

**Review of the Comments,
Complaints and Suggestions
Received During 2006/07**

August 2007

REVIEW OF COMMENTS, COMPLAINTS AND SUGGESTIONS RECEIVED DURING 2006/07

Introduction

The Council's Vision stresses our commitment to providing high quality services, which meet the needs of those who live or work in the Vale or who visit the district to use the facilities or enjoy the countryside. The Council takes seriously comments and complaints made about the quality, nature or delivery of the services provided. Comments and suggestions are also used to review the effectiveness of the provision of these services. Compliments and thank-you letters are also recorded.

In 1993 the Council introduced a Comments and Complaints Procedure to ensure complaints are handled in a fair, objective and consistent way and that views expressed about the quality of services provided are acknowledged and acted upon.

Leaflets explaining the procedure are available from all Council offices, the Council's Website, local libraries, the Wantage Independent Advice Centre, the Abingdon & District Citizens Advice Bureau and Oxford Citizen's Advice Bureau. The leaflet explains how to make a comment, complaint or suggestion and how it is handled by the Authority.

Complaints are dealt with at two levels. The first level is for operational complaints i.e. minor issues reported to departments which are recorded and dealt with on a daily basis. The second level of complaint, which constitutes a more serious comment or complaint to the Council, is dealt with under the Comments and Complaints procedure. There are three stages to this procedure which also sets out the distinction between the two levels.

Although it is hoped that the Council's management can resolve complaints at the first stage within their directorates, complainants can request the Chief Executive to investigate their complaint under Stage 2 of the procedure. The third and final stage is when a complaint is referred to the Local Government Ombudsman. All other comments, suggestions and compliments are recorded and responded to, if applicable, at the first stage of the procedure.

This is the thirteenth year a report on the comments, complaints, compliments and suggestions has been produced. This report covers those received in the year 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2007. It gives information about the comments and complaints handled under the procedure.

Results for the period 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2007

125 comments and complaints were monitored under the procedure during the period (including 8 complaints which went to Stage 2 of the procedure). This is slightly more than the same period last year where we received 115 complaints. We received 99 recorded compliments during the year.

Table 1 at the end of this report provides the split of the types of communication received by the Council within service areas.

The communications received are recorded according to the following categories:

Policy This category is used if a comment, complaint or compliment is about the Council's policies, commitments and intentions for individual services. For example, the Council has a No Smoking Policy for its headquarters in Abingdon. Staff, Councillors and the public alike are not permitted to smoke whilst attending a meeting there.

Procedure This category is used if a comment, complaint or compliment is about working

practices. For example, comments regarding despatch of Council Tax reminders when an applicant has submitted a Council Tax Benefit claim.

Legislation Much of what the Council does is governed by law, government direction or guidance. An example of a complaint which falls into this category is that the Council wastes money publicising the Best Vale Performance Indicators General Satisfaction Survey. The Council is, in fact, required to do so under Section 4 of the Local Government Act 1999.

Technical/ Professional This category covers comments, complaints or compliments about the way in which officers interpret policies, procedures or legislation and their professional judgements. A complaint made by Mr A N Other's neighbour that we should not have permitted Mr A N Other to build his conservatory would fall into this category.

Staff Attitude This category is used when recording compliments paid to staff about their work and/or attitude or complaints about staff being rude or discourteous.

Contractors The Council employs contractors to run several of its services, such as refuse collection and park maintenance. This category covers any comment, complaint or compliment about the way the Authority's contractors carry out services on behalf of the Council e.g. complaints about failing to cut a grass verge.

Discrimination The Council is governed by legal codes on discrimination (including racial, disability and sexual) when employing staff and the attitude of staff to people with whom they come into contact with. A complaint about the lack of facilities provided for young people would fall into this category.

Out of Jurisdiction Some comments and complaints received are about matters over which the Council has no responsibility: most highway matters and the banding of a property for Council Tax purposes for example. In these cases the complaints are passed on to the appropriate authority/agency.

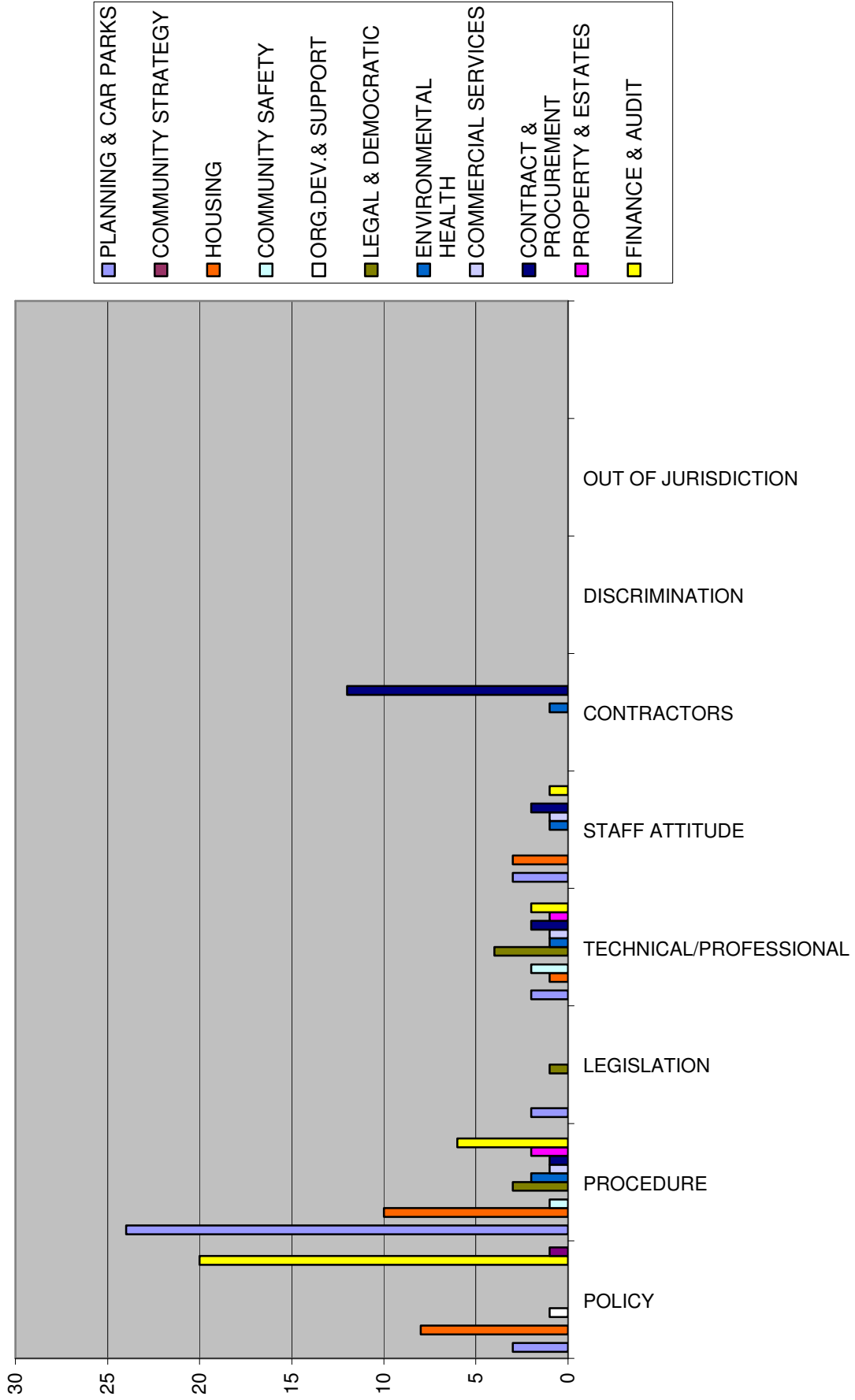
During the period 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2007 125 comments and complaints were recorded. In the majority of cases complaints were resolved to the complainant's satisfaction at Stage 1 of the procedure. The Chief Executive investigated 8 complaints at stage 2.

The majority of complaints related to the policies Council employees have to follow and the procedures that cover the way services are provided or decisions are taken. Table 3 shows a breakdown of the different types of complaints received across the Council.

In 2006/07 the Council received 74 compliments praising specific members of staff for the quality of their work and for advice and help provided.

The Comments and Complaints Procedure aims to respond to all complaints within seven working days. If, however, the matter is complex the procedure allows for an acknowledgement letter to be sent within two days and a full reply within seven days, or if the matter is very complex an interim report, sent within twenty eight days.

NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS ITEMISED BY TYPE FOR EACH SERVICE AREA FOR 2006/07



The Chief Executive's Office

The Chief Executive's Office is responsible for a number of corporate activities, setting policy and giving advice. No complaints were received about the Chief Executive's Office. 17 compliments were received, 6 for the Chief Executive's office and 11 for the Chair of the Council

The Office is also responsible for conducting investigations under stage 2 of the complaints process. This year 8 investigations were conducted, the same number as last year.

The Office is also responsible for conducting investigations as required by the Local Government Ombudsman. This year 10 investigations were conducted, compared to 12 last year.

Planning & Car Parks

There were a total of 34 complaints received in Planning and Car Parks. 30 complaints were for the planning department of which 24 were concerned with planning procedures including lateness of responses to letters, lack of notification of planning applications and retrospective planning permissions.

The administration procedures are currently being re-assessed which will ensure better response times and it is proposed to introduce a leaflet in neighbour notifications of planning applications giving guidance on the procedures for objections.

The 4 complaints received by the car parks section were mainly about the enforcement of excess charges on parking.

8 written compliments were received by these service areas during the year.

Community Strategy

There were no reported complaints within the Community Strategy service area during the year, however 4 compliments were received

Housing

22 complaints were received in the Housing department including complaints about the Choice Based Lettings system, homelessness advice, the choice of a rural exception site in Shrivenham and the consistency of advice given by housing staff. One complaint went to Stage 2 in the process but it was, in fact, a complaint concerning an issue which the Vale Housing Association were responsible for.

3 written compliments were received by housing staff during the year.

Community Safety

3 complaints were received in the Community Safety service area. One was in connection with anti-social behaviour in Grove Street Wantage close to the new Sainsburys store, one was about the lack of CCTV cameras in an area in Abingdon experiencing anti-social behaviour and one was concerning advertising about domestic violence on local transport.

1 written compliment was received.

Organisational Development and Support

1 complaint was received in the Organisational Development and Support area concerning misleading information given in a job application pack.

25 written compliments were received by Contact Services staff in Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage during the year.

Legal and Democratic

8 complaints were received in the Legal Services department mainly in connection with poor response times. 3 of these complaints went to Stage 2 in the procedures. A Head of Legal Services officer has been appointed which will alleviate the problem of the excessive workload being handled by an under-staffed department in the last two years.

Environmental Health

In 2006/07 5 complaints were received in Environmental Health. 2 of these related to Council procedure, 1 on the performance of the Council's contractor for Pest Control, 1 concerning the attitude of a member of staff and 1 to do with a piece of dilapidated ground thought to belong to the Council.

Environmental Health also received 5 compliments during the year which related to noise complaints, pest control problems, licensing and environmental protection.

Finance

In 2006/07 29 complaints were received by Financial Services. 20 of these related to the Council's Corporate Debt Recovery Strategy and the reduction in the amount of time for debts to be paid. 6 were about the Council's procedure and the way that tasks were undertaken within Benefits, Council Tax and National Non Domestic Rates and 3 were concerned with the way staff dealt with customers.

5 compliments were also received.

Contract and Procurement

In 2006/07 17 complaints were received in Contract and Procurement, 12 of which related to the operation of the waste management contract run by Veolia (formerly Cleanaway).

25 compliments were also received of which 11 related to work of the Waste Team, 7 for Parks and Grounds Maintenance and 5 in respect of the Civic Halls.

Commercial Services (including Property & Estates)

In 2006/07 6 complaints were received by Commercial Services, 3 related to the work of Property & Estates and 3 the work of Building Control and the DSO.

3 compliments were also received, 2 relating to the work of the DSO and 1 dealing with a land drainage issue.

Ombudsman Cases

During 2006/07 10 complaints were determined by the Local Government Ombudsman, compared to 12 in the previous year.

Of these 10 decisions, 2 were considered to be premature, 5 were no maladministration and 3 were outside jurisdiction. The Ombudsman did not find it necessary to ask the Council to provide any local settlements.

The Council responded to enquiries within 21 days, compared to 18 days last year, which is well within the 28 calendar days target.

The Ombudsman's office produces an Annual Letter to each Council. This letter confirmed "I did not issue any reports against your Council in 2006-07 or recommend that any complaints should be locally settled. This has now been the case for more than 3 years and I congratulate the Council on its exemplary

performance in this area. The figure for premature complaints is low and is below the national average for Councils as a whole. This suggests that the Council publicises and operates its complaints procedure effectively.

Table 2 at the end of this report gives details of the cases determined by the Local Government Ombudsman between 1998/99 and 2006/07. In the last 10 years of reporting no maladministration has ever been found against the Council

The table below provides details by directorate of the complaints determined by the Ombudsman during the current year.

Service Area	Number of Cases Determined	Determination Reason
Planning	5	3 outside jurisdiction 2 No maladministration
Building Control	1	1 No maladministration
Property and Estates	1	1 No maladministration
Housing	3	1 No maladministration 2 Premature

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF COMMENTS, COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS RECEIVED BY DIRECTORATES FOR 2006/07

Service Area	Comments		Complaints		Compliments
		2006/07	Stage 1 2006/07	Stage 2 2006/07	
Chief Executive's Office					17
Planning & Car Parks			34	1	8
Community Strategy			0	0	4
Housing			22	1*	3
Community Safety			3	0	1
Organisational Dev. & Support			1	0	25
Legal & Democratic			8	3	0
Strategic Management			0	0	2
Environmental Health			5	1	5
Commercial Services, Property & Estates			6	1	3
Contract & Procurement			17	1	25
Finance			29		5
Audit			0		
Total			125	8	98

* This Stage 2 complaint related to an issue with the Vale Housing Association

TABLE 2: DETAILS OF THE CASES DETERMINED BY THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN FROM 1997/98 TO 2005/06

	Premature Complaints	Local Settlement	No Mal-administration	Mal-administration	Out of Jurisdiction	Ombudsman Discretion	Total Complaints Determined
No. of cases determined in 1998/99	5	0	2	0	2	3	12
No. of cases determined in 1999/00	0*	0	3	0	1	2	6
No. of cases determined in 2000/01	-	0	7	0	1	0	8
No. of cases determined in 2001/02	-	1	9	0	0	5	15
No. of cases determined in 2002/03	6	1	2	0	0	2	11
No. of cases determined in 2003/04	0	0	6	0	2	5	16
No. of cases determined in 2004/05	3	0	4	0	2	1	10
No. of cases determined in 2005/06	4	0	4	0	1	3	12
No. of cases determined in 2006/07	2	0	5	0	3	0	10

TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF STAGE 1 COMMENTS AND COMPLAINTS BY SERVICE AREA & CATEGORY

Service Area	Policy	Procedure	Legislation	Technical/ Professional	Staff Attitude	Contractors	Discrimination	Out of Jurisdiction	Totals
Planning	1	24	2	1	2	0	0	0	30
Car Parks	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	4
Housing	8	10	0	1	3	0	0	0	22
Community Safety	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
Org.Dev. & Support	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Legal & Democratic	0	3	1	4	0	0	0	0	8
Environ. Health	0	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	4
Commercial Services	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	3
Contract & Procurement	0	1	0	2	2	12	0	0	17
Property & Estates	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Finance	20	6	0	2	1	0	0	0	29
Totals	32	50	3	16	11	13	0	0	125