

Customer Relations Team Children's Services Annual Report

April 2014 - March 2015

Blackpool Council



Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

Contents

1.	Annual Overview	3
2.	Children’s Services Customer Feedback	4
3.	Complaints.....	4
4.	Compliments	7
6.	Timescales	8
7.	Complaint Theme	10
8.	Lessons Learnt	12
9.	Local Government Ombudsman (LGO).....	13
10.	Members of Parliament (MP) & Councillor Enquiries.....	14
11.	Staff Training	15
12.	Conclusion	15

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

1. Annual Overview

This report covers the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 inclusive and provides information on customer feedback recorded by the Customer Relations Team, both from direct customer contact and/or via a third party.

Children’s Services received 125 complaints over the year, seeing only quarter 4 drop below 30 complaints. Of the 125 complaints received: 7.2% were upheld and 15.2% partially upheld – 22.4% in total.

To add context to this information it is key to recognise that over the same period, it is estimated that 4064 children had an allocated worker during 2014/15. Blackpool has a population figure of 29030 aged 0-17 years.

Over the year Children’s Services has received 57 MP Enquiries and 8 Councillor Enquiries with the peak being in Quarter 3 for MP Enquiries and the 8 Councillor Enquiries being spread across Quarters 2, 3 & 4.

Almost sixty five percent of the annual complaints have been dealt with within the allocated timescale, which compares well with the 49% achieved in 2013/14. However, the statistic confirms how the numbers of complaints across the year impact on resources, staffing and timescales. The standard timeframe for complaint response is 15 working days. However, in complex cases, this timescale will be extended to meet the needs of the complaint on an individual basis whilst ensuring a quality reply.

It is encouraging to see that young people are aware of the complaint process and are using the mechanism to raise their complaints without any detrimental effect on the services they are receiving. There have been 8 complaints and 1 MP Enquiry lodged from young people over the year; of these 1 was upheld and 2 were partially upheld – 37.5% in total. These figures are included within the overall totals and accounts for 6.4% of the total complaints received.

In terms of theme categories, 3 quality of service; 1 request for service; 3 staff conduct/ treatment of customer; 1 policies and procedures and 1MP Enquiry. Of the 7 complaints, one was upheld and two were partially upheld.

Compliments have been reviewed and only those which describe ‘above and beyond’ service delivery are now accepted. This has reduced the number as a whole from 146 to 39 but is an accurate measure of staff ‘going the extra mile’ to make a real difference. However, it must be noted that levels of compliments received are lower than other areas due to the very difficult and emotive arena of work undertaken.

This report will provide further breakdowns of these highlights with potential explanations for some of the statistics.

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

2. Children’s Services Customer Feedback

The following table shows the total numbers of Complaints, Compliments, Comments, MP/Councillor Enquiries and LGO cases for the year.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Year End Totals
Children’s Social Care	48	44	41	47	180
Early Help for Children	5	9	2	4	20
Education	10	16	18	8	52
TOTALS	63	69	61	59	252
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	43	50	87	66	246
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	105	100	70	80	355

The table highlights a decrease (29%) in customer feedback from Children’s Services customers in comparison to 2013/2014 with the major factor in this being a significant reduction in compliments received. The breakdown of this feedback can be seen in the following sections of the report.

3. Complaints

Statutory legislation dictates that all complaints should be addressed and concluded within a 6 month timeframe. Children’s Services feel all complaints should be addressed quickly and efficiently. Therefore, in the first instance, 15 working days has been allocated for a response to be completed. Where complex cases are concerned it is sometimes more appropriate to allocate a longer timeframe for a response. Each case is individual and is viewed on its own merits.

Children’s Services endeavours to make the complaints process accessible so that complainants feel able to feed back their concerns.

Stage 2 Complaints: Not all complaints can progress to the stage 2 process. However, wherever possible, when requests are made to move to stage 2, meetings are held to try to resolve matters further. Sometimes, clear communication and discussion explaining why the Council cannot provide the complainant’s desired resolution can help to improve relationships and find a way forward.

There have been 4 requests to move to stage 2 of the statutory complaints process. Further and appropriate actions were undertaken: each case being individual with particular needs and subsequently no cases progressed to stage 2 of the statutory complaints process.

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

The breakdown of the complaints by service area for the year is shown in the following table:

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Year End Totals
Children’s Social Care	27	31	27	23	108
Early Help for Children	3	2	1	1	7
Education	1	3	4	2	10
TOTALS	31	36	32	26	125
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	20	20	29	21	90
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	35	35	29	35	134

As expected there are higher levels of complaints received by front line services and the level of complaints remained constant for each division over the year as a whole. Whilst the complaints total has dropped by 9 (6.7%) this reporting year, the complexity levels have increased. Children’s Social Care dealt with 86.4% of the total complaints received.

Further analysis of the complaints shows how many complaints where “Upheld” or “Partially upheld”.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Year End Totals
Children’s Social Care	3U & 4PU	2U & 6PU	1U & 6PU	2U & 1PU	8U & 17PU
Early Help for Children	NIL	NIL	1U	NIL	1U
Education	NIL	NIL	2PU	NIL	2 PU
TOTALS	3U & 4PU [31]	2U & 6PU [36]	2U & 8PU [32]	2U & 1PU [26]	9U & 19PU [125]
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	1 U & 2 PU 20	3 U & 2 PU 20	3 U & 2 PU 29	1 U & 1 PU 21	8 U & 7 PU 90
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	6 U & 3 PU 35	0 U & 8 PU 35	4 U & 5 PU 29	3 U & 8 PU 35	15U & 25PU 134

Key: U = Upheld; PU = Partially Upheld

It is encouraging to see the levels of “upheld” or “partially upheld” complaints reducing when compared to 2013/14. A contributing factor to this is that all services have worked hard to improve communications with complainants. The Head of Service for Children’s Social Care meets regularly with the Customer Relations Team to discuss and lead actions in a consistent manner in order to reduce escalation of complaints. Being a front line service Children’s Social Care receives the most complaints; this service has to take decisions for the benefit of children, which some families find difficult to accept.

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

Complainants are continuing to raise more issues within the complaint contacts and each item is reviewed and responded to. This explains the number of items upheld, not upheld or partially upheld in the yearly totals above. It is encouraging to see that complainants are using the process to fully air their dissatisfaction and move forward in a positive manner. Whilst there has been a slight decrease in complaints received this year, the overall outcomes have improved too with fewer items upheld or partially upheld.

The main reasons for complaints being upheld over the year are shown below:-

- Communication
- Conflicting information re LAC reviews, invites and minutes
- Perceived actions/lack of actions of social workers and attitudes
- Legal issues including Court parameters
- Delivery of support, action plans and safeguarding
- Confidentiality
- Perceptions of support, roles and responsibilities
- Forward planning/Lack of action in general
- Financial queries and requests for support
- Impact of service delivery in times of change
- Delays in assessments and clarity around understanding of difficult decisions and processes.

Some complaints are upheld in relation to a number of issues, many will have a combination of upheld and partially upheld findings within one complaint.

In relation to Young People making complaints, extra care is exercised to ensure they feel fully supported and their voice is heard and understood. This involves:

- More user friendly and age appropriate feedback forms:
 - under the age of 12
 - and over 12s
 - free post address explained with clear, easy to read instructions for getting the complaint to us
- Offer of Advocate to support and ensure the information is clearly communicated in both directions
- Recommendation to Investigating Officer to make verbal contact and meet with young person rather than formal response in the first instance
- Formal written response in age appropriate language at the end of the investigation together with further meeting to discuss the findings

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

4. Compliments

Compliments are extremely important and help to highlight the areas we are improving in or maintaining levels of high quality service. They act as a morale booster for staff and are evidence that every detail within service delivery matters. Good practice needs to be shared across the Directorate as and when appropriate.

The table below demonstrates the levels of compliments received by Children’s Services split by Service.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Year End Totals
Children’s Social Care	3	1	0	6	10
Early Help for Children	1	7	1	2	11
Education	5	7	5	1	18
TOTALS	9	15	6	9	39
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	0	48	15	32	95
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	50	46	23	27	146

This reporting year has seen a significant decrease in recorded compliments. This is partially due to a streamlining of ‘what is a compliment’ which has been circulated to all Senior Managers and their teams. This outlines what will and won’t be accepted and reinforces what should be regarded as only genuine heartfelt compliments and thanks being received.

5. Comments

Comments are equally important as complaints and help to shape and improve the quality of service. If necessary, Children’s Services will respond to comments and compliments based upon the same timescale as complaints. However, each comment will be judged individually as to whether a detailed response is necessary or not. The service user will not always be aware of the work being carried out behind the scenes regarding the comments made.

The following table shows the levels of comments received by service area:-

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Year End Totals
Children’s Social Care	4	5	0	2	11
Early Help for Children	1	0	0	0	1
Education	0	0	0	1	1
TOTALS	5	5	0	3	13
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	5	1	4	2	12
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	3	2	2	3	10

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

6. Timescales

It is good practice to keep the complainant informed of progress at all times. Therefore, if for any reason, Children’s Services is unable to meet the allocated timescale for response – a telephone call/holding letter or email contact should be made advising of the delay together with a new expected date of response and apology for inconvenience caused.

It is recommended within the Customer Feedback Procedures, that the following timescales are met:-

- Complaints – 15 Working Days
- Councillor/MP Enquiries & LGO – 5 Working Days
- Comments – 15 Working Days

General reasons for timescales not being met can be as follows:-

- Key members of staff unavailable to respond due to sickness or leave.
- Complex investigation work required for the case, which may include multi-agency communication.
- Senior officers unavailable to sign off final response.
- Whilst the amount of complaints received has decreased, the number of elements and complexity levels has risen. This has impacted on the amount of work and attention to detail required by Managers of all levels to ensure quality responses together with proactive outcomes. Time and resource constraints have hampered the completion of thorough investigation work and therefore ultimately the meeting of allocated timescales.
- Further consideration must be given by Heads of Service at the very start of complaints, as to whether the standard allocated timescale is reasonable and achievable given their resource issues and potential unexpected priority of safeguarding of vulnerable children and Court cases.
- Some front line Managers are more involved in the process than others and require extra time due to the volume of complaints allocated to their various service areas.
- Response not produced early enough for Senior Management to review responses thoroughly and request further information before due date.

It must be noted, that the issuing of a ‘holding’ letter does not extend the timescale from a reporting aspect. If the initial response date is not met, the complaint is counted as out of timescale.

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

The table below shows the percentage breakdown of timescales **successfully met** for complaints by service areas over the year:-

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Year End % Totals
Children’s Social Care	18/27	21/31	15/27	16/23	70/108
	66.67%	67.74%	55.56%	69.57%	64.81%
Early Help for Children	2/3	1/2	1/1	0/1	4/7
	66.67%	50%	100%	0%	57.14%
Education	1/1	3/3	1/4	2/2	7/10
	100%	100%	25%	100%	70%
TOTALS	21/31	25/36	17/32	18/26	81/125
	67.74%	69.44%	53.13%	69.23%	64.8%
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	75%	70%	48%	48%	60.25%
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	11/35	16/35	16/29	22/35	65/134
	31%	46%	55%	63%	49%

It is encouraging to note that meeting of timescales has significantly improved since 2013/14.

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

7. Complaint Theme

These themes help Children’s Services to identify trends and patterns quickly and aids in the recognition of action required. For unity in recording and balancing the number of complaints, the main overarching or most appropriate theme is used for recording purposes. The following table shows the breakdown of the annual complaints by theme.

Themes	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Year End Totals	Upheld [U] or Partially Upheld [PU]
Assessment Undertaken	2	1	NIL	NIL	3	NIL
Bully/Racist Incident	NIL	1	NIL	NIL	1	1PU
Safeguarding	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Confidentiality	2	NIL	1	1	4	1U 1PU
Council Cuts	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Custody of Child	2	NIL	NIL	NIL	2	NIL
Financial/Funding	1	NIL	NIL	NIL	1	1U
Lack of Action	2	11	4	4	21	2U 1PU
Lack of Communication	5	NIL	3	3	11	1U 3PU
Policies & Procedures (1 from Young Person)	1	NIL	NIL	NIL	1	1PU
Quality of Service (3 from Young People)	7	14	8	3	32	3U 10PU
Staff Attitude/ Treatment of Customer (3 from Young People)	8	5	12	13	38	1U 2PU
Request for Service (1 from Young Person)	1	4	4	2	11	NIL
TOTALS	31 [3U 4PU]	36 [2U 6PU]	32 [2U 8PU]	26 [2U 1PU]	125	9U 19PU
Comparison 2012/2013	20	20	29	21	90	15
Comparison 2013/2014	35	35	29	35	134	15U&25PU

Key: U = Upheld; PU = Partially Upheld

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

The 4 top themes are shown in red, with a clear lead theme of “Staff Attitude/Treatment of Customer”. This is a concern for the service as this has been a common trend over the year. However, only 1 complaint was upheld in its entirety in this theme with a further 2 partially upheld. (This equates to 10.7% of the total complaints substantiated in whole or in part.)

Note must be made that perceptions of service users can only be ‘changed’ when open and clear communication is present and checking of understanding has been undertaken. Building of relationships from all parties is highly important to carry out joint and positive working.

This leads into and works alongside the second and fourth highest themes of ‘Quality of Service’ and Lack of Communication’, respectively, for received complaints.

Quality of Service had 32 complaints over the year with 3 upheld and 10 being partially upheld. This equates to 46.42% of the overall total of upheld or partially upheld complaints for the year. This tends to be the ‘umbrella’ theme used when the complainant has many issues resulting in what the complainant perceives as poor quality service or experience. Partially upheld can also relate to those areas where we could have perhaps reached a better outcome earlier.

Lack of Action was introduced as a theme this reporting year. Complainants were presenting with issues they felt the Council had not taken follow up action on. Of the 21 complaints made, 2 were upheld and 1 partially upheld; equating to 10.71% of the complaints upheld in in some format.

Lack of Communication had 11 complaints resulting in 1 upheld and 3 partially upheld complaints making 14.28% of the total complaints upheld.

Childrens Services is a highly emotive area and extra consideration must be given to the position of the family ensuring all communication, explanations and procedures are clearly recorded and relayed to service users and their families as a whole. Clear expectations of all parties are essential and need to be transparent in order to help move relationships forward positively without mis-communication.

The remainder of the complaints fell consistently amongst the remaining themes.

In order to ensure no identification is possible I can confirm that of the 8 complaints made by Young People: 1 was upheld and 2 were partially upheld. One MP Enquiry was also received on behalf of a Young Person.

For Information - School complaints are not handled by the Customer Relations Team or Children’s Services as per Government Legislation. Each School’s Governing Body is ultimately responsible for School complaints, (after Head Teachers) and ‘sponsored’ academies are answerable to their Sponsors.

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

8. Lessons Learnt

The Council feels it must identify lessons learnt and learn from its complaints, thereby improving service delivery. Improvements this year have taken the form of a number of actions:

- Further training for staff
- Periods of close monitoring or supervision
- Cultural changes led by Senior Managers
- Review of contracts with third parties

Lessons learnt can be positive as well as negative and are just as important.

The Customer Relations Team has been working hard with all service areas to ensure lessons learnt are recorded and follow-up action is then taken to make improvements where necessary. Since this work has begun there has been an increase in the number of lessons learnt which is hoped will improve performance and reduce duplicate complaints in future.

As a further positive action, lessons learnt will be monitored and discussed at the Childrens Services Management Team meetings in order that practice can be improved across the Departments as appropriate.

All departments have accepted the need to improve dialogue with service users and their families. Good practice of other areas has been adopted. Below are examples of lessons learnt which have been communicated via the formal response letters:

- Head of Service has reminded all Social Workers of the need to have their identification with them and to introduce themselves, explain the reason for the visit, the need to enter the property as they cannot discuss confidential information on the doorstep and to ensure the parent/family do not feel intimidated or anxious by the intervention.
- All staff reminded of the complaint process and ensure they adhere to the statutory process and advise the Customer Relations Team accordingly. Delay can cause further complaints and escalate a situation unnecessarily.
- Young People’s pack within Care Homes– improved after it was identified that certain details and information was missing. Policy and procedures updated and provided in writing within the initial welcome pack.
- Better communication required with advance notice of plans for Foster Carer, Social Worker and relative regarding contact arrangements. IRO to be utilised and ensure feedback in advance of LAC reviews. Additional meetings to be implemented as required.
- Ensure contact with Young People is improved and full explanations provided so Young People are fully consulted and know about decisions and the reasoning behind them. Full information to be provided on Corporate Parenting, Children in Care Council and how to participate in making things better for Young People. All Young People must be responded to quickly and if the allocated Social Worker is not contactable, telephone calls must be passed to the Duty Social worker or Head of Service to respond to

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

directly. Explanations of Court and Guardian responsibilities to be explained so Young People have the opportunity to tell the Judge during Care Proceedings anything they feel is needed. Feedback after such proceedings is necessary and all staff have been reminded of the importance of this for the Young Person.

- Minutes of LAC reviews must be sent out within appropriate timescales to relevant parties. IROs must be mindful of their tracking of recommendations and the need to disperse minutes in a timely fashion.
- Referrals must be referred to appropriate services and feedback supplied to relevant parties. It has been reinforced that outcomes and feedback is essential clear communication of decisions must be made within a timely fashion ensuring correct threshold is in place.
- The system for prioritising educational psychology time and communication to parents has been updated in recognition of issues brought to our attention. Bid placed to try and increase the number of spaces in Specific schools to reflect need of children in Blackpool. Steps taken to utilise physical space within a specific school in place.
- Contact arrangements not made clear and more involvement with families is now in place to address this.
- All course work delivered by the Family learning service to the Children’s Centres will be handed over personally to the Centre Co-ordinator and a signed receipt provided.
- Complaint and details not passed to the Customer Relation Team resulting in frustration for the complainant. Training provided to ensure process is understood and in place.

9. Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

The LGO is the Governing Body that reviews and investigates complaints against Councils where appropriate; usually where cases have followed procedures and the complainant feels their issues have not been addressed or resolved to their satisfaction. Under the Children’s statutory complaints process, the LGO can be contacted after stage 2 and stage 3 processes have been carried out.

However, some complainants prefer to contact the LGO in the first instance. The LGO will determine whether this is a premature complaint which must be directed back to the Council to respond to in the first instance or if they will commence an investigation based on the information provided by the complainant.

For this reporting period there has been 10 LGO enquiries lodged for Children’s Services; all falling under Children’s Social Care from 5 different complainants. Outcomes to date:

- 1 - Premature complaint – to be dealt with via the complaint process in the first instance.
- 1 - Information supplied and no further action deemed necessary
- All other outcomes awaited

Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

10. Members of Parliament (MP) & Councillor Enquiries

Blackpool Council’s policy is that all MP and Councillor Enquiries must be actioned and resolved within 5 working days. MP and Councillor Enquiries are not complaints – but can be categorised as:

- requests for background information,
- reasons for decisions,
- requests for service or
- requests for review of outcomes

The following table shows the annual breakdown of MP Enquiries received by Children’s Services:-

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Totals
Children’s Social Care	8	4	10	11	33
Early Help for Children	0	0	0	1	1
Education	4	6	9	4	23
TOTALS	12	10	19	16	57
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	16	5	3	4	28
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	10	14	15	10	49

Quarter 3 shows a peak in the number of MP enquiries received. Overall Children Social Care accounted for 57.89% of the total MP Enquiries received in the year. Education was next with 40.35% of the yearly enquiries. For the second successive year there has been an increase in MP enquiries raised with the Council as complainants have become more aware of this facility. Some complainants do remain unhappy with their complaint response, and then exercise their prerogative to make referral to their MP in the hope that their MP will be able to provide an alternative response. This year we have received 1 MP on behalf of a Young Person and it is encouraging to see this process being used.

The following table shows the annual breakdown of Councillor Enquires received by Children’s Services:-

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Totals
Children’s Social Care	NIL	2	3	3	8
Early Help for Children	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Education	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Total	NIL	2	3	3	8
Comparison Totals 2012/2013	2	6	6	7	21
Comparison Totals 2013/2014	7	4	1	3	15

Children’s Social Care dealt with all 8 of the Councillor Enquiries.

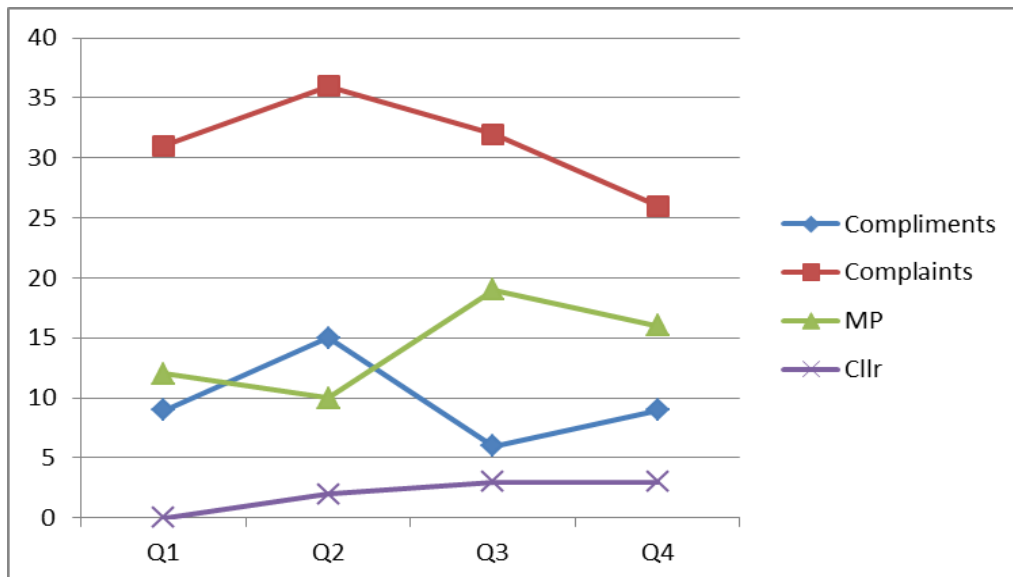
Customer Relations Team – Children’s Services Annual Report

11. Staff Training

There have been a number of structural changes within Children’s Services with new members of staff starting in post. All have been made aware that Customer Relations Team offers training on a variety of subjects such as letter writing, policy and procedures. The Customer Relations Team provide training tailored to the needs of the service as and when requested.

12. Conclusion

To conclude, as engagement with, and confidence in Children's Services to address issues increases, for the year 2014/15 the levels of complaints has marginally decreased but complexity has increased. More emphasis has been placed on ensuring service users can access the complaints process and recognition of limited capacity and time constraints is evidenced by timescales being missed or extended. Compliment figures have also decreased over the year but we are now more stringent in accepting genuine thanks.



Recommendations for Children’s Services, based on the information available are:-

- All service areas to continue to work with the Customer Relations Team to recognise “Lessons Learnt” from their complaints or compliments.
- Improvements in meeting timescales need to continue, with focus on ensuring complaints are responded to within timescales where possible.
- Minimise the number of holding letters issued which can further fuel the expectations of reply responses.
- Further work to be undertaken to establish why trends are occurring in some themes, with particular focus on the high numbers of complaints referring to “Staff Attitude/Treatment of Customer”, “Quality of Service” , “Lack of Action” and “Lack of Communication”.