

## COMPLAINTS MONITORING 2015/16

Portfolio:	Corporate
Ward(s) Affected:	All

### Purpose

**To report on the Council's corporate complaints monitoring arrangements, lessons learned from complaints and Local Government Ombudsman complaints received for the financial year 2015/2016.**

### Background

1. The Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee receive a comprehensive annual report on the Council's complaints monitoring arrangements, lessons learned from complaints received and complaints received by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO).

### Current Position

2. Most complaints received are dealt with informally under Stage 1 of the Council's complaints policy.
3. Stage 2 complaints are formal complaints normally identified when the complainant is unhappy with the outcome of the informal complaint. These complaints are dealt with by the relevant (Executive) Head of Service. Should a complainant be dissatisfied with the outcome of a Stage 2 complaint, they can request the matter is considered by the Chief Executive under Stage 3 of the complaints policy.
4. In 2015/16, 32 formal complaints were made to the Council at Stages 2 and 3. This number should be viewed in the context that the Council provide services to over 86,000 residents and 4,200 businesses across the Borough. Although a small number of complaints related to service issues, a significant number are as a result of complainants disagreeing with the application of a policy.
5. The table below details the formal complaints made for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, by quarter year and dealt with in accordance with the Council's complaints policy. The figures for the same period in 2014/15 have also been included in the table as a comparison.

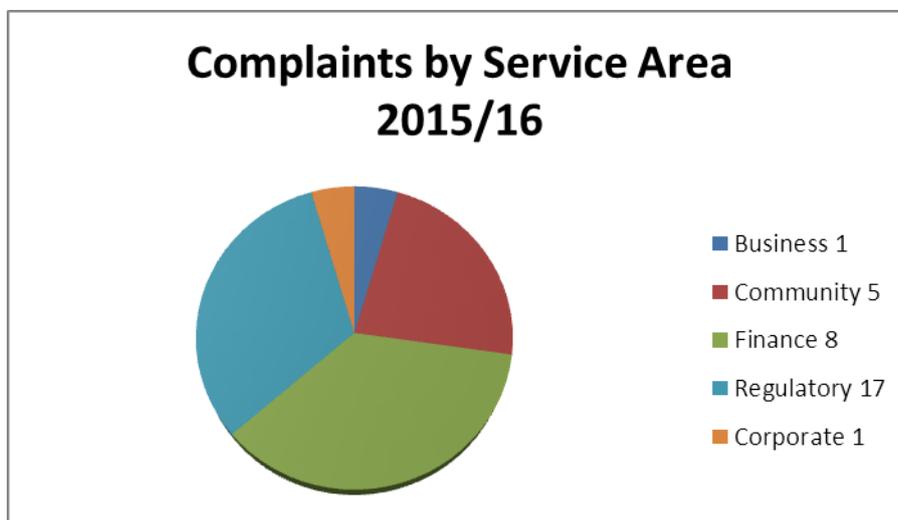
	2014/15	2015/16
Total for Quarter 1 (April – June)	7	7
Total for Quarter 2 (July – September)	4	8
Total for Quarter 3 (October to December)	3	5
Total for Quarter 4 (January – March)	7	12
Total for year	21	32

6. The complaints were recorded against the following Council service areas.

Service Area  
Business

Number of complaints received 15/16  
1

<u>Service Area</u>	<u>Number of complaints received 15/16</u>
Community	5
Finance	8
Regulatory	17
Corporate	1



7. The Service Area complaints relate to the following business areas:

	Stage 2	Stage 3
Leisure	1	
Licensing	1	
Environmental Health	3	1
Planning	12	3
Housing	1	1
Revenues and Benefits	6	2
Democratic Services	1	

8. Whilst complaints in Planning appear relatively high compared to other services this figure should be balanced against a total of 1134 planning applications being considered in 2015/16, which is a little over 1% of the total. Because of the nature of the area, Planning is always going to be a more contentious service. This situation is consistent in most Local Authorities.
9. Of the 32 complaints received, 7 were dealt with by the Chief Executive at Stage 3.
10. For comparison the table below details the Stage 3 complaints received in 2014/15 and 2015/16.

Service	2014/15	2015/16
Regulatory	2	4
Finance	1	2
Community		1

11. Of the 32 complaints received:

- All were acknowledged within 2 days.
- 23 were resolved within 10 days.
- 8 complaints took longer than 10 days to investigate, however the customers were made aware of the reason for delay.
- 1 complaint exceeded the 10 day target. This was a Revenues and Benefits complaint where there was an unacceptable delay in replying by the service. This has been recognised by the Executive Head and was due to resource constraints that existed at the time and for which an apology has been offered to the customer.

12. Status of the 32 complaints received:

- 14 not justified
- 9 part justified
- 7 justified.
- 2 ongoing



### Lessons learned

13. For Regulatory the main issues relate to the Arboriculture and Enforcement services, both of which are staffed by one full time Officer. In respect of tree complaints the issues relate to slow speed of response which is being addressed by the Executive Head to ensure the situation is better managed. In respect of Enforcement, the service are currently putting in extra resources, including support from the corporate enforcement team to address a backlog and review the management of casework, and thereafter how the service is managed. A new software system is being introduced later this year which will help enable an improved monitoring of the situation.
14. For Community many of the issues occurring in respect of waste collection are down to communication failures i.e. crews not reporting to issues in the first instance or when a complaint has occurred, a failure to respond quickly. The administrative systems of the current contractor are largely manual and can be unreliable. In the new Joint Waste contract, this is being addressed. Cab technology will ensure crews have real time information and can report

back any issues immediately. This will ensure that Contact Centre staff dealing with customer enquiries will have access to live data.

### Ombudsman complaints

15. Following the response to a Stage 3 complaint, if the complainant remains dissatisfied with the outcome then their recourse is via the Local Government Ombudsman.
16. The annual review letter for 2015/16 from the Local Government Ombudsman was received in July 2016 and a copy is included as Annex 1.
17. In 2015/16 the LGO received 12 complaints and enquiries in respect of Surrey Heath Borough Council services.
18. Of the 12 complaints:
  - 4 were closed after an initial enquiry
  - 5 were referred back to the Council for local resolution
  - 1 was upheld
  - 2 are on-going.

### Comparison to 2014/15

	2014/15	2015/16
Total number of LGO complaints	6	12
Closed after initial enquiry	1	4
Referred back to Council for local resolution	3	5
Upheld	1	1
Not Upheld	1	
On going		2

19. Whilst more complaints and enquiries were received by the Ombudsman in 2015/16 only 1 was deemed necessary for investigation, with 2 complaints on-going.

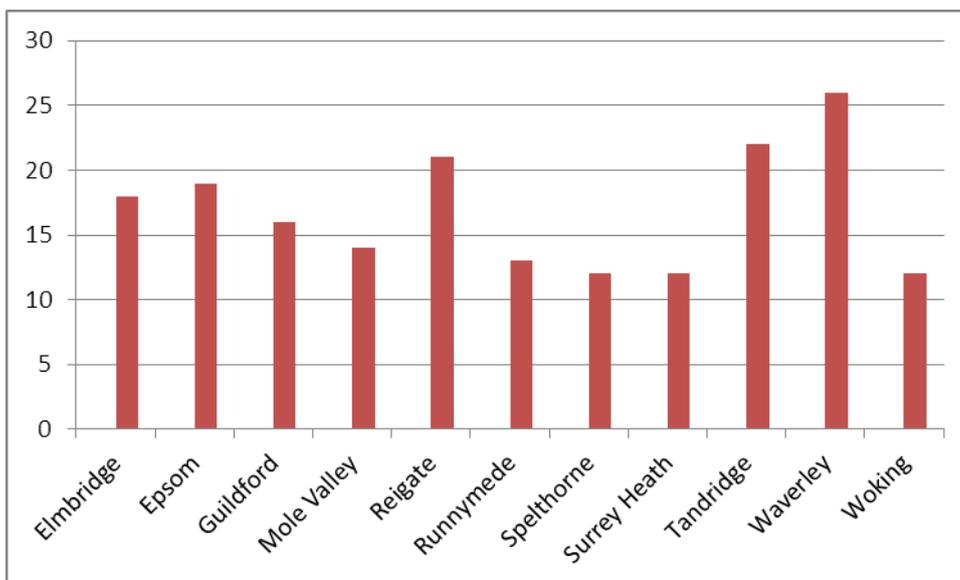
### Complaint Upheld

20. The complaint related to an application for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) where the customer disagreed with the Council's decision to pay the DHP to the claimant's landlord rather than the claimant. It was deemed that there was a lack of adherence to the complaints procedure, in terms of both timescales and failure to respond. This was acknowledged by the service and upheld by the Ombudsman. Following a review of the decision, the Ombudsman directed that the DHP payment be awarded directly to the claimant rather than to the claimant's landlord as had been initially agreed by the Council. The Executive Head of Finance has acknowledged on this occasion the application was not handled as efficiently as possible and has

apologised to the claimant. A review has taken place within the service to ensure that complaints are dealt with more quickly.

### Comparison with other Local Authorities in 2015/2016

21. The chart below shows the number of complaints referred to the Ombudsman across all the Surrey Boroughs & Districts. It can be seen that Surrey Heath has the joint lowest number of complaints and enquiries referred to the Ombudsman.



22. Whilst every effort is made to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity, it will always be the case that some customers will be dissatisfied with the outcome. The Council will always, where appropriate, learn lessons from complaints in order to improve services to residents in the future.

### Recommendation

23. The Committee is advised to consider and comment on the complaints figures reported for 2015/16.

Background Papers None

Author: Lynn Smith 01276 707668  
e-mail: Lynn.smith@surreyheath.gov.uk

Head of Service: Richard Payne  
Executive Head of Corporate