

**Review of the Comments,
Complaints and Suggestions
Received During 2004/05**

August 2005

REVIEW OF COMMENTS, COMPLAINTS AND SUGGESTIONS RECEIVED DURING 2004/05

Introduction

The Council's Vision stresses its 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 and objective way and that views expressed about the quality of services provided are acknowledged.

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.

There are three stages to the Comments and Complaints Procedure. Although it is hoped the Council's staff 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 eleventh year a report on the comments, complaints, compliments and suggestions has been produced. This report covers those received in the year 1st April 2004 to 31st March 2005. It gives information about the comments and complaints handled under the procedure.

Results for the period 1st April 2004 to 31st March 2005

247 comments and complaints were monitored under the procedure during the period (including 8 complaints under Stage 2 of the procedure). This is an increase of 105 from the year 2003/04. 299 compliments were received in the same period compared to 204 in the previous year showing an increase of 95. Table 1 at the end of this report provides the split of the types of communication received by the Council within Directorates.

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.

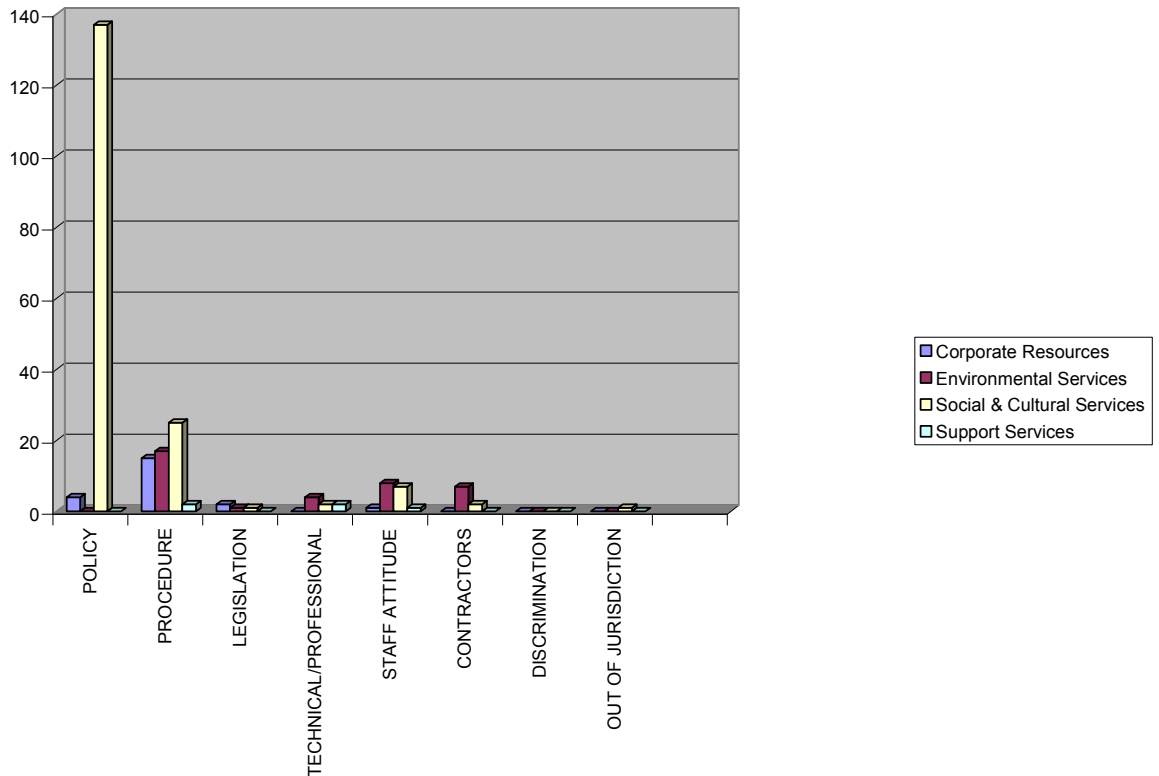
Discrimination The Council is governed by legal codes on discrimination (including racial, disability and sexual) when employing staff and the attitude of staff to people with whom they come into contact with. A complaint about the lack of facilities provided for young people would fall into this category.

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 to 31st March 2004 219 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 2004/05 the Council received 299 compliments praising specific members of staff for the quality of their work and attitude and thank-you's for advice and help provided. This figure is higher than the 204 compliments received in 2003/04.



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.

The content of this summary has been set out as per the structure in operation during 2004-05. The new structure came into operation on 1st April 2005.

The Social and Cultural Directorate received the highest percentage of complaints (74%) and Environmental Services 17%. The increased level of complaints logged within Social and Cultural Directorate were mainly due to the budget decisions made in February 2005 to remove the assisted travel tokens and the funding for the tourist information offices in Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage.

The Chief Executive's Office

The Chief Executive's office was responsible for a number of corporate activities, setting policy and giving advice. These included emergency planning, economic development and tourism. The office also provided personnel, training, best value and health and safety support to other Council directorates.

In 2004/05 the office received 29 compliments.

Support Services Directorate

The Legal Division carried out all the Council's legal work, such as drawing up contracts and providing information for land charges and searches. Democratic Services managed the Council's committees, provided services to the Councillors, compiled the electoral register and managed elections. Technical Services and Estates Services maintained Council properties and offered a drain clearance service.

In the year 2004-05 the Directorate received 5 complaints, 1 of which was a complaint to do with a Member. 1 complaint proceeded to Stage 2 of the Comments and Complaints procedure.

The Directorate received 16 compliments during the year

Environmental Services Directorate

This Directorate included Planning, Car Park Operations, Building Control and Environmental Health. Members of staff in the Directorate have a high degree of contact with the general public. They often have to make recommendations, or give information to local residents and applicants for planning permission, building regulations or excess charges, which may not be popular. The Environmental Protection Service runs three major contracts for recycling, refuse collection and street and public convenience cleaning.

In 2004/05 37 complaints were received at Stage 1. 16 of these were to do with the process of handling planning applications from both applicants and objectors. The procedures for handling applications will be looked at in the coming year.

The Chief Executive received 6 complaints related to the Planning and Development Control services for investigation under Stage 2 of the Comments and Complaints Procedure. 4 of these complaints were in connection with the planning application for Westmill Windfarm at Watchfield.

The Directorate also received 14 compliments during the year (7 to Planning, 5 to Environmental Health and 2 to Building Control).

Social and Cultural Services

This Directorate consisted of Housing and Community Safety, Leisure, Benefits and Community Development (now renamed Innovation and Enterprise). The service areas within this directorate covered Housing Allocation, Housing Benefit, Leisure and Civic Centres, Parks and Landscapes, Economic Development and Grants. Each of these service areas had a high volume of customer contact and consequently had the potential to attract a high number of complaints.

Following complaints highlighted in previous years concerning Housing Register applicants the Housing Department introduced a new system of housing allocation – Choice Based Lettings in September 2004. As a result complaints to the Housing Department have dropped by 40%.

In contrast there were a high number of complaints received in Benefits, directly attributable to the withdrawal of travel tokens with effect from 1st April 2005. A total of 92 of the 175 complaints received in Social and Cultural Directorate were in connection with this new policy. However, through a comprehensive programme of communication with the public and work with outside agencies the public has been directed to alternative travel concessions.

Additionally 27 complaints were received from individual residents and organisations in connection with the closure of the Tourist Information Centres in Abingdon, Wantage and Faringdon which were related to the reduction in grant paid by the Council. These complaints were dealt with by a number of meetings with relevant agencies throughout the Vale explaining the reasons behind the decision and putting in place alternative tourist information points at these locations.

There were a number of complaints concerning cleanliness and staff attitude at the Leisure Centres and although these centres were taken over by SOLL (Leisure) in September last year these issues have been taken up with staff at each of the Centres and continue to be monitored regularly. Through the introduction of QUEST (a performance management scheme specifically designed for the leisure industry) and Sport England Benchmarking we expect complaints to drop and satisfaction grow in the coming year.

As a result of the complaints received from Benefit applicants regarding the repayment of overpayments, procedures have been put in place to ensure that claimants are aware that they can repay overpayments by instalments thus relieving the hardship being experienced by people in this predicament.

All complaints received in the Directorate were resolved under Stage 1 of the Comments and Complaints procedure with none progressing to Stage 2.

A total of 73 written compliments were received during the year 2004-05:

- 16 Leisure
- 8 Community Development
- 32 Benefits
- 14 Housing & Community Safety
- 3 Management.

Corporate Resources Directorate

This Directorate was responsible for the collection of Council Tax and Business Rates. It also carried out the functions of ICT, accountancy, payroll, audit, insurance and payment of suppliers for the whole Council. Contact Services is responsible for the Local Services Points and the Faringdon Area Office, the Communications Service, the operation of the switchboard and the corporate postal service.

The Directorate ensured there were no irregularities in directorates' procedures and processes, co-ordinated the Council's spending and produced an annual budget and statement of accounts.

In 2004/05 the Directorate received 14 complaints, 8 comments and 167 compliments.

All of the compliments received were for the service offered by Wantage and Abingdon Local Services Points.

Of the 14 complaints received 7 were about the Local Services Points and 7 were concerned with Debtors, Asset Management and Council Tax.

Ombudsman Cases

During 2004/05 10 complaints were determined by the Local Government Ombudsman, compared to 16 in the previous year.

Of these 10 decisions, 3 were considered to be premature, 2 were outside of jurisdiction, 1 was Ombudsman discretion and 4 were no maladministration.

The Ombudsman's Office requires all District Councils to provide a full response to investigations within 21 calendar days (this starts from the date of the letter instigating a full investigation to receiving the District Council's response within its Office). Only 21% of District Councils achieved the target this year. The Vale was within target, achieving an average of 18.8 calendar days.

Table 2 at the end of this report gives details of the cases determined by the Local Government Ombudsman between 1995/96 and 2004/05. In the last 9 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.

Directorate	Number of Cases Determined	Determination Reason
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<u>Environmental Services</u> ➤ Planning	7	3 no maladministration 2 premature 2 outside of jurisdiction
<u>Support Services</u> ➤ Legal ➤ Estates	1 1	1 no maladministration 1 ombudsman discretion
<u>Social & Cultural</u> ➤ (insulation grant) *	1	1 premature

* This Ombudsman case was originally sent to the Vale although it was subsequently determined to be the responsibility of a partner organisation and was passed on to be dealt with under that organisation's procedures.

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF COMMENTS, COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS AND THANK YOUS RECEIVED BY DIRECTORATES FOR 2003/04 & 2004/05

Directorate	Comments		Complaints				Compliments & Thank Yous	
			Stage 1	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 2		
	03/04	04/05	03/04	004/05	03/04	04/05	03/04	04/05
Chief Executive's Office	0	0	0	0	0	0	24	29
Corporate Resources	3	8	48	14	0	1	104	167
Environmental Services	0	0	36	37	3	6*	22	14
Social & Cultural Services	0	12	37	163	0	0	34	73
Support Services	0	0	12	5	3	1	20	16
Total	3	20	133	219	6	8	204	299

* 4 of these complaints related to the same planning application for a windfarm

**TABLE 2: DETAILS OF THE CASES DETERMINED BY THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN
FROM 1996/97 TO 2004/05**

	Premature Complaints	Local Settlement	No Mal-administration	Mal-administration	Out of Jurisdiction	Ombudsman Discretion	Total Complaints Determined
No. of cases determined in 1996/97	1	2	7	0	2	0	12
No. of cases determined in 1997/98	0	0	3	0	1	0	4
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

* Premature complaints deleted from statistics

TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF STAGE 1 COMPLAINTS BY DIRECTORATE & CATEGORY

Directorate	Policy		Procedure		Legislation		Technical/ Professional		Staff Attitude		Contractors		Discrimin- ation		Out of Jurisdiction		Totals	
	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5	03/4	04/5
Chief Executive's Office	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Corporate Resources	4	4	34	15	1	2	5	0	3	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	51	22
Environmental Services	1	0	22	17	0	1	14	4	1	8	3	7	0	0	0	0	41	37
Social & Cultural Services	10	137	10	25	2	1	6	2	7	7	0	2	0	0	2	1	37	175
Support Services	0	0	2	2	2	0	13	2	4	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	22	5
Totals	15	141	68	59	5	4	38	8	15	17	7	9	0	0	3	1	151	239