

REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS 2017/18

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report provides an overview of complaints received, and dealt with, by the Corporate Complaints Team during the period 1 April 2017–31 March 2018. It includes those complaints of which the Council is aware were made to the Local Government and the Housing Ombudsmen (the Council is not always advised of complaints made direct to the Ombudsmen). Comparisons with the previous year (1 April 2016–31 March 2017) are included. The report excludes issues that have been referred to and dealt with by the Council's insurers.

2. PROCEDURE AND RECORDING OF COMPLAINTS

2.1 The Council's complaints procedure is attached at Appendix 1. It provides that

- all complaints at stage 1 are dealt with by the relevant Service Manager
- if the complainant is not satisfied with the Service Manager's response, the complaint is dealt with at stage 2 by the relevant Executive Head
- if the complainant remains dissatisfied, they may pursue their complaint to stage 3, when it is investigated by the Executive Head for Governance & Regulation on behalf of the Chief Executive.

2.2 Complaints recorded centrally have in the past been categorised by individual service/service manager. It is considered that it is more meaningful to the public and to Members to group complaints under broader heads, rather than by individual service/service manager. It is accepted that this makes direct comparisons with previous years difficult, but this will improve over time as records build up.

3. COMPLAINTS FOR 2017/18

3.1 Please see:

Appendix 2 - Complaints received by the Council and any escalation

Appendix 3 - Complaints referred to the Local Government or the Housing Ombudsman

Appendix 4 – Complaints found to be justified locally and financial settlements

3.2 It will be noted that a total of 66 complaints were received and logged at Stage 1 in 2017/18, compared with 65 in 2016/17. However, in the previous year, 2015/16, 97 were recorded. The reduction over the past two years is to be welcomed but it is possible that, with the recent changes in officer structures and individual officers' duties, there might have been an element of under-recording. The issue will be raised with Service Managers. In common with previous years, the highest numbers of complaints relate to housing or planning issues. This is to be expected because of the nature of the work undertaken by those services.

4. COMPLAINTS TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OR THE HOUSING OMBUDSMAN

- 4.1 The Local Government Ombudsman has sent statistical information of complaints received by him to the Leaders of all principal authorities in England, as well as to the Chairmen of the relevant Scrutiny Committees. The numbers of complaints referred to in the Ombudsman's communication do not match this Council's records – the Ombudsman accepts that differences will occur. Except in exceptional circumstances, the Local Government Ombudsman will not investigate a complaint unless the complainant has exhausted all stages of a Council's complaints procedure. In some (and, it appears, most) cases the Ombudsmen might not inform the Council about a complaint, especially if they consider that no action is required by the Council.
- 4.2 The Ombudsman's statistics refer to nine complaints made to him in 2017/18. The Corporate Complaints Team is aware of only five. Of the complaints made to the Ombudsman, only one was upheld. This related to a delay in the dealing with complaints relating to enforcement action and an apology was given. One local settlement was reached in response to another complaint before consideration by the Ombudsman.
- 4.3 Different criteria apply to complaints to the Housing Ombudsman, but both cases referred to the Housing Ombudsman in 2017/18 had been through the Council's procedures to Stage 3. There were no findings of fault by the Housing Ombudsman.

5. LEARNING FROM COMPLAINTS

- 5.1 It remains important for Services to review each complaint received and, where appropriate, to take action to avoid or to minimise complaints of a similar nature. As part of their initial responses to any complaints received, Service Managers are expected to address any underlying causes that might remove the reason for the complaint.
- 5.2 If complaints are escalated to Stage 2, the Executive Head will examine the reasons for the complaint and, if considered appropriate, ensure that changes in practices are put in place.
- 5.3 When undertaking stage 3 reviews or responding to complaints to an Ombudsman, the Executive Head of Governance & Regulation will discuss the complaint in detail with the relevant Service Manager and/or the appropriate Executive Head, and encourages actions or changes. If the matter is one which appears to affect other services as well, she ensures that those services are involved.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The Council's Complaints Procedure continues to provide a robust system for investigating and resolving complaints. Whilst there has been a very small increase in the number of complaints to the Ombudsman, there does not appear to be any single cause or underlying factor which needs to be addressed.
- 6.2 The Ombudsman has found that the Council was at fault with only one complaint, with a further local settlement being reached between the Council and a complainant before that further complaint was determined by the Ombudsman.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 That the report be noted;
- 7.2 That Service Managers be encouraged to ensure that employees respond appropriately to customers who appear not to have received an expected standard of service from the Council;
- 7.3 That Service Managers be reminded to review complaints about their services regularly, and to implement any learning from them.

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