

SOCIAL CARE, HEALTH AND HOUSING – ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORT 2010/11

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REASON FOR REPORT

Customer feedback is essential to service improvement and complaints are a way in which customers can inform us of where things go wrong and allow us the opportunity to put matters right and learn for the future. This report presents information about complaints concerning adult social care and housing complaints during 2010/11 and how these have been used to shape service improvements. At the request of Committee in previous years, this report includes information about Members Enquiries received during 2010/11. A separate report will be produced and presented to the appropriate Policy Overview Committee for complaints relating to Children's Social Care.

OPTIONS OPEN TO THE COMMITTEE

Members of the Committee discuss and comment on the annual report and use the report to inform their overview activities.

1. Members of the Committee agree to raise any concerns with the relevant Cabinet member
2. Members of the Committee note the contents of the annual report.

INFORMATION

2. Summary

We aim to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity and to learn from complaints to improve our services.

Overall, the number of complaints and general concerns received has fallen during 2010/11 when compared to the previous year: 217 new complaints were received during 2010/11 compared to 314 in 2009/10 and 494 in 2008/09.

The focus of complaints management continues to be to prevent and resolve the customers' complaint at an early stage. This approach is effective as the overall number of complaints escalating to higher stages of the complaints procedure has fallen in 2010/11 compared to previous years.

It is important at this juncture to highlight the differences in procedures in Housing matters in comparison to those required for the Adult Social Care Complaints procedure that came into effect in April 2009.

Housing complaints are regulated by the Corporate Complaints Procedure, which operates a standard 3 stage procedure, with final escalation to the Ombudsman, which in effect serves as a fourth stage.

The Adult Social Care complaints policy is far less prescriptive, and operates a one stage procedure, with escalation directly to the Local Government Ombudsman, who in their changed role, will now investigate complaints at a 'second' stage of the complaints procedure. The inferred intention of the one stage procedure is to allow the Local Authority the opportunity to seek effective and complete resolution at the first attempt, and to remove any potential delays for the client.

The one stage complaints process for Adult Social Care is designed to empower the client, who is instrumental from the outset in shaping how the approach to the complaints investigation will take place. In complex cases, the opportunity remains to commission external complaints investigators.

There are no timescales set in stone, and this makes comparative data with the Corporate Complaints Procedure difficult.

Resolving Complaints

For complaints relating to Housing Services, there is a further 2 stages to resolve the complaint in line with the Corporate Complaints Procedure.

92% of Housing complaints were resolved at stage 1 of the complaints procedure (166 Stage 1 housing complaints received, 13 of which proceeded to stage 2 of the complaints procedure).

Overall, the number of complaints progressing to stage 2 during 2010/11 dropped significantly compared to the previous year (13 stage 2 complaints in 2010/11 compared to 26 in 2009/10).

Of the 13 housing stage 2 complaints received in 2010/11, 9 (70%) were successfully resolved at this stage (compared to 85% during 2009/10).

At stage 3, a total of four complaints were received in 2010/11, compared to three in 2009/10.

The key themes from all complaints received during 2010/11 have been related to:

Policy decisions (7 complaints, 3%) – related to the outcome of housing assessments and homelessness decisions, housing benefit assessments, the recovery of overpayments, repairs policy decisions, the right to succeed a tenancy in the event that the tenant dies, the application of the Council's charging policy for adult social care services and the outcome of social care and occupational therapy assessments.

Service Failure (161 complaints, 74%) – perceptions of staff attitude / conduct when communicating unwelcome policy decisions including the outcome of housing needs assessments and decisions to recover housing benefit overpayments, a need for improved clarity in supporting information and letters sent to customers explaining policy decisions and assessments; and not always keeping the customer up-to-date with developments and decisions.

Staff Attitude/Slow Service – (49 complaints, 23%) complaints about the quality of temporary accommodation, the quality / accuracy of housing benefit and housing needs assessments in which complainants did not feel the information they had provided had been taken into account; complaints about water leaks in neighboring properties affecting the tenants property; complaints about the condition of kitchen's / bathrooms; and delays in completing repairs, particularly to heating / hot water systems. Complaints have also been made about the timeliness of domiciliary care services and the quality of residential and nursing care – these relate to services commissioned from private and voluntary care providers.

3. Context/Overview

Social Care Health and Housing works with and serves a large number of vulnerable people throughout the Borough. The department provides and arranges a wide range of support services to enable vulnerable people and those with care needs to live in appropriate housing and to stay in their own homes and when this is not possible will support residential or nursing care placements. Our services also include seeking to address the housing needs of residents, housing benefits and a housing landlord. Whilst we always aim to provide high quality services that meet the needs and circumstances of individuals, carers and their families, sometimes things do go wrong.

The complaints procedure is a mechanism to identify problems, resolve issues and make changes to improve services. The analysis of information about complaints at each stage of the procedure gives the Council an opportunity to reflect on the quality of the services it provides to our customers and consider how well it listens and responds to their needs.

This report provides information about complaints made during the twelve months between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2011 under adult social care complaints procedures and the Corporate Complaints procedure (housing services).

What is a Complaint?

A complaint, as defined by our corporate policy and procedure is:

“An expression of dissatisfaction by telephone, personal visit or in writing, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the council or its staff affecting an individual or group of customers.”

Who can make a complaint?

Under adult social care requirements, a person is eligible to make a complaint where the local authority has a power or duty to provide, or to secure the provision of, a service for someone and their need or possible need for such a service has (by whatever means) come to our attention. This also applies to a person acting on behalf of someone else.

We want the complaints procedure to be as accessible as possible. We publish information about how to make a complaint in both the corporate leaflet and the fact sheet referring to the social care process for complaints.

A series of outreach visits have been made by staff throughout the year to voluntary organizations, day centres and residential settings to promote the accessibility of the complaints service.

Complaints can be made in person, by telephone, in writing, by fax, via our website or email, either directly to the service area, Contact Centre or to the Customer Care and Complaints Team.

Stages of the Corporate Complaints Procedure

The complaints procedure has three stages.

Stage 1, Local Resolution - This is the most important stage of the complaints procedure. We expect the department's teams and external contractors providing services on our behalf to resolve as many problems and complaints as possible at this point. The complaints procedure requires complaints considered under the corporate complaints procedure at stage 1 to be responded to within 10 working days up to a maximum of 20 working days. For social care and healthcare complaints this is the only stage available to resolve the complaint before progression to the Local Government Ombudsman. For housing related complaints, including those for Hillingdon Homes, there are two further stages of the complaints procedure.

Stage 2, Formal Investigation - This stage is usually implemented where the complainant is dissatisfied with the findings at stage 1. For complaints under the corporate procedure, the complaint is reviewed by the Deputy Director (for housing complaints).

Stage 3, Review Panel - If complainants are still not happy after their complaint is investigated at stage 2, under the corporate procedure, the Chief Executive commissions an investigation by an officer in Democratic Services and responds to the complainant in light of the findings of the investigation.

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) - The LGO is empowered to investigate where it appears that our own complaints procedure has not resolved the complaint. Complainants can refer their complaint to the LGO at any time, although the LGO normally refers the complaint back to us if it has not been through our procedure first.

4. OVERVIEW OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

Stage 1 of the Complaints Procedure

The final out-turn for 2010/11 confirms that the Customer Care and Complaints Team received 217 new complaints at stage 1 during the year, compared with 315 the previous year (30% reduction in formal complaints received). This figure is the total number of complaints that the complaints team handled for complaints relating to housing and adult social care.

In addition to formal complaints, the Customer Care and Complaints Team take customer enquiries or 'concerns' and deal with them promptly and informally. Many people contacting the Customer Care and Complaints Team want action to resolve the issue quickly and are happy that this is undertaken informally. We have seen a drop in the number of complaints received at stage 1 mainly due to an increased emphasis to resolve issues and concerns quickly and avert the need to escalate these to a complaint. Table 1 below summaries the number of complaints received during 2010/11 by service area:

Table 1 - Comparison of Stage One Complaints

Service Area	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Learning Disability	18	15	4
Mental Health	5	1	0
Older People	74	37	30
Physical/sensory Disability	13	6	17
Total Social Care	110	59	51
Housing Services	171	126	92
Hillingdon Housing Service	213	130	74
Total Housing	384	256	166
Total	494	315	217

The process of complaints resolution involves talking to the customer and talking through the issues they have raised, clarifying any points and understanding what outcome they are seeking to achieve, logging the complaint, progress chasing, advising and liaising with managers to seek the best outcome for the customer and the department. Clearly some complaints are very complex and require the involvement of several service areas within the Department or outside agencies, including Health partners.

Complaint Themes

The following table (table 2) summarises the complaints received at stage 1 during 2010/11 by theme:

Table 2 – Summary of complaints received by theme at stage 1:

Theme	Adult Social Care	Housing Services	Hillingdon Housing Service	Total
Against Council Policy	0	2	5	7
Customer Care / Communications / Officer Conduct	10	11	20	41
Quality of Service	41	79	49	169
Total	51	92	74	217

Against Council Policy – The Housing Needs Team have received a number of complaints about the decision making process used by officers in reaching a decision on the homelessness status of households and their access to alternative housing. Complaints have also been received about the housing needs assessment banding with complainants dis-satisfied with the needs criteria / their assessment of need. A number of households have complained that the Council's decision that they are not homeless is not correct and have been dis-satisfied with the housing options available. Wherever possible, advice and information about alternative housing options is offered to the customer to help them resolve their housing issues. This includes advice and support to access more suitable housing in the private sector.

Complaints have also been received about the assessment for housing benefit in which some complainants felt the benefit award was lower than they were expecting; Complaints have also been received about the Council recovering overpayments in housing benefit (e.g. due to a change in circumstances for the claimant which has been notified to the Council some time after the change resulting in the claimant being overpaid benefits).

For Hillingdon Housing Services there have been complaints about the repairs policy in which tenants have complained about the refusal of Hillingdon Homes to undertake repairs which are considered the responsibility of the tenant detailed in the repairs policy.

Customer Care/ Communications / Officer Conduct – With difficult decisions being made by council officers, including housing needs assessments, homelessness

decisions, housing benefit assessments and recovery of overpayments, the charging policy for adult social care and the eligibility criteria for adult social care, some complaints have been received which relate to the way that officers communicate decisions in a non-empathetic way to people who approach the council for assistance.

During 2010/11, in those cases in which officer conduct has been the source of the complaint, improvements have been driven by follow up discussions with teams and individual members of staff to ensure that the customer experience improves. In some instances improved information has been produced to support the explanations about changes in services and options available to customers.

Some complaints have also been received about neighbour disputes / nuisance which have been referred to the anti-social behaviour team.

Quality of Service – For adult social care, complaints received about the quality of adult social care include the home carers not attending a clients home in line with the care plan and the quality of residential and nursing care. During 2010/11 these issues have been escalated with private/voluntary sector home care providers and residential/nursing home providers. Regular visits to care providers are undertaken by the Council's Care Inspection Team which has contributed to improvements in the quality of care provided in Hillingdon.

Adult Social Care related complaints have been received about waiting times for assessments and changes to care packages following a review of their needs. This includes complaints about changes to Direct Payments.

Housing Benefits complaints are mainly about delays or a lack of understanding about the way in which benefits are calculated. Improvements have and continue to be made to help people who apply for housing benefits to understand how their benefit is calculated.

Quality related complaints about Hillingdon Housing Services have tended to centre on the quality of kitchens, bathrooms and windows with existing or new tenants requesting replacements. In most cases the existing kitchen / bathroom / windows were found to meet the required minimum standard and will be considered for replacement during the next scheduled planned maintenance programme. Complaints have also been received about mould and dampness in some properties. In response Hillingdon Housing Services has provided advice to tenants about ventilating and heating their property. Water leaks from neighbouring properties (usually flats) has resulted in some complaints from tenants / residents.

Complaints about the quality of the repairs service and repairs undertaken during 2010/11 have fallen significantly. This has been due in part to the creation of a dedicated call centre and new ways of working to resolve many representations quickly and satisfactorily, reducing the need to progress to stage 1 of the complaints procedure.

Some complaints were received about contractors not keeping to scheduled appointments which have been followed up with the contractor throughout the year.

Stage 2 of the Corporate Complaints Procedure

During 2010/11, 13 complaints progressed to stage 2 of the complaints procedure. This represents a 50% drop in escalation to the same stage in 2009/10 (26 complaints progressed to stage 2 of the complaints procedure in 2009/10). Table 3 below summarises the complaints at stage 2 by service area. This section of the report provides more detail about the complaints received and the outcome to demonstrate how individual complaints have been resolved. Due to the aforementioned change in the regulations for adult social care complaints, there is not a second or third stage to the procedure for these complaints.

Of the 13 stage 2 complaints, four (31%) were not upheld, five (38%) were partially upheld, four were upheld (31%) and none are ongoing.

Table 3 – Total Number of Complaints Progressing to Stage 2

Service Area	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11
Learning Disability	3	0	0
Mental Health	0	0	0
Older People	0	0	0
Physical/sensory Disability	1	0	0
Total Social Care	4	0	0
Housing Services	10	12	5
Hillingdon Housing Service	11	14	8
Total Housing	21	26	13
Total	25	26	13

Housing Services – Stage 2 Complaints

Overall there were five complaints which progressed to stage 2 of the complaints procedure. 4 complaints were partially upheld. 1 complaint was upheld.

Table 4 – Complaints Progressing to Stage 2 (Housing Services)

Complaint details	Outcome	Action taken
Complainant wanted to be re-assessed for housing due to a change in circumstances. Unhappy about not being awarded a higher band. Frustrated at perceived lack of communication	Partially Upheld (due to the need to keep complainant up-to-date)	Training needs of staff identified, and development opportunities followed up.
Complainant and family have lived in temporary accommodation for the past 8 years. The accommodation is overcrowded.	Partially upheld	Review of entire case carried out, specifically around the involvement of HB and the managing agent.
Complaint about Council needing to take further action to address a vermin issue in a neighbouring property	Partially Upheld	Confirmed current course of action with relation to empty property. Advised complainant on how to address issues with rats
There is an infestation of rats or mice that occupy the ceiling of the extension.	Upheld	Major works carried out to line walls to rear extension. Holes sealed up to eliminate entry to building.
Dissatisfaction with level of investigation at Stage 1 in relation to permission to bid on Locata & with management of rent arrears.	Partially Upheld	Changes proposed to improve bidding process.

Hillingdon Housing Service – Stage 2 Complaints

There were eight complaints investigated at Stage 2 for Hillingdon Housing Service and six were upheld or partially upheld. Six complaints at stage 2 were successfully resolved. Two progressed to stage three of the complaints procedure, and there were two Local Government Investigations into complaints.

Table 5 – Complaints Progressing to Stage 2 (Hillingdon Housing Service)

Complaint details	Outcome	Action taken
Complaint against housing officer and Line Manager conduct. Concerns anti-social behaviour from neighbour.	Not Upheld	Service Manager agreed to ensure that officers exercise care when asked by complainants to disclose potential timelines for transfers. This will avoid raising expectations.
Complainant is alleging that he has experienced unpleasantness from Council Officers (officer conduct)	Partially Upheld	Staff performance reviewed in one-to-one sessions and monitored closely.
Officer action leaving client to complain about housing situation having been left with no-where to stay.	Upheld	Officer action raised expectations of family beyond what was possible at the time. In conjunction with Housing Needs, decision made to offer a license to the household to occupy a plot to live at. Apology given and household satisfied with the outcome.
Complainant would like to be taken off the restricted persons register	Upheld	Risk assessment for complaint reviewed and complainant notified that their details will be removed from the restricted persons register.
Complainant has waited 3 months following a written complaint regarding dampness problem and lack of double glazing, but has yet to receive any response.	Not Upheld	The complainant's home is scheduled for planned improvement works. Complainant given additional information to help minimise damp in property.

Complaint details	Outcome	Action taken
Complainant alleging that the council have contradicted themselves over the planned work in relation to her bathroom and kitchen.	Partially Upheld	<p>The complainant's home is scheduled for planned improvement works. Complainant given additional information to help minimise damp in property.</p> <p>Officers advised to improve communications with tenants about managing the expectations for improvement works to properties.</p>
Further to a water leak in the property, complainant would like his laminated kitchen floor replaced and a brand new carpet to his lounge.	Partially Upheld	Offer to contribute towards the replacement of the carpet.
The complainants are alleging that they were not consulted correctly in relation to a rear extension to their neighbour's property	Upheld	Review processes and individual officer performance within monthly supervision sessions.

Stage 3 Complaints

During 2010/11, four complaints progressed to stage 3 of the complaints procedure – compared to three the previous year.

Table 6 – Total Number of Complaints Progressing to Stage 3

Service Area	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11
Learning Disability	0	0	0
Mental Health	0	0	0
Older People	0	0	0
Physical/sensory Disability	0	0	0
Total Social Care	0	n/a	n/a
Housing Services	4	2	2
Hillingdon Housing Service	2	1	2
Total Housing	6	3	4
Total	6	3	4

Housing Services – Stage 3 Complaints

Table 7 – Housing Services - Stage 3 Complaints

Complaint details	Outcome	Action taken
Complainant wanted to be re-assessed for housing due to a change in circumstances. Unhappy about not being awarded a higher band. Frustrated at perceived lack of communication	Partially Upheld (due to the need to keep complainant up-to-date)	Training needs of staff identified, and development opportunities followed up.
Complainant and family have lived in temporary accommodation for the past 8 years. The accommodation is overcrowded.	Partially upheld	Review of entire case carried out, specifically around the involvement of HB and the managing agent.

Hillingdon Housing Service – Stage 3 Complaints

During 2010/11 Hillingdon Homes received two complaints which progressed to stage 3 of the complaints procedure.

Table 8 – Hillingdon Housing Service - Stage 3 Complaints

Complaint details	Outcome	Action taken
Complaint against housing officer and Line Manager (conduct) Had been experiencing anti-social behaviour (ASB) from the neighbour above from Dec 2007.	Upheld	The stage 3 investigation confirmed the need to keep the complainant up-to-date with the investigation. Key improvement identified: Need for team leaders to review progress on ASB cases and ensure clients updated appropriately.
Complainant alleging that he has experienced unpleasantness from Council Officers	Partially Upheld	In addition to the action taken at stage 2 of the complaints procedure (Staff performance reviewed in one-to-one sessions and monitored closely), the Tenant has been identified as needing to be included in the 'two-room redecoration scheme' at his new address (a two-bedroom house), which gives tenants the right to have two rooms decorated every five years.

Local Government Ombudsman Investigations

The Local Government Ombudsman receives complaints and although the standard is to ensure that the Local Authority has had an opportunity to respond, there are occasions when the Ombudsman will investigate a complaint that has not proceeded through the complaints procedure.

We work with the Ombudsman to ensure that they are fully informed of the rationale of our decision-making and we openly apologise when we need to.

During 2010/11 we saw an increase in the number of complaints the Ombudsman made a decision on – to fifteen during the year (from eight the previous year). In many cases there was no or insufficient evidence from the complainant to support the

complaint. Table 9 below summarises the complaints received by the Local Government Ombudsman.

In housing services, two complaints were received about housing benefits and five complaints were received about access to suitable housing. In the complaints about benefit services, one was found to be outside jurisdiction and in the other a local settlement was agreed. For the complaints about housing allocations, the ombudsman used their discretion to reach a resolution for most and in one there was no or insufficient evidence to progress the complaint.

Of the Hillingdon Housing Service complaints investigated by the Ombudsman, one was for tenancy management in which no or insufficient evidence was found; a complaint about housing repairs and planned maintenance were found to be outside of jurisdiction; and a complaint about anti-social behaviour could not be decided due to no or insufficient evidence to support the claim of maladministration.

Table 9 – Hillingdon Complaints/enquiries Received by the Local Government Ombudsman

Service Area	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11
Learning Disability			1
Mental Health			
Older People	1	4	3
Physical/sensory Disability		1	1
Total Social Care	1	5	5
Housing Services	5	7	8
Hillingdon Housing Service	2	3	2
Total Housing	7	10	10
Total	8	15	15

Adult Social Care Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Cases

It is essential to add context to the recording of Ombudsman referrals under the heading of Adult Social Care. The Ombudsman's new role in this respect is to review complaints from dissatisfied clients as what is effectively the second stage of the Adult Social Care complaints procedure.

The new arrangement is one that has met with differing experiences amongst the Complaints Managers who meet quarterly to discuss complaints across London.

During the period reported on here, there have been escalations, but as yet, no decisions.

Adult Social Care LGO Referrals

Complaint Details	LGO Decision	Recommendations
Unhappy with conduct of staff and with the placement of son in a residential service.	Awaiting Outcome	Not Available
Complainant wishes to dispute monies requested to be repaid by Direct Payments Team	Awaiting Outcome	Not Available
Complaint regarding assessment process of mum and dad in relation to a proposed placement, added to dissatisfaction with Care Management	Awaiting Outcome	Not Available
Client complained about the quality of care and health care provided to her late husband	Awaiting Outcome	Not Available
Complaint regarding Mother's move into a Nursing Home. The complainant felt that the communications should have been more comprehensive and requested that the PCT contribute to fund the placement.	Awaiting Outcome	Not Available

Housing Management LGO referrals

Complaint Details	LGO Decision	Recommendations
HC-000297 Allegation that repairs have not been completed.	No Maladministration	No recommendations.

<p>HC-000352</p> <p>From March 2009 LBH have not fulfilled their duty to carry out repairs.</p> <p>Concern about the safety of their children playing in the garden in the absence of a fence and lack of privacy.</p> <p>(Easy access for pets, especially dogs, from neighbourhood).</p>	<p>Maladministration causing injustice</p>	<p>Delays in the Council in dealing with the request for repairs confirmed. Apology given.</p> <p>A link fence is to be erected by the Council.</p>
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Housing Services LGO Referrals

Complaint Details	LGO Decision	Recommendations
<p>HC-000491</p> <p>Complainant wanted to be re-assessed for housing due to a change in circumstances. Unhappy about not being awarded a higher band. Frustrated at perceived lack of communication</p>	<p>No Maladministration</p>	<p>Discontinued the investigation and closed complaint.</p>
<p>HC-000504</p> <p>Complainant alleges that the Council has failed to respond properly to his need for re-housing since he approached them for assistance around May 2009</p>	<p>Maladministration</p>	<p>Council advised to address issues from the complaint.</p> <p>Following assessment, LBH made a further offer of a property, which complainant accepted and moved into in the summer of 2010.</p> <p>The Private Sector Housing Team to ensure that more than 1 chaser enquiry is made to an address before cases are closed due to no contact.</p>
<p>HC-000589</p> <p>Enquiry from the LGO about Housing Benefit entitlement and the suspension of payments.</p>	<p>Discontinued</p>	<p>Information provided, no comeback from the LGO</p>
<p>HC-000597</p>	<p>Awaiting Decision</p>	<p>Not known at this stage</p>

Complaint Details	LGO Decision	Recommendations
Complainant and family have lived in temporary accommodation for the past 8 years. The accommodation is overcrowded.		(awaiting determination)
HC-000601 The complainant alleges that the Council have failed to assess the complainants medical needs correctly and as a result the complainant has been placed in the wrong band for re-housing.	No Maladministration	No recommendations. LGO provisional findings were that the Council fairly assessed the medical information supplied in accordance with allocations policy. Furthermore the LGO consider the Council's decision to place the complainant in band C to be reasonable based on the information supplied.
HC-000667 Complainant unhappy and wants to be housed with emergency temporary accommodation.	Maladministration; No Injustice	The Council provided the complainant with emergency temporary accommodation and offered a remedy at an earlier stage. The LGO therefore felt there was no injustice.
HC-000697 Enquiry from the LGO about the complainant's status in applying for re-housing.	No Maladministration	LGO reports that it is not clear what else an investigation by the Ombudsman could achieve
HC-000837 Complainant alleges that the Council is unreasonably pursuing him in order to recover an overpayment on Housing Benefit and Council Tax.	No Maladministration	Council action considered reasonable in pursuing recovery of overpayment.

Members Enquiries

Enquiries can be submitted to officers on behalf of residents to Elected Members. During 2010/11, we received 903 enquiries from elected members on behalf of our residents in addition to the complaints set out above. Enquiries from members can include a request for further information, questions about an assessment, decisions or quality of service experienced by our resident.

Summary

Social Care Health & Housing received 903 enquiries between April 2010 and March 2011. Housing Needs received the highest number of enquires at 323 (36%) followed by Hillingdon Housing Service at 185 (20%), Private Sector Housing had 158 (18%), Access and Assessment 101 (11%), Benefits 83 (9%) and 53 others (6%).

The top 5 enquiries related to Housing Needs Assessments (191) followed by Housing Advice (119), Access to Care (73), Benefit decisions (64) and finally Day to Day Repairs (50)

5. Complaints Learning

Every complaint is an opportunity to learn from our customers about what works and what does not. Even when a complaint is not upheld we need to look at why the person felt that they needed to make a complaint. Often it is because their expectation of the service differs from the actual service standard.

Communication is the key to a good relationship with our customers and it is as fundamental as:

- Accessible information about our services
- Clear eligibility criteria and rationale
- Clear service standards that are achieved and developed in partnership with customers
- Well-trained staff who are knowledgeable and have excellent customer care skills, who listen and demonstrate empathy
- Staff who keep in touch with the customer, keep them informed and return calls
- Clear communication and written correspondence.

Specific themes where services have identified improvements as result of complaints are set out below.

- Improving customer care and communication issues
- Improvements to written information in everyday language to explain housing benefit decisions and changes
- One-to-one discussions with individual members of staff and reviewing their written communication before letters are sent to customers
- A review of standard letters across Benefit Services to ensure they are clear and easy to understand.
- Targeted action and visits to care providers to review and follow up on quality of care issues to ensure care standards are met

- Continued improvements to adult social care access and assessment services have been made during 2010/11 to ensure a focus on timely completion of assessments, reviews and greater choice and personalization for the service user and their carer. This includes continuing to improve the information system for adult social care to support effective information and performance management.

6. Complaints Promotion

In order to promote the complaints service to all our customers, a series of visits were made to Day Centres and Voluntary organizations. The visits not only promoted the complaints service but offered customers and partners the opportunity to learn more about the process and in fact make referrals to all services across the council.

Customer Care and Complaints Staff have also attended team meetings to promote and advise staff of the complaints procedure and provided one-to-one support for staff dealing with complaints.

An 'outreach programme' has been undertaken by the Complaints Team, which has involved visiting various agencies who do (or potentially could) serve as an advocacy service for residents living in Hillingdon. The purpose of such a programme has been to promote the complaints service, and to introduce the staff as well as the possibilities that the complaints service can offer to clients, particularly those who may require assistance in approaching the Local Authority to express dissatisfaction.

The outreach programme was a mini roadshow, which visited Age UK; TAGEERO; MIND; Hillingdon Carers; and DASH among others.

The information gathered from the sequence of visits to external agencies has ranged from a need to increase awareness of the complaints process, to an eagerness to work closely together to encourage and enable clients to make use of the complaints procedure that is of course open to everyone.

It is the intention of the service to build on this piece of work and to expand the outreach programme in 2011/12 to further strengthen the relationship with the complaints service and the other professionals working towards putting the residents first.

7. Future Developments

The successful implementation of feedback surveys of residents who have made a complaint have enabled the service to further strengthen complaints management and service improvement. The focus remains to:

- Improve the communication with complainants during the investigation and resolution of their complaint. When asked, some complainants felt that they were not always kept up-to-date. We will work with managers to address this.

- Further develop information about how to access the complaints procedure; this includes web access as well as an overall campaign to provide written and visual information across the Borough
- Review with management teams how the arrangements for resolving complaints is working
- Develop mechanisms for reporting and monitoring changes and learning from complaints. This will be part of the developing quarterly quality assurance framework for Social Care, Health and Housing.
- Work with managers to implement the Complaints Procedures.

BACKING DOCUMENTS

Complaints regulations for adult social care
Corporate Complaints procedures

SUGGESTED OVERVIEW ACTIVITY

Members of the Committee discuss and comment on the annual complaints report and use the report to inform their overview activities.