0	0	2	1	<b>2</b>
<b>Council tax &amp; business rates</b>	0	2	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Development control</b>	0	2	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Housing &amp; council tax benefits</b>	0	0	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Housing options</b>	0	0	0	0	2	<b>2</b>
<b>Parking enforcement</b>	0	0	0	1	1	<b>2</b>
<b>Planning enforcement</b>	0	0	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Public toilets</b>	0	0	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Waste collection</b>	0	1	0	0	1	<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>16</b>