

North Tyneside Council Report to Cabinet Date: 12 November 2012

ITEM 7(f)

Title: Complaints Service
Annual Report 2011-12

Portfolio(s): Elected Mayor
Adult Social Care
Children, Young People and Learning

Cabinet Member(s): Mrs Linda Arkley
Councillor Les Miller
Councillor David Lilly

Report from Directorate: Chief Executive's Office

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Customer & Member Liaison Manager

Wards affected: All

PART 1

1.1 Purpose:

To provide Cabinet with details of complaint related activity during 2011-12 and comply with the requirement to publish an Annual Report on Complaints under the relevant statutory complaint legislation.

1.2 Recommendation(s):

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Note the complaint related activity during 2011-12 as set out in the Complaints Service Annual Report for 2011-12 (Appendix 1).
2. Approve and authorise the above Report for publication by the Head of Legal, Governance and Commercial Services; and
3. Receive the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Review of complaints concerning North Tyneside Council for 2011-12 (Appendix 2).

1.3 Forward plan:

The report is listed on the Forward Plan published on 10th October 2012.

1.4 Council plan and policy framework

This report supports the Council Priorities for “Our People” and “Our Resources” in the Council Strategic Plan 2012-2015, as lessons learned from complaints are a key driver in service improvement and ensuring best value for money.

1.5 Information:

1.5.1 Background

The Council undertakes millions of transactions with its 198,500 residents, and substantial numbers of visitors to the Borough, throughout the year. Against that background, the number of complaints received by the Council remains consistently very low, reflecting the excellent services our customers receive and the Council's ability to resolve swiftly any issues that do arise at the first point of contact.

The number of formal complaints continues to increase and is reflective of efforts to raise awareness of the complaints service within the Council and is not necessarily reflective of a poorer quality of service to the public. Complaints leaflets tailored to Corporate, Social Care Services and young people are widely available in Council buildings and to download from the Council website. It is also now very easy for our customers to contact us on-line and Social Care Service users are provided with a complaints leaflet at the first point of contact.

Customer satisfaction with the complaints process increases year on year and the Council continues to resolve the vast majority of complaints at Stage 1 of the procedure. The Council welcomes complaints as valuable feedback from its customers, and complaint outcomes provide valuable lessons learned to further improve and enhance Council services and procedures.

1.5.2 The Council operates statutory complaint procedures for Adult Social Care and Children and Young People's Services. It also provides a Corporate Complaints Procedure for all other services. The Customer & Member Liaison Office (CMLO) Manager is the main contact with the Local Government Ombudsman's Office, (LGO) responding to initial enquiries, gathering information and arranging access to files and interviews of staff under the instruction of the LGO investigators and the CMLO providing advice and assistance to Council Officers who may be subject of a complaint.

All work in supporting the operation of these services are undertaken by the CMLO within Legal, Governance and Commercial Services.

1.5.3 Local Government Ombudsman

In 2011/12 the Council responded to LGO enquiries within an average of 18 days, which is well within the required timescale for response of 28 days, reflects positively compared to national statistics and is an improvement on the previous year. The LGO's Annual review of complaints 2011/12 is at Appendix 2.

1.5.4 Annual Complaints Report

The Council's Complaints Service Annual Report for 2011-12 is attached at Appendix 1. Cabinet is invited to note that the overall number of formal complaints rose by 22% from 537 in 2010-11, to 654 in 2011-12. Despite this increase, as set

out above the number of complaints received remains very low given the huge volume of transactions the Council undertakes every year, and may also be reflective of the work undertaken to promote the availability of the complaints process to service users.

It is worthy of note that complaint numbers are sensitive to service changes and weather and that the increase in 2011-12 was largely related to three things:

- The weather – the snow over the winter of 2010-11 pulled down over 3,000 gutters in Council houses, a position that did not recover until the beginning of this year;
- Changing the refuse collection routes to 4 days a week; and
- Charging for bins and caddies.

The first issue was a significant repair problem that required a major programme of works to resolve. The latter were policy changes necessary to deliver efficiencies and balance the budget.

1.5.5 Corporate Complaints

The number of Corporate Complaints received rose by 22%, from 485 in 2010-11 to 590 in 2011-12. The increase in complaints is attributed to several service areas, the bulk of these relating to North Tyneside Homes (NTH), from 94 to 121, Kier North Tyneside, from 165 to 245, and Environmental Services, 61 complaints during 2010-11 increased to 80 in 2011-12.

The increase in complaints during 2011-12 was largely due to changes in how services are delivered. There was an initial settling in period when refuse collection rounds were changed from a 5 day to a 4 day service. There was also a change in policy when a charge was introduced for replacement bins and recycling caddies.”

The Council provide services to 15,500 tenants and 700 leaseholders. Last year we carried out 55,000 repairs, let 1,200 properties, undertook 13,000 arrears visits and answered 109,000 phone calls. The number of complaints received represents a very small percentage of our customers.

The Council recognises that it is important to deal with complaints well as this is central to providing a good customer service. Services need to try and put things right and learn from our complaints so that we can continually improve our services.

Last year, the Council recognised that it needed to improve our performance at dealing with complaints in line with tenants’ priorities. The Council appointed a new Tenant Feedback Officer who came into post in December 2011. This enables the service to be more responsive to tenant feedback including answering complaints more quickly, providing a more consistent approach to complaints and also increasing capacity for robust monitoring and providing robust information to support service improvement.

As part of the Council’s commitment to learning from complaints, the Tenant Feedback Officer has worked closely with our service managers and Kier North Tyneside to identify and address the issues that are affecting customers so that we can improve services.

2011/12 saw a large increase in the amount of complaints related to day to day repairs carried out by Kier North Tyneside. The largest number of complaints was in the guttering/roofing/scaffolding category as a result of a backlog of work due to extreme weather. Analysis of the complaints data for the first five months of 2012-2013 shows a reduction in repairs complaints to around 2010/11 levels which is due to a large drop in complaints about guttering which can be related to the completion of the guttering programme.

The results are set out in detail in Section 3 and Table 8 of the Annual Report at Appendix 1.

1.5.6 Social Care Complaints

The number of Social Care complaints (relating to both Adult Social Care and Children and Young People's Services) increased from 52 in 2010-11 to 64 in 2011-12, a rise of 23%. Although a combined increase of 23% appears high, it equates to an increase of 4 cases in Children Social Services and 8 cases in Adult Social Care.

The results are set out in Section 2 and Tables 2 to 4 of the Annual Report at Appendix 1.

1.5.7 Customer Survey

A survey of complainants' experiences of and satisfaction with the complaint services undertaken in respect of complaints handled during 2011/12 resulted in 24% of forms being returned. The majority of those responding found it easy to find information about the service and were happy with the length of time taken to respond to their complaint and the content of the response letter.

1.5.8 Future Developments

One key aim of the complaint process is 'learning' from complaints and this is a core driver in all future developments. A number of changes were made to procedures and practice in services as a result of complaints resolved during 2011-12. Examples have been listed on page 11 of the Annual Report.

A continuing area of development is partnership working, where services are provided on behalf of the Council in conjunction with other public, voluntary and private sector organisations. Such change has potential for complaint processes to become complex, so arrangements will be in place from the outset to ensure the customer's experience is as straightforward as possible. Securing the efficient handling of complaints will also be a vital component of ongoing arrangements with our current and future partners.

Since early September 2009 Housing Repairs, Voids, work relating to the Decent Homes Standard, Gas Servicing and Construction Group work have been managed by Kier North Tyneside. Since then North Tyneside's CMLO have successfully worked in partnership with our partner organisation Kier North Tyneside Customer Services providing a seamless complaint service to residents following the changeover. Arrangements are being put into place with our new partners Capita Symonds and Balfour Beatty to provide a similar service.

A number of service areas are examining ways of collecting, monitoring and analysing positive feedback, such as compliments, in order to provide a fuller picture of customer feedback. Complaints management has also been an important feature in the consideration of the new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) arrangements. The CRM system is currently being used for managing low level complaints, Ombudsman cases, Adult Social Care complaints, NT Homes and Kier NT complaints as well as comments and compliments received by the CMLO. The next phase will be to go live on CRM with the remainder of Corporate complaints and Children Social Care complaints during 2013.

1.5.9 Conclusion

Complaints are now widely recognised as integral to the provision of quality services at both individual and strategic levels. The Council's successful history and current good practice in effective complaint handling will be an integral service improvement driver in the current rapidly changing culture. The demands of maintaining, and increasing levels of customer satisfaction, coupled with organisational changes across public and partner sectors, will be well supported by the current robust complaint handling procedures.

The Annual Report will be published on the Council's website, and will be available in Libraries and on request from the Customer and Member Liaison Office.

1.6 Decision options:

All councils providing 'social service functions' including North Tyneside Council are required by law to publish an annual report on complaints received.

1.7 Reasons for recommended option:

The Local Authority is legally required to publish an Annual Report on Complaints. Publication of an annual report also supports community engagement, and promotes transparency and opportunities for organisational improvement.

1.8 Appendices:

Appendix 1: North Tyneside Council Complaints Service Annual Report 2011-12
Appendix 2: The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Review of complaints about North Tyneside Council 2011-12.

1.9 Contact officers:

Vivienne Geary, Head of Legal, Governance and Commercial Services, tel. 643 5339
Yvette Monaghan, Customer & Member Liaison Manager, tel. 643 5361
Alison Campbell, Finance Business Manager, tel. 643 7038

1.10 Background information:

The following background papers and research reports have been used in the compilation of this report and are available for inspection at the offices of the author.

- The Local Authority Social Services Complaints (England) Regulations 2006 and Guidance (Children)

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2006/1738/contents/made>

- The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009 and Guidance (Adults)
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+www.dh.gov.uk/en/SocialCare/DH_12_0361

- North Tyneside Council Corporate Complaints Procedure
http://www.northtyneside.gov.uk/browse-display.shtml?p_ID=28887&p_subjectCategory=629

PART 2 – COMPLIANCE WITH PRINCIPLES OF DECISION MAKING

2.1 Finance and other resources

There are no financial or other resource implications arising directly from this report. The delivery of the service is provided for from existing budget provision. Compensation payments are funded from the existing service budgets from the relevant Service area.

2.2 Legal

Local Authorities with Social Service functions are required to publish Annual Reports on Complaints. Failure to produce a report will render the Council in breach of the relevant statutory provisions set out in The Local Authority Social Services Complaints (England) Regulations 2006.

2.3 Consultation/community engagement

Internal Consultation

The Annual Report has been circulated to Heads of Service, Strategic Directors, the Chief Executive, the Elected Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Members for Adult Social Care and Children, Young People and Learning. Comments received have been incorporated where relevant.

2.4 Human rights

The service promotes equal access to complaint services and opportunities to contribute to service improvement.

2.5 Equalities and diversity

The service promotes equal access to complaint services and opportunities to contribute to service improvement. Material is available in different formats and the CMLO actively provides assistance for people with individual needs as required.

2.6 Risk management

A risk assessment has taken place. All risks identified can be managed through North Tyneside Risk Process and will be added to the Council Risk Register.

2.7 Crime and disorder

There are no implications directly arising from this report.

2.8 Environment and sustainability

There are no implications directly arising from this report.

PART 3 - SIGN OFF

- Chief Executive X
- Strategic Director(s) X
- Mayor/Cabinet Member(s) X
- Chief Finance Officer X
- Monitoring Officer X
- Strategic Manager Policy & Partnerships X