

Appendix 2 Anonymised Summary of a sample of Complaints and Lessons Learned by Directorate

Corporate Services

Causes of complaints which have been upheld/partially upheld include decision making, delay in service provision, collaborative working, following policies/relevant legislation and clarity/accuracy/timeliness of information.

Corporate Finance

(1) A complaint was received regarding the way in which a council tax reduction was handled and the time taken to consider the matter. The assessment took into account a carers allowance when considering income and did not recognise that such payment automatically ceases when a state pension is received.

As a result of the complaint a review is being undertaken regarding Carers Allowance and State Retirement Pension, to identify those claimants who may have similar circumstances to those of the complainant and checks are being carried out to confirm that the correct benefit is being paid.

In addition, staff have been reminded of the importance of being vigilant when checking the Customer Information System.

With regards to the time taken to undertake the assessment, the delay was due to a number of business pressures which resulted in the assessment taking longer to process than officers would have liked. However over the coming months managers will be working with staff to establish if there are further actions which can be taken to improve the timeliness of the assessment process.

(2) A Council Tax adjustment notice was issued cancelling a single persons discount on the basis that a child living at the property had reached the age of 18 without checking the child's status. In addition the resident suggested that as her child received a bus pass for school this would have provided the necessary information regarding the applicability of the discount.

It was accepted that on the face of it, contacting a council tax payer when their son or daughter is approaching their 18th birthday to check on their status appeared to be common sense. The benefit of doing this would enable the Council to continue awarding discounts where appropriate and this approach was taken when Council Tax was first introduced in 1993. However, in practice it was found that so few council tax payers were responding to these enquiry letters that the procedure led to delays in issuing revised adjustment notices, which in turn caused further problems as tax payers had less time available in which to pay an increased bill. For this reason, it was decided to remove this initial process and cancel the discount when a person attained the age of 18. However in light of the complaint the current procedures will be revisited.

Regarding the bus pass the complainant was advised that it is not always possible to routinely share data even within the same organisation without consent of the relevant person. However it was accepted that this was a valid point which would be taken forward with the Council's Education department.

Customer Services

(1) By way of background, almost all interactions with customers in the Customer Service Centres take place at either the reception desk or service desk. However, interview rooms are available for customers who would like more privacy. In this case, the customer visited the Customer Services Centre in Blackwood Library but was not aware that an interview room was available. Signs are usually up in customer waiting areas informing customers that interview rooms are available, however, when the Centre was set up in the library the sign about interview rooms was not put up.

As a result Centres have been checked to ensure that signage is in place and the content of the sign has been reviewed. In addition alternative ways of informing customers about the availability of interview rooms have been considered, such as including information on the Queue screens. The availability of interview rooms has also been reviewed.

2) A customer made several calls relating to the same issue but the first call was not logged correctly and as a result the details could not be found during a later call.

It was possible that the advisor who took the original call may not have heard the customer clearly. Whilst the customer services centre has a call coaching scheme that uses call recordings to coach Advisors on things such as active listening, confirming addresses etc, the call recording system is not currently active and as such it was not possible to check the call. However a new Call Recording Policy is under consideration with a view to re-instating the call recording system.

Environment Directorate

Causes of complaints upheld/partially upheld include delay in service provision, accessibility of services, quality of work, decision making, delay in service provision, collaborative working, following policies/relevant legislation and clarity/accuracy/timeliness of information.

Waste collection

With regard to Waste Collections Services, there were 16 complaints upheld within the last year. However putting the number of complaints in context it should be borne in mind that the Service undertakes just under 40,000 collections per day (over 10,000,000 per annum) and deal with over 600 Service Requests per week (approximately 30,000 per annum). The service operates 30 collections vehicles. Service requests are dealt with outside of the complaints policy.

The majority of complaints upheld/partially upheld related to a delay in the service provision in the main for repeated missed collections including regular refuse and bulky collections. Other examples related to repeated requests for bin repairs to be undertaken, accessibility of the services and quality of work in respect of assisted collections.

The following are examples of complaints dealt with in the Waste collection service.

1) A resident who is registered blind had the benefit of an assisted collection but had complained on numerous occasions that his food waste bin had not been placed back on his property. He had received an apology on each occasion. However, he wanted an assurance that this occurrence would be prevented. The area supervisor spoke to the collection crew and issued a specific instruction to ensure the bin was collected from and returned to the property.

2) A resident made numerous phone calls to complain about repeated missed collections of refuse which he said occurred at least once or twice per month. The Area Supervisor spoke to the collection crews who assured him that this would not happen again and instructed the crew to contact him when the collections were made.

3) Recycling bins were not emptied on two separate occasions. The resident was assured that the collection would be made in the following 48 hours so the bins were placed out for collection. Unfortunately the refuse was not collected and resulted in a complaint. It was ascertained that the original missed collection was an oversight on the part of the crew. There was a miscommunication in passing the second agreed collection date onto the crew, however upon receipt of the complaint arrangements were made to empty the bins the following day.

4) A complaint was received regarding fly tipping which was occurring outside one of the Councils' Civic Amenity Sites. The materials were removed and checked by site attendants for evidence such as addresses which may result in a full investigation. In addition arrangements are being made to erect fly tipping signs on the gates at all of the Council's Civic Amenity Sites.

5) Repeated requests were made by a resident for a repair to her bin after the lid was taken off by the refuse lorry. The bin was left out empty as directed on a number of occasions but was not repaired. The bin was subsequently repaired and apology given.

6) A bulky waste collection was not undertaken on the date arranged. The resident made contact with officers over subsequent days and asked for the collection to be undertaken the following week. This collection was also missed and the resident made further contact and was told he would be called back. It was accepted that there was a communication breakdown between the office staff and the area supervisor and the collection was removed.

Leisure

1) A leisure centre had no record of a request for a specific room when taking a booking for a function. The complainant was given an alternative room on the day but was not happy with the facilities provided. In upholding the complaint the leisure centre has changed its booking procedure whereby a tour of the room will be given in future prior to a booking being taken.

2) A refurbishment project was being undertaken in a leisure centre sports hall which was not completed by the date a booking for its use had been taken.

As a result to ensure this type of issue does not re-occur, each project will be allocated an amount of slippage time and any booking requests which fall within this time period will only be supplied on the basis that the project has been completed. Notification will be provided to the person making the booking in writing with progress updates.

Park Services

1) Initially two letters of complaint were written to the authority to different service areas, one of which was park services. Information required to respond to part of the complaint was provided to park services in order to incorporate into one response.

The complainant referred the matter to the Ombudsman six weeks after the original correspondence was sent to the Council who subsequently referred the matter back to the Authority to respond under its corporate complaints procedure.

As a result an officer from park services visited the complainant and followed up the discussions with a letter within the policy timeframe, however the letter failed to incorporate the additional information provided.

Officers were reminded that correspondence should be logged and dealt with in accordance with corporate timescales. The comments to officers from other departments should be included in the response to ensure the complainant has a full picture of the actions taken by the council and why. Staff were also encouraged to seek advice from their Supervisor if they were unsure of what action to take.

2) An initial service request relating to an overgrown tree adjacent to street lighting was logged as an issue to be dealt with within street lighting. The correspondence escalated as the customer called for an update. It was ascertained that the tree was not situated on council owned land and the information relayed to relevant officers.

An internal request was subsequently sent to Park services to prune the tree as it was obscuring the lighting column. This request was referred to the Arboricultural Officer. The complainant called for a further update some three months after the original request. A decision had been made internally to undertake the pruning works but this was not conveyed to the customer. A formal complaint was then made which was responded to confirming the tree was not owned by the council but that it would be coppiced that week.

It was noted that internal communication should be improved and customers should be provided with regular updates. Additional resources have now been placed within the section to specifically assist with Service Requests relating to trees. Also awareness has been raised with staff to ensure corporate compliance targets are adhered to.

3) A resident contacted the Authority regarding a tree opposite his property. This was treated as an emergency as the complainant stated branches were snapped and overhanging the highway. The contact was acknowledged on the same day advising the request had been referred to the Tree Officer. Over two weeks later the resident emailed for an update, which was referred to Park Services for a response, but despite this no response was provided. Over six weeks after the original referral the resident was advised of his right to make a formal complaint which he did. The day following receipt of the complaint, the tree was inspected, an instruction issued to undertake remedial works and a formal written response to the complaint was sent.

Officers recognised the importance of improving communication links between the Authority and the customer. This tree was not deemed as an emergency and did not require an immediate response or inspection. However, this information was not communicated to the complainant. Additional resources have now been placed within the section to specifically assist with Service Requests relating to trees.

The service area will also work closer with the Contact Centre to ensure requests are not prioritised as emergencies when they are routine requests for service.

Planning

1) Maintenance work was undertaken to a public right of way, over a specified width which involved the clearance of overgrowth either side of the actual footpath which led to a complaint being received from the adjoining landowner that excessive cutting had taken place on his land.

Whilst the work undertaken was not considered to be excessive it was acknowledged that out of courtesy the landowner should have been advised of the works being undertaken. As a result efforts will be made to notify the landowner prior to any future maintenance works being undertaken.

2) A resident wrote to the Council to advise that they would wish to address the Planning Committee to reiterate objections made to an application. This was accepted by officers as a clear indication of the request. However the resident was not subsequently advised when the application was due to be reported to the Planning Committee so that the resident could make the views known to its members.

Planning officers have been reminded to ensure it is made clear in the letters of consultation that neighbours are not kept apprised of the progress of planning applications and that where an application is reported to the Planning Committee they are responsible for contacting the Council's committee clerk to make arrangements to speak at the meeting.

Engineering Services

1) A complaint was received regarding incorrect positioning of double yellow lines on the highway and consideration of the issues fell below that which should have been expected.

Officers were reminded to deal with issues raised in accordance with response times.

2) Following completion of work undertaken to install a drop kerb, the phoneline to the adjoining property failed which resulted in short term loss of internet and potential aesthetic issues. The owner was also dissatisfied with the workmanship.

A full width reinstatement was carried out to ensure the resident was satisfied with the works. As a result of this complaint staff have been formally reminded of the importance of compliance with the relevant method statements and risk assessments provided as part of the job.

Housing

Causes of complaints upheld/partially upheld include decision making, delay in service provision, following policies/relevant legislation, clarity/accuracy/timeliness of information and quality of work.

The majority of Stage 2 complaints upheld related to recharges which, when reviewed as Stage 2 complaints, were subsequently withdrawn. In July, a recharge panel was formally established to consider recharge appeals and as such will no longer be dealt with under the Corporate Complaints policy. The appeal decision will however provide the complainant with a right to refer the decision to the Ombudsman if they are dissatisfied with the decision of the Panel.

1) During WHQS rewiring works at a designated older person's property a new electrical consumer unit was fitted. However, a concerned family member brought to officer's

attention that due to the location of the new consumer unit the tenant was unable to access it without assistance. As a result it was agreed that when being changed all consumer units must be located in easily accessible locations.

2) There have been a small number of complaints in relation to the re charge for failed appointments. In the past when repairs were reported to the Out of Hours team and the operatives attended the call but were unable to gain access to the property, the operative would have just moved on to their next call and the tenant would have received a recharge for this failed appointment. However these arrangements have been reviewed and arrangements put in place for the operative to ring back to the control room who will then attempt to contact the tenant to advise them the operative is outside their property. This small change has had the practical effect of reducing the number of recharges for failed appointments

3) An officer could not get any reply when they attempted to ring a tenant to arrange a repair appointment so an appointment letter was hand delivered arranging the appointment for 2 days time. The tenant was not available for the appointment and was subsequently recharged for a missed appointment. When the recharge was appealed it was agreed that practices should be amended so that if the tenant could not be reached by telephone to agree a mutually convenient appointment, a letter would be sent advising the tenant of the appointment date, giving at least 7 days notice.