



Corporate Comments, Compliments and Complaints Annual Report

1 April 2009 – 31 March 2010

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Introduction

This report is intended to provide an overview of the Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure (the procedure), the impact the procedure has had since its implementation and the complaints, compliments and comments received by the Council following the implementation of the procedure on the 1 April 2009. The report identifies topics and trends in relation to complaints information, makes suggestions for service improvements and identifies areas of organisational learning that have taken place in relation to people, policy and process.

In addition to the statistical information presented in this report it is important to recognise the work of the Corporate Complaints Unit (CCU) that underpins this in terms of promoting an organisational culture in which complaints are recognised, accepted, owned and resolved as efficiently and as close to the point of service delivery as possible. The development of an organisational culture in which complaints are viewed as a positive means of engagement will ensure that the Council can deliver high levels of customer satisfaction with complaints handling. It will also enable the Council to continue to collect accurate information on complaints in order to identify topics and trends and improve services accordingly.

Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure

The procedure sets out how the Council will deal with all complaints, compliments and comments received with the exception of those received in relation to Adult and Children's Social Care Services and Members which will be dealt with under separate procedures.

The objectives of the procedure are to:

- a) Improve customer satisfaction with respect to complaints handling;
- b) Enable the Council to readily establish the position of a specific complaint at any point in time;
- c) Reduce duplication of effort in investigating complaints at stages two and three;
- d) Reduce the number of complaints being received by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) either following full internal investigation or prematurely; and
- e) Enable the Council to identify topics and trends in relation to complaints and improve services as a result.

The procedure places a strong emphasis on early resolution and organisational learning. The definition of a complaint adopted under procedure is:

“When someone tells us they are not happy about a service or something we have or have not done that has had an impact upon them”

The key features of the procedure are:

- a) Two stages;
- b) A strong focus on resolving issues as close to the point of service delivery as possible (stage one);
- c) An acknowledgement timescale of two working days;
- d) A requirement for responding officers to contact the complainant within five working days;
- e) A stage one timescale of 20 working days; and
- f) A stage two timescale of 25 working days.

The procedure has two stages. Stage one is a local resolution stage where we try to resolve those complaints that cannot be resolved immediately as part of our day to day business. Stage one complaints are dealt with locally, that is within the service being complained about. We aim to resolve the majority of complaints at stage one of the procedure.

Stage two is a formal investigation stage where complaints will usually be investigated by the Corporate Complaints Manager or another officer independent of the service being complained about.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied following a stage two investigation they may refer the matter to the LGO.

Complaint outcomes under the new procedure take a different approach to those used previously by some departments. Under the new procedure the outcomes of upheld and not upheld are not intended to indicate whether a service is at fault or not as the procedure does not look to apportion blame. The focus of the procedure is to identify and resolve problems, learn from complaints and use the information collected to improve services.

The CCU implemented the procedure on 1 April 2009. As part of the implementation process the CCU rolled out an extensive training programme to front line staff that would be expected to receive complaints, compliment and comments in line with the procedure. More detailed training sessions were provided for senior managers who are asked to investigate complaints under the procedure and two sessions were provided for Members. In total 237 front line staff attended the 15 sessions provided and 79 Senior Managers attended the seven sessions provided for them. Due to demand a number of additional training sessions than those initially planned were delivered by the CCU and further sessions will be delivered as needed. The training was well received and the feedback provided was positive.

Public information and accessibility

The Council have a complaints leaflet which is available in all Council buildings. It has been written in line with the Plain English Campaign standards. The title is written in the most commonly used community languages and it contains details on how to access the information in other formats, for example, large print, audio and Braille.

Information is available on the Council's website which contains an electronic form which people can use to make a complaint, pay someone a compliment or pass comment on Council services.

Recently the CCU have been working with Connexions to engage young people by developing a leaflet which will raise awareness of the kinds of services provided by the Council, as well as the complaints procedure in order to encourage young people to share their views on Council services. They also provided views on the website and how they think the Council should use the web to engage with young people.

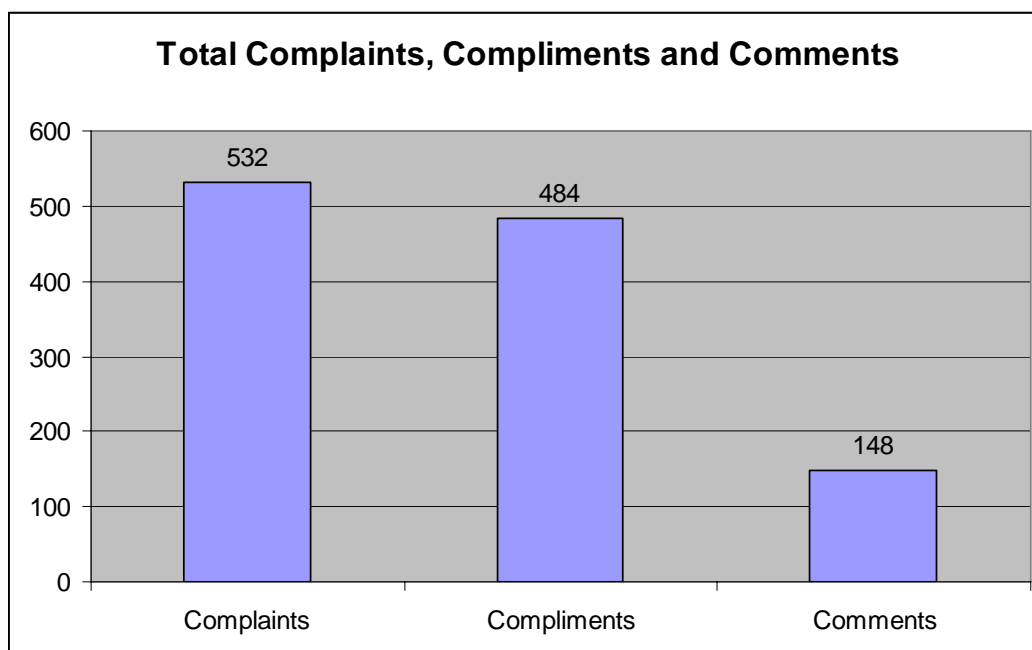
People may make a complaint in any format they wish. This can be in writing, via the web, over the phone, in person or by any other reasonable means.

The CCU can make provision for advocates and interpreters (including British Sign Language interpreters) where appropriate.

Complaints information and organisational learning

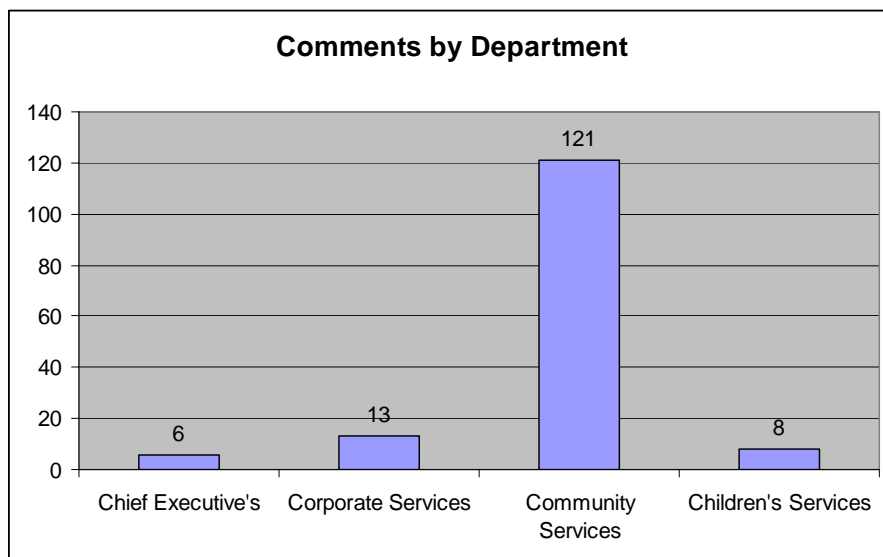
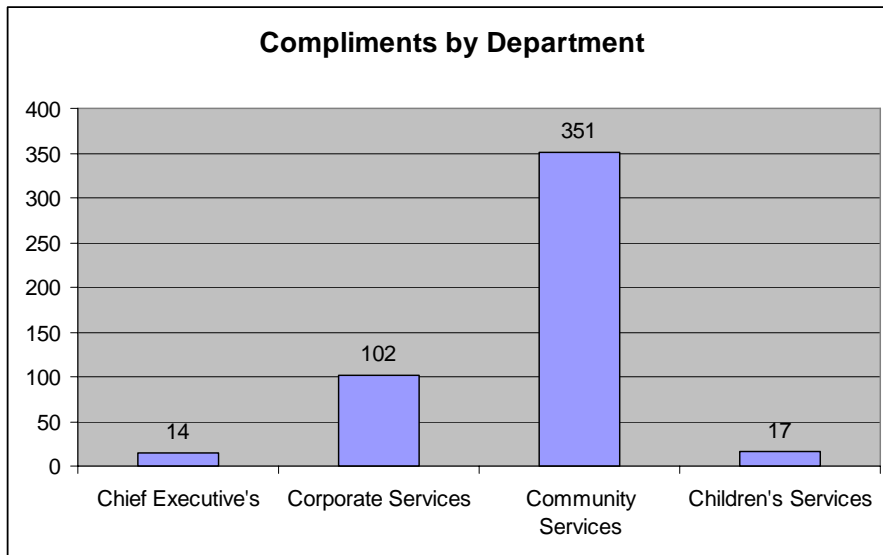
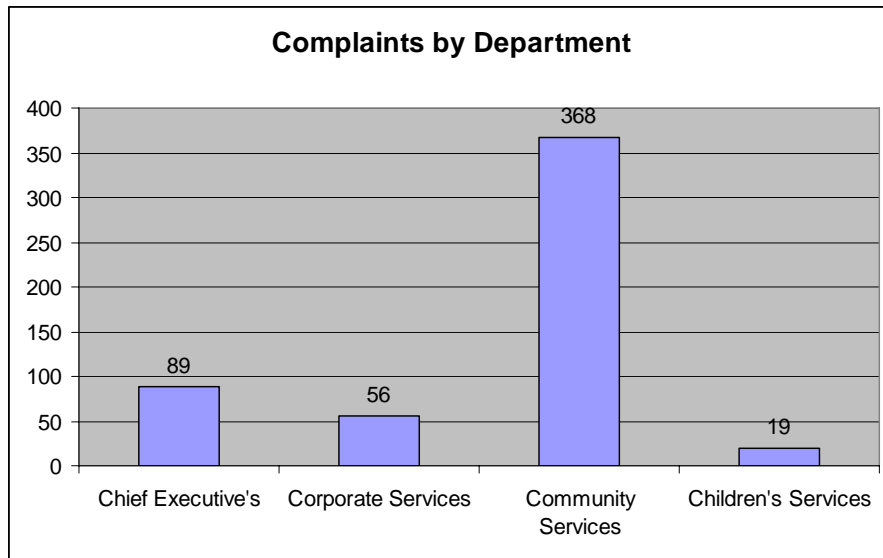
Overview of complaints, compliments and comments

Between 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2010 Darlington Borough Council received 532 complaints, 530 of which were initially dealt with at stage one of the procedure, and two of which were initially dealt with at stage two. Forty seven of the 530 stage one complaints were escalated to stage two following a stage one investigation. The Council also received 484 compliments and 148 comments.



While the majority of cases have been referred to the CCU, in some areas old practices have persisted. It is important to note that all complaints, compliments and comments should be forwarded to the CCU on the day of receipt.

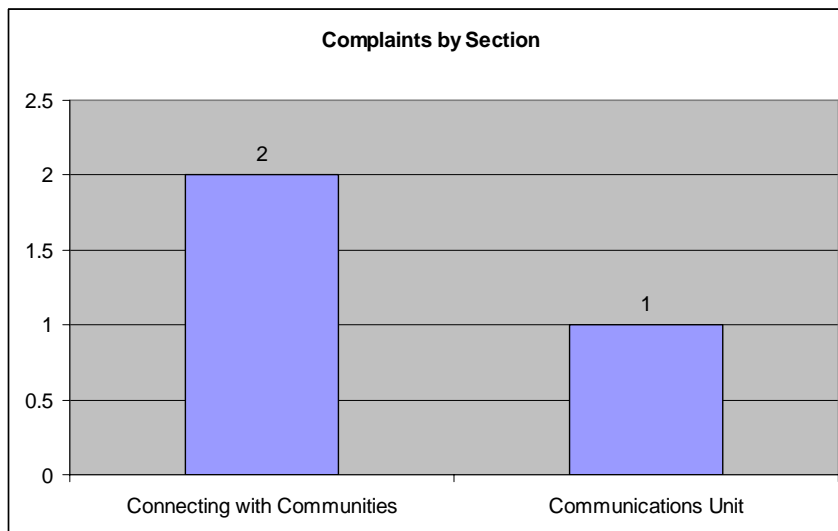
A breakdown of the total number of complaints, compliments and comments received by department is provided below.



Complaints, compliments and comments by department

Chief Executives Department Assistant Chief Executive – Policy Division

The complaints received by each section within this division are illustrated below.



Of the three complaints received by the Assistant Chief Executive (ACE) Policy Division, two were in relation to the disclosure of personal information. The other complaint related to the service provided by Welfare Rights.

Compliments and Comments

No compliments or comments were received for the ACE Policy Division.

Complaints by stage

All of the complaints regarding the ACE Policy Division were dealt with at stage one.

Complaints by outcome

Stage 1

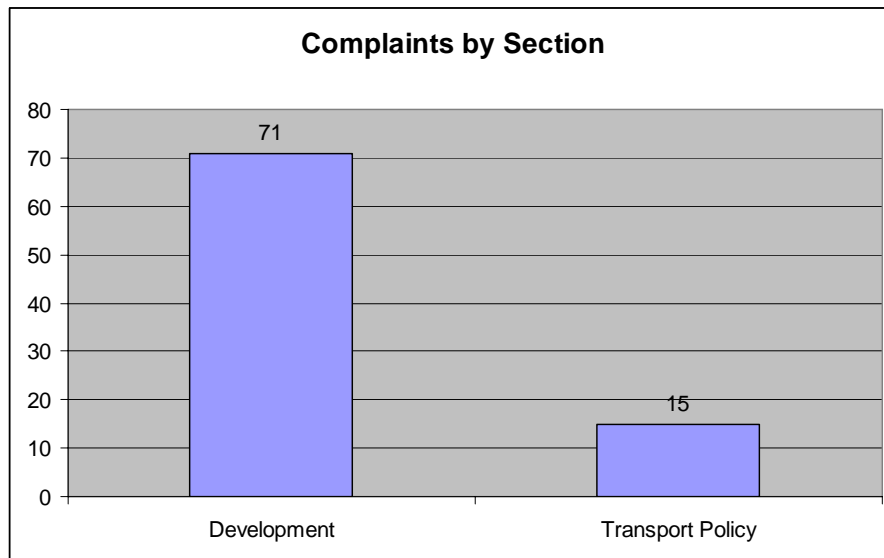
Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Connecting with Communities	0	0	1	1	0	2
Communications Unit	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total for ACE (Policy)	0	1	1	1	0	3

Organisational Learning

Following a complaint to the Communications Unit about personal details being included in the Town Crier in relation to dog fouling despite the individual being assured this would not happen, Street Scene Enforcement Offices were reminded to advise, if asked, that any individual attending court would appear in the Town Crier. It was also requested that this information be included in the letter sent as part of the fine process.

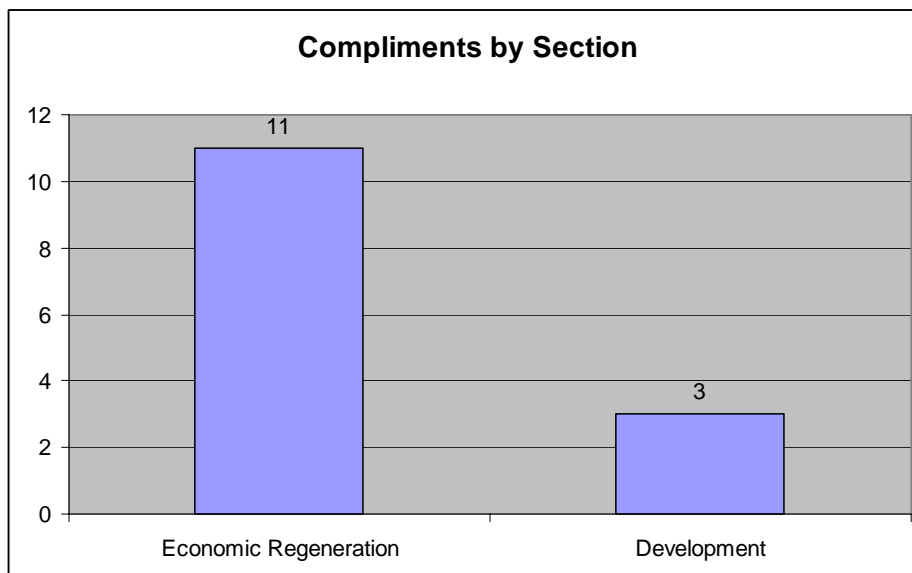
Chief Executives Department Assistant Chief Executive – Regeneration Division

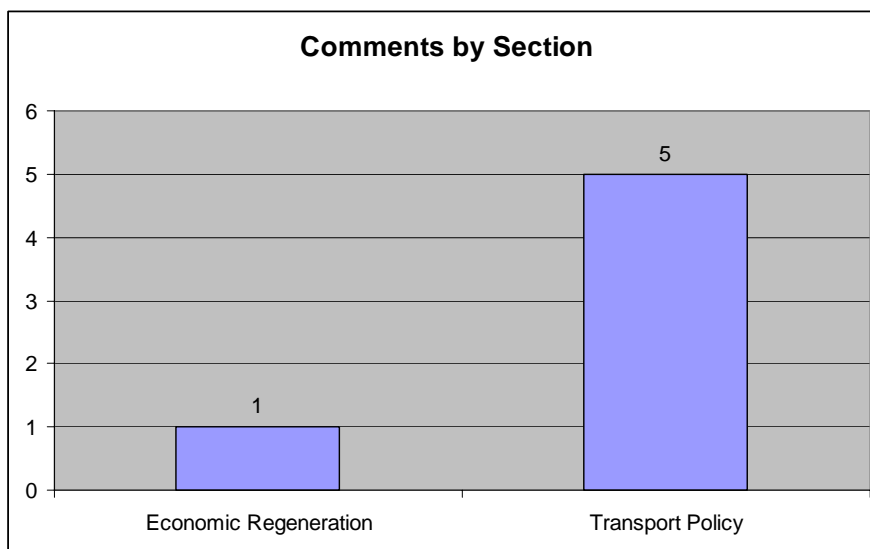
The complaints received by each section within this division are illustrated below



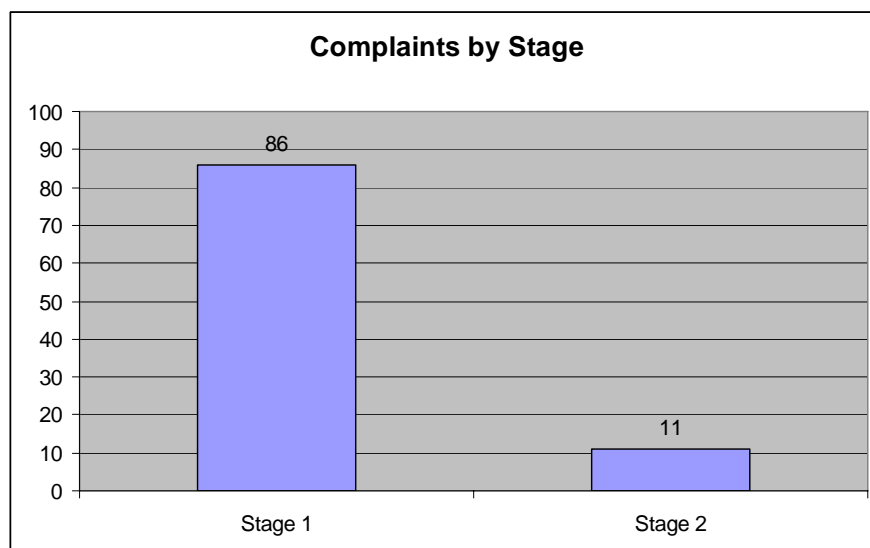
Of the 71 complaints received by the Development Section, 58 were in relation to the change of use of Victoria House Hospital. None of the 58 complaints about Victoria House Hospital were upheld. The most common topic of the remaining complaints was lack of enforcement action.

Of the 15 complaints received by the Transport Policy Section, six complaints were regarding bus services.





Complaints by stage



All of the complaints received by ACE Regeneration Division were initially dealt with at stage one of the procedure, 11 of which were escalated to stage two.

Complaints by outcome

Stage 1

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Development	0	67	1	2	1	71
Transport Policy	0	9	0	6	0	15
Total for ACE (Regeneration)	0	76	1	8	1	86

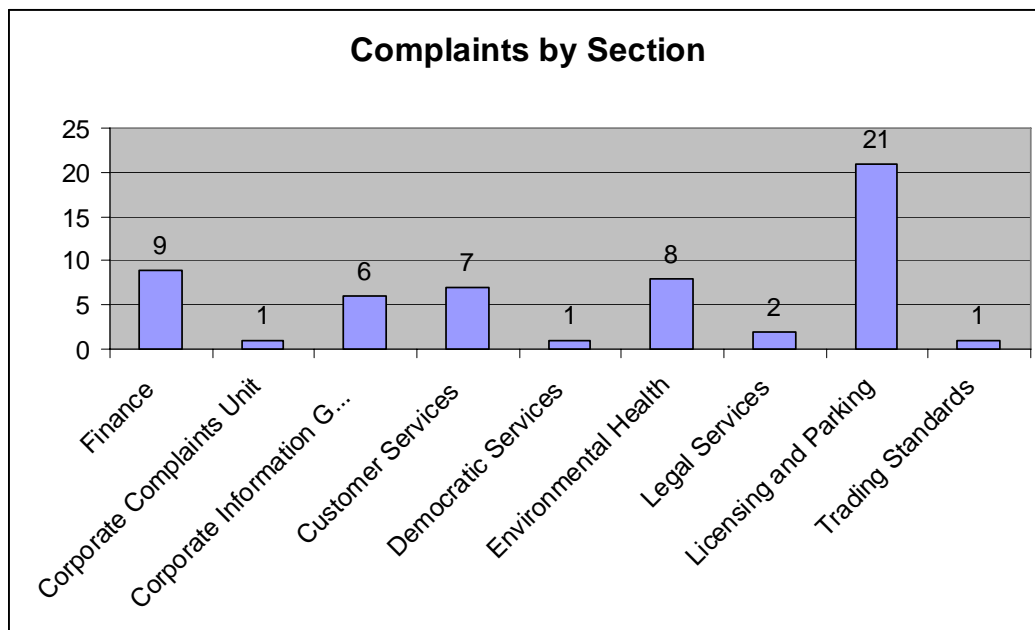
Stage 2

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Development	0	8	2	0	0	10
Transport Policy	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total for ACE (Regeneration)	0	9	2	0	0	11

Organisational Learning

Following a complaint about the manner in which a planning application was publicised, planning officers were asked to ensure planning applications for major developments are publicised in line with not only the regulations but the requirements set out in Darlington Borough Council's Statement of Community Involvement.

Corporate Services



Of the 21 complaints received about Licensing and Parking the most common themes were customer service and handling of parking appeals. A recently emerging theme has been the lack of discretion parking wardens have in issuing Excess Charge Notices, particularly with regard to parking outside of marked bays.

Two complaints in relation to Finance concerned problems with the on-line payment system; these were investigated in conjunction with Xentrall and the matter was successfully resolved.

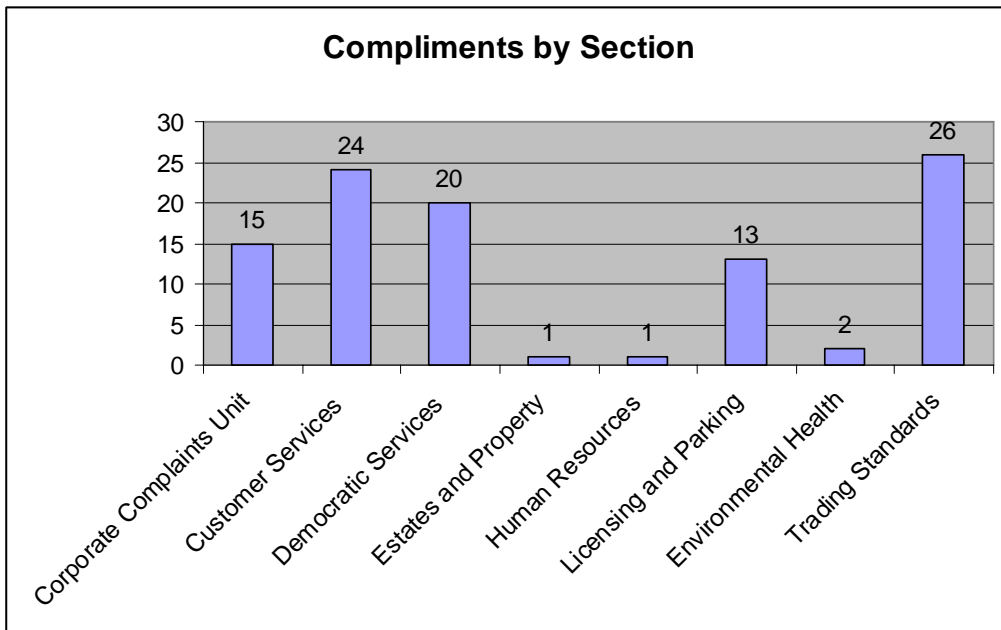
The most common issue in relation to complaints about Environmental Health was the charge for the treatment of wasps and other insects.

The complaint about the Corporate Complaints Unit was with regard to non-compliance with the procedure and communication.

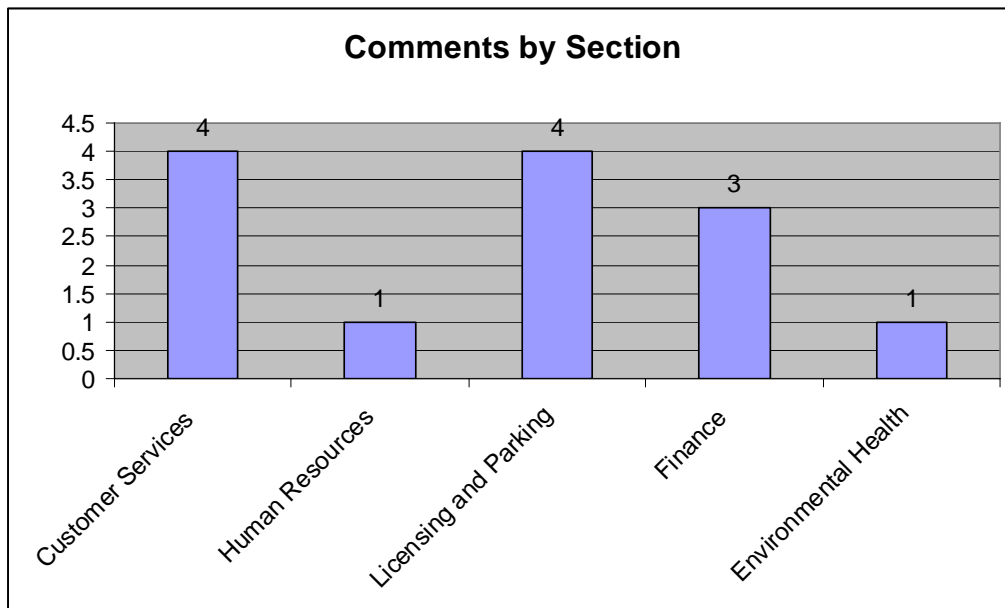
Three of the seven complaints received about Customer Services related to communication or being unable to reach an advisor.

As a result of the Information Commissioner suggesting local authorities were not dealing with requests for internal reviews of Freedom of Information Requests appropriately, it was agreed that Darlington Borough Council will deal with these requests through the Corporate Complaints Procedure, hence the six complaints received for Corporate Information Governance.

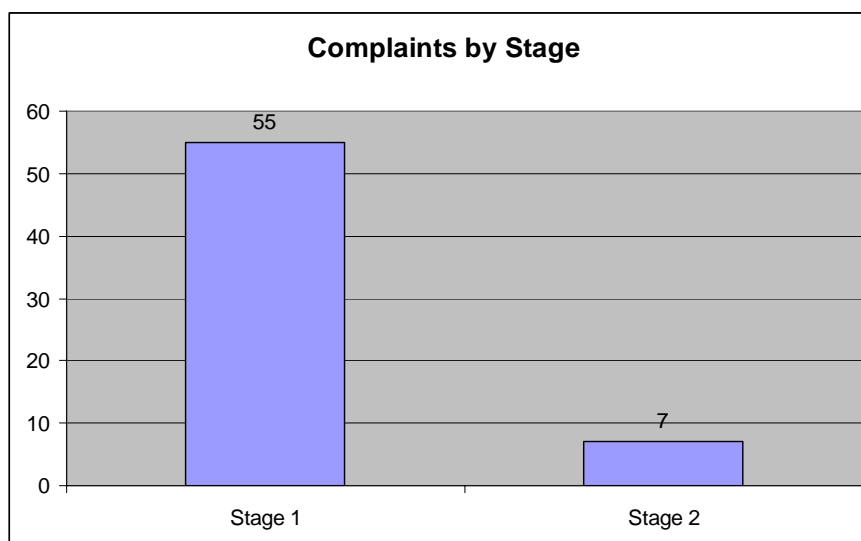
There were no identifiable themes in relation to Democratic Services or Trading Standards.



The majority of compliments received by Democratic Services related to wedding ceremonies.



Complaints by stage



Fifty five of the complaints received by Corporate Services were initially dealt with at stage one of the procedure, one was initially investigated at stage two, and six were escalated to stage two following a stage one investigation.

Complaints by outcome (Stage 1)

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Finance	0	4	3	2	0	9
Corporate Complaints Unit	0	0	0	1	0	1
Customer Services	1	1	2	3	0	7
Democratic Services	0	1	0	0	0	1
Corporate Information Governance	0	6	0	0	0	6
Legal Services	0	2	0	0	0	2
Licensing and Parking	0	17	2	2	0	21
Environmental Health	0	4	1	3	0	8
Trading Standards	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total for Corporate Services	1	35	8	12	0	56

Complaints by outcome (Stage 2)

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Finance	0	1	0	0	0	1
Customer Services	0	1	0	0	0	1
Democratic Services	0	1	0	0	0	1
Legal Services	0	1	0	0	0	1
Licensing and Parking	0	1	1	0	1	3
Total for Corporate Services	0	5	1	0	1	7

Organisational Learning

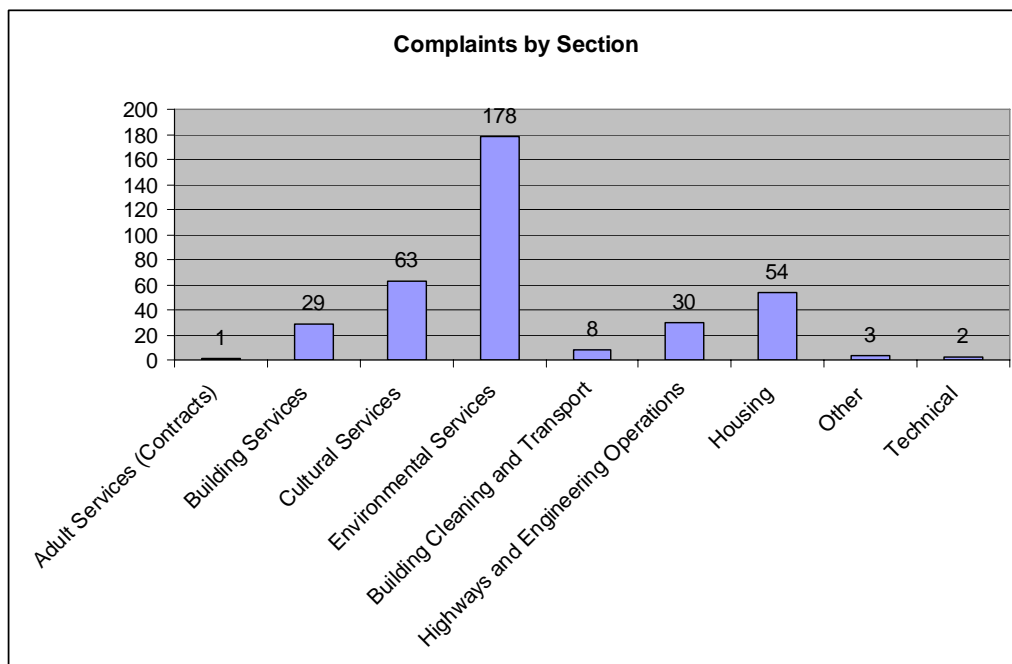
With regard to the complaints about Customer Services, Customer Services staff have been cross trained to increase the numbers available to help deal with customer calls during busy times. The Council are also in the process of reviewing the telephony requirements of the Customer Contact Centre to ensure there is the capacity to meet customer demand both now and in the future.

Following a complaint regarding having to attend the Town Hall to complete a concessionary fares application form, application forms and supporting documents can now be obtained from Customer Services or on-line and returned by post. Once the form has been received an appointment can then be made for the customer to attend the Town Hall to have their photograph taken.

As a result of a complaint regarding the test for private hire licenses, the question sheet which was used has been redesigned to prevent any future disputes.

Following a stage two complaint about the Licensing and Parking Section the Council updated the information provided to the public concerning loading/unloading in residents parking zones. Another recommendation made as a result of this complaint was that the Licensing and Parking Section ensure that appeals are administered in line with the appeals procedure.

Community Services



Of the 29 complaints received by Building Services, dissatisfaction with repair work and length of time taken to complete works were the most common themes.

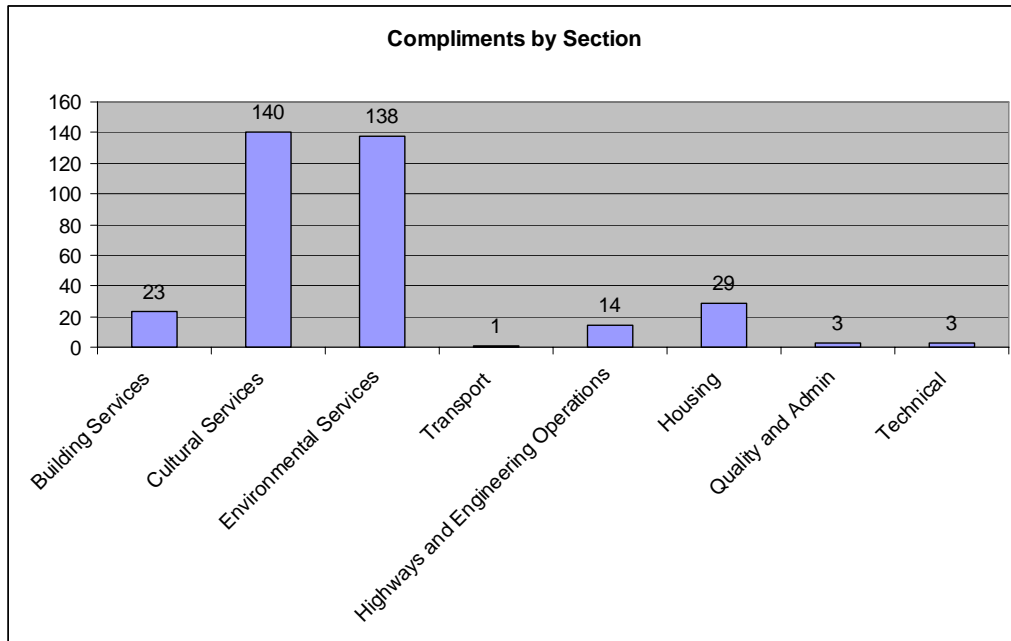
Of the 63 complaints received for Cultural Services, 31 were for the Civic Theatre. In the 2009/10 six monthly report, it was noted that an emerging topic was dissatisfaction with the booking fee which had been added to ticket sales for the Arts Centre and Civic Theatre. Following some initial dissatisfaction with this fee, only three complaints of the 15 received in the last six months concerned the booking fee.

Of the 178 complaints received by Environmental Services, 171 were for Street Scene. The most common themes were problems with rubbish and recycling, including missed assisted collections (97 complaints). Street Cleaning and Street Care also received 45 complaints with the most common themes being gritting and levels of cleanliness in Darlington.

Transport Services received five complaints, four of which related to either the driver of school transport, or the passenger assistant.

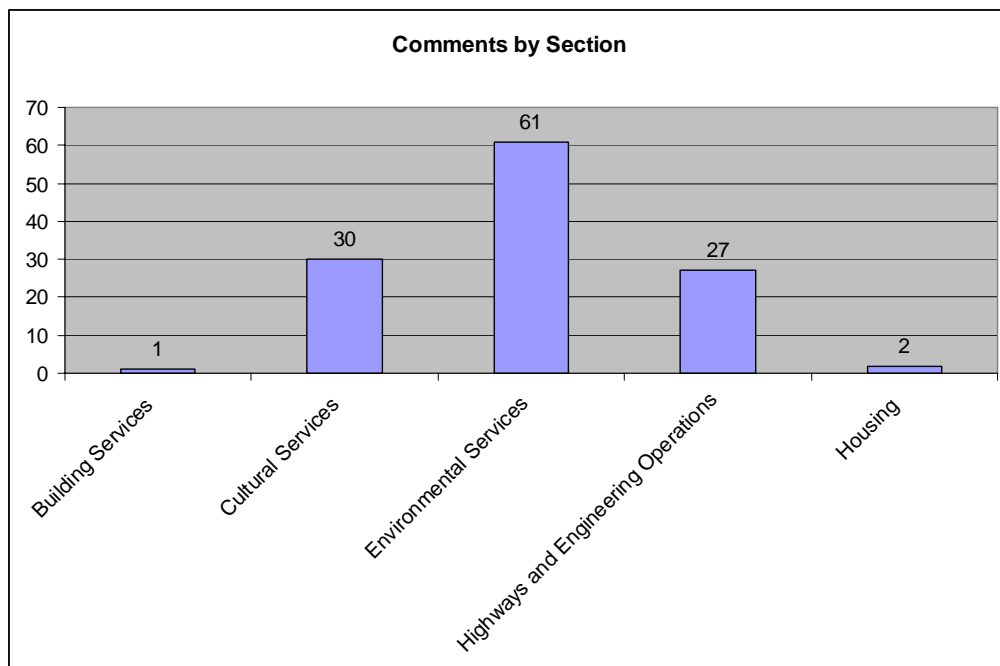
The identifiable themes in relation to Highways and Engineering Operations were verge hardening and potholes on the highway. Another common theme was the size of parking bays.

There were no identifiable themes in relation to Housing or Technical Services.



There were no particular identifiable trends in the compliments received for Cultural Services, however there was a good mix of praise for shows at the Civic Theatre, Christmas Party Nights at the Dolphin Centre, the golf course at Stressholme and the Fireworks Event. The majority of compliments were for the good service received from all venues.

The majority of compliments received for Environmental Services were in relation to good services from Street Scene. Street Cleaning and Street Care in particular received 37 compliments for good service, which included ten compliments for gritting and clearing snow. Twenty seven compliments were received for Grounds Maintenance and Horticulture and were mainly regarding floral displays around the town.

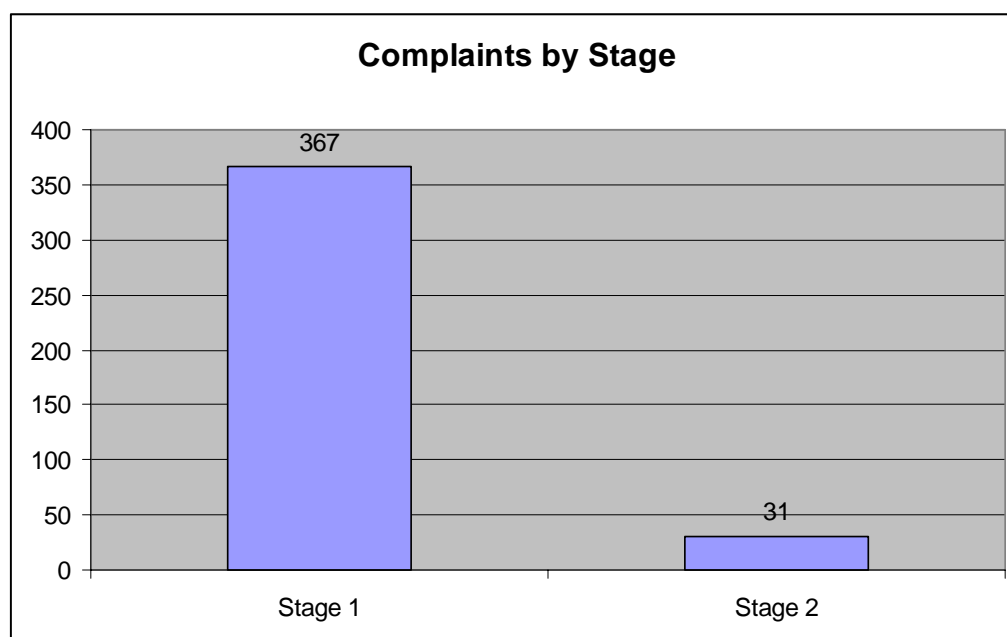


Cultural Services received four comments in relation to a party of college students causing problems during a play which has been addressed by the Arts Centre.

Two comments were also received regarding the change in opening times at the Head of Steam Museum.

Within Environmental Services, the only identifiable trend was around winter maintenance issues.

Complaints by stage



367 complaints received by Community Services were initially dealt with at stage one of the procedure, 30 of which were escalated to stage two. One complaint was initially dealt with at stage two.

Complaints by outcome (Stage 1)

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Adult Services	0	1	0	0	0	1
Building Services	0	9	5	14	1	29
Cultural Services	1	26	13	23	0	63
Environmental Services	2	58	10	113	3	186
Highways & Engineering Operations	0	13	8	9	0	30
Housing	0	26	15	12	1	54
Technical	0	2	0	0	0	2
Other	0	3	0	0	0	3
Total for Community Services	3	138	51	171	5	368

Complaints by outcome (Stage 2)

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Building Services	0	3	0	1	0	4
Cultural Services	0	2	1	0	0	3
Environmental Services	1	6	3	5	3	18
Highways & Engineering Operations	0	2	0	2	0	4
Housing	1	0	1	0	0	2
Total for Community Services	2	13	5	8	3	31

Organisational Learning

As a result of the comments received in relation to the opening hours of the Head of Steam Museum, the museum's opening times were amended and it is now open during the week in school holidays.

Several complaints/comments were received in October regarding an Environmental Notice issued to all residents of Northgate Ward to remind them of their responsibilities when putting their refuse out for collection. The wording of the letter accompanying this notice led to some residents feeling that they were being accused of an offence. As a result, the letter has now been amended to better explain what the aims of the exercise are and to ensure that individuals are aware that the Council are not implying that they have previously committed an offence.

Following a stage two complaint the procedure for allocating allotments was reviewed and it was decided that due to the huge increase in the numbers of people on the waiting list variations in the way allotments were allocated according to locally specific circumstances was no longer tenable. It was also decided that the new allotment strategy would include information on the Council's lettings policy.

A complaint was received regarding the closure of a main road to fell a dangerous tree at peak time and, as a result, it has been written into the tree management procedure that the carriageway should remain accessible to road users until 9.30am to allow early traffic passage before work/school commences if deemed safe and the site supervisor is happy with the risk. It was also decided that in the case of road closures, notices should be given to the affected residences, if practical, in writing the day before the closure.

A complaint was received from a Darlington landlord regarding the payment of housing benefit directly to the tenant when it had been requested it be paid to the landlord. As a result of the complaint, Housing Benefits have reviewed their procedures so that every applicant is advised verbally or in writing whether or not a payment is to be made to the landlord and this is recorded. Landlords who apply for direct payment are told in writing if their request is refused before payment is issued and nominees are given written information about their role, responsibility and how overpayments will be recovered.

Furthermore letters issued to the applicant and nominee were rewritten so that they are very clear on how much entitlement there is and who this is being paid to, a reminder was also included to say that the rent should be paid. In addition to these measures the information leaflet on Local Housing Allowance, information for landlords was reviewed to make it clearer as to when a landlord can/will receive payment.

As a result of a complaint about the dropped kerbs outside a supermarket in Cockerton being incorrectly positioned a Disability Equality Impact Assessment was carried out and the dropped kerbs were relocated.

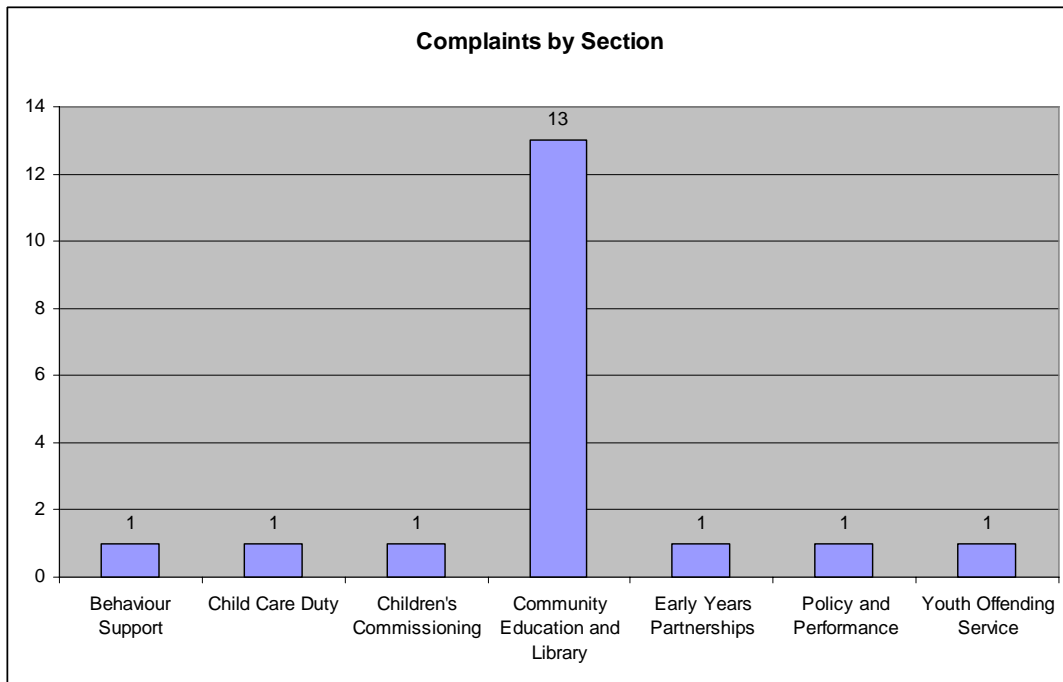
As a result of a stage two complaint about the provision of free tickets to carers of wheelchair users and blind people and not to carers of other disabled people the Civic Theatre have discontinued this historical arrangement. The Council removed the reference to this arrangement from the website and further consideration has been given to developing a policy to ensure a fair approach to the provision of free tickets for carers of disabled people.

Further Recommendations

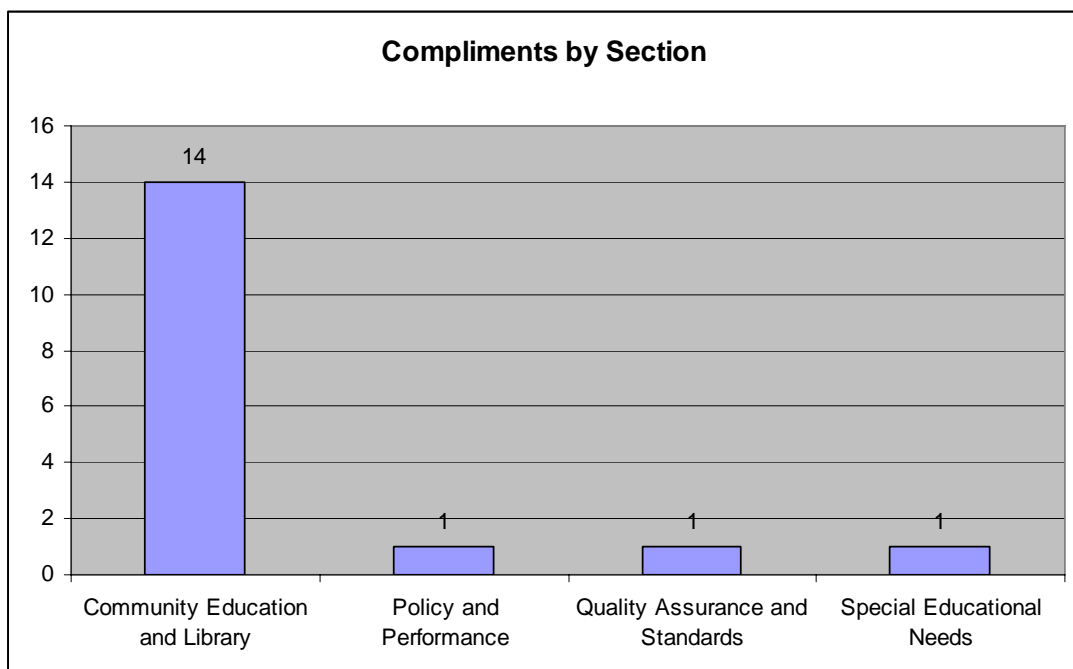
Street Scene – implement effective solutions for those individuals who have to contact the Council regarding their rubbish and recycling being missed on a consistent basis including those people with assisted collections (*97 people complained following problems with their rubbish and recycling collections, including people in receipt of assisted collections*).

Highways and Engineering Operations - parking bays are reviewed as proposed in the Council's new parking strategy and that any new parking spaces meet the required specifications as quoted in the adopted Borough of Darlington Local Plan

Children's Services



Other than two complaints about the change in opening hours at Crown Street Library there were no identifiable themes.



The majority of compliments received by Children's Services were in relation to good customer service.

All 14 comments received were for Community Education and the Library, two of which related to the change in Crown Street Library's opening hours.

Complaints by stage

None of the complaints investigated at stage one of the complaints procedure were escalated to stage two.

Complaints by outcome (Stage 1)

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
Behaviour Support	0	1	0	0	0	1
Child Care Duty Team	0	0	0	1	0	1
Children's Commissioning	0	1	0	0	0	1
Community Education & Library	0	9	0	4	0	13
Early Years Partnerships	0	0	0	1	0	1
Policy and Performance	0	0	0	0	1	1
Youth Offending Service	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total for Children's Services	0	11	1	6	1	19

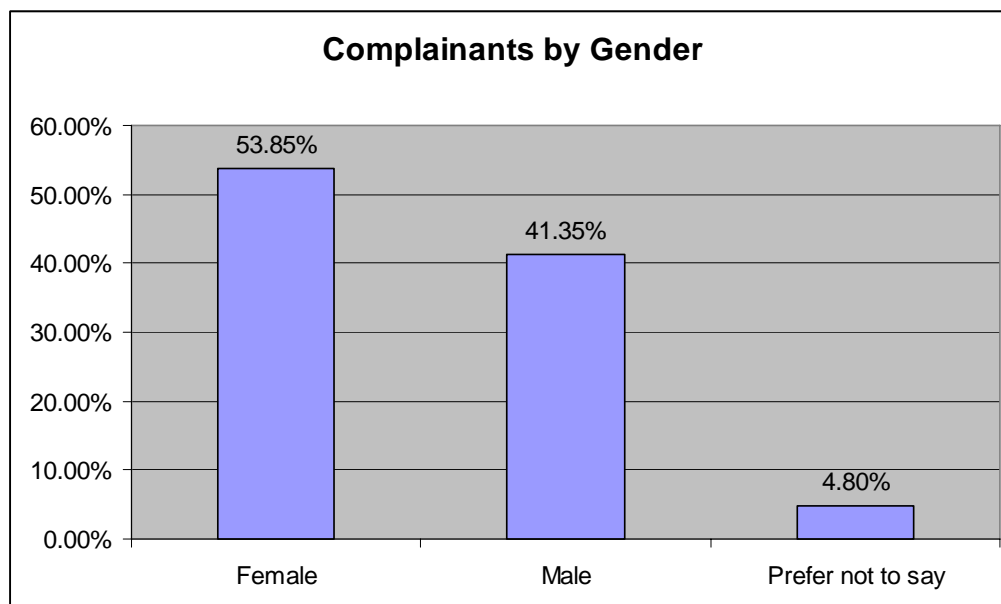
Organisational Learning

Child Care Duty Team - following a complaint about a breach of confidentiality in relation to a safeguarding issue staff were reminded of the importance of ensuring the anonymity of referrers.

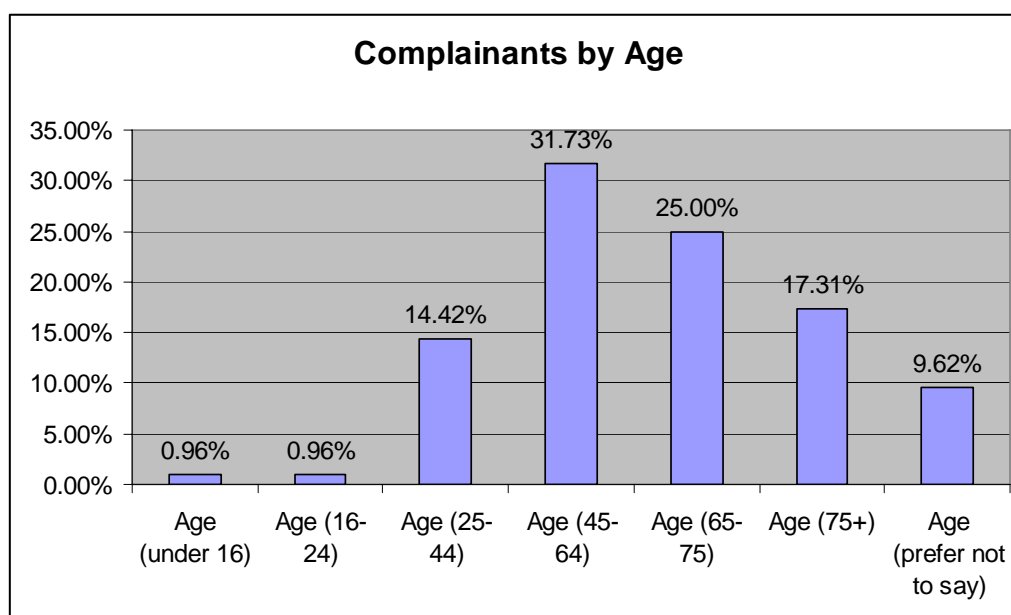
Equal opportunities monitoring

Of the 532 complaints received, 104 people returned their ethnic monitoring forms.

Gender



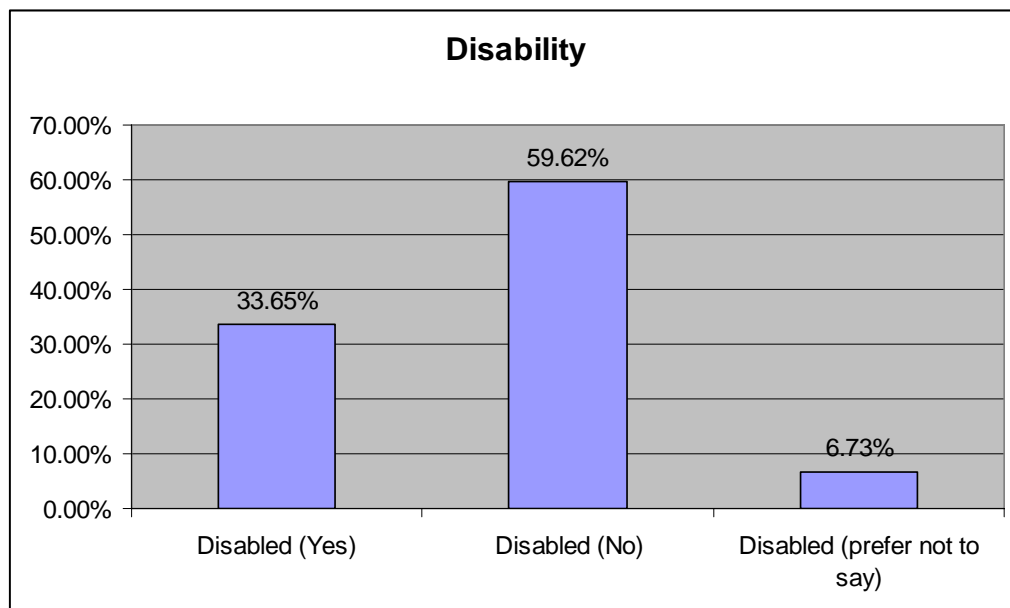
Age



The number of complaints received from young people was particularly low. Recently the CCU have been working with Connexions to engage young people by developing a leaflet which will raise awareness of the kinds of services provided by the Council, as well as the complaints procedure in order to encourage young people to share their views on Council services. They also provided views on the website and how they think the Council should use the web to engage with young people something which has now been implemented by the Web Team. Along with recent website developments i.e. the

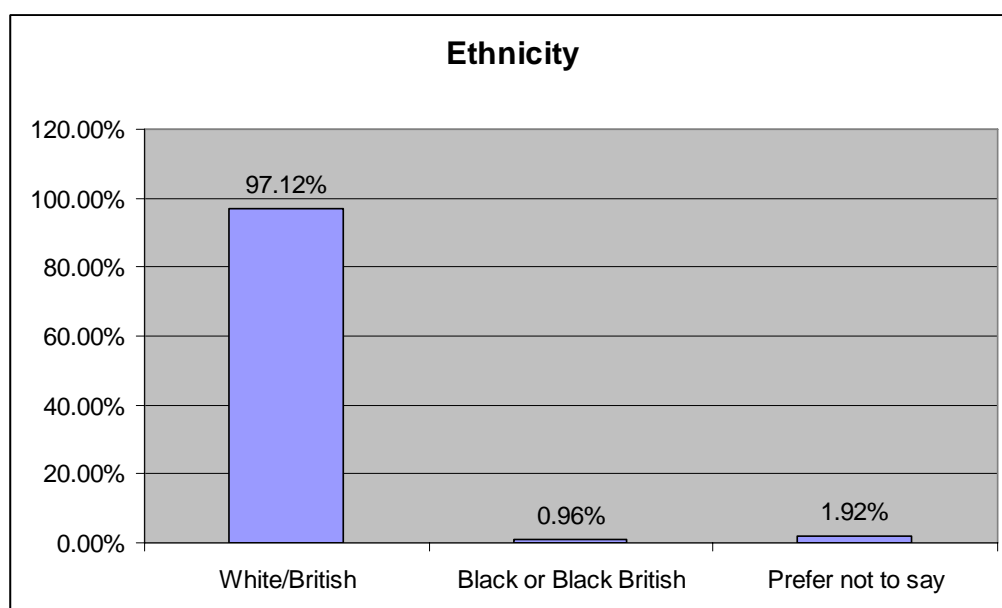
use of social networking sites it is hoped that there will be an increase the number of young people engaging with the Council via the procedure.

Disability



According to census data, there is, in Darlington, a slightly higher than average percentage of people who stated they had a long term illness, health problem or disability (this includes mental, physical and sensory impairment) which limited their daily activities or work (20.4%, compared to a national average of 18.2%). Even so from the information available it would appear that disabled people have made a higher number of complaints than would be expected. It is important that officers recognise that complaints that contain an element of disability should act as a trigger for a screening exercise in line with the Council's Disability Equality Scheme.

Ethnicity



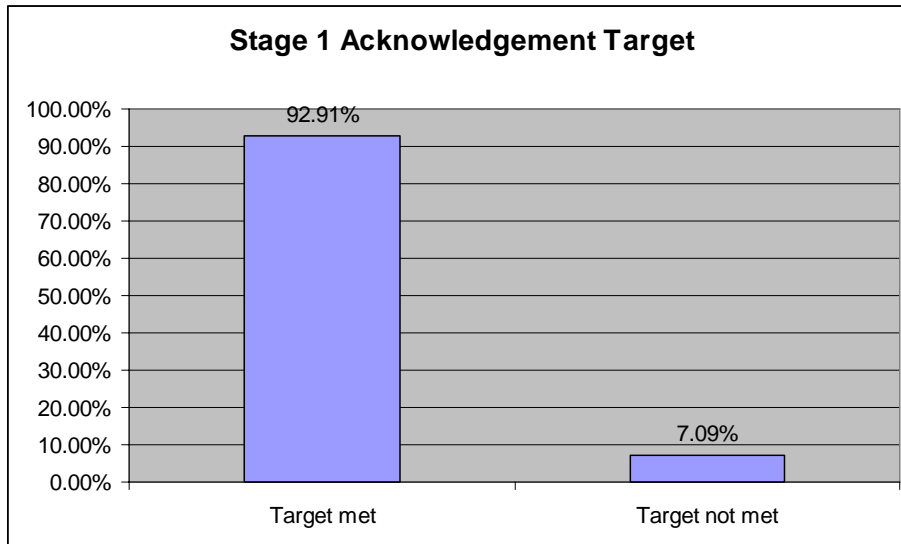
97.12% of complainants who returned the equal opportunities monitoring form were white British.

Darlington's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population was 2.1% at the time of the 2001 and while anecdotally the CCU are aware of a number of complaints received by people from the BME Community, they are underrepresented within the complaints procedure. In addition to printing the title of the complaints leaflet in the most commonly used community languages the CCU will undertake further work during the 2010/11 to encourage people from the BME community to engage with the Council via the procedure.

Performance against the Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure

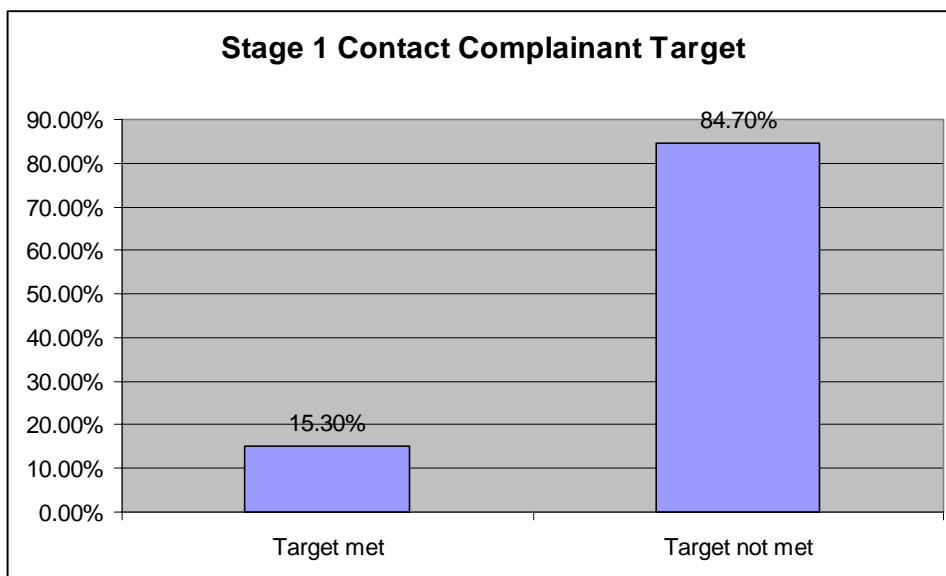
Stage 1

Performance against stage 1 acknowledgement target (2 working days)



The most common reason that the stage one acknowledgement target was not met was because the complaint was not forwarded to the CCU on the day of receipt. Information is provided in the procedure practice guidance on how officers can ensure complaints reach the CCU in time to be acknowledged within the two working day timescale.

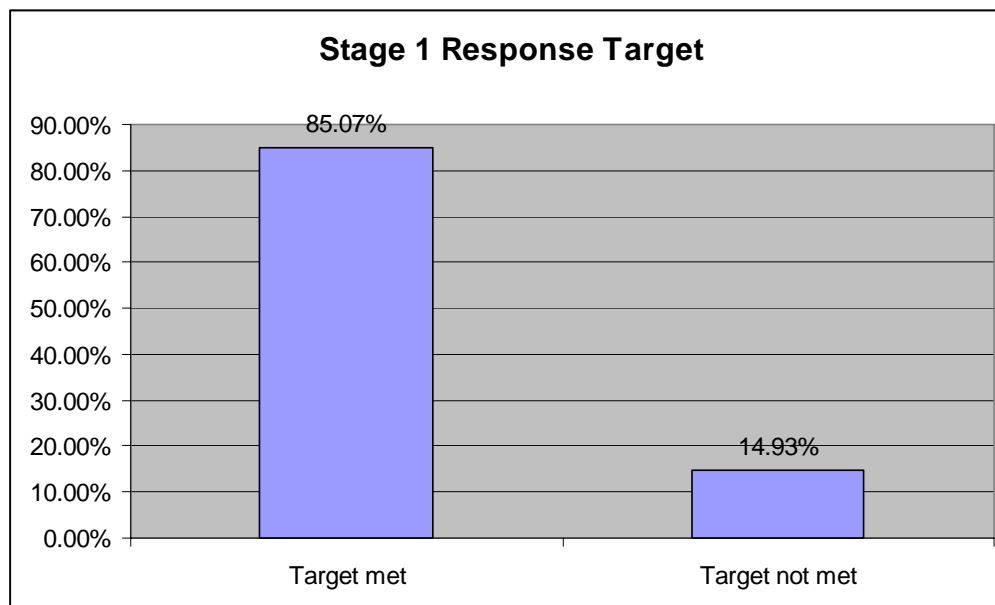
Performance against Stage 1 contact complainant target (5 working days)



In the majority of cases no contact was made with the complainant to discuss their issues and desired outcomes. This dialogue is vital in ensuring officers fully understand complainants issues and are able to resolve their complaints as close to the point of service delivery as possible. This dialogue will also help ensure a high level of customer satisfaction with complaints handling. While it may not be necessary to

contact all complainants it is recommended that greater emphasis is placed on the importance of this dialogue between the Council and the complainant.

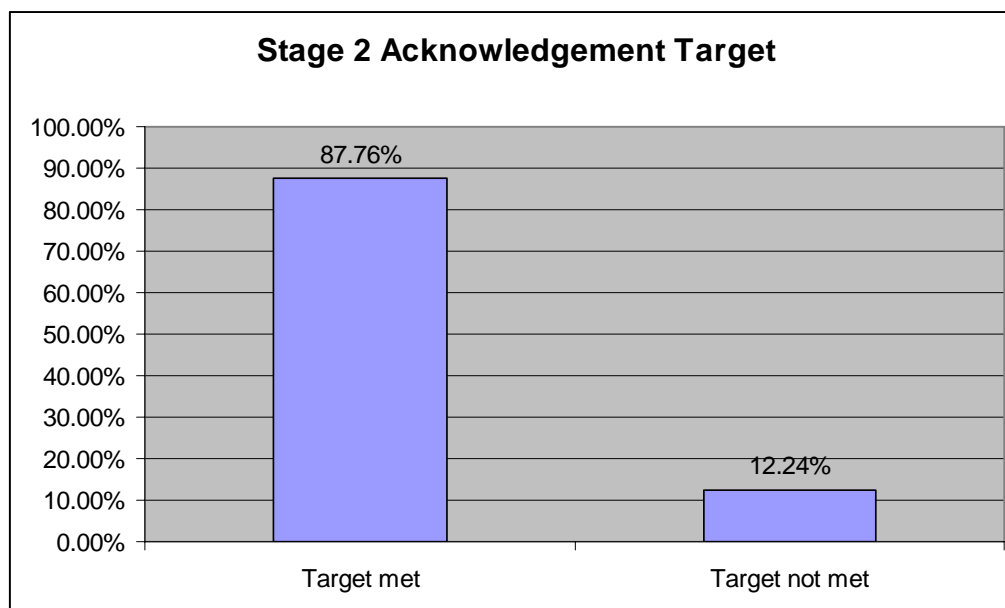
Performance against stage 1 response target (20 working days)



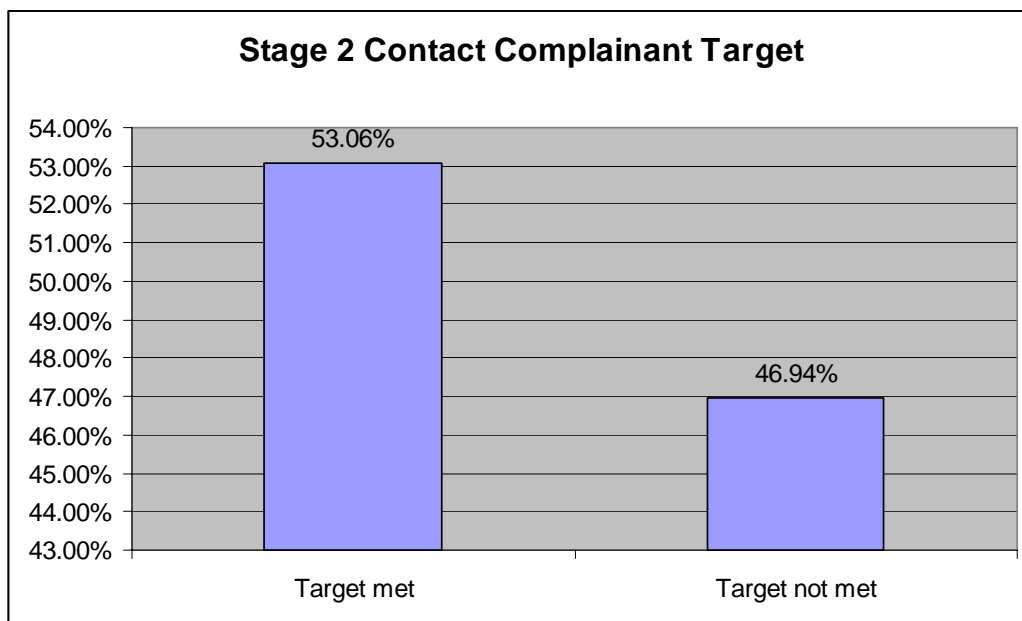
Performance against the stage one response target is monitored by the CCU. In the majority of cases between April and October where the timescale was missed an extension was agreed in advance with the complainant as per the complaints procedure, however, this has not been the case in the later half of 2009/10.

Stage 2

Performance against stage 2 acknowledgement target (2 working days)

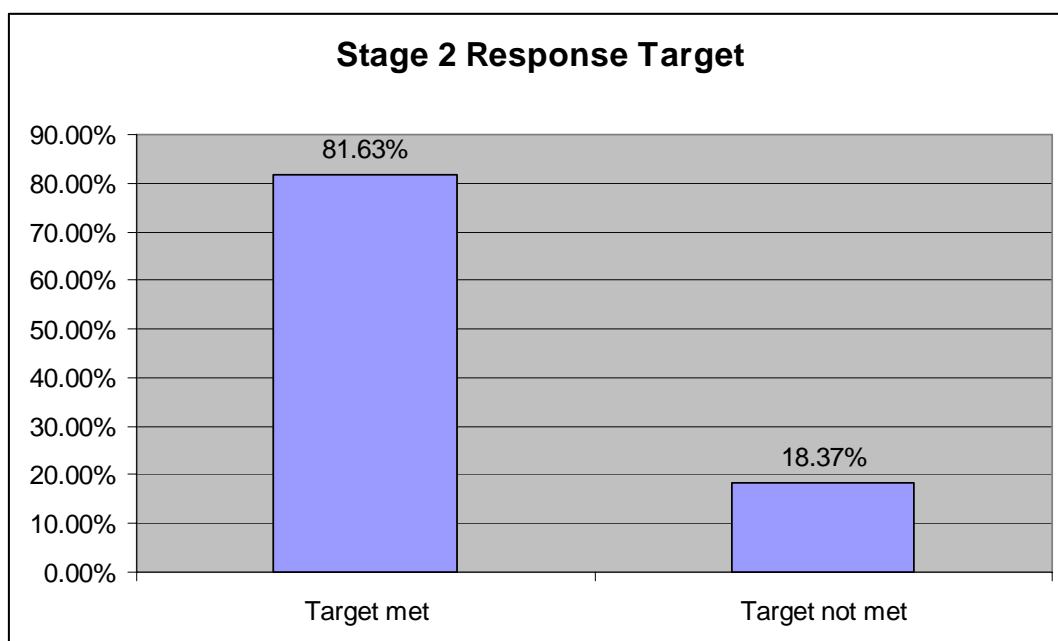


Performance against Stage 2 contact complainant target (5 working days)



In cases where the complainant telephoned the Complaints Manager to ask for their complaint to be escalated to stage two it was not necessary to ring them back to discuss the matter. These cases were initially recorded as the target not being met or applicable, in hindsight, these cases will be recorded as target met to ensure a more accurate representation of the Council's practice in respect of this matter.

Performance against stage 2 response target (25 working days)



Those investigations not completed within the 25 working day target were not done so due to the complexity of the case or officers/complainants being on annual leave/holiday. In all cases an extension was agreed with the complainant in advance.

Performance against local performance indicators

LI 0410 - Percentage of those making a complaint satisfied with the handling of these complaints.

The **TARGET** for 2009/10 is **65%** (*an increase of 30% from 2008/9*).

The **ACTUAL FIGURE** for 2009/10 is **64.2%**

In the first two quarters of 2009/10, the CCU sent satisfaction surveys out at the end of each quarter resulting in a response rate of 16 out of 97 (16.5%).

As a result the CCU reconsidered this approach and now sends a satisfaction survey, together with an equal opportunities form, at the closure of each complaint. At the point of writing, 65 out of 258 satisfaction surveys sent out had been returned (25.2%).

Despite the questionnaire being designed in way that clearly asks the complainant to separate the outcome of their complaint from the manner in which it was handled a key problem in measuring this PI is that complainants often do not do this.

It is envisaged that during 2010/11 by encouraging officers to enter into a dialogue with complainants in accordance with the procedure and by keeping them informed of progress/agreeing extensions to timescales we will achieve a satisfaction rating of 67.50%.

LI 0426 - Percentage of Stage 1 complaints escalated to Stage 2.

The **TARGET** for 2009/10 is **2 %**.

The **ACTUAL FIGURE** for 2009/10 is **9.14%**

This target was based on the complaint figures for 2008/9 prior to the implementation of the complaints procedure and the effective collection of complaints information. In hindsight it would appear the information used included around 500 requests for service which has made for a very ambitious target in the first year. However, this target is something we would like to attain through continuing to deliver training focused on good investigative practice and working to foster a culture in which complaints are accepted, owned and resolved as close to the point of service delivery as possible.

The main reasons that complainants remained dissatisfied and requested their complaint be escalated to stage two was due to the quality of the initial investigation. In particular, problems occurred where officers failed to address all the issues raised within the complaint. It is recommended that this issue be addressed by officers ensuring they contact complainants within 5 working days to discuss the complainants' issues thoroughly.

Another reason complainants remained dissatisfied was where a particular course of action had been agreed to remedy a complaint and the actions had not been taken. This issue is currently being addressed through the completion of action plans and the monitoring of progress against those action plans by the CCU.

Using the accurate data collated during 2009/10 as a base line the target set for 2010/11 is 8.75%.

LI 0427 - Percentage of all complaints received referred to the Ombudsman following investigation through the Council's complaints procedure.

The **TARGET** for 2009/10 is **1.2%**

The **ACTUAL FIGURE** for 2009/10 is **2.8%**

Again this target was based on the complaint figures for 2008/9 prior to the implementation of the complaints procedure and the effective collection of complaints information. Using the accurate data collated during 2009/10 as a base line the target set for 2010/11 is 2.5%.

During 2009/10 15 complaints were referred to the Ombudsman following investigation through the Council's complaints procedure.

LI 0428 - Number of complaints submitted to the Ombudsman without consideration through the Council's complaints procedure.

The **TARGET** for 2009/10 is **13**.

The **ACTUAL FIGURE** for 2009/10 is **3**.

There are a number of factors which are likely to have contributed to this including the elevated profile of complaints within the authority in terms of staff awareness, a successful awareness raising campaign via leaflets and the web and the Ombudsman's Council First campaign.