Public Key Decision - No

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Annual Complaints Report 2020/21

Meeting/Date: Corporate Governance Committee – 14th

September 2021

Executive Portfolio: Councillor David Keane Executive Councillor for

Corporate Services

Report by: Louise Sboui

Ward(s) affected: All

Executive Summary:

The report provides Members with information on complaints referred to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGO) during 2020/21. 22 complaints were received by the LGO, four were investigated. Of the four complaints investigated, three were upheld. The report also provides data relating to Stage One and Stage Two complaints received by the Council between April 2020 – March 2021, broad themes, actions taken/service improvements from these have been considered.

Recommendation(s):

The Committee is invited to comment on the LGO local authority report for Huntingdonshire District Council (2020/21) and the data relating to formal Stage One and Stage Two complaints received (2020/21).

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report provides Members with information on complaints referred to the LGO and those received by the Council between April 2020 – March 2021.

2. WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY/BACKGROUND

- 2.1 One of the purposes of the annual summary of statistics on complaints made to the LGO is to help ensure that learning from complaints helps inform service provision. The LGO statistics show complaints and enquiries received by service area and whether a decision was upheld, not upheld, advice given, closed after initial enquiry, incomplete/invalid, or referred back for local resolution.
- 2.2. A further purpose of this report is to provide Members with data relating to Stage One and Stage Two complaints by Service area.
- 2.3 Due to the delayed 2019/20 report, this is the second Complaints Report submitted to Members in 2021 and now brings us up to date with annual complaints reporting.

3. OPTIONS CONSIDERED/ANALYSIS

- 3.1 There were 22 complaints received by the LGO during 2020/21 (23 received during 2019/20) this includes those which did not progress to the LGO assessment stage or beyond. The LGO paused case work at the end of March 2020, to allow authorities to concentrate efforts on vital frontline services during the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak. Casework restarted in late June 2020.
- 3.2 Of these 22 complaints, there were four detailed investigations carried out (four carried in 2019/20), of the four complaints investigated, three were upheld. In summary:
 - Development Management Customer complains the Council failed to consider the impact on property's amenity caused by raised ground levels at a new development near their home. The customer also complains the Council failed to take account of the advice of the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) regarding a permeable rainwater storage tank near their property. The Council's failure to record the reasons for its decision to discharge a planning condition amounts to fault. However, the LGO concluded that this fault did not cause the customer an injustice.
 - O Housing Needs Customer complains the Council did not properly consider their application to join the housing register and delayed responding to their complaint. The LGO found no fault in the way the Council considered the application, but some fault in how it handled the complaint. The agreed action remedies the injustice caused (apology to customer, reminder to staff to adhere to complaints process).

Benefits/Tax - Customer completed an on-line change of address form. The Council made an error and failed to properly enter the details into the database. This meant it did not issue a new bill and did not tell the customer about how much council tax was liable for the new property. The LGO did not further investigate this complaint about the Council's decision not to waive some council tax after it made an error. This is because the Council offered a fair remedy. The LGO upheld the complaint even though injustice remedied during the complaint process (apology and explanation of what went wrong and offered a payment plan).

One was **not upheld**

- Community Customer complained about the way the Council handled complaints about noise from a nearby wind farm. There was no fault in the way the Council dealt with the complaints.
- 3.3 The LGO has created a new interactive map Your Council's Performance the site also provides helpful links to decisions made on all cases where the LGO have been involved. It should be noted that most cases are closed after initial enquiries made (investigation not warranted, alternative appeal/tribunal routes available or no worthwhile outcome achievable by investigation) or referred back for local resolution (complaint premature).
- 3.4 The number of Stage One complaints (109) recorded on Complaints Tracker has decreased from last year (280). To provide context, for the Services with the higher number of complaints received, the higher volume customer transactions for these Services have also been indicated below.
 - 28 complaints received by Development Management (26) & Growth (2), these related mainly to delays in response to planning application decisions (3301 planning applications received)
 - 27 complaints received by Customer Services (Customer Services includes a number of different services e.g. council tax, benefits, housing needs, and customer services/call centre), these related mainly to decisions about council tax (approx. 93,000 council tax amendments made per year)
 - 21 complaints received by Operations, these related mainly to missed bins (approx. 5.9 million bins collected per year)
 - 8 complaints received by Community these related mainly to Council procedures for handling noise nuisance complaints (596 service requests for noise complaints)
 - 1 complaint received by Leisure & Health (One Leisure was closed for most of 2020/21
 - 1 complaint received by Corporate Services (Resources), this related to Council procedures.
 - 1 complaint received for Shared Services. A non HDC issue (street naming); recorded at 3CICT but response from Building Control
 - 22 Covid/business grant complaints (over 10,000 payments made).
 Complaints related mainly to eligibility criteria. There was a high proportion of complaints escalated to stage 2, reflecting the

importance, priority and frustrations felt by our customers during this difficult economic period.

3.5 36 Stage Two complaints were received, (up from 17 last year) but 16 of these of these related to Business Grants/Test & Trace Support payments and these complaints related mainly to lack of eligibility. Covid business support grants were a one-off Local Authority activity during the Government lockdowns in 2020/21; it should be noted that over 10,000 payments were made totalling c£54million across a number of Central Government schemes. It will still have a legacy in 2021/22; but is unlikely to feature on an ongoing basis.

Themes, actions taken/service improvements from Stage One and Stage Two complaints are included in Appendix 4 and 5.

3.6 Annual Performance monitoring:

- 94.5% of Stage One complaints were resolved within time (PI 40) against a target of 90%. In the entire year we had 6 late responses out of a total of 109 complaints. Of the 6 late responses, 4 were for Ops (waste & recycling) one for Covid/Business Grants and one for Community.
- 89% of stage 2 complaints were resolved within time against a target of 90%. In the entire year we had four late responses out of a total 36 stage 2 complaints, 3 were for Development (2 for planning apps and 1 for enforcement) and one for Covid/business grants.

3.7 Unreasonable Complainants

In 2019 four customers were being managed through the Council's Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy, following a review in 2020/21, restrictions (single point of contact) were lifted for two of these customers and relationships returned to normal. Two customers continue to be managed under the Council's Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour Policy, both have a single point of contact at HDC; and we are continuing to manage both cases in a way that does not entail a disproportionate amount of time at the expense of other residents.

4. KEY IMPACTS / RISKS

- 4.1 With complaints, there is always a risk that we do not record all the complaints we receive and so do not have the full picture or identify trends. Following changes to web content and web form (early 2020), the majority of complaints are now being received via the online form. As a result of improved online processes and content, we continue to see a significant reduction in complaints about issues that are not within HDC remit (e.g. on street parking issues, highways, and roads) with customers being redirected to the correct organisation from the website (47 non-HDC complaints received 2019/20 and 16 received 2020/21).
- 4.2 The impact of Covid and lockdown measures is clearly visible in 2020/21 complaints figures. There has been a significant drop in the number of stage 1 complaints received and although the number of stage 2 complaints doubled, half of these related to business grants. It is

important to note the Covid/business grant complaints, however if we place this activity to one side, and focus on the Councils normal activities, the complaint figures for Stage 1 would be 87 and the figure for Stage 2 (20) shows that we have retained fairly level figures compared to previous years.

- 4.3 The Council's internal monitoring and recording system for complaints (Complaints Tracker) continues to provide a significant aid to improving how complaints are both recorded/monitored and handled on time. The system sends deadline reminders to Officers, who have reported is a helpful function.
- 4.4 Where possible, the identification of lessons learnt and service improvements as a result of complaints by Service area (you said we did) has been reflected in App 4 and 5 below. Further work with services to demonstrate service improvements has been piloted with a number of services in Q1 and Q2 2021(dates fall outside of remit of this report). We will continue to push this approach. However, some early findings from this analysis include
 - Changes to back office processes (Call Centre)
 - Change of telephone provider/request for better reporting mechanisms (Call Centre)
 - Road removed from maintenance schedule (Ops)
 - Maps updated (Ops)
- 4.5 Complaints are just one aspect of customer feedback, it is important that we also record, monitor and report upon compliments, 351 were received in 2020/21. These are set out by service area in App 6 below. Again, the impact of Covid and lockdown measures are reflected in the compliments received by Services, particularly for some teams within Customer Services and Operations (waste & recycling). Primarily, customers reporting their gratitude for Council services continuing to operate during the various lockdowns.
- 4.6 A review of the Council's complaints process has been completed and an action plan created. Work so far has focused on raising awareness with specific services on a regular basis to highlight complaints (numbers, themes, lessons learnt/service improvements). Themes for further work include - review of customer feedback policy, staff guidance and training, and further development of the process to demonstrate evidence on how complaints lead to service improvements.
- 5. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES, AND/OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

 <u>See Corporate Plan</u>
- 5.1 Complaints handling links to the following Strategic Priority within the Corporate Plan Becoming a more Customer Focused Organisation.

6. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

6.1 Members are invited to note the LGO Local Authority Report for Huntingdonshire District Council and note the data relating to Stage One and Stage Two complaints and compliments received by the Council.

7. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 Appendix 2 Appendix 3	LGO statistics for HDC HDC recorded complaints by Service HDC recorded complaints by Teams
Appendix 4	Complaints – Stage 2 themes/actions taken/service improvements
Appendix 5	Complaints – Stage 1 themes/actions taken/service improvements
Appendix 6 Appendix 7	Compliments LGO statistics – neighbouring authority comparison

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Appendix 1 LGO Local Authority Report – Huntingdonshire District Council

Complaints and Enquiries Received (by Category) 2020/2021

HDC	Benefits and Tax	Corporate and Other Services	Environment Services, Public Protection and Regulation	Planning and Development	Housing	Highways and Transport	Adult Care Services*	Total
2020/21	11	1	3	6		0	1	22
2019/20	2	0	5	10	3	3		23
2018/19	6	3	2	6	0	0		17

^{*}recorded due to comments made about health & well-being (but more a corporate & other services complaint)

Complaints and Enquiries Decided (by Outcome) 2020/21

HDC	Upheld	Not upheld	Advice given	Closed after initial enquiry	Incomplete/ invalid	Referred back for local resolution	Total	Uphold rate (%)	Average uphold rate (%) of similar authorities
2020/21	3	1	0	9	0	10	23	75	53
2019/20	2	2	1	10	1	4	20	50	45
2018/19	1	3	0	6	0	5	15		

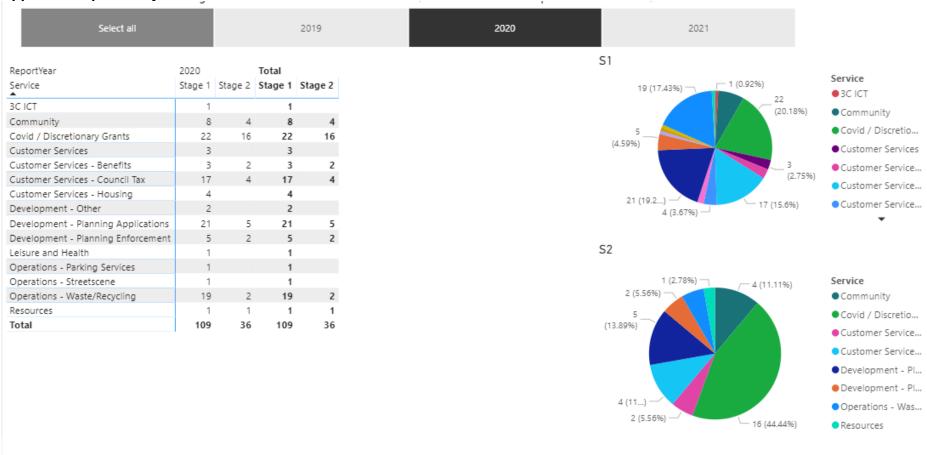
A number of cases will have been received and decided in different business years, this means the number of complaints and enquiries received will not always match the number of decisions made.

Appendix 2 - HDC Recorded Complaints March 2020 - April 2021

Service		Stage One			Stage Two			Total		LGC) investigati	ons
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Community	8	4	8	4	-	4	12	4	12	-		1
Covid (Business Grants/Test & Trace Support Grants)	N/A	N/A	22	N/A	N/A	16	N/A	N/A	38	N/A	N/A	
Customer Services*	43	37	27	7	2	6	50	39	33	-	1	2
Development & Growth	46	44	28	5	11	7	51	55	35	4	2	1
Operations	224	161	21	3	1	2	227	162	23	-	1	
Corporate Services (Resources)	1	4	1	-	1	1	1	5	2	-		
Leisure and Health	93	30	1	-	1	-	93	31	1	-		
Shared Services	3	-	1**	-	-	-	3	-	1	-		
Other (cross cutting)	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-			
Total	419	280	109	20	17	36	439	297	145	4	4	

^{*}Customer Services includes a number of different services e.g. council tax, benefits, housing needs, and customer services/call centre **3CICT/building control

App 3 - Complaints by Teams



Due to number different teams it is not possible to show entire legend for above stage 1 pie chart

Appendix 4 2020/2021 Stage Two complaints - summary of themes and actions taken/service improvements

Service	Themes	Actions taken/service improvements
Community (4) Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 3 Partially upheld - 1	 Environmental health Process for handling statutory nuisance, process for evidence collection and assessment SPOC handling Garage lease Noise nuisance 	Clarity and reassurance provided Clarity and reassurance provided Clarity and reassurance provided Service improvement - team will review standard outcome letter for when statutory nuisance not found, customers will be provided with more explanation as to why.
Covid/Business Grants (16) Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 16 Partially upheld - 0	Eligibility criteria for Government Covid support grants	Further explanation and clarity provided on grant criteria and reasons for rejection provided
Customer Services (6) Upheld - 1 Not upheld - 2 Partially upheld - 1	Council Tax (4):	Acknowledged there was officer error, officer advised of process. Payment plan offered Team reminded of correct procedures when closing Ctax accounts.
Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 2 Partially upheld - 0	Benefits: Eligibility for Housing Benefit Alleged data breach	

Service	Themes	Actions taken/service improvements
Development & Growth (7)	Planning applications: How objections are considered	Further clarity and reassurance provided. The Service acknowledges and apologise for any delays in response.
Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 5 Partially upheld – 0	 How tree application handled Water drainage issues Decision making process x 2 	Site visit offered. Customer asked for feedback on how council can improve on informing customers about legal implications of any actions they may take
		Service acknowledges issue around how the planning process works e.g. how objections are considered, the weight these objections carry, how impact is considered is complex process, which can be hard to explain simply
Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 2 Partially upheld – 0	Planning Enforcement	Further clarity and reassurance provided Further clarity and reassurance provided
Operations (2) Upheld - 1 Not upheld - Partially upheld – 1	Waste/recycling:	Apology and further explanation provided Customer called, bin emptied next day, new bin sent out and property placed on watch list
Corporate Services (Resources) (1)	Industrial unit repair costs following end of lease	Further clarity and explanation provided
Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 1 Partially upheld – 0		

App 5 - 2020/21 Stage One complaints – summary of themes and actions taken/service improvements

Service	Themes	Actions taken/service improvements
Community (8)	Environmental Health (4):	
Upheld - 0	Process for handling statutory nuisance	Opportunity to provide further clarity
Not upheld - 6	Noise nuisance	
Partially upheld -2	Noise nuisance	
	Noise nuisance	
	Community (3):	
	Process for Single Point of Contact	Opportunity to provide further clarity
	Lease charges for garage plot	
	Neighbour access issues	
	Licensing (1):	
	License for home business	
Covid/Business Grants (22)	People not adhering to social distancing x2	Opportunity to provide further clarity
Upheld - 0	Eligibility criteria for Government Covid support grants	Website wording amended to ensure clarity for customers
Not upheld - 22	(discretionary grant, additional restrictions grant, Test & Trace	
Partially upheld - 0	Support grant) x 16	Internally, the importance of involving and working closely with
	Closure of Grant fund x 1	Customer Services/Call Centre was recognised, this team was often first point of call for customers and the right advice and support needed to be provided to the team to enable them to
	Lack of support for hospitality sector x 1	support customers.
	Eligibility criteria for Test & Trace support grant x 2	
Customer Services	Council Tax/Business rates (17):	Advice provided and offer of payment plan
(27)	Liability for C/tax/delays in response	Further training for staff member
11.1.11.0	Unable to make contact by telephone	Process revised to ensure similar fault does not occur in the
Upheld - 2	Liability for C/tax x 3	future.
Not upheld - 10 Partially upheld – 5	Issue of reminder notice x 2	Reminded Advisers to listen to individual customer circumstances
Partially uprield – 5	Eligibility for business rates x 2	when dealing with calls.
	Direct debit process	
	Online payment & refund issues	
	Use of enforcement agents	
	C/tax summons x 3	
	Issuing of reminder notice	

Service	Themes	Actions taken/service improvements
Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 3 Partially upheld - 0 Upheld - 1 Not upheld - 1 Partially upheld - 1 Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 0	 Attachment of earnings process Benefits (3): Eligibility for Housing Benefit Alleged data breach Eligibility for Council Tax Support Call Centre/Customer Services (3): Length of time on hold Process for passing queries onto back office teams Advisor not being helpful Housing Needs (4): way in which case handled x 2 	Process has been revised to enable call centre team to advise customers at first point of contact
Partially upheld - 4 Development & Growth (28) Upheld - 5 Not upheld - 11 Partially upheld -5	 way in which case handled x 2 issues with temporary accommodation x 2 Planning Applications (21): How objections considered How tree application handled How planning application considered How water drainage considered Lack of response/communication x 11 Delay in application being determined Issues with seeking advice using website Lack of time for consultation Bias in decision making process Issues with decision making process How case handled 	Worked with the applicant to achieve a favourable outcome to the complainant's planning application. Procedures adjusted Provision of a comprehensive explanation regarding the consideration and determination processes for the applications Re-allocation to a new officer to finalise the application and get a decision issued. IT issue raised; workaround found. Communication re IT issues raised amongst team Site visit Telephone call with customer The Service continues to acknowledge that issues around how the planning process works e.g. how objections are considered, weight these objections carry, how impact is considered is complex process, which can be hard to explain simply

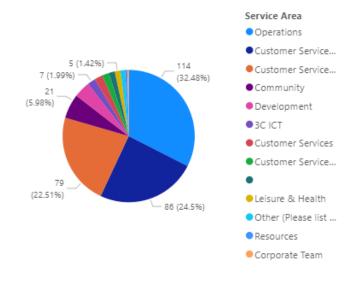
Service	Themes	Actions taken/service improvements
Upheld - 2 Not upheld - 2 On-going - 1	Planning Enforcement (5): • Alleged planning enforcement failure x 3 • Delay in response • Way application handled	The Service also continued to acknowledge that there have been delays in responding to customers, explanations and apology provided to customer(s). Issues with IT following 'work from home' did cause some significant problems and delays. Explanation provided Apology provided and officer advised of importance of providing regular communication.
Upheld - 0 Not upheld - 0 Partially upheld - 2	Development (Growth & Other) (2): • Lack of advice about CIL • Links in Economic Development newsletter not working	Apology provided
Operations (21) Upheld Not upheld - 1 Partially upheld	Parking (1): • Misuse of land/car parks	External organisations reminded to be mindful of local residents (noise levels)
Upheld - 1 Not upheld - 0 Partially upheld - 0	Street Scene (1): • Tree removal	Site visit, tree works undertaken
Upheld - 11 Not upheld - 8 Partially upheld - 0	Refuse/recycling (19): Missed collection x 11 Rejected bin x 4 Direct debit process Bulky waste process New bin request process Damage by vehicle	Issues rectified and customers reassured that steps taken to ensure collection teams issued with a map and further instructions to ensure that bins are collected as they should be in future. Customer called Apology and explanation provided Next day collection arranged Team reminded to check customer records/history before logging requests Internal processes reviewed to ensure no delays in future/crews issued with advice

Service	Themes	Actions taken/service improvements
Leisure & Health (1)	Use of tennis courts during lock down	Reassurance that tennis courts were out of use during lock down
Upheld - 0		periods
Not upheld - 1		
Partially upheld - 0		
Corporate Services	Estates:	
(Resources) (1)	 Industrial unit repair costs following end of lease 	Comprehensive response provided
Upheld - 1	·	
Not upheld - 0		
Partially upheld - 0		
Shared Services (1)	Recorded as 3CICT but response from Building Control – non	Contact made with Royal Mail and customer advised of what to do.
Non-HDC - 1	HDC matter (street naming issue)	

Appendix 6 - Compliments April 2020 - March 2021

Service Area	2020	Total
	5	5
3C ICT	7	7
Community	21	21
Corporate Team	1	1
Customer Services	7	7
Customer Services (Call Centre)	79	79
Customer Services (Housing)	86	86
Customer Services (Revs & Bens)	6	6
Development	14	14
Leisure & Health	5	5
Operations	114	114
Other (Please list in description)	4	4
Resources	2	2
Total	351	351

Compliments by Service



Appendix 7 LGO Neighbouring Authority Statistics

Cambridgeshire Councils	Detailed investigations decided (by outcome) 2020/21		Complaints and enquiries received		
	Not upheld	Upheld	2019/20	2020/21	
Huntingdonshire	1	3	23	22	
South Cambridgeshire	1	4	23	14	
Fenland	2	0	10	7	
East Cambridgeshire	0	0	13	8	
Cambridge City	1	3	14	12	
Cambridgeshire County Council	4	7	71	39	