

REPORT TO: SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 28 JUNE 2017
REPORT ON: ANNUAL REPORT ON COMPLAINTS
REPORT BY: CHIEF EXECUTIVE
REPORT NO: 177-2017

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To analyse complaints statistics for 2016/2017, with comparisons to previous periods, and to report on the action which continues to be taken to ensure that complaints are handled well and to learn from complaints.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Committee notes:

- (a) the key performance indicators on complaints closed between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017, with trends from previous periods.
- (b) the latest update from the Complaints Review Group which meets quarterly to check the quality of complaints handling and to promote learning and process improvement from complaints.
- (c) the results of the satisfaction surveys sent to everyone who made a complaint closed during each quarter of 2016/2017, with trends from previous surveys.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Since 1 October 2012, the Council has been operating the model Complaints Handling Procedure for Local Authorities as required by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Part of that procedure is that regular reports are produced for the Council's management team and elected members.
- 4.2 This latest report covers complaints closed during the year from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, and includes performance on key indicators as well as the results of the satisfaction surveys sent to all those who made complaints closed during each quarter, with charts showing the trends compared to previous periods.
- 4.3 The report also updates Committee on the work of the Complaints Review Group which meets quarterly to check that the complaints handling procedure is being followed correctly and to promote learning from complaints and ensure that the intelligence and insight gathered from complaints is translated into process improvements.
- 4.4 The aim of this report is to analyse performance where people have used the Council's complaints process. There has been discussion previously at Committee about issues raised with Councillors, and paragraph 6.8 of this report provides information on an approach to ensuring that useful information from such contacts is captured.

5. COMPLAINTS STATISTICS: 1 APRIL 2016 - 31 MARCH 2017

5.1 In 2016/2017:

- 474 complaints were closed (this excludes complaints about Social Work as they were not subject to the model Complaints Handling Procedure, although that changes for 2017/18).
- 62.4% of complaints at the frontline stage were closed within the target of 5 working days and a further 9.3% within an extended target time.
- the aim of the Complaints Handling Procedure is for as many complaints as possible to be resolved at the frontline stage (stage 1) with as few as possible going for further investigation (stage 2). During 2016/2017, our ratio of complaints dealt with at stage 1 compared to stage 2 was 83.7% to 16.4% - close to the Ombudsman's 'good practice' ratio of 85/15.
- 70.1% of complaints at the investigation stage were closed within the 20 working days target and a further 18.2% within an extended target time.
- the average number of working days taken to close complaints was 7.0 days at the frontline stage and 21.2 days at the investigation stage (combining 'opened at' and 'escalated to' figures). The Ombudsman has emphasised that the 5 and 20 day targets are designed to drive improvement rather than absolute standards which must be complied with. It is acknowledged that some complaints take longer to resolve and that missing the targets is not regarded as a 'fail'. In particular, complaints relating to schools tend to take longer to resolve as they often involve arranging meetings with parents or investigations according to agreed procedures for teachers.
- at the frontline stage, 28.8% of complaints were upheld and a further 13.9% were partially upheld.
- at the investigation stage, 35.1% were upheld and 16.9% were partially upheld.
- the percentage of complaints recorded in each category is shown below (with the figure for 2015/2016 in brackets):

- delay in responding to enquiries and requests	-	14.2%	(16.0%)
- failure to meet our service standards	-	15.5%	(18.4%)
- treatment by, or attitude of, a member of staff	-	25.8%	(25.6%)
- failure to provide a service	-	24.5%	(18.0%)
- dissatisfaction with our policy	-	13.0%	(14.0%)
- failure to follow the proper administrative process	-	6.2%	(6.8%)
- refusal to give advice or answer questions	-	0.8%	(1.2%)

Complaints categorised as relating to treatment by or attitude of staff continue to be the highest group. In order to examine this issue in more detail, the Complaints Review Group (which normally reviews a random sample of complaints) focused specifically on 'staff attitude' complaints at its last meeting. The group found that a high proportion of the complaints had not been upheld, this decision sometimes being assisted by the investigating officer being able to listen to a recording of a telephone conversation to confirm that the member of staff had behaved appropriately. This is borne out by analysis of the % of complaints upheld, which is lower in the case of 'staff' complaints than the average. While action has been and will continue to be taken where members of staff do not give a good standard of customer service, this review (along with the very positive scores in the annual consumer survey for the courtesy, friendliness and helpfulness of staff) does not suggest any widespread concern about the attitude or behaviour of employees.

The other category of complaints with a high % of cases is 'failure to provide a service'. However, detailed analysis suggests that the root cause of these is generally a service not being satisfactorily implemented as quickly as the customer expected, rather than the service not being provided at all.

- 28 people made more than one complaint during 2016/2017 - 24 made 2 complaints, 3 made 3 complaints and 1 made 4 complaints.
- by service, the number of complaints recorded were:
 - Corporate Services (104)
 - Children & Families
 - Education (99)
 - Neighbourhood Services
 - Housing (131)
 - Environment (96)
 - Communities (2)
 - City Development (40)
 - Chief Executive's (2)

A breakdown of each service's figures is given in Appendix One.

5.2 To put the number of complaints received into context, the Council manages a huge volume of transactions with customers. For example, in a typical year we:

- manage over 13,000 Council houses and relet over 1,400 of these.
- carry out around 55,000 repairs and deal with over 1,500 reports of anti-social behaviour.
- bill around 74,000 domestic properties for Council Tax and issue approximately 350,000 Council Tax bills and reminder notices, not including benefit notifications and other letters which would take the total number of Revenue transactions to over 600,000.
- educate over 17,000 pupils (over 3.2 million 'pupil days') and process nearly 1,500 placing requests.
- process over 4,000 free school meal and clothing grant applications and over 600 applications for Education Maintenance Allowance.
- carry out around 800 food inspection visits, 600 occupational health and safety visits and 7,000 pest control visits.
- empty over 6 million bins.
- provide home care to over 1,800 people and residential care to 1,000 service users.
- receive over 1,400 requests under Freedom of Information Legislation and Environmental Information Regulations.
- register around 4,000 births and deaths and conduct around 600 weddings.
- receive over 100,000 service requests on our website (job applications, requests for wheelie bins, book renewals etc).
- process more than half a million payments valued at around £150 million.
- process 1,100 Building Warrant applications and 900 planning applications, and investigate over 150 planning enforcement complaints.
- maintain over 500 Km of roads and almost a million Km of footpaths, and travel about 30,000 Km treating priority roads in the winter.
- process over 17,000 recruitment applications via the Talentlink portal.
- provide over 5,000 interpretation and translations per year.

- deliver 3,700 adult learning opportunities and deliver a youth work programme to almost 3,500 young people.
- have over 29,000 attendances at community centre activities by children aged 5-10.
- have 8,000 attendances at community events.

5.3 Key quarterly trends from the analysis of performance indicators are shown in the charts in Appendix Two. Note that the figures for each quarter will not necessarily add up to the annual totals reported - complaints are only counted once although their status may change during the year eg a complaint may be counted as a stage 1 in one quarter but be counted as a stage 2 in a subsequent quarter and in the annual statistics if it has been escalated.

6. LEARNING FROM COMPLAINTS

6.1 A Complaints Review Group, made up of complaints administrators from a number of services and officers with a remit for performance and improvement from the Chief Executive's service, meets every quarter to review a sample of complaints and check if these were well recorded, investigated and responded to. The group also looks at all 'open' complaints which are beyond the target date for response, and at the planned service improvements identified by officers when they close complaints as upheld or partially upheld. A key aim is to identify any lessons learned from complaints which can be used as intelligence, translating the insight gained from complaints into practical action which can help to prevent the same issues recurring.

6.2 The group continues to find evidence that complaints are generally being recorded, investigated and responded to well, along with evidence that complainants are being contacted to keep them informed of progress if complaints are taking longer than the target number of days to investigate. The group does still see some cases where targets have been missed, complainants have not been advised about escalating complaints if still dissatisfied and clearer explanations and apologies could have been given where complaints were upheld but these are discussed with complaints administrators and good practice is encouraged. The importance of dealing with complaints quickly, keeping complainants informed and advising complainants what to do if still dissatisfied continues to be emphasised to staff through guidance on the intranet, reminder messages on the complaints system, emails and presentations.

6.3 The Complaints Review Group has also begun to assess the effectiveness of the Council's complaints handling arrangements using a Performance Assessment Tool developed by the Complaints Standards Authority within the Ombudsman's service. This tool allows organisations to assess their performance in relation to six themes of good practice and to identify any areas requiring improvement action. As a result of the initial assessment, the following priorities have been identified:

- repeat the training programme implemented when the model Complaints Handling Procedure was introduced, and ensure that training continues to be refreshed on a 3-year cycle.
- ensure that dealing with complaints is among the competencies considered in Employee Performance and Development Reviews for relevant staff.
- make further efforts to establish the 'root cause' of complaints and ensure that any improvements made in response to individual complaints are communicated across the service and the Council. In particular, the Performance Assessment Tool highlights the importance of identifying key themes from complaints and being able to demonstrate improvement actions as a result.
- make sure that independent advice agencies are aware of the Council's procedures so can advise and assist complainants where required.
- ensure that reports such as this are cascaded to staff involved in dealing with complaints.

- 6.4 Most of the 'planned service improvements' identified as a result of complaints during 2016/2017 involved speaking to individuals about errors or arranging training for teams to remind them of procedures and customer care standards. However, over the year there were also a number of service improvements identified, for example:

A customer complained that	We listened, we acted
There wasn't a proper waiting system at an office.	A new queue management system was introduced.
They were not given appropriate information after the death of a relative.	A review of Corporate Appointeeship processes tightened processes on identifying 'next of kin'.
They did not have information in advance on the cost of pest control.	Information about charges on the website was clarified.
They were disappointed not to receive a brown garden waste bin.	A review of waste collection routes is being carried out.
Their child's photo appeared in the press and on social media.	Procedures for parents giving permission for use of photos have been reviewed.
Language used when describing a pupil becoming unwell caused distress.	The school has reviewed procedures for dealing with seizures and communication with parents.
There was a delay in dealing with water coming through his ceiling.	Roles of officers involved in chasing up repairs have been clarified and steps taken to improve communication.
They were trapped at the entrance to a car park, unable to enter because it was full or to reverse to get away because of cars queued behind.	A Vehicle Messaging System was installed to indicate when the car park is full, at a point where drivers can more easily move away from the entrance.
There was a lack of communication between staff in a school playground.	The school purchased walkie-talkies to allow playground staff to communicate with each other.
A repair to the catch on their kitchen door was not treated as an emergency	A new procedure was put in place to ensure that contact centre staff are aware that repairs to fire doors are classed as emergencies.
Items they had paid to have uplifted had not been collected on the scheduled date.	Instructions to customers about access information have been improved and a new system allowing more interactive contact is to be introduced.

There had been delays carrying out electrical repairs over the holiday period.	Discussions have taken place between Housing and Construction Services about better matching of trades availability to likely levels of demand over the festive period.
They had been asked to make an appointment at the Registrars	Hospital doctors were reminded to advise people that they need to make an appointment when registering a birth or death.

- 6.5 The electronic complaints recording system also has a feature which sends an automatic 'follow-up' email to those who record planned service improvements when closing complaints. The aim is to ensure that these improvements are implemented. Officers are prompted to give further updates a month after the complaint was closed, and these are also reviewed by the Complaints Review Group.
- 6.6 Analysis of complaints will now be used systematically to inform decisions on topics for STEP reviews. STEP (Systems Thinking Empowers People) is the Council's approach to service improvement based on the principles of lean service and customer insight, and it is felt that this approach lends itself well to learning from complaints and improving processes to prevent recurrence.
- 6.7 We also learn from complaints about other authorities. Each month the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman issues a newsletter highlighting complaints and, where these concern local government, we draw these reports to the attention of relevant services to ensure they are aware of any criticisms of other Councils or examples of good practice. Examples in the past year include policy and procedures on anti-social behaviour, management of tied houses, adjustments for people with disabilities and management of poster advertising.
- 6.8 Analysing complaints is just one of a wide range of methods the Council uses to gather feedback from the people who use its services, in order to drive continuous improvement. Because councillors have so much interaction with customers and service users, we are keen to develop a process which ensures that feedback from these contacts, which would help to identify improvements, is not missed. In April this year, we piloted a short survey giving members the opportunity to identify the most common subjects raised by constituents and any suggestions for Council processes or policies which, if improved, would reduce the number of issues raised with them. The most common themes highlighted by members were housing, roads/traffic/parking, environmental issues and anti-social behaviour. Suggestions for improvements included:
- co-ordination - officers not just dealing with their part of a problem but taking a 'lead professional' approach
 - communication - better communication, with a real concentration on plain language and more care taken with standard letters
 - timescales - reinforce to officers the agreed timescales for responding to elected members

These issues will be discussed at the Complaints Review Group, highlighted to service management teams and covered in staff training.

One suggestion was made was the development of a case management system which allows members to track cases from mobile devices. We will continue to monitor the development of user-friendly systems which would help members manage their caseloads.

Regarding the 'nature' of complaints, there was no clear overall consensus but the most common mentions were for:

- delay in responding to enquiries and requests
- failure to provide a service

It is reassuring, in the light of the discussion at section 5.1 above, that the responses do not highlight any major concerns about staff attitude or behaviour.

It is proposed to give all members the opportunity to give similar feedback around October this year, with a view to including the results in the bi-annual report to Scrutiny Committee in December and seeking the members' views on whether or not this would be a useful exercise to repeat regularly.

7. SATISFACTION WITH THE COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE

7.1 The model Complaints Handling Procedure requires that the Council reports on a measure of customer satisfaction with its complaints process. To achieve this, we issue surveys to people who have made a complaint in the previous three months.

7.2 Trends in satisfaction are highlighted in the charts in Appendix Three. Since the survey sample always consists entirely of people who have made complaints about the Council, the majority of which are not upheld, it is not surprising that satisfaction levels are not always high. Samples each quarter are also small, so caution needs to be exercised in drawing conclusions from one quarter's results.

7.3 Points to note from the survey trends include the need to continue to reinforce the importance of:

- responding quickly to complaints, and keeping complainants informed when that is not possible.
- giving complainants information and explanations that are clear and easy to understand.

7.4 It is recognised to be very difficult to get complainants to comment objectively on the complaints process, as distinct from the outcome, where their complaint was not upheld or did not result in the action they wanted. Nevertheless, our aim is to increase the % of complainants who acknowledge that the process of dealing with their complaint was satisfactory, even if they did not get the outcome they desired.

7.5 Performance will continue to be monitored and messages about good complaints handling will continue to be reinforced. Overall trends since the Council adopted the model Complaints Handling Procedure are positive, but those responding to the survey still indicate high levels of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of how we have dealt with their complaints so efforts to improve will continue. It should be noted, however, that overall levels of customer satisfaction with contact with the Council remain high, as evidenced by the results of the annual citizen survey. In particular, the survey continues to show high satisfaction with the friendliness, courtesy and helpfulness of employees.

8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

8.1 This report has been screened for any policy implications in respect of Sustainability, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Anti-Poverty, Equality and Risk Management. There are no major issues.

- 8.2 The complaints recording system includes a feature that asks complaint handlers to highlight any complaint relating to an equalities issue - age, disability, gender, LGBT, race or religion. In 2016/2017, five such complaints were recorded, four regarding LGBT issues and one regarding disability. Three people complained about the removal of flowers, candles etc from City Square following a vigil to remember the people killed in a gun attack on a gay nightclub in Orlando. The other complaint about LGBT issues alleged that employees had been heard making derogatory remarks about gay people. The complaint relating to disability concerned learning support for a school pupil. All have been drawn to the attention of the Council's Equality and Diversity Co-ordinator, and he had no concerns about how they were dealt with.

9. **CONSULTATIONS**

The Council Management Team has been consulted in the preparation of this report and agrees with its contents

10. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None.

David R Martin
Chief Executive

BREAKDOWN OF DATA ON KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS FOR 1/4/2016 TO 31/3/2017

Corporate Services													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	92	88.5	60	65.2	10	10.9	34	37.0	44	47.8	14	15.2	4.9
Opened at Investigation	4	3.8	3	75.0	1	25.0	1	25.0	1	25.0	2	50.0	7.3
Escalated to Investigation	8	7.7	6	75.0	2	25.0	2	25.0	5	62.5	1	12.5	23.0

Children & Families - Education													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	64	64.6	19	29.7	9	14.1	11	17.2	30	46.9	23	35.9	16.2
Opened at Investigation	30	30.3	23	76.7	4	13.3	13	43.3	13	43.3	4	13.3	26.5
Escalated to Investigation	5	5.1	3	60.0	1	20.0			2	40.0	3	60.0	23.6

Neighbourhood Services - Housing													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	110	84.0	88	80.0	11	10.0	26	23.6	76	69.1	8	7.3	4.5
Opened at Investigation	3	2.3	1	33.3	1	33.3	1	33.3	1	33.3	1	33.3	15.7
Escalated to Investigation	18	13.7	12	66.7	4	22.2	7	38.9	10	55.6	1	5.6	17.5

Neighbourhood Services - Environment													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	93	96.9	58	4	3	3	39	41.9	45	48.4	9	9.7	5.8
Opened at Investigation	1	1.0			1	100.0			1	100.0			42.5
Escalated to Investigation	2	2.1	1	50.0					1	50.0	1	50.0	25.4

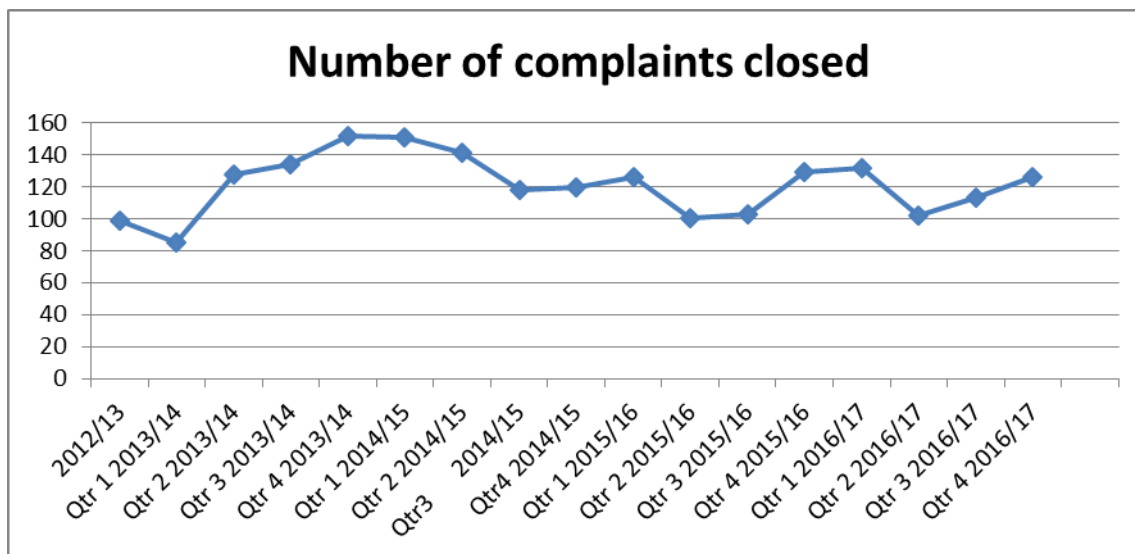
Neighbourhood Services - Communities													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	1	50.0									1	100.0	15.9
Opened at Investigation	1	50.0	1	100.0			1	100.0					18.1
Escalated to Investigation													

City Development													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	36	90.0	21	58.3	4	11.1	4	11.1	32	88.9			6.3
Opened at Investigation													
Escalated to Investigation	4	10.0	3	75.0			2	50.0	2	50.0			7.4

Chief Executive's													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	1	50.0	1	100.0					1	100.0			4.0
Opened at Investigation													
Escalated to Investigation	1	50.0	1	100.0					1	100.0			1.0

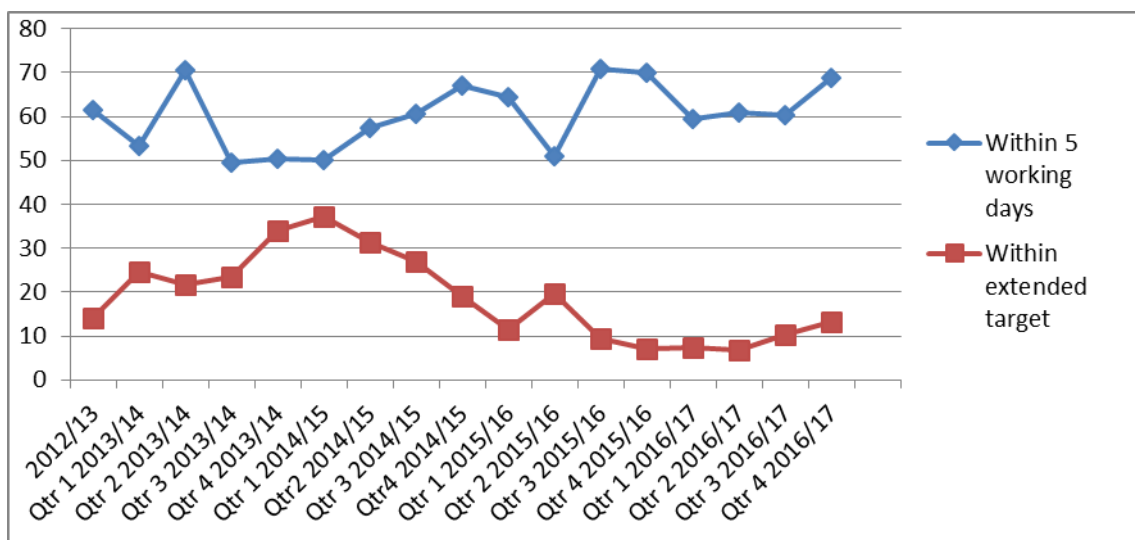
Totals													
Stage	Total		Within Target		With Extension		Upheld		Not upheld		Partially upheld		Average days to resolve
	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	Count	% age	
Frontline	397	83.7	247	62.4	37	9.3	114	28.7	228	57.4	55	13.9	7.0
Opened at Investigation	39	8.2	27	69.2	7	17.9	16	41.0	16	41.0	7	18.0	23.9
Escalated to Investigation	38	8.1	27	71.0	7	18.4	11	28.9	21	55.3	6	15.8	18.4

COMPLAINTS STATISTICS



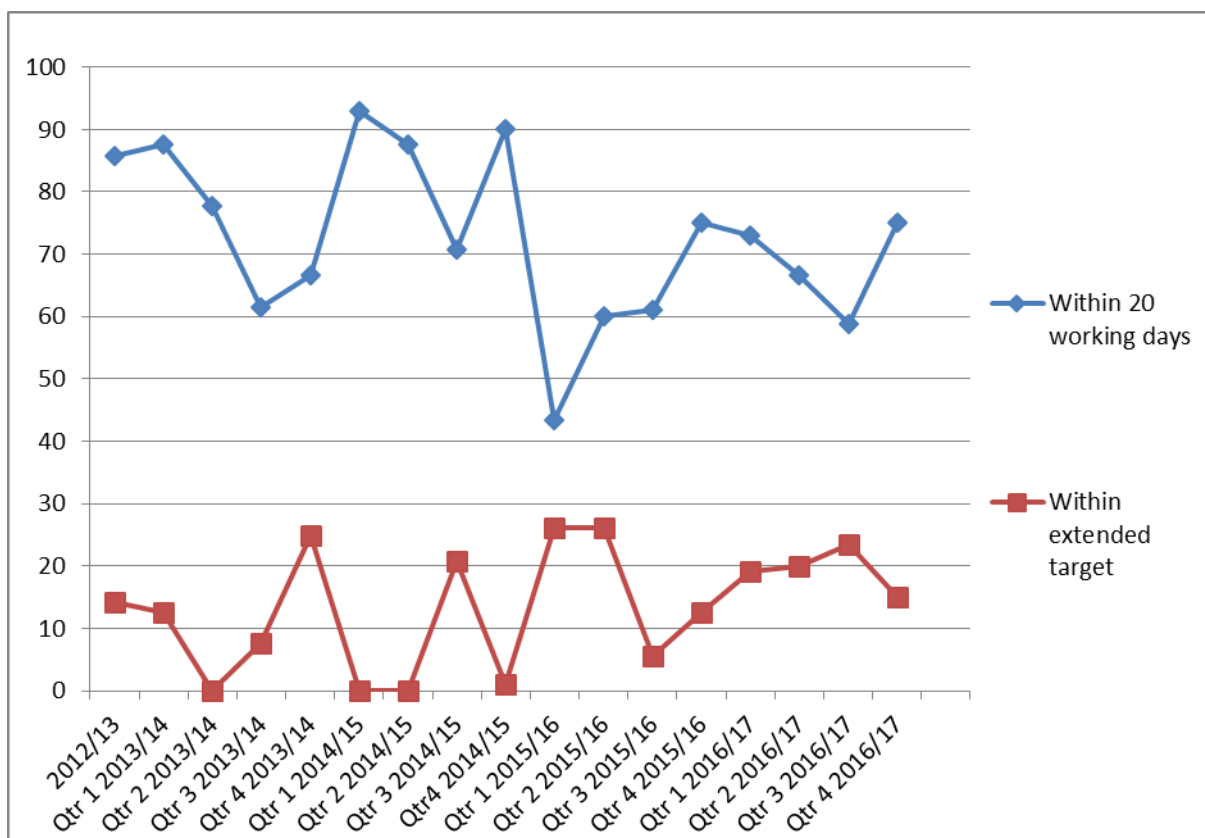
While the overall trend has risen since 2012, we believe this reflects greater use of the electronic complaints recording system rather than any increase in actual dissatisfaction. The Council should continue to emphasise that it welcomes complaints as a valuable source of customer feedback and an opportunity to identify improvements, rather than something negative.

% of stage 1 complaints closed within target



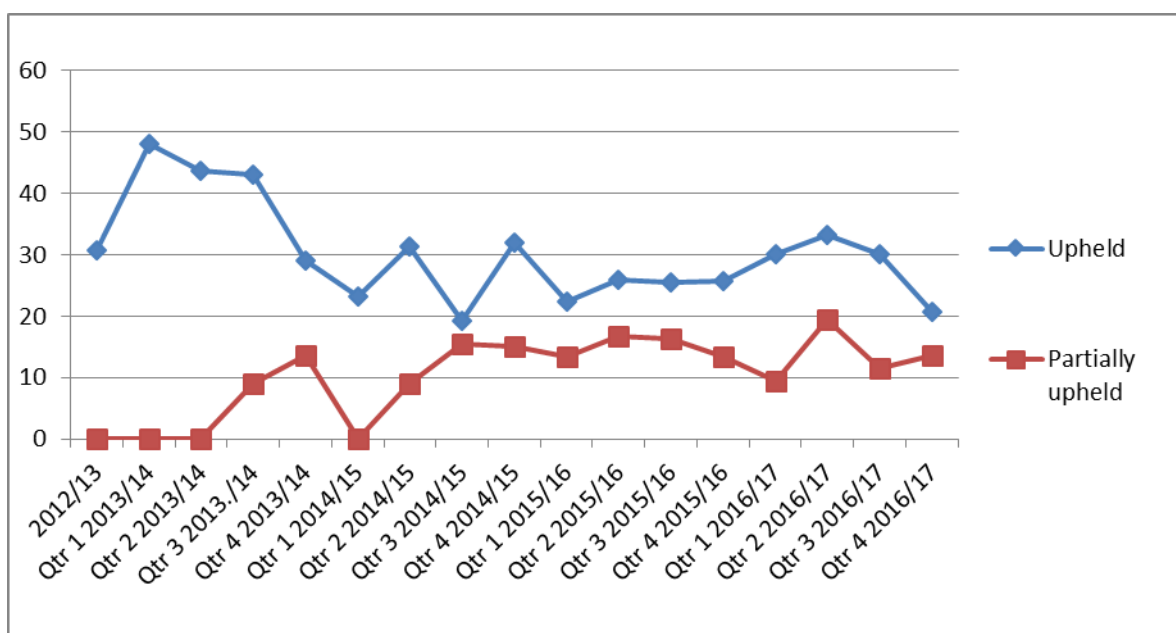
We continue to emphasise to staff the importance of responding to complaints within target (or contacting customers to agree extended targets if a quick response is not possible).

% of stage 2 complaints closed within target



A very small number of complaints go to stage 2, so % figures will fluctuate considerably from one quarter to the next due to individual cases. Chief officers and managers receiving stage 2 complaints have been reminded that these should be acknowledged within 3 days as well as responded to within 20 days or an agreed extended target timescale.

% of stage 1 complaints upheld and partially upheld



'Partially' upheld was not originally included as an option in the indicators specified by the SPSO, so these figures are only available from 1 October 2013. The % of complaints being upheld or

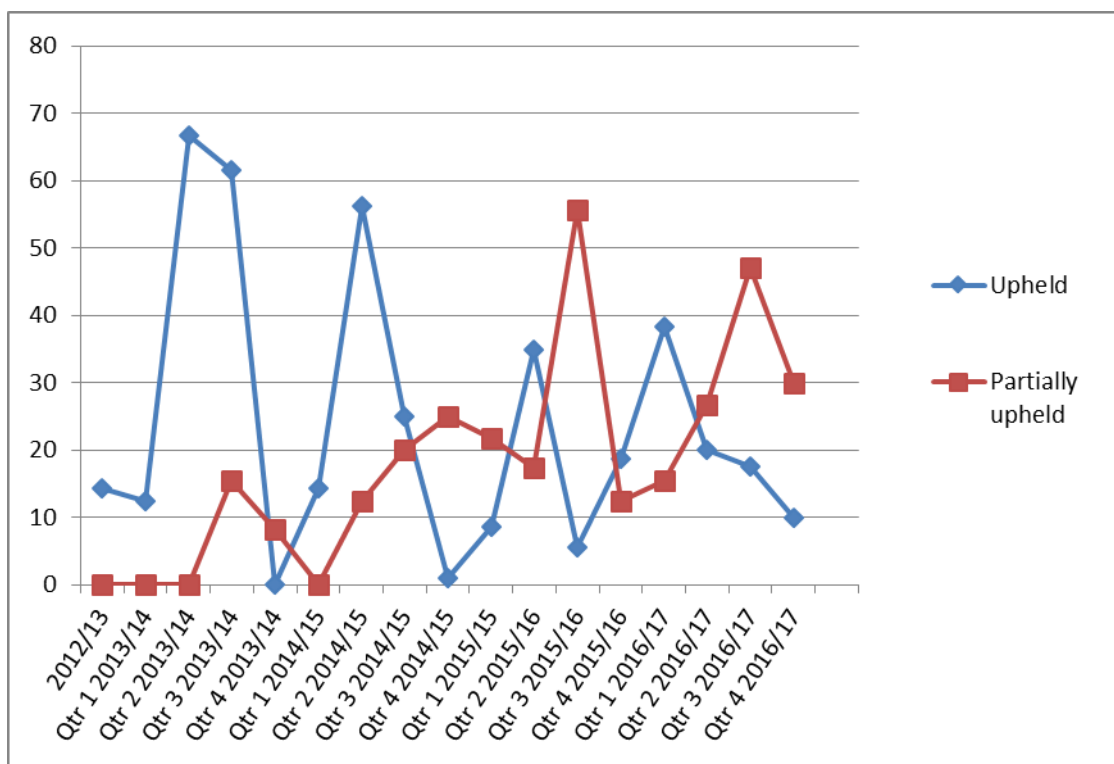
partially

upheld

appears

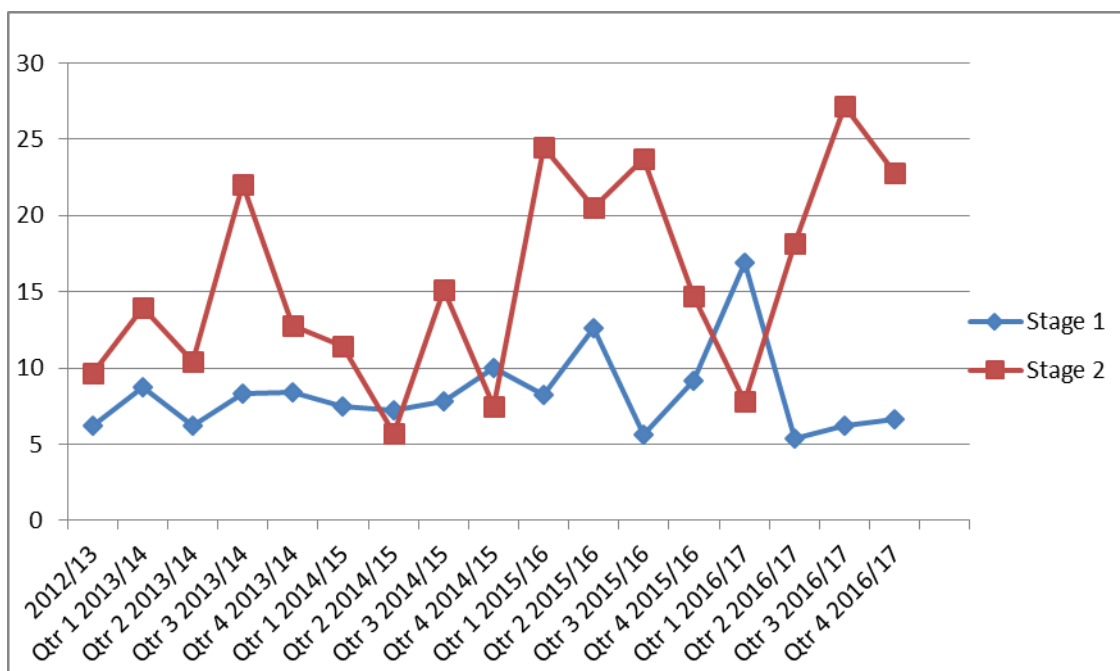
reasonable.

% of stage 2 complaints upheld and partially upheld



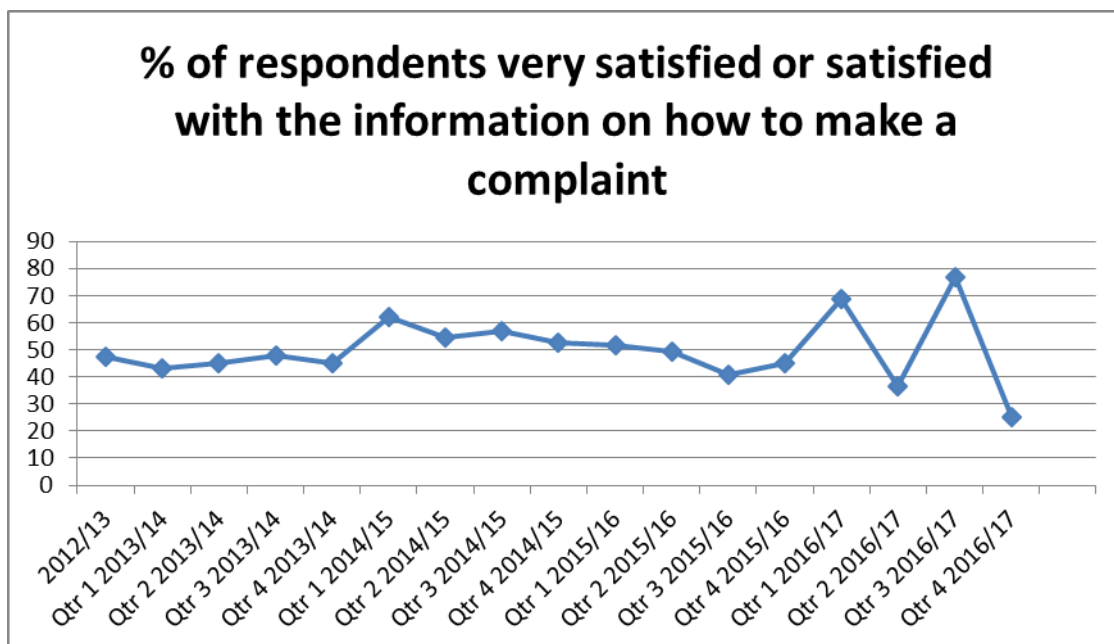
A very small number of complaints go to stage 2, so % figures will fluctuate considerably from one quarter to the next due to individual cases.

Average number of days to close complaints



All services should aim to respond quickly to complaints, although it is acknowledged that some are complex and resolving these is likely to drive up the 'average number of days to close' performance.

RESULTS OF SATISFACTION SURVEY OF THOSE WHO MADE COMPLAINTS

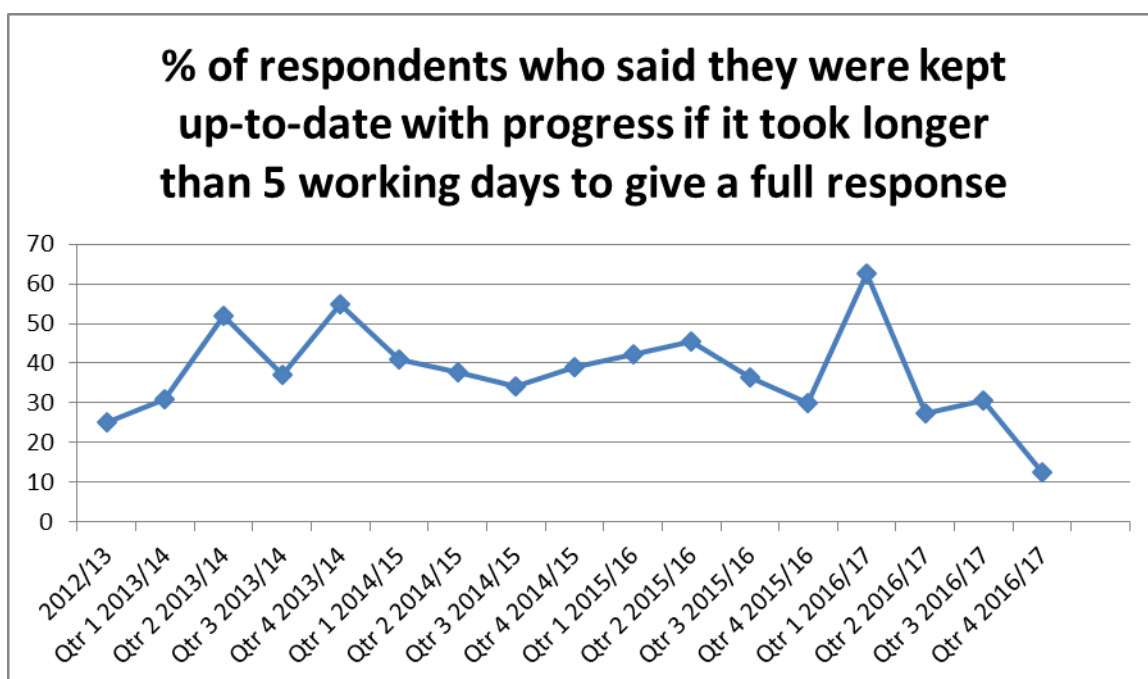


The latest figure is unusually low although it is based on a small sample. We will review the availability of complaints leaflets in offices and check that the information on the website about making a complaint remains prominent and clear.

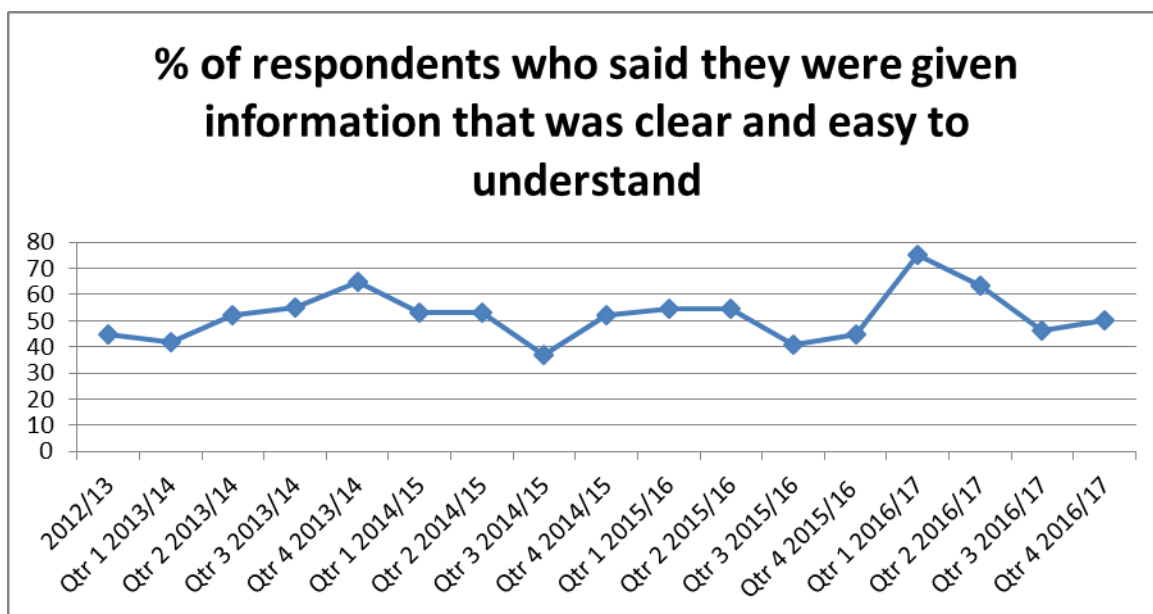




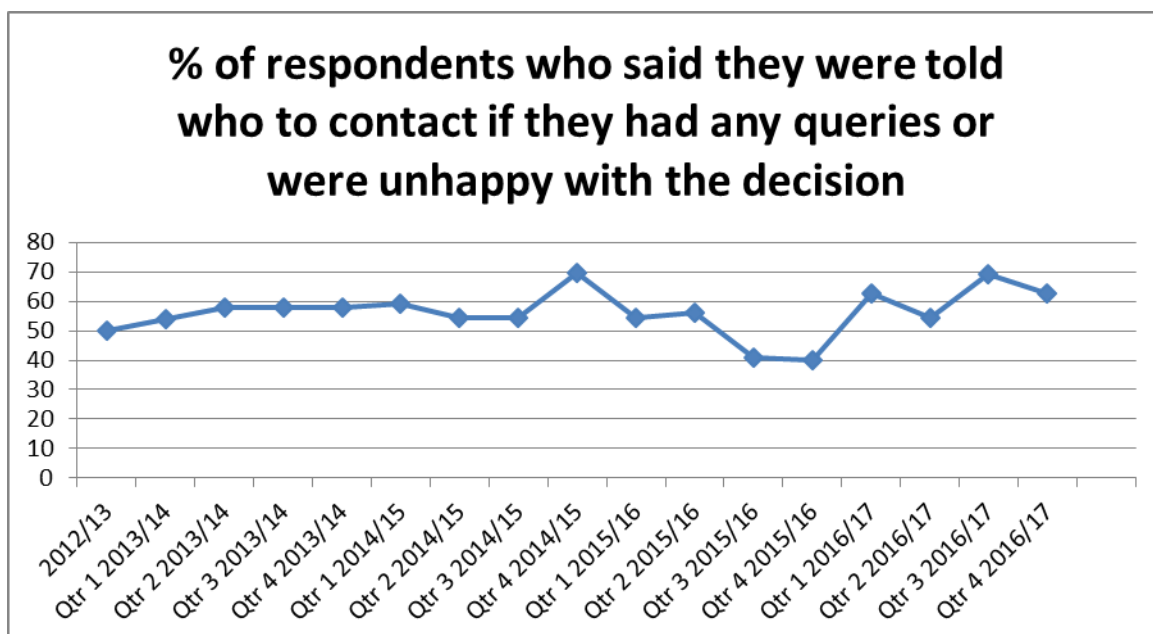
The % of those responding in the latest quarter who said they were 'very dissatisfied' with the time taken to deal with their complaint was 37.5%. Chief officers have been asked to continue to reinforce to officers the importance of dealing with complaints as quickly as possible, and explaining to customers where this is not possible – see next result also. However, it should be noted that the percentage of cases closed within the 5 day and 20 day targets did increase in the last quarter.



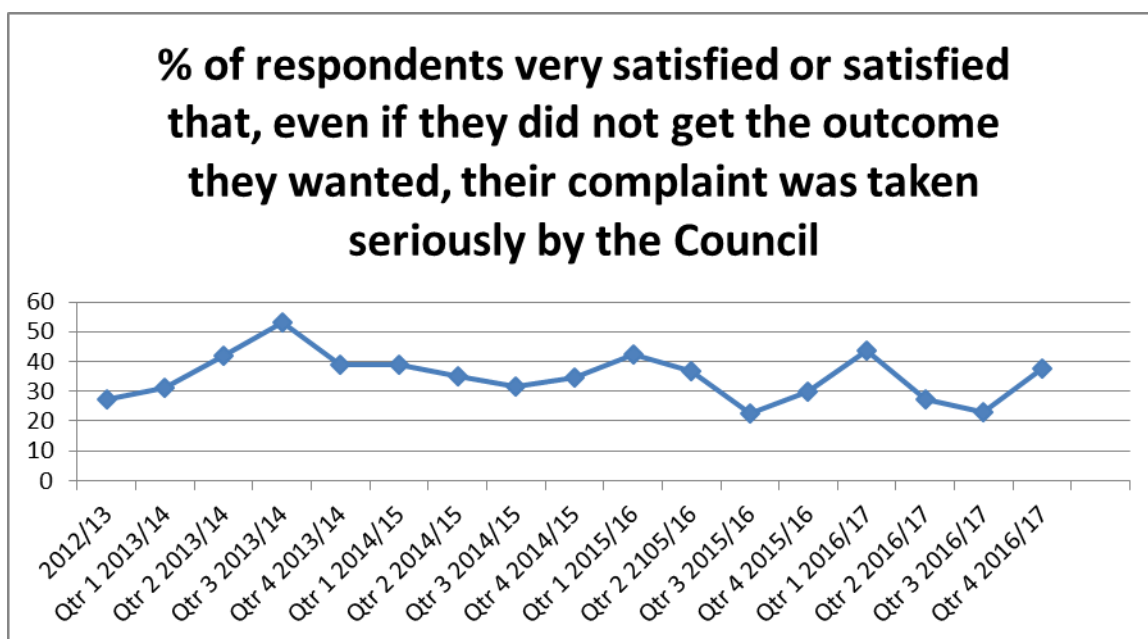
Chief Officers have been asked to reinforce to staff the importance of keeping complainants up-to-date with progress on complaints which take longer than the target number of days to resolve.



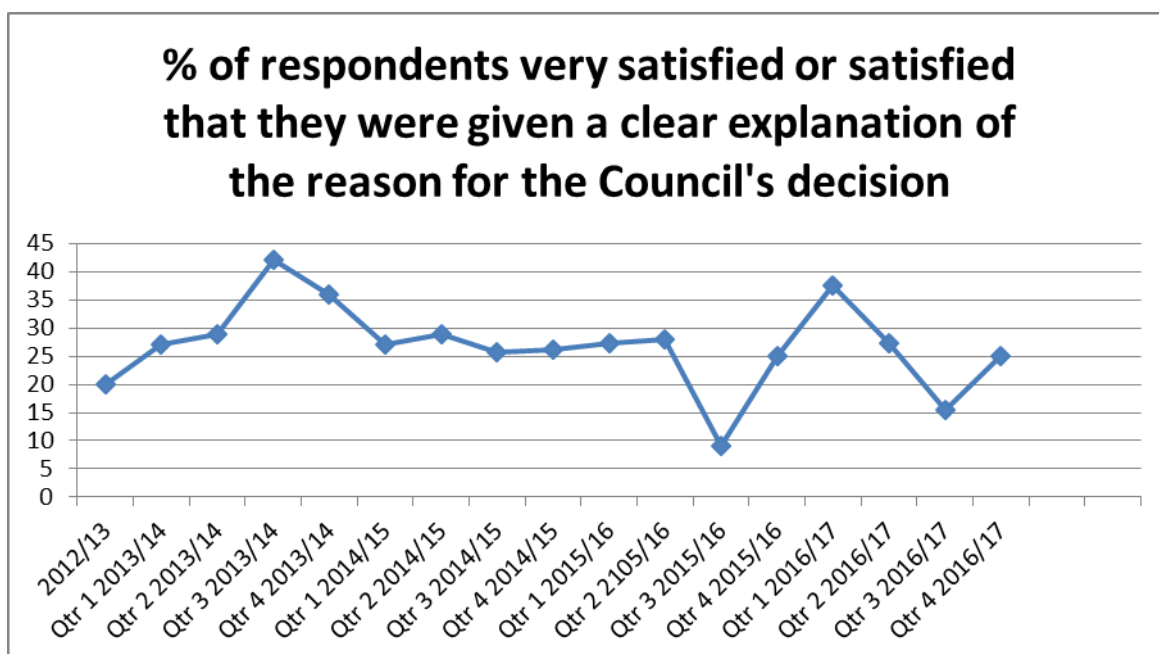
We continually reinforce to staff the importance of using plain English and techniques such as bullet points, headings etc to make complex explanations easier to read and understand.



It should be clear to all complainants who to contact in every case. We continue to reinforce the importance of telling complainants who to contact if dissatisfied with a response, and to monitor a sample of cases to check this is being done.



37.5% of respondents in the latest survey said they were 'very dissatisfied' that their complaint had been taken seriously. Although based on a small sample, and less than in the previous period, this suggests that we still need to make more effort to assure complainants that their concerns have been taken seriously even where their complaint is not upheld.



50% of respondents in the latest survey said that they were 'very dissatisfied' with this aspect of the process. We will continue to emphasise to staff the importance of clearly explaining decisions on complaints, although it is acknowledged that this result will be affected by people's feelings on the outcome of their complaint.