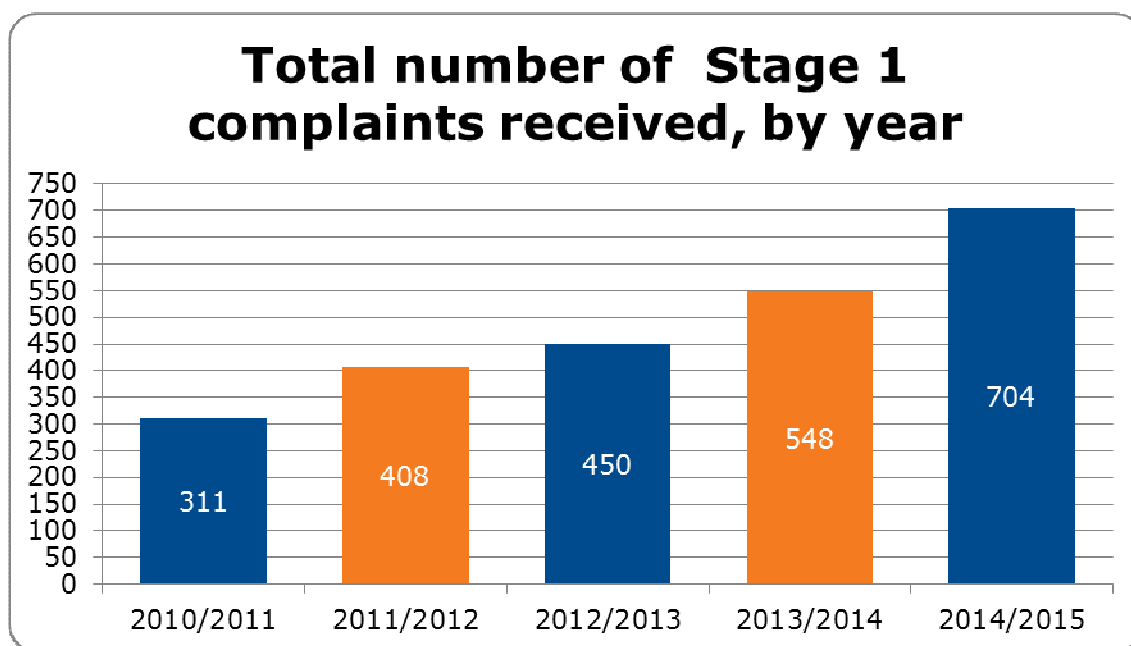


2014/2015 End of Year Complaints Briefing

1. Complaints Volumes

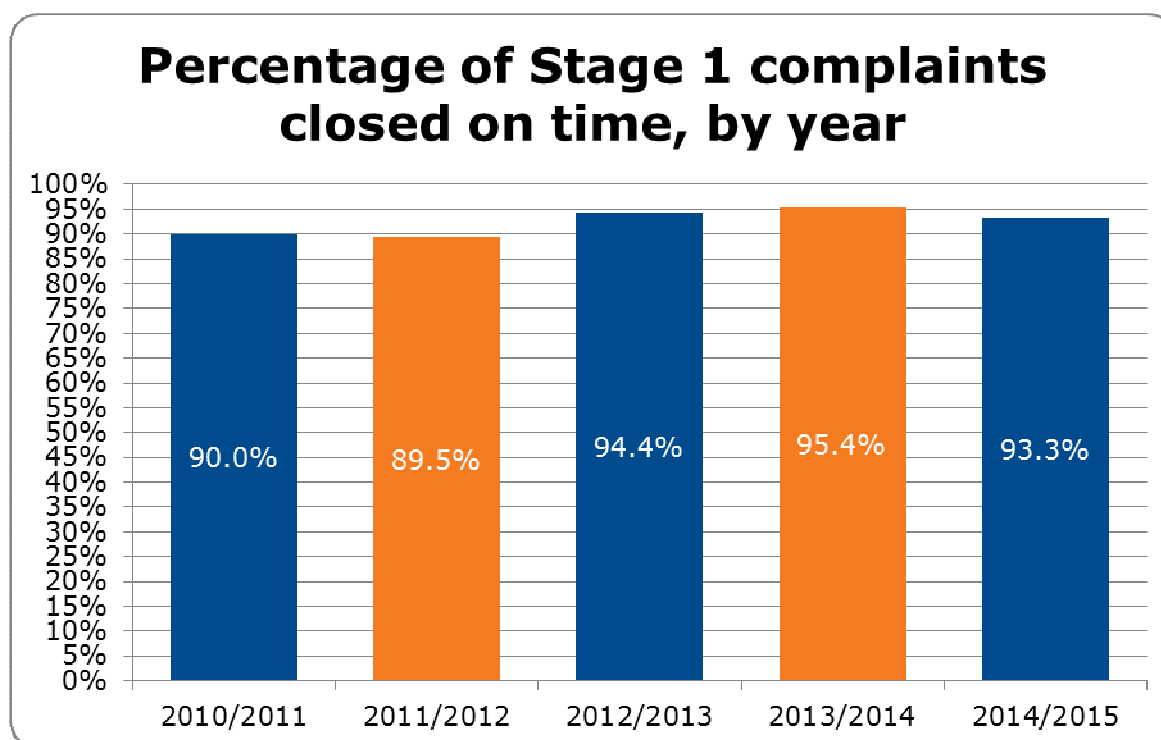
The council received 704 stage 1 complaints this year, a 28.5% increase compared to 2013/14. The graph below shows the number of complaints received for each year since 2010/11.



The main factor in the increase in complaints was that we received 108 complaints about the Landed Festival. This is discussed in more detail in section 3. Other than the complaints received about the Landed Festival, complaints have increased across the board; rather than as a result of specific incidents, policy changes or problems experienced by customers. For example, out of the 29 services that received complaints this year only seven received less complaints this year than last year.

2. Closing complaints on time

The graph below shows the percentage of stage 1 complaints closed on time by year for the last 5 years. The percentage of stage 1 complaints closed within the target time dropped 2.1% compared to 2013/14, which is outside of the target of 95% set in the Strategic Plan.



The drop in performance in 2014/15 should be considered in the context of the rise in complaints. It is also important to consider that our standard turnaround time for stage 1 complaints is 10 working days. Some local authorities have a 15 or even 20 working day turnaround time for Stage 1 complaints.

Departments are dedicating more resources to deal with these complaints within the 10 working day turnaround time, and generally are performing well and hitting the target.

The Policy and Information Manager is currently undertaking a review of complaints and the turnaround times will be considered as part of this review.

3. Complaints received by service and categorisation

The table below shows the full breakdown of complaints by service, sorted into categories and showing performance in terms of complaints closed on time. Trends and some explanation around complaint numbers are explored in more detail for particular services in the following section.

Service	Number	On Time	Late	% on Time	Service	Policy	Staff	Time Taken	Lack of Contact	Discrimination
Benefits	14	12	2	85.7%	12	0	2	0	0	0
Bereavement Services	3	3	0	100.0%	0	0	3	0	0	0
Building Control	3	3	0	100.0%	1	0	2	0	0	0
Community Safety	3	3	0	100.0%	2	0	0	0	1	0
Corporate Property	4	4	0	100.0%	4	0	0	0	0	0
Customer Services	16	16	0	100.0%	11	0	4	0	1	0
Depot	7	7	0	100.0%	2	0	5	0	0	0
Development Management	80	71	9	88.8%	47	13	6	6	7	1
Economic Development	5	5	0	100.0%	5	0	0	0	0	0
Electoral Registration	21	15	6	71.4%	15	5	0	0	0	1
Environmental Enforcement	38	37	1	97.4%	12	8	17	0	0	1
Environmental Services	124	123	1	99.2%	90	12	16	4	2	0
Finance	3	3	0	100.0%	3	0	0	0	0	0
Grounds Maintenance	2	2	0	100.0%	2	0	0	0	0	0
Housing (Homelessness)**	9	8	1	88.9%	6	1	0	0	1	1
Housing Options/Register*	39	28	11	71.8%	19	6	4	7	1	2
Housing Register**	17	13	4	76.5%	12	4	0	0	0	1
Legal Services	1	1	0	100.0%	1	0	0	0	0	0
Licensing	2	2	0	100.0%	0	0	2	0	0	0
Market	3	3	0	100.0%	2	0	1	0	0	0
Parking Services	74	74	0	100.0%	30	16	23	1	1	3
Parks and Leisure	159	152	7	95.6%	39	113	3	4	0	0
Planning Enforcement	13	11	2	84.6%	8	2	0	1	2	0
Planning Support	16	15	1	93.8%	8	0	3	5	0	0
Private Sector Housing	5	2	3	40.0%	1	0	1	3	0	0
Policy and Communications	4	3	1	75.0%	1	2	1	0	0	0
Property & Procurement	1	1	0	100.0%	1	0	0	0	0	0
Revenues	38	38	0	100.0%	23	12	2	1	0	0
Total	704	655	49	93.0%	357	194	95	32	16	10

* Q1/Q2 only, before Housing Options was split into Register and Homelessness

** Q3/Q4 only

Parks and Leisure

Parks and Leisure received the highest number of complaints out of all council services this year. Of the 159 complaints received by this service, 108 were about the 'Landed Festival' which happened over the Easter weekend of 2014 in Whatman Park. The complaints were mainly about the noise generated by the event, the timing of the event on the Easter weekend (in particular Easter Sunday) and some complaints of antisocial behaviour as a result of the festival. Parks and Leisure recognise that this particular event was not appropriate at this time of the year, and will consider the type of events held in our parks during religious holidays in future. They will also be assessing the potential noise generated by any proposed events for Whatman Park, due to the large number of complaints received regarding the noise generated by the event.

Parks and Leisure received 19 complaints in quarter 2 about 'The Social' festival, which was held in Mote Park in September. As a result of these complaints, the following issues will be picked up when organising the festival in 2015:

- Litter bins will be placed on the approach to Mote Park to discourage littering
- Portaloos will be installed at the entrance to the park to discourage public urination
- Parking restrictions will be placed on nearby streets and drop off/pick up points close to the festival will be organised, in order to minimise traffic disruption for nearby residents.

Environmental Services

Environmental Services received the second highest number of complaints this year receiving 124. This was a decrease in the number of complaints received compared to 2013/14, when 174 complaints were received. It should be noted that the new waste collection contract was introduced during 2013/14, resulting in a higher than usual number of complaints as changes were implemented. There were no common themes, trends or particularly noteworthy complaints that required service changes over the year.

Revenues

In 2013/14 Revenues received 47 complaints, whereas in 2014/15 they received 38. However there have been an increasing number of policy complaints where the complainants are dissatisfied with policies introduced in 2012 as a result of the localisation of council tax benefit. The specific policies complained about were:

- The removal of the discount for second home owners
- Reducing the discount for empty properties from six months to one month
- Introduction of the long term empty premium, where if a property is empty for more than 2 years a 50% premium is added to the council tax bill.

People who had been directly affected financially by the policies made all of the complaints regarding these policies. These complaints will be considered when the policies are reviewed, as they give us an insight on the impact of these policies.

Development Management and Planning Enforcement

Development Management and Planning Enforcement both received a high number of complaints this year and there are a number of key trends that can be observed.

Most customers complaining about the Development Management service were objectors to planning applications who were either unhappy with a decision that had been made or unhappy with the way in which their representations were handled.

The planning system does not allow objectors to appeal a decision that has been made (other than through Judicial Review), so it appears that the complaints process is the only way those affected feel they can express their views once a decision has been made.

Complaints regarding Planning Enforcement are related to a lack of awareness of the limitations within planning legislation around using enforcement action. For example, that people can make retrospective planning applications, or that, applications cannot be refused just because they are retrospective. In addition, complainants tended to have differing expectations of how quickly planning breaches could be resolved.

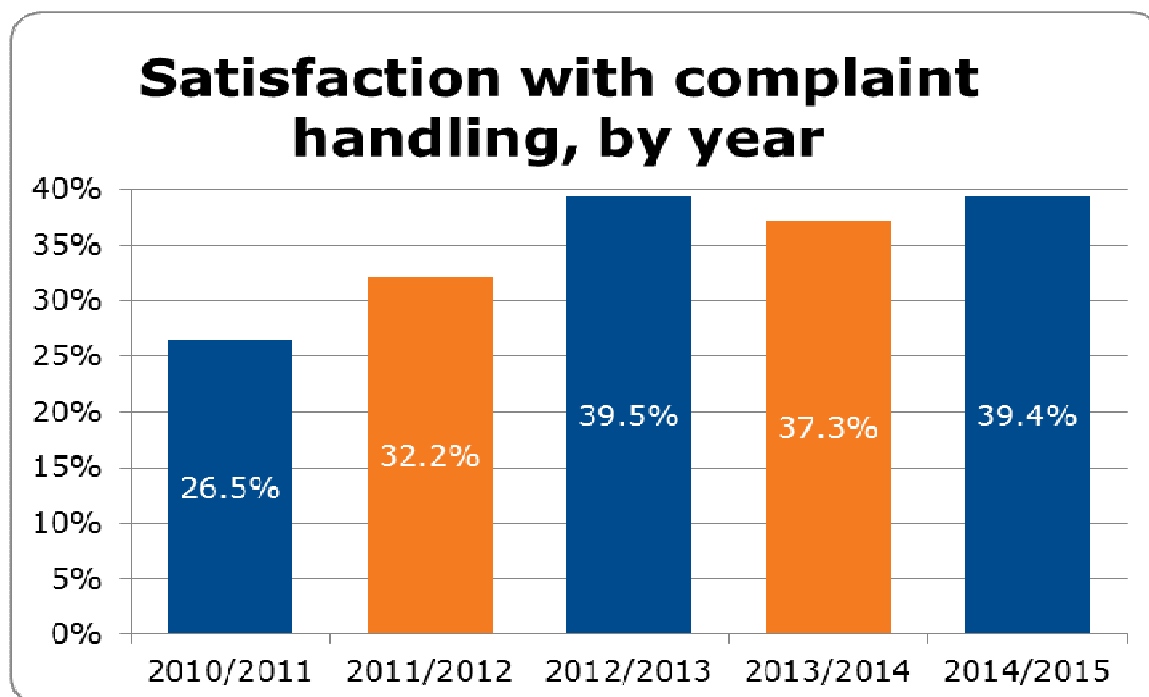
Both of these themes are further explored in the section on stage 2 complaints (section 6); as both of these services had a high escalation rate for stage 2 complaints.

Parking Service

Parking Services saw a 28% increase compared to 2013/14. There were no individual incidents or issues faced by customers that generated a higher than usual number of complaints. Parking Services have an extensive appeals process for those who have been issued PCNs, so there were very few complaints regarding the issuing of PCNs. It is unclear why there was an increase in the number of complaints received as the number of PCNs issued has remained relatively stable compared to last year (31,693 issued in 2013/14 compared to 32,547 issued in 2014/15). The number of hours patrolled saw a decrease in 2014/15 (20,982 patrol hours) compared to 2013/14 (22,295 patrol hours).

4. Satisfaction with complaint handling

There was a 2% in satisfaction with the way complaints have been handled compared to 2013/14. This is still below the target of 45% that was set in the Strategic Plan. The long term trend since 2010/11 has been an increase in satisfaction with complaint handling up until 2012/13. Since then satisfaction levelled off at between 37.3% and 39.5%. The graph below shows the satisfaction rate with complaint handling for the last five years.

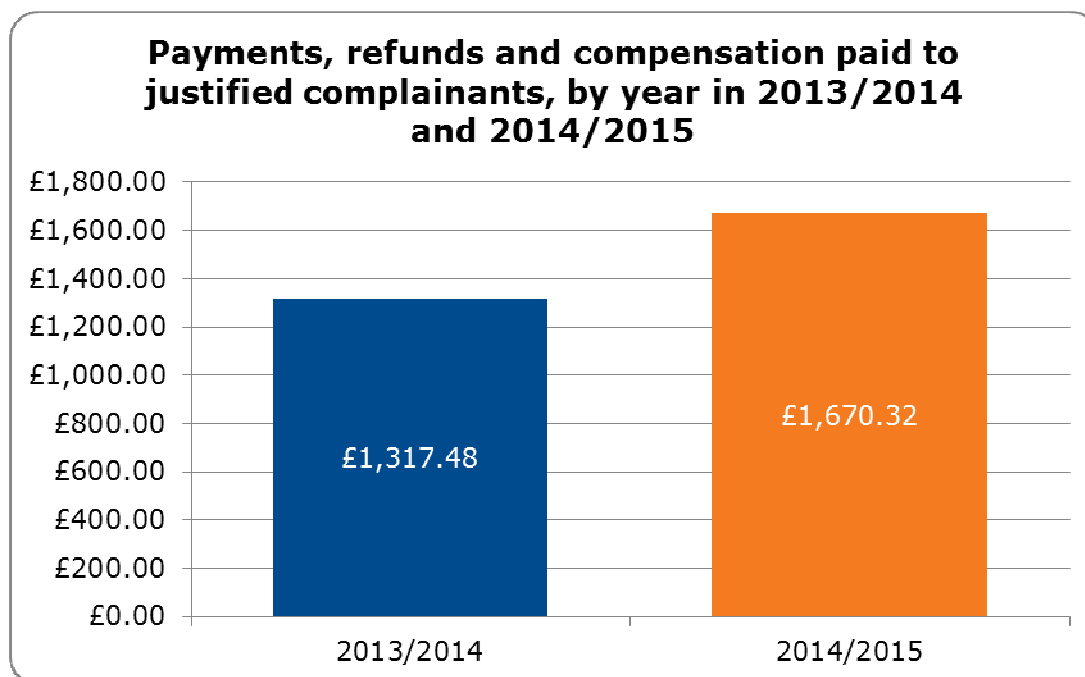


The complaints satisfaction survey has a poor response rate and contains very little usable information to improve the way the service is delivered. The Policy and Information Team have observed an increasing number of stage 2 complaints raised following receipt of a complaint satisfaction survey.

As part of a review of the complaints service other methods of monitoring satisfaction are being explored.

5. Payments, refunds and compensation

This year the council paid, refunded, or offered free services to the value of £1670.32 to complainants whose complaint was found to be justified in 2014/2015. This was an increase of £352.84 compared to 2013/14. The graph below shows the totals for 2013/14 and 2014/2015 for comparison.



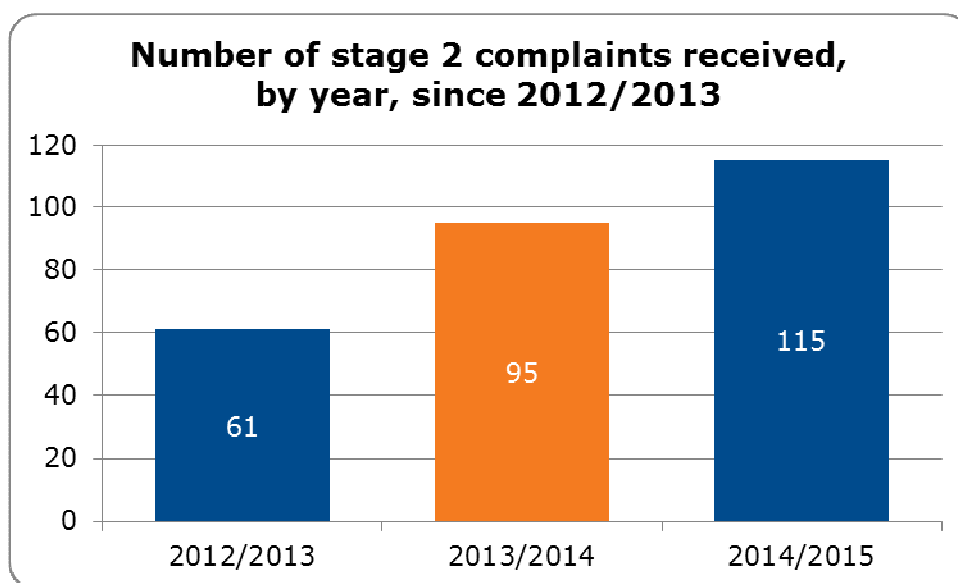
Payments, refunds and compensation are much more likely to be made at stage 1 of the complaints process rather than at stage 2. The table below shows the proportion of payments or refunds made at stage 1 compared to stage 2 for 2013/14 and 2014/15. A table showing the proportion of compensation paid at the different stages of the process can be found below.

	2013/2014		2014/2015	
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 1	Stage 2
Total (£)	£849.98	£467.50	£1,581.92	£88.40
%	64.5	35.5	94.7	5.3

The Policy and Information Team have been raising awareness of the remedies for justified complaints policy, and encouraging teams to refer to the policy when complaints have been upheld in order to check whether compensation was due. This was because last year the team noticed that many justified complaints were going to stage 2 because although we had recognised we had done something wrong we weren't considering whether an ex gratia payment, refund or compensation was due to the complainant. We consider this to be a success as the percentage of compensation paid at stage 2 of the complaints process has dropped by around 30%.

6. Stage 2 Complaints

In 2014/15 the council received 115 stage 2 complaints. This represents a 21.1% increase compared to 2013/14 when 95 stage 2 complaints were received. This must be taken in the context of the increasing number of stage 1 complaints received by the council over the last 3 years. The number of stage 2 complaints received for the last three years can be found on the graph below.



The number of stage 2 complaints we receive has been increasing year on year. This is not surprising as the number of stage 1 complaints we have received has also been increasing at a similar rate.

The table below shows the escalation rate for stage 2 complaints for the previous three years. The escalation rate shows the percentage of stage 1 complaints that are escalated to stage 2.

Year	Number of stage 1 complaints	Number of stage 2 complaints	Escalation rate
2012/2013	450	61	13.6%
2013/2014	548	95	17.3%
2014/2015	704	115	16.3%

The escalation rate has dropped slightly compared to 2013/14, however the volume of stage 2 complaints received increased by 21%. The number of stage 2 complaints received has doubled since 2012/13, meaning the Policy and Information team are required to dedicate more resources to investigating stage 2 complaints.

In 2014/15 8 of the 118 stage 2 complaints were responded to outside of target time (20 working days), which represents 93.2% of stage 2 complaints responded to within target time. All of the complainants that were responded to late were kept updated on the progress of their complaint. Of the 8 stage 2 complaints responded to late, 3 of them were only closed late by 1 day.

The breakdown of stage 2 complaints received by service, along with each service's escalation rate, is set out in the table below.

Service	Number of Stage 2s	Number of Stage 1s	Escalation Rate
Benefits	2	14	14.2 %
Building Control	2	3	66.6%
Community Safety	2	3	66.6%
Customer Services	3	16	18.8%
Development Management	24	80	30.0%
Electoral Registration	1	21	4.8%
Environmental Enforcement	6	38	15.8%
Environmental Services	8	124	6.5%
Housing (homelessness)**	1	9	11.1%
Housing Options/Register*	7	39	18.0%
Housing Register**	1	17	5.9%
Licensing	1	2	50.0%
Market	1	3	33.3%
Parking Services	13	74	17.6%
Parks and Leisure	14	159	8.8%
Planning Enforcement	7	13	53.8%
Planning Support	2	16	12.5%
Policy and Information	3	4	75.0%
Private Sector Housing	1	5	20.0%
Revenues	15	38	39.5%
Spatial Policy***	1	0	-
TOTAL	115		
* Quarter 1 and 2 only, these services were separated for quarter 3 onwards			
** Quarters 3 and 4 only			
*** One stage 2 received for a stage 1 complaint received in q4 of 2013/2014			

The service that received the greatest number of stage 2 complaints was Development Management. The number received by this service represented a 30% escalation rate, which is almost double the overall escalation rate for the council this year.

Revenues

Revenues also had both a high escalation rate as well as a high number of stage 2 complaints. However 6 of the stage 2 complaints received by Revenues were about policies introduced in 2012 when the responsibility for administering Council Tax Support was handed to councils. The policies complained about were:

- the long term empty premium
- the removal of council tax discounts for second homes
- a reduced discount period for empty homes.

Generally, these complaints were made because complainants did not agree with the policies wished to have them changed, or an exception made in their case. There were no complaints about these policies from people who were not directly affected by them financially.

Planning Enforcement

Of those services with an escalation rate over 50%, only Planning Enforcement received more than 4 stage 1 complaints in the year. Many of the Stage 2 complaints received by Planning Enforcement were regarding lack of contact, delays to correspondence and lack of action in Planning Enforcement cases. There may be the potential for some work to be undertaken around expectation management for those who make complaints against Planning Enforcement. In particular it may be valuable to review our enforcement policy and publish it on our website so that service standards and options for enforcement are readily available to residents before they contact the service.

Development Management

Development Management also received a high number of stage 2 complaints this year, as well as an escalation rate above the average for the Council. Many of the complaints received for this service were from those dissatisfied with the outcome of planning applications, how an application was handled and aspects of an application that were not considered that complainants felt should be. The majority of these complaints were from planning objectors, rather than applicants, as only 6 complaints were received from planning applicants. Applicants have a right of appeal against planning decisions that are not decided in their favour; however objectors have no right of appeal (other than through Judicial Review). The Policy and Information Team are working with Mid Kent Legal Services and the Planning Team to produce some guidance around this subject to assist the contact centre when dealing with enquiries of this nature; as well as to assist with the drafting of stage 1 complaint responses to make this clearer to complainants.

Environmental Services

Environmental Services had a very low escalation rate, particularly considering the number of complaints received for this service. This suggests that complaints are being dealt with appropriately at the first stage of the process as they are not being escalated to stage 2. The majority of complaints about this service are regarding missed collections and other issues that are usually relatively simple to resolve, hence the low escalation rate. However the team should be commended for getting these issues resolved at the first stage, especially considering the number of complaints they receive.

7. Stage 3 (Ombudsman) Complaints

The Local Government Ombudsman publishes statistics for each local authority every July. The 2014/15 review letter is attached as Appendix III to this report. The review letter shows that of the 22 decisions taken by the LGO, 6 detailed investigations were carried out. Of these 6, 3 were upheld. The Policy and Information Team cannot supply a full analysis of LGO information for two reasons. The first is that the reference numbers used by the LGO do not match those used by us on our complaints system. The second is the reporting function on the complaints system is not currently able to report against LGO complaints.

The review letter received for 2013/14 showed that 19 decisions on complaints were made by the LGO that year. Of these 19, 3 detailed investigations were carried out. All three of these complaints were upheld in 2013/14.

Although the LGO carried out more investigations (and received more enquiries) in 2014/15 than 2013/14; the same number were upheld. This suggests that our complaints process is fairly robust.

Below is a table showing information on LGO decisions taken for Kent District Councils in 2014/15. The table shows that our performance regarding detailed investigations carried out is fairly typical. However the number of complaints upheld is towards the high end, with only Thanet District Council and Dover District Council having more complaints upheld by the LGO.

Authority	Decisions Made	Detailed investigations carried out	Upheld	Not Upheld
Ashford Borough Council	22	6	1	5
Canterbury City Council	34	3	1	2
Dartford Borough Council	26	1	1	0
Dover District Council	30	11	5	6
Gravesham Borough Council	30	0	0	0
Maidstone Borough Council	22	6	3	3
Sevenoaks District Council	15	5	1	4
Shepway District Council	20	5	1	4
Swale Borough Council	22	6	2	4
Thanet District Council	39	9	4	5
Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council	8	0	0	0
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	13	3	2	1

8. Complaints Review

The Policy and Information Team are currently conducting a review of complaints in order to improve the way in which complaints are handled across the authority. The objective of the review is to:

- Reduce the numbers of complaints received (and particularly those that go to stage 2 and local government ombudsman)
- Improve the quality of complaint responses across the council
- Streamline the complaints process internally
- Raise awareness of any complaints policy changes and other policies relating to complaints (Unreasonable or Unreasonably Persistent Complainants Policy and Remedies for Justified Complaints Policy) across the council;
- Review the effectiveness of the current complaints computer system;

The review will incorporate:

- Feedback from staff and managers from informal meetings
- Benchmarking how our Cipfa nearest neighbour authorities and Kent District Councils perform in relation to complaints, and comparing their differing complaints policies
- Our own data and information held about complaints and complainants.

The Policy and Information Team is aiming to finalise the review by the end of August.