

Audit and Corporate Governance Committee Report

Report of: Chief Executive
Author: Jeanette Cox
Telephone: 01491 823103
Textphone: 18001 01491 823103
E-mail: jeanette.cox@southoxon.gov.uk
Cabinet member responsible: Ann Ducker
Tel: 01491 823131
E-mail: ann.ducker@southoxon.gov.uk
To: AUDIT AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
DATE: 28 September 2010

AGENDA ITEM NO 11

Review of complaints 2009/10

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the committee with information and statistics about the complaints received during 2009/10.

Strategic objectives

2. By analysing complaints we can identify any trends and introduce service improvements where necessary, thereby supporting the strategic objective of managing our business effectively.

Background

THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

3. The main benefits of having a council-wide procedure for dealing with complaints are that:
 - members of the public know what to do if they have a complaint and how we will deal with it
 - staff can be confident about what to do when they get a complaint
 - everyone is treated fairly and equally

- by analysing complaints we can improve our services.
4. A good complaints procedure gives us the opportunity to show that we want to be open and honest; that we care about providing a good service and that we value feedback on problems that need attention. Our procedure has three stages:

Stage one

The head of service responds, or arranges for a member of their team to respond on their behalf, within 15 working days of receipt of the complaint.

Stage two

The relevant strategic director responds within 15 working days of receipt of the date of the request to escalate the complaint to stage two.

Stage three

The complainant writes to the chief executive, within six weeks of the strategic director's response, asking for district councillors to consider their complaint. The chief executive will decide whether or not there is merit in referring the complaint to a panel of councillors. Our procedure does not specify a response time; however, the chief executive aims to advise the complainant of his decision in accordance with our published service standards, i.e. within ten working days of receipt of the request. If, in his view, there is merit in referring the complaint to councillors, we will convene a special complaints panel made up from members of the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee.

5. If, having followed these three stages, the complainant remains dissatisfied; s/he has the right to ask the local government ombudsman to investigate their complaint.

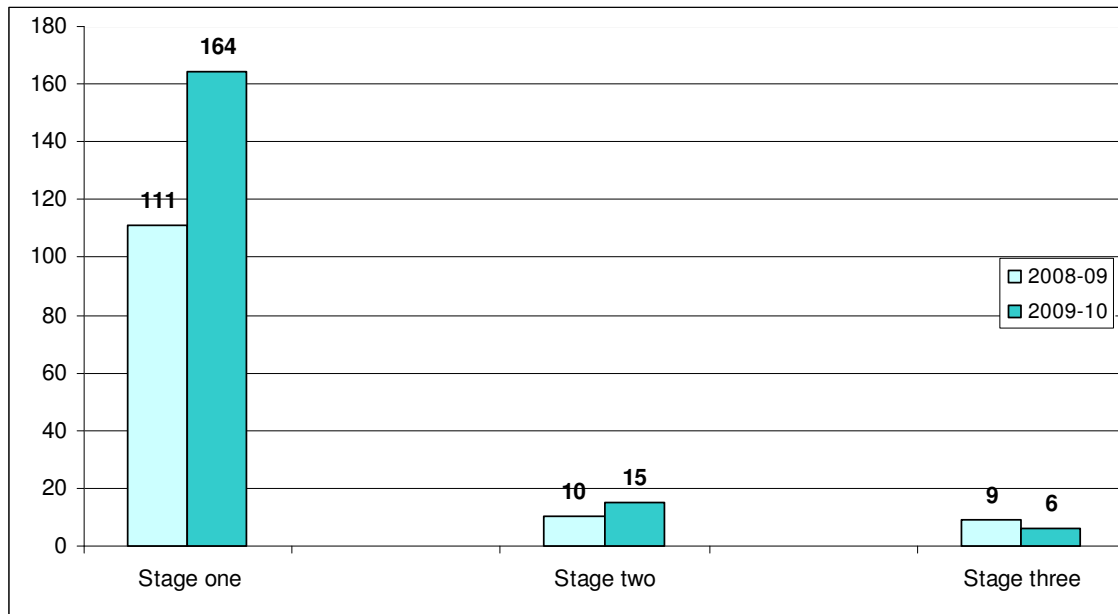
COMPLAINTS STATISTICS

6. We publish complaints statistics as part of the monthly Board Report that councillors receive via the Weekly Information Sheet.
7. The Audit and Corporate Governance Committee receives an annual report setting out the details of the complaints that have been referred to the Local Government Ombudsman during the preceding year. In future we will also produce a report setting out details of the complaints that we have considered using our own complaints procedure; this is the first of those reports.

Statistics

8. Figure one shows the number of complaints considered at each stage of our complaints procedure, compared to 2008/09.

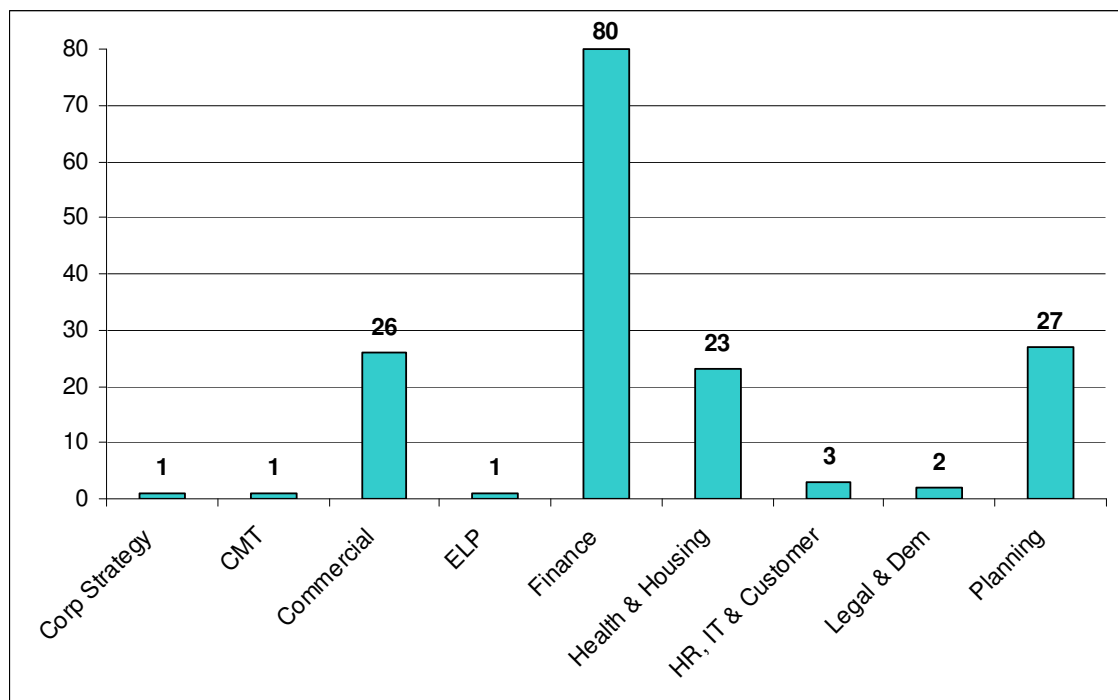
Figure one



9. We received 53 more complaints in 2009/10 than in 2008/09. This increase is spread fairly evenly across the services teams, and there are no areas of particular concern.

10. Figure two shows the number of complaints received during 2009/10, broken down into service teams.

Figure two

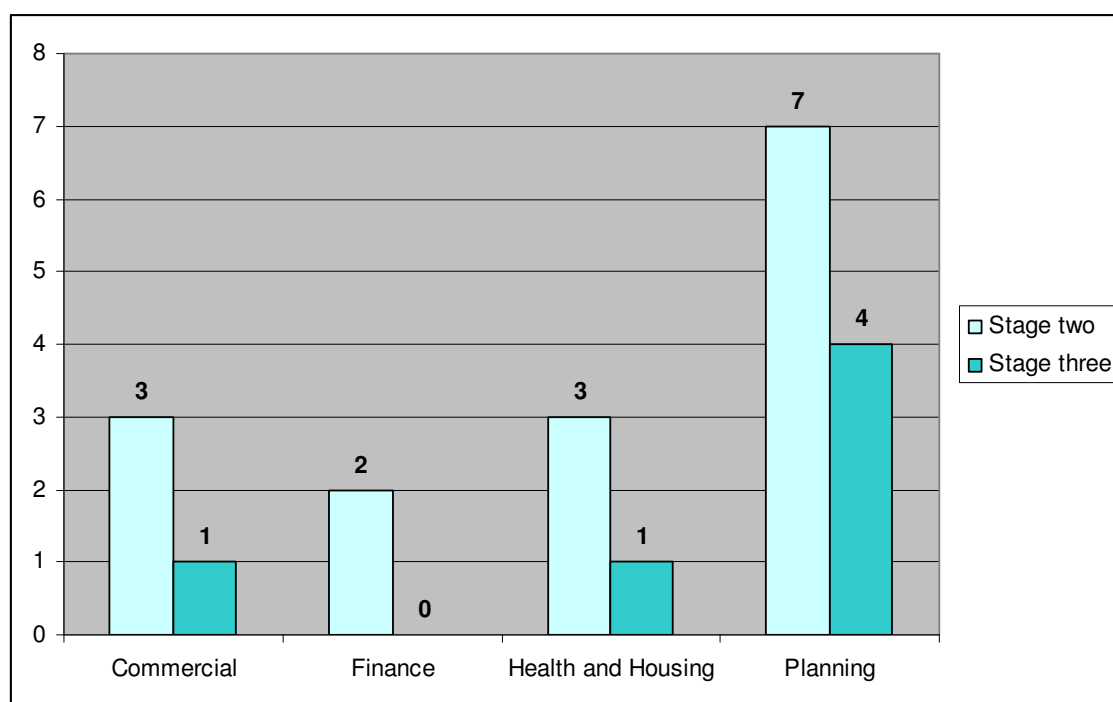


11. It is clear from this that the finance team receives the largest number of complaints. The majority of those complaints relate to council tax and business rate billing and recovery and the administration of the benefits service. As we have

a tax base of in excess of 60,000 and operate strict enforcement regimes, it is unsurprising that we receive a number of complaints about those services. In addition, due to the complexity of the benefits system and the requirement for our most vulnerable customers to receive prompt, accurate payments, we are also likely to receive complaints if service levels dip.

12. Figure three shows the complaints escalated to stages two and three.

Figure three



13. It is interesting to note that, although finance received the highest number of complaints, almost all of them were resolved at stage one, with only 2.5 per cent escalated to stage two and none to stage three.

14. Commercial services, health and housing and planning received a similar number of complaints, with commercial services and health and housing having almost identical escalation rates. However, the escalation rate for planning was far higher, with 25 per cent of complaints taken to stage two; of those 57 per cent were escalated to stage three.

15. Of the six complaints escalated to stage three, none went before a panel of councillors. In five cases, this was because a panel of councillors could not achieve the outcome the complainant was seeking, for example, overturning a planning decision. One complainant alleged that Verdant caused damage to her property and the chief executive held the stage three complaint in abeyance for three months pending further investigations; we subsequently paid the complainant a small amount of compensation as a gesture of goodwill.

Financial implications

16. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Legal implications

17. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Risks

18. Having a formal complaints procedure allows us to analyse complaints and improve services where necessary; it also gives members of the public clarity about what to do if they have a complaint, and how we will deal with it. If we did not have a formal procedure, we would be unable to carry out such analysis, with the risk that we would fail to make service improve improvements.

Other implications

19. There are no human resources, sustainability, equality or diversity implications arising directly from this report.

Conclusion

20. This report provides information and statistics about the complaints received during 2009/10.

Background papers

None