

REPORT TO: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 11 April 2018

REPORT TITLE: Update on Complaints Performance

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PURPOSE OF REPORT: To provide an update of complaints handling between October 2016 – December 2017.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The last report to Overview and Scrutiny dated 23 February 2017 covered the period up to September 2016. This report provides details of complaints handling and performance from October 2016 to December 2017, regarding complaints handled under the Council's corporate complaints scheme. It does not cover statutory complaints made concerning children and adults social care services.

In summary;

- accessible and transparent systems are in place to record and track complaints and concerns from residents/customers
- the Council have been taking action to resolve complaints informally
- formal complaints are decreasing
- more than 90% of complaints are resolved at First Stage
- the numbers of complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman have reduced
- the Council is taking action to improve the complaints handling service and the causes of complaints.

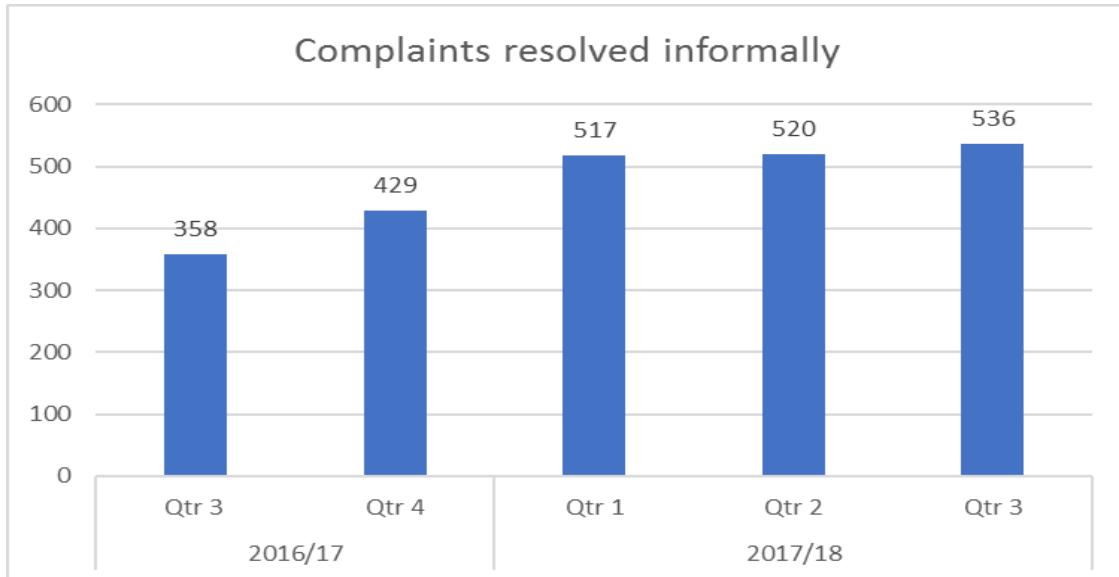
1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Complaints are handled by the central Complaints and Access to Information Team. The team is also responsible for co-ordinating all member's enquiries, school appeals and statutory requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act or Data Protection Act.
- 1.2 The Council aims to resolve concerns and complaints as soon as possible, therefore contact from customers is initially presented to the team or person responsible for delivering the service where dissatisfaction has arisen, so that the matter can be addressed.
- 1.3 Where attempts for resolution have been unsuccessful, the complaint will be handled under the two-stage process outlined below.
 - First Stage - the complaint is investigated and responded to by an appropriate officer from the service concerned. This would usually be the person who has direct responsibility for the staff involved or the issue complained about. All attempts to resolve the matter will be taken at this stage.
 - Final Stage – if the complainant remains dissatisfied, the complaint will be reviewed by a senior officer on behalf of the Chief Executive. The review officer will be independent of the service group which is the subject of the complaint.

2. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- 2.1 **Early resolution**
- 2.2 The complaints policy promotes early resolution of complaints. This approach ensures that swift action is taken to resolve the matter for complainants, without the need to go through the formal complaints procedure. The Council aims to deal with informal complaints within 5 working days. The Chart below provides a quarterly breakdown of complaints and concerns that were resolved informally during October 2016 – December 2017.

Chart 1



Complaint Themes and Causes

2.3 The main issues raised in complaints were:

- a) council tax - disputed bills, discounts, change of circumstances, bailiff, summons
- b) housing benefits – quality of communication and delays regarding applications, disputed assessment decisions
- c) waste- missed collections, recycling, contaminated bins and staff behaviour
- d) highways - Cycle Enfield, Parking (illegal, zones and restrictions), road works and Traffic lights
- e) housing repairs – various repair issues (kitchen, boiler, bathroom, windows), with leak and delay being a recurring theme

2.4 Complaints were contributed by a variety of factors, including, but not only:

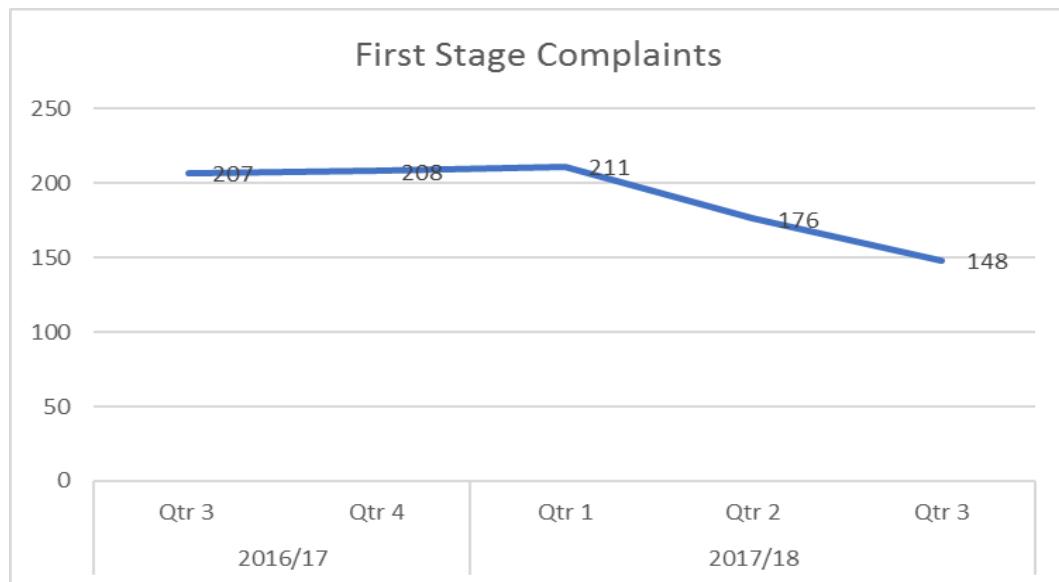
- i. demand from customers; (for example on housing and benefit services) coupled with the legislative constraints on the Council where officers have had to issue negative decisions
- ii. backlog of cases within the Council Tax service (which have now been cleared)

- iii. a number of controversial programmes of work which are ongoing, including enforcement of crossovers and Cycle Enfield
- iv. in Council Housing, there has been contractor failure in one area. Action Plans have been agreed with all the Contractors to improve the service.
- v. increased and consistency of recording through a central complaints team - the online form for submitting complaints makes it easy for residents to raise concerns (historically complaints and concerns were dealt with by individual officers within departments and not always recorded onto a central system). The Council can now start to analyse themes and trends in ensuring that lessons are learned to improve services for residents.

First Stage Complaints

2.5 The chart below shows the number of First Stage complaints received in each quarter during October 2016 – December 2017. There is a downward trend in the numbers of formal complaints as a result of the efforts being made in resolving concerns at the outset.

Chart 2- First Stage Complaints

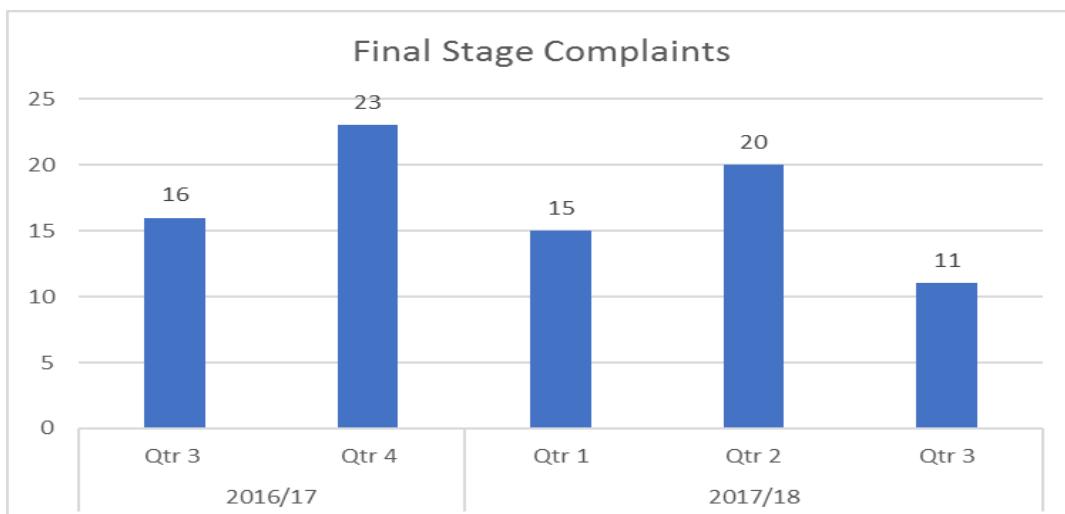


2.6 The total numbers of complaints received as Early Resolution and at First Stage are broadly in similar with the numbers received by other London councils. For example, in 2016/17, Haringey, Waltham Forest and Barnet (neighbouring boroughs) received 1896, 2377 and 4414 respectively. Tower Hamlets – 3797, Lewisham – 3040 and Islington – 2220.

Final Stage Complaints

- 2.7 During the period covered by this report, 950 complaints were handled at First Stage. Of these, 85 (less than 10%) progressed to Final Stage. This is due to the focus by officers in resolving issues without the need for further escalation.
- 2.8 The chart below shows the number of Final Stage complaints received in each quarter during October 2016 – December 2017.

Chart 3 – Final Stage Complaints



Local Government Ombudsman

- 2.9 Relationships with the Ombudsman have remained positive during this period of change. The Complaints and Access to Information Manager represents the national social care complaints' forum at quarterly meetings between the Local Government Ombudsman and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care Services to shape and share good practice regarding complaints handling across the country. This means that Enfield Council is well positioned to benefit from current developments in the field.
- 3.0 The Complaints and Access to Information Team work in partnership with services to ensure that timely responses are made to Ombudsman's enquiries and appropriate settlements are negotiated to achieve resolution. Using the insight provided through historic LGO investigations, the Complaints and Access to Information Team is also working with service managers to develop plans to address the underlying reasons that led to upheld complaints.
- 3.1 The positive outcomes mentioned above have contributed to a decrease in the numbers of complaints escalated to the Ombudsman. Other factors include the role of the Complaints and Access to Information Team in undertaking Final Stage investigations; ensuring

that complaints are properly investigated and remedied internally by the Council.

- 3.2 It should be noted that, in some instances, complainants contact the Ombudsman without having gone through the Council's internal processes. In such cases, the Ombudsman would refer the matter to the Council to be dealt with.
- 3.3 During 2016/17, there were 135 complaints dealt with by the Local Government Ombudsman. This compares with 157 in 2015/16 and 154 in 2014/15. The numbers of Ombudsman complaints in Enfield are low when compared with our closest neighbours, based on data published on the Ombudsman's website for 2016/17: Waltham Forest- 152; Haringey- 205 and Barnet – 181.
- 3.4 The Ombudsman usually highlight significant issues of concern within their annual letter. It is noted that, unlike some Councils, no concerns were raised within the letter to Enfield.

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 The Complaints and Access to Information have made significant progress in transitioning from a fragmented departmental system to delivering a coordinated complaint handling service across the whole Council.
- 4.2 Moving forward the team aims to build on these successes, by:
 - a) working with ICT to improve the functionality of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) electronic system to improve efficiency in the end to end process.
 - b) using the intelligence from complaints and other forms of customers feedback to proactively resolve concerns before they become complaints and improve Council services by addressing the underlying causes of complaints.