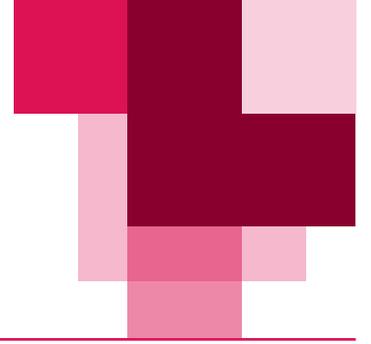


# Aiming for the best

Using lessons from complaints to improve public services





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## Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS)

The Centre for Public Scrutiny is an independent charity that promotes transparent, inclusive and accountable public services and celebrates excellent and effective scrutiny across the public sector. We support individuals, organisations and communities by creating networks and forums and sharing learning through published guidance, consultancy, training and events. Our website [www.cfps.org.uk](http://www.cfps.org.uk) contains the largest on-line collection of scrutiny reviews and reports as well as other resources that show more about what scrutiny can do for you.

## Local Government Ombudsmen (LGO)

The LGO's mission is to provide an independent means of redress to individuals for injustice caused by unfair treatment or service failure by local authorities, schools and care providers and to use our learning to promote good public administration and service improvement.

The LGO's jurisdiction extends to a wide range of public bodies providing local services, including local authorities (excluding town and parish councils); all registered adult social care providers; national parks; police authorities; education appeal panels and some maintained schools. Complaints can include dissatisfaction with planning decisions, the allocation of social housing, benefits payments, anti-social behaviour, the care of adults or children, or other local issues that impact on people's lives.

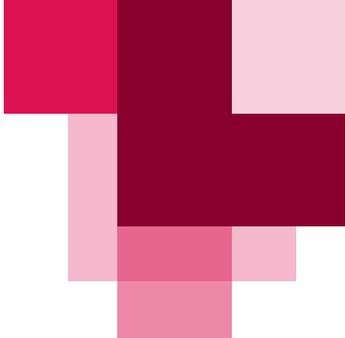
[www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk)

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# 1. What this guide is about



This guide has been published by the LGO and CfPS for councillors and officers supporting overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs) to help develop understanding about how the experience of services and decisions by individual citizens can inform improvements in the way services are planned and delivered. This guide can be used by OSCs to consider how the proper analysis and management of information about complaints can feed in to business planning, commissioning and scrutiny arrangements. Several councils have contributed to the guide by providing examples of how they are approaching the challenge. More details can be found in section 4 of the guide, but some common enablers and barriers to using insight from complaints effectively are illustrated below:

## Enablers

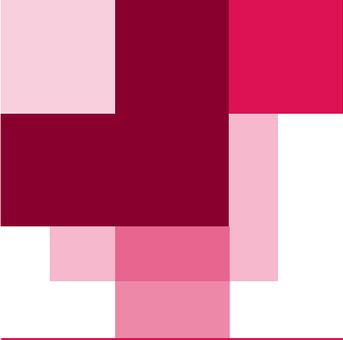
- creating a culture of learning and improvement
- providing people with lots of ways to give feedback
- leadership in sharing lessons across the organisation
- a co-ordinated resource that maximises the impact of learning

## Barriers

- treating complaints as an opportunity to simply defend practice
- poor communication with citizens and complainants
- silo approach to complaints, no sharing of lessons across the organisation
- little connection between feedback and strategic planning

Learning from complaints provides opportunities for services to be shaped by people's experiences. These can often be people who are traditionally considered 'hard to reach' and who may be less successful at navigating complex public services. When developing a policy or service model, it is almost impossible to anticipate all potential variables of implementation and impact. This is why complaints should be viewed as a strategic resource providing rich and diverse perspectives. They can illustrate how well goals and standards are being achieved from the point of view of the needs and aspirations of citizens and on any unintended consequences of the way policies are implemented or decisions are made.

Councillors and officers supporting scrutiny can prompt use of citizen insight through complaints by reviewing their council's organisational culture, systems for collecting and assessing information about complaints, and by reviewing how complaints procedures work and how learning from complaints is spread across the organisation. Although OSCs often gather 'citizen insight' about a range of issues through their reviews, there are few examples of OSCs specifically reviewing how councils use insight through complaints to make improvements to individual services or to contribute to corporate learning and improvement overall. This guide aims to reinforce the active role that overview



## 2. How complaints support local accountability and help improve services

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and scrutiny committees can play.

In its policy paper 'Accountability Works'<sup>1</sup> CfPS identifies that accountability can come through:

- the ballot box
- the media
- the market and choice
- complaints and redress for wrongs
- regulation, inspection and audit
- management processes
- scrutiny carried out by lay non-executives

Complaints and redress for wrongs are not always immediately acknowledged as a means of accountability.

Through their independent and impartial investigations of the decisions, actions and services of councils as they have affected individual citizens who claim injustice, the LGO provide an important means by which local councils can be held to account.

The prime purpose of an LGO investigation is to provide remedy and redress when decisions are not properly taken by an authority or a failure of service provision occurs. The LGO encourages local resolution of complaints at the earliest opportunity and will normally expect complaints to have been dealt with internally before they start an investigation.

Often these early settlements will result in service improvements being put in place or changes to policy. If not the LGO may recommend changes are introduced with their final decision.

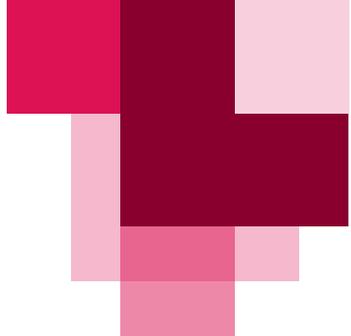
They will also comment on poor internal complaints processes and offer support and advice for improvement, as well as compensation where appropriate. Each year the LGO publish an annual review of each council which also provides an opportunity to comment on the outcome and impact of complaints<sup>2</sup>.

When an LGO investigation finds evidence of systemic failings that affect all service users a report is usually issued that councils are by law required to consider and then inform the LGO of the action it will take. Below are examples where the LGO's investigation led to wide-ranging changes in two councils.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cfps.org.uk/what-we-do/accountability-works/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lgo.org.uk/CouncilsPerformance/>



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## Birmingham City Council – Adult Social Care and Disability Complaint

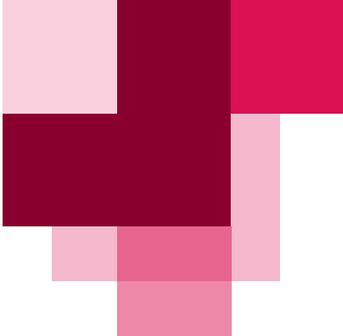
The LGO received a complaint from Mrs B, the foster-sister of Ms D, a deaf woman with learning difficulties. Mrs B complained to the council previously as she felt that her foster-sister had been neglected over fifteen years and left in a foster placement which hampered her independence, preventing her from living in a signing community.

The council conducted an independent investigation which upheld the majority of Mrs B's complaint and committed to keeping her informed of matters involving Ms D, including inviting her to all assessments and reviews. However, this recommendation was not followed through when the first review took place and the council took six months to respond to the recommendations made by the review panel. Mrs B was concerned that other vulnerable adults may be in a similar situation to her foster-sister.

The LGO issued a report about the complaint in 2008, which found maladministration relating to a number of specific points in relation to Ms D. The council had failed to assess and review Ms D's needs, only acting after an Adult Protection investigation. Ms D was placed with foster carers approved for children. The council failed to adequately respond to concerns raised by Mrs B and other professionals as well as the independent review panel. There was also delay in providing funding for an advocate for Ms D.

The LGO made wide-ranging recommendations as a result. This included that the outcome of the audit should be reported to the appropriate scrutiny committee within 18 months from the report (September 2009). Ongoing communication between the LGO and Birmingham to track progress, as well as records from Birmingham's Audit Committee and a report from the Cabinet Members for Adults and Communities to their Overview and Scrutiny Committee reveals that following the Ombudsman investigation and report the following systematic changes were made:

- developing easy to read information in relation to reviews
- strengthening the management of the learning disability service
- internal review of learning disability assessments with findings reported to the Learning Disabilities Partnership Board
- developing a longer term strategic plan for the needs of young people leaving school
- examining the skills mix of staff
- applying a different approach to annual reviews of people in long term placements

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- addressing the shortfall in case file recording, including implementing electronic social care records
  - ‘Total Place Initiative’ which initiated a joint framework and training between Health, Social Care and Learning Disabilities teams. This included establishing a discrete ‘transitions’ team
  - looking at links with providers and provider reviews as part of the statutory review process

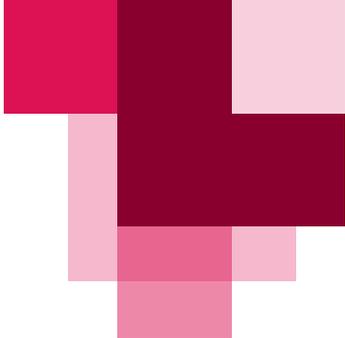
Responding to complaints is a key ingredient of responsive services. Effective complaint handling goes further than having proper procedures – it also means promoting an organisational culture that is open to challenge, makes the most of opportunities to learn and is willing to change. A proactive approach to complaints could also help councils identify underlying issues, for example relating to vulnerability or safeguarding.

Complaints can be a rich source of citizen insight. Complaints are unsolicited and should be valued as illustrating what a ‘customer journey’ may be like for the citizen in practice. Complaints can help councils identify risks and weaknesses across services that should inform future planning and commissioning decisions.

Each complaint should be considered in context. The circumstances of the person complaining can be just as relevant as the context in which a service is being delivered. For example, a missed bin collection could have a different impact on an affluent single person who has been provided with a large wheelie-bin than on a large household living in difficult circumstances with infants in nappies and a ‘black bag’ collection system.

The impacts will also depend on whether it is an isolated incident or recurs regularly or whether there are extraordinary circumstances such as flooding or heavy snowfall. The experience of ‘complaining’ (in this instance reporting the missed collection and asking for it to be rectified) could be different if it is made early in the day when procedures can be activated to arrange collection, compared to being made after the refuse crew have finished for the day or when there is no agreed procedure for collecting ‘missed bins’.

Useful insights can be gained from straightforward data about high volume services such as refuse collection, street environment, benefits, tax collection or housing repairs. For example, mapping complaints about missed bin collections can identify streets where inconsiderate parking makes access for refuse vehicles difficult, allowing solutions to be identified.



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OSCs should take contextual factors in to account when presented with statistics about complaints and in seeking to extract general lessons from individual complaints. The CfPS guide 'Green Light'<sup>3</sup> highlights the contrast that can exist between performance management information and experiences of citizens.

When service provision depends upon individual assessment and allocation of scarce resources, such as special educational needs or community care services, it may be more difficult to collect volume data. Different approaches and techniques will be needed to learn from complaints related to this type of personalised service – for example, valuable insight can come through listening to people's stories to learn from their experience and balance quantitative and qualitative information. This may require sensitivity, respecting the privacy and confidentiality of the citizens involved.

One individual experience can reveal extensive and systemic problems:

### **Kirklees Council – Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)**

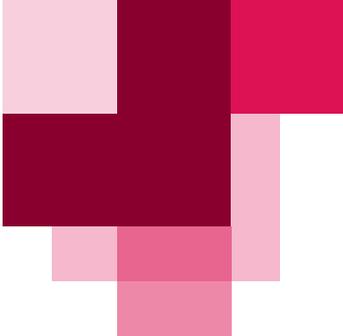
This complaint was received by the LGO from the family of a recently disabled man who had waited for 18 months for the council to agree a disabled facilities grant application. The family had requested the adaptations to meet the needs of their son Mr H, in his early twenties who had become quadriplegic whilst receiving treatment for leukaemia, as well as their foster son who had special needs. The adaptations were required to allow the foster son to have a separate dining room to meet his needs and to allow a carer to sleep in the same bedroom as Mr H who had developed a fear of being alone in the night due to his breathing and swallowing difficulties. The planned adaptations would also allow Mr H to meet his friends at home in private, thus contributing to his independence and well-being. The complaint and accompanying evidence illustrated the persistent and prolonged struggle that the family had been engaged in, during which they and their children had suffered. Their efforts were recognised by the recommendations made by the LGO.

In a report issued by the LGO, the Ombudsman specifically highlighted that the council had failed to:

- provide written information and explanations about the adaptations process at an early stage
- failed to provide a single point of contact
- failed to respect the views of the family and the needs of the foster child

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cfps.org.uk/what-we-do/publications/cfps-general/?id=118>



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Due to the restrictions on his life endured by Mr H, the Ombudsman recommended financial compensation. A sum was also recommended to be paid to his parents for their struggle in attempting to meet Mr H's needs adequately without the necessary adaptations as well as for their time and trouble in pursuing the complaint.

To prevent similar incidences in the future, the Ombudsman asked the council to review its procedures against the Good Practice Guide for Delivering Adaptations and for the results to be reported within six months to the council executive as well as the LGO. This was undertaken and the council executive met to discuss improving the adaptations service and to approve changes.

As a result of the Ombudsman investigation, prior to the final LGO report, an Adaptations Project Group had been set up to agree outcomes and deliverables. One of the changes implemented as a result of this action was that responsibility for the approval of adaptations was transferred from the Joint Officers Group (JOG ) to assessors/adaptation surveyors and medical advisory officers up to the statutory limit of £30,000. Applications above the statutory limit were referred to an Adaptations Manager, Adults Manager or Children with Disabilities Manager and an Occupational Therapy Manager who would have to meet within seven days of the case being forwarded to the Adaptations Manager.

The assessment process for applying in the first place was also streamlined to include self-assessment, assisted self-assessment, low level assessment and complex assessment. A new operational policy was developed to ensure adequate follow-up support and re-assessment as well as contacting service users to check on the adequacy of equipment provided.

The group also made recommendations to make leaflets and web information advertising the service more accessible. To inform their own recommendations they conducted a number of focus groups to better understand the customer perspective and experience of the adaptations service.

To further enhance the planning and operation of the adaptations service, Kirklees established a new inter-agency group consisting of a disabled user representative as well as NHS staff. The group undertook a variety of functions including making recommendations for changes in policy and procedure, staff training, considering complaints and satisfaction data, over-seeing the budget and forecasting future demand.

### 3. How ‘overview and scrutiny’ can use learning from complaints to add value to the improvement of services

In a changing political and financial environment, there is a vital role for non-executive councillors to influence decisions about planning and delivering services through councils’ overview and scrutiny function. OSCs can be a powerful force for improvement and innovation at a local level. They can help councils to strengthen democracy for the future by involving citizens and service users in scrutiny as a mechanism for strengthening accountability.

Scrutiny provides a chance to take an overview of complaints handling, to assess the corporate culture towards complaints and assess the extent to which complaints currently provide learning across the whole organisation which drives improvement. In carrying out this role, OSCs can draw lessons from individual complaints, either for individual services or for the council as a whole.

By hearing from people directly affected by policies and services, OSCs can get an understanding about the services people and communities value. Outcomes from this kind of work could add value to decision-making processes by introducing considerations of ‘value’, not just ‘cost’, an approach advocated in the CfPS guide ‘Measuring What Matters’<sup>4</sup>. By hearing from service users about what they value in their community and about their aspirations for service delivery, OSCs can strengthen the evidence-base about what matters to communities, helping those who plan and deliver public services to make judgements about the best ways to achieve short term savings and longer term improvements.

Through their overview and scrutiny function, councils can use a range of creative and innovative ways to gather an evidence-base about what matters to service users and how they would like to see future services planned and delivered around their needs and aspirations. Scrutiny is a process that allows people to ‘tell their stories’, helping to bring a reality check to data about performance and complaints. This can be powerful, but needs careful planning and facilitation.

Overview and scrutiny committees have a track record of involving service users in scrutiny reviews. However, tackling the challenges ahead will require them to go beyond traditional approaches and engage service users about a much broader range of issues, building ‘citizen insight’ into the heart of service improvement.

At a time when difficult decisions need to be made about future funding for public services and when public involvement is low, learning from service users through scrutiny can strengthen public trust.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cfps.org.uk/what-we-do/publications/cfps-general/?id=148>

The following framework for reviewing insight through complaints might be helpful:



### Cultural factors:

#### 1. Establishing a transparent, inclusive and accountable culture:

- is there a commitment to transparency, inclusiveness and accountability in respect of policies and services?
- if yes, are there examples of policies and services changing as a result?
- if no, how can the principles best be introduced?

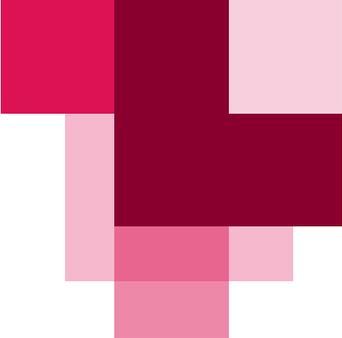
#### 2. Promoting a positive culture about the value of complaints:

- is the complaints policy about a bureaucratic process or is it focused on learning and improvement?
- are issues arising from complaints discussed by politicians and senior officers?
- how is learning from complaints spread across the organisation?

### Operational factors:

#### 3. Understanding how feedback is gathered:

- how can people provide feedback about their experience?
- do people know they can provide feedback?
- what are the most and least popular methods that people use to give feedback?



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#### 4. Identifying best practice in handling insight through complaints:

- does the approach to complaints mirror best practice?
- are there any lessons to be learnt from customer relationship management in the private sector?
- how do we compare with similar areas?

#### 5. Exploring the information held about complaints and how it is used:

- who has responsibility to handle complaints?
- are there arrangements to review levels of complaints and outcomes from them?
- how is learning from complaints built in to decision-making?

#### 6. Exploring the information provided by the LGO:

- has the Ombudsman investigated any decisions or services?
- are there any trends in complaints received against the council identified in the LGO Annual Review?
- has the Ombudsman made any specific comments about the way the council handles and learns from complaints in its individual investigations or summarised in the Annual Review?
- does wider information about LGO cases provide useful information about how services can be improved and risk managed? Do LGO reports about other areas prompt the question 'could it happen here?'
- how do politicians assess risks and assure themselves that services are performing well and that people are respected?

### Strategic factors:

#### 7. Making use of the business planning or commissioning cycle:

- how does insight from complaints influence strategic planning?
- is learning from complaints a feature of contracts with providers?
- how is citizen feedback routinely captured?

## 4. Examples of practice

These examples of practice come from a range of councils serving different kinds of communities. But they have one thing in common – they demonstrate willingness on the part of the organisation to listen to people and to change what they do as a result.

The examples were chosen by open invitation through LGO and CfPS networks. Expressions of interest were accompanied by supporting evidence and the final selection was chosen by a panel of LGO and CfPS staff, together with a CfPS independent trustee. The LGO made a commitment that relationships with the councils would not be influenced by any findings from the project.

The project team reviewed supporting evidence and used structured telephone or face to face interviews to gather operational and strategic experience and learning.



Darlington Council introduced a new complaints procedure in April 2009, administered through a Corporate Complaints Unit. The idea of establishing a Corporate Complaints Unit was to create an organisational culture in which complaints are welcomed as a positive means of engagement with citizens and issues are resolved as close to the point of service delivery as possible.

The Unit does not simply focus on resolving individual issues but takes into account the wider implications of complaints for the service concerned. This approach enables policies and working practices to be improved as a result of complaints, reducing the likelihood of receiving similar complaints in the future. This approach has benefits both in terms of the costs of complaint handling and improvement of services for citizens.

The complaints management system is configured so that all complaints are recorded and monitored, enabling the production of detailed information about complaints. This enables the council to demonstrate how it learns from complaints as an organisation, something it was previously unable to do. For example, following an analysis of the information held about complaints, effective solutions were identified for those individuals who have to contact the council regarding consistently missed rubbish and recycling collections. This was especially important for people relying on assisted collections.

Lee Downey, Corporate Complaints Manager, provides another example of how a complaint from a landlord helped the council to change its processes:

“A complaint was received from a landlord regarding the payment of housing benefit to a nominee when the landlord had requested it be paid directly to him. While in law the council was entitled to make the payment to any third party it chose it was felt such a black and white approach was unlikely to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of the complainant or enable the council to put measures in place to avoid a similar situation arising in the future.

Following consideration from the complainant’s perspective the council felt it was reasonable for the landlord to have expected to receive payment given that he had made a request to do so and had not been advised otherwise. As a result the Housing Benefits section 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.

The council’s leaflet ‘Local Housing Allowance - Information for Landlords’ was reviewed to make it clearer about when a landlord can/will receive payment and the letters issued to applicants and nominees 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. Since making the changes we have not had a similar complaint”.

Lincolnshire County Council has introduced improvements to the way it delivers its Registration and Celebratory Services. One of the drivers for making the changes was feedback from customers about difficulties they had finding venues for appointments. Consequently people were either late for appointments or ‘did not attend’, causing frustration for customers and staff. Information from the council is now much clearer at the first point of contact and this has resulted in far fewer difficulties with people attending appointments.

Donna Sharp, County Services Manager for Registration, Celebratory and Coroners Services, provides another illustration of the way in which clear information is important for both customers and the council:

“Clarity of information especially about statutory requirements and expectations is vital to delivering successful celebratory services. In one instance, there was a misunderstanding between the service and a couple about the period of notice of marriage required by law. The misunderstanding led to the couple deciding on a date for their ceremony which the council could not accommodate because the legal minimum notice of marriage had not been given. This obviously distressed the couple, they made a written complaint and the outcome was that reasonable adjustments were made by the couple and the council within the legal limitations.”

Lincolnshire receives very few complaints and analyses each one to try to understand what has gone wrong and what it can do to stop similar things happening again – in this case, whether vital and fundamental information about services can be given in different ways and whether there are ways to check that customers understand the information given.

The example above led to very specific training for staff about the importance of not just giving people information but also making sure customers fully understand the implications – in this case the legal requirements for giving notice of marriage – and the potential consequences of getting it wrong. Since making these changes, the council has had no complaints of this type.

“The importance of effective communication cannot be underestimated”, says Donna. “This is not just about giving information, but about checking whether it’s been understood. We need to be flexible in the way we communicate with people and it’s also important to be able to understand the issues from the complainant’s point of view”.

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Using complaints to drive improvement is integral to the working culture in Haringey. The cabinet considers an annual report entitled *Handling of Customer Feedback* which includes complaints.

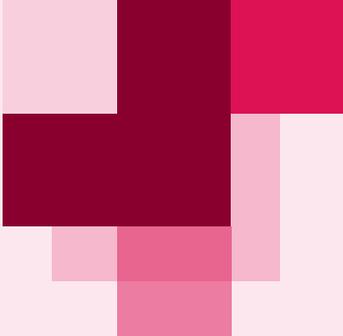
Complaints handling is integrated into the performance management framework and complaints are part of the customer focus indicators, which link to 'delivering high quality efficient services.' The report for 2009/10 stated "learning from complaints is an important tool for delivering cost-effective, value for money services that are responsive to people's needs."

There is a Feedback and Information Team (FIT) to support this activity. Ian Christie from the team explains that "the team meet each directorate lead officer twice a year to review and support their actions on audit findings. This is designed to enhance complaints learning and the implementation of remedial actions. In addition, there is a corporate learning log for stage 3 and Ombudsman complaints".

An LGO complaint about a housing tenancy generated insights into how residents experienced services, leading to systematic changes. A tenant in temporary accommodation had a number of complaints regarding the condition of her accommodation. In addition, she complained that the council had failed to fully explain the rent deposit scheme and to award her lease-end points.

The LGO found that Haringey lacked clarity in the lettings policy in relation to lease-end points and the fact that if a new temporary accommodation tenancy was taken out a tenant would not receive lease-end points. Phil Harris, Assistant Director for Housing, describes how "this represented a wider failure to manage the expectations of service users. It was felt that this case represented the situation of many other homeless people and tenants in Haringey".

As a result, the lettings policy was changed. Greater clarity was provided on lease-end points and how much priority this would give tenants as well the number of points they would have to bid for properties using choice based lettings.



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The points system was abolished and replaced by a banding system, and the temporary accommodation standards were also changed. The new lettings policy was agreed by the cabinet. The Housing Service is much improved today – an Audit Commission report in 2010 found it to be ‘a fair service with excellent prospects for improvement’.

Changes in management and attention from the LGO and Audit Commission were critical factors in ensuring that the department was open to being challenged rather than being defensive and were keen to glean insight from complaints.

Housing staff are encouraged to think about the person at the centre of the complaint and to consider how they can resolve problems before the Ombudsman is involved. This approach is helped by a new temporary accommodation user forum which provides a ‘human face’ to complaints and also acts as consultative forum on changes to policy.

Even where only a single complaint is received, staff ask themselves whether they represent a wider problem. Phil believes “that an Ombudsman complaint could be extremely useful in providing extra scrutiny and problem solving for the council. Highlighting the financial benefits from learning from complaints and making changes as a result can also be a way to guarantee wider support”.

In Richmond, social care complaints are handled by a central corporate complaints team, but complaints about all other services are responded to by officers in the relevant service area and data is collated quarterly by dedicated complaints monitoring officers. There is a three stage process for children's social care complaints, a single stage for adults and a new (as of 1 April 2011) shorter two stage process for all other corporate complaints. The complaints team produce quarterly reports on all types of complaints for the executive board, including learning reports from lead officers that can be completed even where complaints are not upheld – because Richmond believes learning can be gained from any complaint. Directors are expected to discuss learning points with their management teams and these feed into departmental business planning.

The complaints team look at complaints over time to identify patterns because the council wants to avoid repetition in complaints. Having a corporate resource for collating learning helps to embed wider change. Before this resource existed, complaints were managed on an individual basis and learning was not embedded across the council.

Mandy Skinner, Assistant Director for Commissioning, Corporate Policy and Strategy, sees complaints as “integral alongside other feedback mechanisms, in line with Richmond's desire to be a *'Listening Council'*”. Last year the council undertook a survey of all households in the borough. Some 13,500 people responded and 6,600 people said that they wanted to be kept informed about how they can get more involved in their area. To re-enforce our intentions, on the council's website there is a section that says: “*You Said: We Did*”. Mandy gives an example of how the council responded to a particular complaint about adult social care:

“The council received a complaint from the son of someone who had suffered a stroke and needed to receive adult social care. It was decided that the father would go into residential care, subject to his consent. However, the son felt that the council's care manager had been insensitive in their discussion of financial matters. The complaint was not upheld as the care manager had acted appropriately but there was an acknowledgement that, in explaining funding options, the care manager failed to adequately explain the leaseback arrangement for a number of beds that the council had with several care homes.

The council recognised that information on leaseback arrangements was difficult to understand and there was a general misunderstanding and confusion amongst staff about these arrangements. As a result of the complaint, the council re-issued updated guidance on the subject to all relevant staff”.

Manchester City Council published a new ‘complaints mandate’ in April 2010. The mandate ‘recognises that complaints are an opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to customer values and to learn and improve our service provision’. The mandate sets out six customer priorities that need to be embraced when dealing with complaints:

- respond quickly – for example, not all responses need to be by letter
- get it right first time – for example, be responsive not defensive
- be efficient – for example, act quickly to build a positive relationship
- be more flexible, putting the customer first – for example, meet face to face
- learn lessons from complaints – for example, use a ‘learning log’
- ensure quality through our complaints panel – review by senior officers

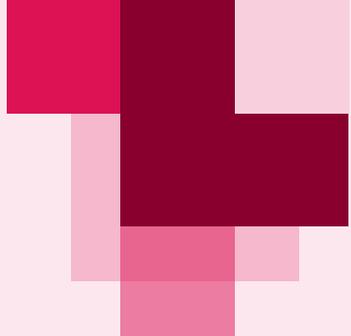
Alongside the introduction of the mandate, Manchester has begun to use ‘learning logs’ across all its services. The idea is to record learning points and actions taken as result of complaints.

For example, staff are asked to note anything that could have been done better and whether they think there is a need to change policies, procedures or guidance. There is an expectation that staff will take ownership of the remedy and think about what they can do personally to implement the required action.

A random sample of ‘learning logs’ is reviewed each quarter by the council’s complaints panel that is chaired by an Assistant Chief Executive. The panel assesses the root causes and outcomes of complaints and gives feedback to the relevant service managers about how complaints were handled.

Kate Tonge, Casework Manager Appeals Quality and Complaints for the Revenues and Benefits Service, gives three examples of how customer feedback has led to improvements:

“From one customer’s complaint it was clear that he did not understand what was happening so we arranged a face to face meeting. This resulted in him withdrawing his complaint and he actually sent in a ‘thank you’ letter instead. We’ve tried this approach in other cases and found that meeting customers really does help them to better understand. In another case, a complaint led us to discover that it is possible for some benefit enquiries not to be allocated any priority for being dealt with. So we now allocate priorities for all enquiry types – since we did this we’ve had no other complaints about this kind of issue. Thirdly, we responded to a complaint about the time taken for the council to respond to tribunal cases by treating these cases as a priority and submitting all papers within three days”.



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Lucy Knight, Complaints Advisor Research and Performance, feels that the council's 'learning logs' really add value. "They make you stop and think about things from the customer's point of view. They also encourage innovation by allowing staff to suggest ways to improve services. The council's complaints panel is an excellent way to spread the learning so that something learnt by one service can be implemented by others".

Salford Council identified problems with the system that allows people to make payments for council services by telephone. People were complaining that information about how to use the payment system was confusing. As a result of the feedback the council revised the information it provided about how to use the system and provided alternative payment methods, for example through an on-line system. This approach provided people with a range of ways to make their payments and ensured that the council did not suffer loss of income due to difficulties with the system.

Complaints about the payment system were dealt with through the council's corporate complaints system. Historically, the council had individual complaints processes for each service area but it recognised that this did not allow outcomes and learning from complaints to be shared across the whole organisation.

Another example involved the maintenance of cemeteries, which is a sensitive issue and one particular complaint had gone on for some time about a particular plot being overgrown with grass and weeds. Under the previous system, only a few people might have known about the ongoing issues and that these kinds of complaints had been made. There was also a risk that issues became longstanding and would eventually escalate. In the end, the complaint about the cemetery plot was resolved through a site visit with the complainant. The corporate approach also enabled the council to learn about weak points in the service.

Under the new system, colleagues meet monthly to discuss complaint handling and learning. This corporate group plays a key role in making the complaints system more effective and customer focused. This new way of working has made it easier for the council to understand weaknesses in services and to make improvements.

John Tanner, Assistant Director Customer Services, believes this corporate approach to complaints has allowed the council to develop a 'learning culture' and this has been a key driver for improvement across the council. "Complaints provide us with opportunities to review weaknesses" says John. "Communicating the outcomes and learning from complaints was difficult under the old system of individual departmental complaints processes. But the corporate approach provides a platform for making the whole system more efficient".

Sandwell Council identified through a place survey that a priority for improvement for residents was the cleanliness of their local area. A co-ordinated analysis of survey information, feedback and complaints from residents and other local and national survey information identified hot spots of dissatisfaction, with four wards having the most dissatisfaction. Working with focus groups to understand residents' specific concerns, the council discovered links between the state of the environment and levels of anti-social behaviour rather than simply a problem about waste and litter. As a result, the council undertook a 'deep cleanse' in four particular wards - street cleansing, pot hole and lighting repairs and detritus removal. Residents were made aware of the work being undertaken and were encouraged to raise specific concerns that were also responded to as part of the campaign. Before and after the deep cleanse the council surveyed the same residents – it found that satisfaction levels had risen from 27% (before) to 76% (after).

Steve Handley, Director Streetscene, says that this is just one example of how the council responds to issues raised by citizens. "The council receives complaints in all sorts of ways – for example, through personal contact, letter, telephone or e-mail. These are allocated through our customer relationship management system to the managers of the relevant services. A key part of the process is that complainants are given the chance to discuss the issues through visits or telephone calls, rather than relying on impersonal letters. The council's performance management processes evidence a golden thread linking together complaint handling and organisational learning", adds Steve. "It's important that we embrace complaints rather than pushing them aside. Rather than just addressing individual complaints, we need to learn from them about how we can improve our services".

An Overview and Scrutiny review helped identify priorities for responding to residents concerns about waste and cleaning. The council have identified added value to service improvements through:

- constructive challenge through the scrutiny function
- 'joined up' thinking and planning, looking beyond the immediate issues
- targeted action to improve the natural environment
- recognising that 'understanding' is part of good communication
- making changes and measuring the impact

Sandwell has identified some key lessons from its experience:

- insightful intelligence is critical, including understanding 'perceptions'
- measuring 'before and after' provides evidence of impact
- getting the basics right is fundamental
- targeting funding demonstrates commitment
- informing, engaging and feeding back are all important
- using 'pilots' can help to test and rollout success
- sharing learning across services supports corporate improvement

Southend introduced a revised corporate complaints process in April 2009. The primary reason for doing this was to capture and record stage one complaints in a standardised way where previously there was limited corporate data. This process continues to encourage customer focused services. This focused service extends to meeting with customers to help resolve their complaint. This approach allows the council to provide a more 'joined up' response to complaints rather than dealing with them on a service by service basis.

The council's Customer Services Centre uses e-forms as a training aid for its advisers, which ensures improved handling of complaints. Standard complaints correspondence has been revised so that information requested from complainants is more useful to the council in developing a response. Previously, the information sought from complainants was quite generic and did not add much value to the complaints process.

The council reports that the benefits of the new approach include providing a range of ways for customers to give feedback (for example, by phone, through the web and in person); the routine capture of comments and compliments about services; learning lessons from the various kinds and forms of feedback that helps to improve the way services are planned and delivered. For example, following complaints from motorists about a lack of information about road gritting the council now updates its website more regularly both in and out of hours. Following complaints about confusing charging schedules and errors in charging for sports facilities, booking forms have been simplified leading to more clarity for customers and better income for the council through clarity of bookings.

Responses to complaints about requests to re-pay housing benefit overpayments were perceived as confusing by customers because of their technical nature. All responses are now presented in a table format showing clear calculations. There is also an offer to meet complainants to explain further. This leads to fewer escalations of complaints to the next stage. It also reduces staff time spent on complaints reaching the next level and provides better insight in to customer experience – leading to better services and better communication.

Sue Hewitt, Complaints and Data Quality Officer, explains how a complaint about a refusal to issue a 'blue badge' helped the council to change its processes:

"The council often receives appeals when we have decided not to issue 'blue badges'. Our previous experience was that applicants were supplying medical information that wasn't relevant to their application. This took a lot of their time but wasn't actually helpful to us in deciding whether our decision had been right", Sue explains. "We've now redesigned our forms to make it clearer what kind of medical information will be useful to us. This makes things clearer to applicants".

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