

REVIEW OF COMMENTS, COMPLAINTS AND SUGGESTIONS RECEIVED DURING 2007/08

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.

The Comment and Complaints Procedure has been in existence in the Council for 15 years and continues 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.

Information on how to make a comment or complaint is available on our website at www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk Comment and Complaint forms can be filled in on-line or acquired from all Council offices. The form 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.

Although it is hoped that the Council's management can resolve complaints at the first stage within their directorates, complainants can request that the Chief Executive investigates 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 comments, complaints and suggestions are logged by individual departments and complaints received under Stages 1, 2 and 3 of the procedures are logged on the Council's database and reported to the Executive annually.

This report covers comments and complaints received in the year 1st April 2007 to 31st March 2008.

Results for the period 1st April 2007 to 31st March 2008

146 comments and complaints were monitored under the procedure during the period (including 13 complaints which went to Stage 2 of the procedure). This is more than the same period last year when we received 125 complaints. However, we received 139 recorded compliments during the year which was higher than the previous 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.

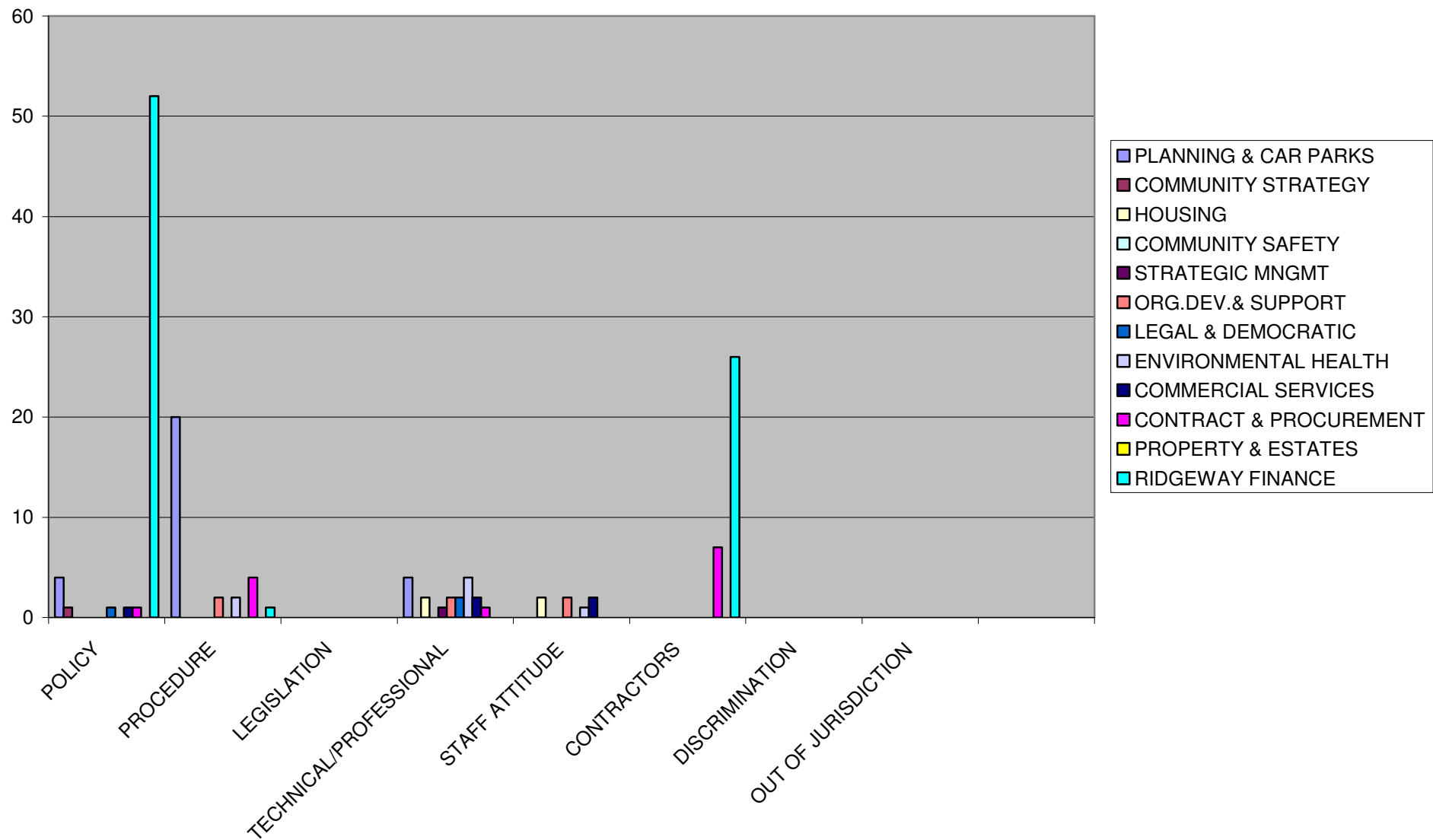
Discrimination The Council is governed by legal codes on discrimination (including racial, disability and sexual) when employing staff and the attitude of staff to people with whom they come into contact with. A complaint about the lack of facilities provided for young people would fall into this category.

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.

In the year 2007/08 the most of the complaints received were resolved to the complainant's satisfaction at Stage 1 of the procedure. The Chief Executive investigated 13 complaints at stage 2.

The majority of complaints related to the policies Council employees have to follow, the procedures that cover the way services are provided or decisions are taken or were in respect of services provided by contractors on behalf of the authority. Table 3 shows a breakdown of the different types of complaints received across the Council.

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 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 and 13 compliments were received.

The Office is also responsible for conducting investigations under stage 2 of the complaints process. This year 13 investigations were conducted, compared to 8 last year.

The Office is also responsible for conducting investigations as required by the Local Government Ombudsman. This year 20 cases were determined, compared to 10 last year.

Strategic Management

One complaint was received in the Strategic Management office. This was in connection with the July 07 flooding event and concerned a resident's dissatisfaction with the response to their request for sandbags. All aspects of the flooding event have been investigated and procedures put in place for future emergency events.

2 compliments were received in the Strategic Management office during the year.

Planning & Car Parks

There were 28 comments and complaints received in the Planning and Car Parks service areas.

Analysis of these comments and complaints showed that, whilst the detail of each was clearly specific to the particular case, the pattern overall followed that of previous years, falling into three main categories:

- Concerns that points of objection made in response to particular planning applications had not been taken fully into account in the decision-making process. This category of complaint was common and frequent within the planning department, and officers were vigilant in taking objectors views into account and continuing to follow the proper decision making process in accordance with the Council's approved scheme of delegation. A full response explaining how a decision on a planning application was reached was always provided in replying to complaints of this nature.
- Perceived failures in the development control service's planning application neighbour notification process was also a frequent subject of complaint. In a small number of cases this could be the result of a genuine error and the service would apologise and ensure the records were corrected. In other cases the complaint might have arisen because the resident concerned fell outside the service's neighbour notification catchment area criteria. This would be explained in response to a complaint of this nature.
- The third category of complaint concerned the planning enforcement service's slow progress or perceived failure in dealing with alleged breaches of planning regulations. It was acknowledged that this process was often lengthy and protracted as each breach had to be investigated thoroughly and precisely and efforts were made to resolve issues before resorting to formal enforcement procedures. However, the service's enforcement policies and procedures had been subject to a recent review and a draft policy document produced. Consultation on this document was currently underway.

There was 1 complaint received by the car parks section which was to do with stringency to which our policy on issuing excess parking charges was adhered to.

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

Community Strategy

There was 1 complaint to the Community Strategy service area which was to do with the perceived lack of funding for rural areas on amenities such as grass cutting and maintenance of commonly used areas.

4 compliments were received by Community Strategy staff.

Housing Services

4 complaints were received in the Housing department, a big drop on the previous year, indicating that customers were becoming more familiar and satisfied with the Choice Based Lettings system. There was 1 complaint concerning alleged sub-standard workmanship of a contractor, 1 complaint was in connection with a possible breach of confidentiality which was proved to be groundless, 1 complaint declaring racial discrimination which again was proved not to be the case and 1 complaint concerning problems of anti-social behaviour at one of our temporary accommodation sites.

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

Community Safety

No complaints were received in the Community Safety service area this year.

7 written compliments were received, mainly to CCTV staff in connection with their valuable help in identifying potential problem situations or individuals.

Organisational Development and Support

6 complaints were made to the Local Services Point in Abingdon. 3 of these complaints were from customers experiencing difficulty in accessing information either by telephoning or by coming into Abbey House. 1 complaint was made by a customer who was given confidential information of another customer in error and 2 complaints concerned the perceived unhelpfulness of the Contact Services staff. Regular analysis was undertaken across the whole of this service area to ensure customer satisfaction was maintained and any identified failure in the service was addressed rigorously by the managers.

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

Legal and Democratic

3 complaints were received in the Legal Services department during the year. 1 complaint was concerning unanswered letters, 1 was from the local newspaper group who had been refused an FOI request on information regarding the tendering process for the Old Gaol site. 1 complaint was received in the Land Charges section concerning the length of time taken on a search. The Head of Legal Services and his team were addressing the known issues concerning Land Charges and more timely responses to complaints received.

Environmental Health

6 complaints were received at Stage 1. Of these, 4 related to Environmental Health and covered dust generated by building works, pest control charges, evidence relating to fly tipping and the way in which a fixed penalty notice was issued. One complaint also related to Food & Safety and one to Licensing.

8 compliments were received by this service area during the year.

Ridgeway

79 complaints were received at Stage 1. Of these, 50 related to the recent policy changes made by the Council relating to the withdrawal of the use of the bus passes at the park and ride and also the change of start time for the new National Bus Pass Scheme. The remainder of the complaints received covered the areas of Council Tax, Benefits, Business Rates and Exchequer Services. These services are undertaken by Capita on behalf of the Council.

2 compliments were received by this service area during the year.

Contract and Procurement

13 complaints were received at Stage 1. Of these, 8 related to Waste Services and the collection of refuse and emptying of green boxes and brown bins. These matters were raised directly with the Council's Waste Contractor, Veolia, with remedial action being taken as necessary. One complaint related to Parks regarding the pruning of trees and shrubs. Four complaints related to Leisure, two of these regarding the staffing of a bar at the Civic Halls at one particular event, one related to the withdrawal of the community discount scheme at the Civic Halls and one related to an accident which took place at a Leisure Centre.

19 compliments were received by this service area during the year.

Commercial Services (including Property & Estates)

5 Complaints were received at Stage 1. Of these, 2 related to Estates, one concerning the lack of consultation on a particular land transaction and one regarding the attitude of a member of staff. One complaint related to Building Control and the delay in the issuing of a building regulation certificate. One related to the Direct Services Organisation (DSO) and confusion over the charges to clear a sewer blockage. One other complaint related to Emergency Planning and the perceived lack of action following the July 2007 floods in implementing measures to prevent further flooding. (The vast majority of the works thought necessary fell outside the jurisdiction of this Council).

3 compliments were received by this service area during the year.

Ombudsman Cases

During 2007/08 20 complaints were determined by the Local Government Ombudsman, compared to 10 in the previous year. Although the number of cases has doubled this year, this is due to the fact that in 2 cases there were multiple complainants (6 in one case and 4 in another).

Of these 20 decisions, 12 were considered to be premature, 1 was no maladministration and 5 were ombudsman discretion. The Ombudsman asked the Council to provide local settlements in 2 cases.

The Council responded to enquiries within 25.2 days, compared to 21 days last year, which is well within the 28 calendar days target.

The Ombudsman's office produces an Annual Letter to each Council and this is available on the Council's website.

Table 2 at the end of this report gives details of the cases determined by the Local Government Ombudsman between 1999/2000 and 2007/08. In the last 10 years of reporting no maladministration has ever been found against the Council.

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

Service Area	Number of Cases	Determination Reason
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	Determined	
Planning	15	5 Ombudsman discretion 10 Premature
Legal	1	1 Local Settlement
Revenues and Benefits	2	1 Local Settlement 1 Premature
Parks/Waste	1	1 Premature
Car Parks	1	1 No maladministration

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

Service Area	Comments		Complaints			Compliments	
		2007/08	Stage 1	Stage 2		2007/08	
Chief Executive's Office		0	0	0		13	
Planning & Car Parks		2	26	11		6	
Community Strategy		0	1	0		4	
Housing		0	4	0		6	
Community Safety		0	0	0		7	
Organisational Dev. & Support		0	6	0		69	
Legal & Democratic		0	3	0		0	
Strategic Management		0	1	0		2	
Environmental Health		0	6	0		8	
Commercial Services, Property & Estates		0	5	*1		3	
Contract & Procurement		0	13	0		19	
Ridgeway Financial Services		0	79	**1		2	
Total		2	144	13		139	

* This Stage 2 complaint was the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council

** This Stage 2 complaint was the responsibility of the Valuation Office

**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 1999/00	0	0	3	0	1	2	6
No. of cases determined in 2000/01	0	0	7	0	1	0	8
No. of cases determined in 2001/02	0	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	13
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
No of cases determined in 2007/08	12*	2	1	0	0	5**	20

* 6 premature complaints related to the same case

** 4 ombudsman discretion complaints related to the same case

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
Chief Exec. Office	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Planning & Car Parks	4	20	0	4	0	0	0	0	28
Community Strategy	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Housing	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	4
Community Safety	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Org.Dev. & Support	0	2	0	2	2	0	0	0	6
Legal & Democratic	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
Strategic Management	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Environ. Health	0	2	0	3	1	0	0	0	6
Commercial Services	1	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	5
Contract & Procurement	1	4	0	1	0	7	0	0	13
Property & Estates	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ridgeway Finance	52	1	0	0	0	26	0	0	79
Totals	60	29	0	17	7	33	0	0	146