

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW  
AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**2<sup>ND</sup> SEPTEMBER 2014**

**REPORT OF THE HEAD OF POLICY AND COMMUNICATIONS**

**Report prepared by Sam Bailey**

1. **REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS APRIL-JUNE 2014 (QUARTER 1)**

1.1 Issue for Decision

1.1.1 To consider the Council's performance in dealing with complaints during April to June 2014 (quarter 1).

1.2 Recommendation of the Head of Policy and Communications

1.2.1 It is recommended that the Committee notes the performance in relation to complaints, in particular:

- i. The high number of complaints received about the 'Landed Festival' held on Easter Sunday at Whatman Park;
- ii. The increase in overall numbers of complaints as a result of this festival;
- iii. The higher than usual number of complaints received about electoral registration, including the high proportion of complaints responded to outside of target time for this service; and
- iv.

makes recommendations as appropriate.

1.2.2 That the Committee note the compliments received by teams and individual officers within the Council.

1.2.3 That the Committee notes the prominent themes mentioned on social media during quarter 1 (attached at Appendix E)

1.3 Reasons for Recommendation

1.3.1 One of the Council's key corporate values is superb customer service; as such Maidstone Borough Council is focused on improving services for customers.

The Council's complaints policy recognises "that we will not always get it right and complaints are not only a way of customers telling us when they are dissatisfied but also provide useful information that can help us to improve our services."

1.3.2 In order to ensure that complaints are being dealt with effectively and within corporate timescales it is important that a monitoring mechanism is in place.

1.3.3 Details of the complaints received broken down by service area, timeliness and category can be found at Appendix A. Complaints have been categorised, but many complaints will be about more than one element (e.g. both policy and staff attitude).

1.3.4 As requested by the Committee at the meeting of 8<sup>th</sup> July 2014, any issues picked up by the Committee will be recorded and included in the annual review of complaints.

#### 1.4 Quarter 1 Performance

1.4.1 Details of quarter 1 complaints handling performance can be found in Appendix A.

1.4.2 During quarter 1, 250 stage 1 complaints were closed, of which 239 (95.6%) were closed on time. There was a 112% increase in the overall number of complaints received this quarter compared to the previous quarter. Performance in responding to complaints on time decreased by 2.7% compared to quarter 4 of 2013/2014. However performance was 0.2% higher than the figure for 2013/2014 as a whole. A table showing the comparison can be found in Appendix F- Charts and Graphs. The figure of 67.2% of complaints being justified appears high, however it must be noted that all 108 complaints about the Landed Festival were treated as justified, pushing this percentage up.

1.4.3 A table showing headline complaints performance can be found in Appendix F, Figure 1. The number of complaints received was high this quarter, significantly higher than Quarter 2 of 2013/2014 when the new waste contract was implemented. Performance in terms of responding to complaints on time is down by 1.4% compared to the overall figure for 2013/2014. The number of stage 2 complaints received was relatively high compared to the numbers received quarterly last year, however the percentage of those escalated to stage 2 was low compared to the previous year. The percentage of stage 2 complaints that were justified was also lower than the 2013/2014 overall figure. However these figures should be treated with caution, as 108 stage 1 complaints were about the Landed Festival and only four complaints for the Landed

Festival were escalated to stage 2.

1.4.4 The Landed Festival accounted for 108 of the complaints received this quarter. All of these were responded to in time. This suggests that the increase in complaints responded to outside of target time was not related to the increase in number of complaints, and is a genuine decline in performance.

1.4.5 Of the complaints responded to outside the target time:

- One was about Benefits
- One was about Development Management
- Three were about Electoral Registration
- One was about Environmental Services
- One was about Finance
- Two were about Housing Options
- One was about Planning Enforcement
- One was about Private Sector Housing

1.4.6 The reasons for these complaints being responded to out of time included:

- Two complaints were closed late as further information was requested from the complainant; and
- For two of the complaints that were late, the customers were kept updated on the progress of their complaint.

1.4.7 It is worth noting the complaints policy states that:

*'All stage 1 complaints will be responded to within 10 working days. If we are unable to do this we will contact you to let you know the reasons why and keep you informed of progress.'*

Therefore those complaints that were closed later than ten working days mentioned in paragraph 1.4.6 above should be considered as being late but were still dealt with appropriately according to the complaints policy.

1.4.8 However this leaves seven complaints that were closed late without a valid reason, and without the customer being kept updated. These complaints were for the following services:

- Private Sector Housing (1)
- Electoral Registration (3)
- Finance (1)
- Planning Enforcement (1)
- Benefits (1)

## 1.5 Complaints by Service

1.5.1 The services which dealt with the highest number of complaints were:

- Parks and Leisure (118);
- Environmental Services (which includes waste, recycling and street scene) (33);
- Housing Options (16);
- Development Management (15);
- Parking Services (15); and
- Environmental Enforcement (11).

1.5.2 Other than Parks and Leisure, the numbers of complaints received by these services is around the level that we would expect when there were no major incidents, policies or problems that generate large numbers of complaints. Comparative data for these services in the form of a bar chart can be found in figure 2 of Appendix F.

1.5.3 Parks and Leisure received the highest number of complaints this quarter (118). 108 of these complaints were as a result of an event that was held at the Easter weekend called 'The Landed Festival', which was held in Whatman Park. Common themes of the complaints can be summarised below:

- That the festival was too loud, and could be heard as far away as Allington;
- The festival was held on an inappropriate day, as it was a religious holiday (Easter Sunday);
- The bass sound from the festival was disruptive;
- The impact on wildlife in the park;
- Residents were not given enough forewarning for the event; and
- Residents were not able to get through to the council's contact centre as well as the council's Environmental Enforcement officers who were on site monitoring sound levels.

1.5.4 In response to complaints about the Landed Festival, the council apologised and assured residents of the following:

- That the council would be more sensitive to religious holidays when future events of this type were proposed;
- The impact on wildlife was monitored throughout the day, however no adverse impact was observed;
- That the event organiser had adhered to terms of the licence, and that MBC Environmental Enforcement Officers were on site throughout the day to ensure compliance; and

- The event organiser followed the correct procedures in notifying residents by advertising in the local press, as well as placing notices in the park 28 days prior to the event.
- 1.5.5 A copy of the letter sent to those who made complaints about the festival can be found in Appendix G.
- 1.5.6 The lessons learned from this event, and the complaints generated by it, have been incorporated into the borough's festivals and events strategy. This strategy will be considered by the Economic and Commercial Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 26th August 2014.
- 1.5.7 Despite the high number of stage 1 complaints (108) about the Landed Festival, only 4 stage 2 complaints were received. This represents 3.7% of stage 1 complaints leading to a stage 2 complaint. This, along with a high satisfaction rate (63%, according to the satisfaction survey) for these complainants, suggests that complainants were satisfied with the council's response to their complaint.
- 1.5.8 As can be seen in Appendix E, the Landed Festival also generated feedback on social media. Social media gives residents the opportunity to make positive as well as negative comments. On balance, across MBC social media sites, feedback about the festival was overwhelmingly positive. Of the 42 comments received:
- 28 were positive (66%);
  - 12 were negative (29%); and
  - 2 were neutral (5%).
- 1.5.9 Despite high number of complaints for Parks and Leisure this quarter, all complaints were closed on time for this service.
- 1.5.10 Environmental Services received the second highest number of complaints this quarter (33). Of these complaints:
- Seven were about missed general waste, recycling or food waste collections;
  - Two were about missed green waste collections;
  - Three were about problems with delivery of green waste bins;
  - Six were about bins not being returned to the appropriate place or bins causing an obstruction; and
  - Three were about problems experienced with bulky collections.

- 1.5.11 There were no other trends in complaints for Environmental Services.
- 1.5.12 Housing Options received 16 complaints this quarter. Of these complaints:
- Eleven were about Service;
  - One was about Policy;
  - Two were about Staff; and
  - Two were about Time Taken.
- 1.5.13 Trends noticed in complaints for Housing Options:
- Two complaints this quarter were received about problems that users had experienced with Kent Homechoice, the council's bidding system for social housing.
  - The complaint about policy was about the way the banding system works in the Housing Allocations Policy.
  - For the two complaints about time taken, one was about time taken to deal with a housing application and the other was about the time taken to respond to an enquiry. Whilst there were only two complaints solely about time taken this quarter, other complaints about service also had an element of complaints about time taken within them:
    - Two complaints about service also raised the time taken to process housing register applications; and
    - Two complaints about service also raised the time taken to rehouse those on the Housing Register.
- 1.5.14 Development Management received fifteen complaints this quarter. Of these complaints:
- Seven were about service;
  - Three were about policy;
  - Three were about time taken; and
  - Two were about lack of contact.
- 1.5.15 Whilst there were no particular issues that generated a high number of complaints for Development Management, the following general themes emerged:
- Frustration with the lack of contact from Planning Officers around live planning applications; and
  - Policy complaints were expressions of dissatisfaction with the outcome of planning decisions.

1.5.16 However it should be noted that three of the fifteen complaints for development management were upheld (one each for service, lack of contact and time taken).

1.5.17 Parking Services received fifteen complaints this quarter. Of these complaints:

- Six were about policy;
- Five were about service;
- One was about discrimination; and
- Three were about staff.

1.5.18 Of the six policy complaints:

- Two were requesting that CEOs use discretion when observing contraventions, however the customers were informed that this would be unfair and that any mitigating circumstances would be taken into account on appeal;
- One was about the increase in parking charges at Lockmeadow car park;
- Two were about the way in which the visitor/resident permit system works, particularly if the resident pays for a full year's permit but has to renew in year due to the renewal dates being phased; and
- One policy complaint was about how renewal letters are sent out to multiple permit holders within a household, despite permits being limited on a per household basis.

1.5.19 Of the remaining complaints for parking services:

- There were two complaints that the appeals section of the website was not working. In both of these cases, the complainant was directed to submit their appeal by email instead. The issue has not been fully resolved. However a message has been placed on the website to advise those making an appeal to send their appeal via email instead;
- The two complaints about staff conduct were both about Civil Enforcement Officers who were on patrol, neither of which were upheld; and
- The one complaint about discrimination was that there were not enough disabled bays in the town centre. The response informed the complainant that those with a disabled badge may park on single, or double yellow lines, as well as any town centre car park in addition to specified disabled spaces.

1.5.20 Environmental Enforcement received eleven complaints this quarter. Of these complaints, seven were about the issuing of litter fines or the litter enforcement policy and the other complaints were

about unrelated issues.

1.5.21 Electoral Registration received eight complaints this quarter, which is high for this service. For comparison, Electoral Registration only received five complaints during the whole of 2013/2014. Electoral Registration also closed three of their complaints late. However it is worth noting that quarter 1 of 2013/2014 was a busy period for Electoral Registration as it was around the time of the borough election.

1.5.22 Of the complaints against Electoral Registration, five of these were from residents who experienced problems with registering to vote before the election. In response it was explained that, especially during busy periods, occasionally forms can be mislaid. The response apologised for any inconvenience caused.

## 1.6 Stage 2 Complaints

1.6.1 32 stage 2 complaints were received this quarter. This is a high number compared to the numbers received each quarter in 2013/2014.

1.6.2 However the percentage of complaints escalated to stage 2 was comparatively low, at 12.8% (32 stage 2 complaints out of 250), compared to last year (17.4% of complaints were escalated to stage 2 in 2013/2014- 95 stage 2 complaints out of 548). The percentage of complaints escalated to stage 2 this quarter appears low compared to quarterly figures and the overall figure for 2013/2014. This was because there were many complaints about the Landed Festival that didn't go to stage 2 this quarter. Full comparative figures can be found in Appendix F under figure 1.

1.6.3 If the four complaints that were received for the Landed Festival (all classified as justified) are removed from the justified complaints category, the percentage of justified stage 2 complaints reduces to 21.4%, from 31.3%. This, along with the fact that no compensation, payments or refunds were offered as a result of stage 2 complaints suggests that whilst the number of stage 2s received was high compared to previous quarters, this was not as a result of stage 1 complaints not being investigated properly.

1.6.4 There were no major issues that generated a high number of stage 2 complaints this quarter, other than the four stage 2 complaints about the Landed Festival.

1.6.5 Development Management received a higher than usual number of stage 2 complaints this quarter. Only one of these complaints was found to be justified. Four complaints for Development



Management were policy complaints, where a complainant was dissatisfied with a planning decision or a particular planning policy.

1.6.6 The percentage of stage 2 complaints that were justified in quarter 1 of 2014-2015 (31.3%- 10 justified out of 32 complaints) was lower than the overall result for 2013-2014 (38.9%- 37 justified out of 95 complaints). However this indicator has increased since quarter 4 of 2013-2014 when just 23.5% (4 justified out of 17 complaints) of all stage 2 complaints were justified.

1.6.7 Of the 32 stage 2 complaints received this quarter, three were answered late. The reasons for these complaints being answered late were:

- One complaint was closed late but only by one day;
- One complaint was closed late (by four days), but the complaint had been missed and only escalated to stage 2 after the due date; and
- One complaint was closed late (by five days) because the investigating officer was awaiting further evidence from the complainant before the investigation could be concluded.

## 1.7 Complaints Handling Satisfaction

1.7.1 A breakdown of complaints satisfaction surveys can be found at Appendix B. For quarter 1, 58 complaints satisfaction surveys were returned. This represents a response rate of 23.2%.

1.7.2 54.4% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the way their complaint was handled. 7.0% of respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. 38.6% of respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way in which their complaint was handled.

1.7.3 Despite the large number of complaints for Parks and Leisure following the Landed Festival, 58.3% of complaints satisfaction survey respondents stated that they were satisfied with the way the complaint was handled.

## 1.8 Safety

1.8.1 Nine complaints were received this quarter regarding safety concerns. Of these, four were considered as justified:

- One was a complaint that an Environmental Enforcement Officer parked on double yellow lines to issue a littering Fixed Penalty Notice. The Enforcement Officer in question was reminded of their responsibilities when driving a council

vehicle, and cautioned about future conduct;

- One complaint was about waste crews leaving bins in a position that put a resident in a potentially dangerous position when returning home in their car. The complainant's property was put on a hotspot list, and no further complaints have been received on this matter;
- A complaint was made after a child cut themselves in Mote Park and a café operator refused use of their first aid kit. In the response it was stated that the contractors in the café were not responsible for giving first aid, but that the matter would be raised at the next meeting between the Parks team and the contractors; and
- A complaint was made about the way in which a fall was dealt with by a hirer of the market hall. The complaint response agreed that the incident was handled poorly and that the Market Manager would take steps to ensure the hall hirers are aware of correct procedures around accidents and near misses.

## 1.9 Discrimination

- 1.9.1 One complaint was *primarily* about alleged discrimination or unfair disadvantage for people with protected characteristics. The complaint was against Parking Services. The complaint was that there was not enough parking for disabled people in the town centre. The complaint response didn't support this assertion, and outlined several areas throughout the town centre where disabled people were allowed to park, including designated parking bays and single and double yellow lines.
- 1.9.2 A further two complaints were not primarily about discrimination, but contained claims of discrimination. However neither of these complaints were upheld.
- 1.9.3 Ten complaints were from, or on behalf of, complainants with protected characteristics under equalities legislation. These complainants are identified through what they tell us during the complaint process. For example, in the age category a complainant may mention that they are elderly and that a policy discriminates against them. It is worth noting that some complainants had more than one protected characteristic:

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Maternity/ Pregnancy</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>
<b>Complainants</b>	7	1	6	1

1.10 Improvements made as a result of complaints

1.10.1 The table below shows improvements made as a result of complaints this quarter:

<b>Service</b>	<b>Complaint</b>	<b>Improvement</b>
Council Tax	No tickbox available for self-employed on a form	Form was changed following complaint
Grounds Maintenance	Overhanging trees and foliage onto a footpath	Trees and foliage cut back following site visit.
Depot Operations	A broken road sign had not been replaced, despite being informed it would be	A new road sign was ordered and fitted.
Customer Services	A customer arrived at the Gateway at 17.30 to drop off some documents. However the officer would not accept the envelope as the Gateway was closed.	The Gateway Team were informed that they should accept documents presented in this way.

1.11 Compliments

1.11.1 Many compliments have also been received by the Council this quarter. Compliments are classified by service and can be found below, along with numbers of compliments received this quarter.

<b>Service</b>	<b>Number of Compliments</b>	<b>Number of Complaints</b>
Parks & Leisure	1	118
Grounds Maintenance	4	2
Customer Services	5	6
Environmental Services	7	33
Parking Services	2	15
Depot Operations	3	1
Economic Development	2	1
Housing Options	1	16

1.11.2 Many of the compliments received were thanking individual officers for helping customers with their enquiries.

- 1.11.3 Several compliments were received for the waste crews giving exceptional customer service by, for example:
- Asking residents whether their garden waste bin needed emptying when it was not out for collection, rather than not attempting to make a collection;
  - Collecting household waste bins when they were not put out for collection; and
  - Waste crews ensuring their vehicle did not block the road for a funeral procession, and bowing their head whilst the funeral procession passed.
- 1.11.4 Many of the compliments received were about the speed in which officers resolved problems.
- 1.11.5 It is worth noting that those services with the highest number of complaints also in the main seemed to receive the highest number of compliments and are the services with high levels of customer contact.
- 1.12 Methods of Contact
- 1.12.1 Complaints were received by the following methods of contact this quarter:
- 88 (35.2%) were made by email
  - 15 (6%) were made face to face
  - 16 (6.4%) were made by post
  - 131 (52.4%) were made by telephone
- 1.13 Payments, refunds and compensation
- 1.13.1 In total, £1026.42 was offered to justified complainants in refunds, compensation and offers of free services. This was all offered at stage 1.
- 1.13.2 Full Details of payments, refunds or compensation can be found in Appendix D.
- 1.14 Social Media Themes
- 1.14.1 Appendix E outlines the prominent themes that were mentioned on social media during quarter 1. This appendix was prepared by the Communications team. The pictures show how many mentions each topic received, with words in larger text receiving proportionately more mentions than words in smaller text. The information is picked up by searching all social media posts for any comments or tweets with the word 'Maidstone' in. Those words with the text so small as to be unable to read it received so few

mentions there is little value in being able to read them.

1.14.2 The value of including this is that it can give a wider context to the issues raised in the complaints report, by showing what is being mentioned online other than complaints.

1.14.3 It must be noted that this is a crude tool to demonstrate the major themes, and not positive and negative publicity on social media.

#### 1.15 Unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants

1.15.1 There were no complaints received by unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants this quarter. However a large amount of correspondence was received by the council from such complainants. For example in May and June, one unreasonably persistent complainant sent 69 emails to the council.

#### 1.16 Alternative Action and why not Recommended

1.16.1 The Council could choose not to monitor complaints handling but this would impact severely on the Council's ability to use complaints as a business improvement tool.

#### 1.17 Impact on Corporate Objectives

1.17.1 Customer service is a core value and one of the Council's priorities is Corporate and Customer Excellence. Management, and effective resolution, of complaints is crucial to the success of this objective.

#### 1.18 Risk Management

1.18.1 Failure to manage complaints in a robust fashion represents a service, financial and reputational risk to the Council. Regular reports are produced for CLT and also presented to the Corporate Services and Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Monitoring is carried out by the Policy and Information Team.

1.19 Other Implications

1. Financial
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

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1.19.1 Financial Implications

All financial implications are set out in Appendix D

1.20 Appendices

- Appendix A- Complaint Categorisation and Timeliness
- Appendix B- Complaint Satisfaction Surveys
- Appendix C- Stage 2 Complaints
- Appendix D- Payments
- Appendix E- Social Media Themes
- Appendix F- Charts and Graphs
- Appendix G- Landed Festival Response

**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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