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**To:** EHW Policy Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 14<sup>th</sup> September 2010

**Subject:** EHW Annual Complaints, Comments & Compliments Report 2010

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**Classification:** Unrestricted

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**Summary:** This report informs this Committee of the operation of the complaints, comments and compliments procedure by the Environment, Highways and Waste Directorate between 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2010.

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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 As the expectations of customers increase and they begin to demand the same levels of service from KCC that they expect and receive from the private sector, Environment, Highways and Waste (EHW) need to actively seek ways to enhance customer service delivery and raise levels of customer satisfaction when they interact with the Directorate.
- 1.2 One mechanism used to review feedback from customers is through complaints, compliments and comments monitoring. This is an important source of 'unsolicited' customer feedback that we have used to demonstrate that we actually listen to and learn from our customers and are striving to continuously improve our customer service delivery whilst maintaining a focus on achieving 'value for money' for our citizens through local government expenditure.
- 1.3 This report provides information on complaints and compliments received during 2009/10 and gives examples of where analysis of the feedback has led to service change across the Directorate. The report also outlines complaint trends, the source of complaints, overall performance on handling complaints, diversity data and an update on Local Government Ombudsman complaints.

## **2. The number of Complaints received**

- 2.1 Across EHW, we received 1641 complaints from April 2009 to March 2010 compared to the same time period in the previous year when we received 429 complaints.
- 2.2 As our two frontline services, Kent Highway Services (KHS) and Environment & Waste (E&W) received the majority of the complaints with KHS receiving 1259 complaints (77%) in 2009/10 and E&W receiving 380 complaints (23%). 2 complaints were received within Integrated Strategy & Planning (ISP).
- 2.3 A number of factors have contributed to the increase in complaint volumes, some of which were outside of our control (the severe weather conditions in December 2009/January 2010 followed by flooding which had a detrimental effect on the quality

of the road surfaces across Kent and led to a significant increase in pothole and flooding related complaints).

- 2.4 We also implemented changes to our complaints process and this coupled with increasing customer expectations as our customers have become more aware of what information they are entitled to access also contributed to an increasing trend in our recorded complaints data.
- 2.5 In April 2009, a revised corporate complaints policy was implemented across KCC with the aim of providing a fair, consistent and simple complaints procedure that our customers could access easily. This was subsequently rolled out across the Directorate and we are now very consistent in the way we capture complaints from our customers.
- 2.6 Although these factors have been largely outside of our control, we have also seen an increase in complaint volumes due to the standard of work completed or where staff have been perceived by our customers as being rude or unhelpful and this is something that we have looked to address in our aim to put our customers at the centre of everything that we do. This is summarised under sections 6 – 7 of this report.
- 2.7 Comments from complaint snippets are outlined in Appendix A.

### **3. KHS Complaints**

- 3.1 During 2009/10, KHS received 1259 complaints compared to the same time period in the previous year when 195 complaints were received.
- 3.2 908 of the 2009/10 complaints (72%) were received at the end of Q3 and into Q4 and were as a direct result of the extremely harsh winter which Kent suffered. The extraordinary weather conditions (which lasted from December 2009 to February 2010) caused severe damage to the Kent road network and KHS, like many other local authorities struggled to manage the subsequent increased weather related faults being reported. These included queries on the winter maintenance policy, pothole related complaints and flooding/drainage issues.
- 3.3 The Contact Centre answered 142,758 Highways calls in 2009/10 of which less than 1% were complaint related. (0.9%)
- 3.4 From December 2009 to March 2010, 6118 of the calls received by the Contact Centre concerned winter maintenance, 8511 related to potholes and 3273 were about drainage/flooding issues. In the same time period, KHS received 908 complaints which equates to only 5% of the winter related calls received.

### **4. E&W Complaints**

- 4.1 During 2009/10, E&W received 380 complaints compared to the same time period in the previous year when 231 complaints were received.

- 4.2 Of the 380 complaints received in E&W, the majority came from two main service areas – Country Parks which received 109 complaints and the Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) which received 260 complaints.
- 4.3 There were three key issues highlighted through the HWRC complaints received. 152 complaints (40%) related to height barriers, walking waste onto the sites and changes to the twin axle policy. The remaining two issues concerned rude/unhelpful staff (43 complainants mentioned this as an issue) and the Wyecycle recycling/incinerator fees (42 complaints).
- 4.4 Across the Country Parks, the key issues highlighted by customers through complaints related to café queues/prices, car parking charges and litter (including dog fouling).

## 5. Complaint Handling Performance

- 5.1 Across EHW, we received 1641 complaints from April 2009 to March 2010 compared to the same time period in the previous year when we received 429 complaints.
- 5.2 1559 complaints (95%) were acknowledged within the corporate standard of 3 working days and 1601 complainants (98%) received a full response within 20 working days.)
- 5.3 Complaint response times were as follows:

<b>Complaint Response Times</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>2009/10</b>
Complaints acknowledged within 3 working days	411 (96%)	1559 (95%)
Full response to complaints within 20 working days	416 (97%)	1601 (98%)

- 5.4 Complaints were received as follows:

<b>Method of Contact</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>2009/10</b>
Comment Cards	72 (17%)	65 (4%)
Email (including systems)	129 (30%)	239 (14%)
Letter (including fax)	113 (26%)	126 (8%)
Telephone	115 (27%)	1211 (74%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>429</b>	<b>1641</b>

- 5.5 The reasons for these complaints were as follows:

<b>Reason for Complaint</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>2009/10</b>
Personal Decision	36 (8%)	162 (10%)
Policy Matter	0	232 (16%)
Standard of Work	393 (92%)	1247 (74%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>429</b>	<b>1641</b>

## **6. Customer Service Improvements implemented across KHS following complaints**

- 6.1 The complaints received across KHS throughout 2009/10 have provided valuable customer feedback and coupled with other sources of feedback obtained through monthly customer satisfaction surveys and the annual tracker survey have enabled KHS to implement several service improvements. These have resulted in an improved focus on meeting customer expectations.
- 6.2 To help the Contact Centre provide the caller with some expectation of when a fault will be actioned, each enquiry is automatically given a 28 day target (for routine repairs or drain cleansing etc) or a programmed target (for more complex work that requires planning such as requests for traffic calming). Where KHS meet the 28 day target but further work is required (for example a gully is cleaned but still does not work due to a broken pipe) then KHS let the customer know the timescales for this programmed work. The Contact Centre has also strengthened relationships with all KHS departments to ensure that the advisors have the latest information available to pass onto the general public.
- 6.3 KHS continue to promote the web form for logging faults on line via the KCC website and currently around 1500 are logged each month. This reduces the demand on the Contact Centre and allows customers to track the progress of their fault on line in real time. KHS are continually improving this feature and are currently planning for easier login to the system and improved maps to enable customer to easily locate a fault.
- 6.4 Following the extremely harsh winter and subsequent damage to the KHS network, a huge volume of complaints were received about potholes and how quickly KHS were repairing them. A major programme of work called 'Find & Fix' was introduced which saw KHS using private contractors to repair rural roads with the main term contractor (Ringway) being used to fix problems on major A & B Roads. For potholes, the recent find and fix process has delivered some significant improvements to the network. KHS is reviewing the balance between reactive pothole repair hoping to meet customer demands and the overall improved customer perception of the programmed approach.
- 6.5 Over the first six months of the year, Kent Highway Services and the specialist tarmac teams have fixed over 130,000 potholes – double the total number repaired in the first half of last year.
- 6.6 In the KHS drainage team, recent improvements have included the use of specialist crews to fix drainage problems where the initial gully clean has fixed the blockage. By linking the cleansing crews with the specialised repair crews, KHS have speeded up the end to end time from customer call to fix. In addition, crews have been targeting whole parish or village areas with known drainage hot spots and meeting up with parish councillors working with them to ensure their local knowledge is used to review and fix the whole drainage system and not just localised drains.
- 6.7 To ensure that performance is being measured on a regular basis, KHS have introduced monthly Balanced Scorecard meetings, where all team managers now report on team performance directly to the KHS Director. These meetings are used to review current workloads, customer satisfaction levels (as measured through the Contact Centre 100 call back survey), complaints received and any required improvements to the business.

6.8 Twenty one customer service innovations and improvements have been identified through monthly Contact Centre performance review meetings and have included introducing a seamless service for customers who report fly tipping, raising awareness at police HQ of the information that the Contact Centre need from the police to improve our response to customers, implementing new ways to manage speed awareness calls, arranging first point resolution meetings with the top 10 Contact Centre agents to identify best practice/tips to share across the Contact Centre and implementing system based enhancements to CSM - the KHS work management system.

## **7. Customer Service Improvements implemented across E&W following complaints**

7.1 As a result of feedback from customers and contractors, Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) policy changes were introduced in July 2009. Customers were made aware of these improvements through leaflets, signs, newspaper articles and the kent.gov.uk website. As a result of additional complaints regarding these policy changes:

- The trailer policy was reviewed and subsequently amended in line with customer comments to allow twin axle trailers within sites.
- HWRC site opening times were extended during the summer months to allow late night opening every Thursday from April 2010 to help alleviate customer queues at the weekend.
- An allowance has been made for disabled customers regarding the introduction of a 2m height barrier at sites. If a disabled customer has a vehicle over 2m in height and a Blue Badge, that customer can make contact with Waste Management staff who will arrange for the customer to deliver waste to a site of their choice where the height barrier will be raised for them to enter.

7.2 A customer complaint was recently received regarding a sign informing the public that waste could not be walked into the Faversham HWRC. The complainant highlighted that the sign was incorrectly situated and not immediately obvious to the public. Subsequently, work is currently underway to relocate this sign to a more appropriate position.

7.3 As a result of recent customer comments regarding unhelpful staff, HWRC site staff will be issued with high visibility jackets bearing the statement (or similar to) *'please ask me for assistance'* on the reverse. This will initially be introduced at the Church Marshes site and will hopefully be rolled out to all HWRCs in the future.

7.4 Waste Management provided bespoke customer service training to HWRC site staff and contractors in November 2009 to ensure customer standards were clarified and enhanced. Follow up customer care training is planned for winter 2010, including a refresher around the latest complaints received and conflict resolution. Furthermore in all new HWRC contracts, contractors are obliged to provide some training to their site staff.

7.5 Waste Management staff received bespoke training in March 2010 on customer service clarifying the KCC complaints procedure, timescales for responding to customers and the standards of customer care expected.

- 7.6 The impact of a planned nine week closure of the Shorncliffe HWRC on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2010 for essential maintenance and structural repairs is being mitigated by alternative arrangements - additional household waste will be accepted at the Ashford and Dover sites 7 days per week and the Hawkinge site at weekends.
- 7.7 A customer satisfaction survey will be appearing on [www.kent.gov.uk](http://www.kent.gov.uk) in late August 2010 to ask customers for feedback regarding the HWRCs. The Waste Operations Team is currently establishing a new Performance Management toolkit to assist with HWRC monitoring and customer satisfaction.
- 7.8 A number of visitors at the Country Parks complained via the comment cards that the queues were too long at the café and prices were too expensive. This was also picked up in a 2009 customer survey at Shorne Woods Country Park. To help alleviate these issues, the following initiatives have been implemented:
- The menu in the café at Shorne Wood Country Park has been reviewed to ensure prices remain affordable to customers and in doing so a number of the regular suppliers have been changed.
  - To start to address queue times within the café, some of the items that take longest to prepare have been removed from the menu.
  - The café has very recently been refurbished with a self service counter in order to serve customers quicker during peak times.
  - Children's lunch boxes have been included on the menu at Shorne Wood Country Park.
  - Comments were made about the baguettes in the cafes being too hard to eat and soft bread options have been included at Shorne Wood and Lullingstone Country Parks.
  - The exit survey carried out at Trosley Country Park in 2009, revealed that the public wanted a refreshment facility and a refreshment van now operates on site.
- 7.9 The Kent Country Park exit survey 2009 and the survey into young people's opinions highlighted events that people would be interested in attending and evaluations are being carried out into the potential of hosting these events at the parks.
- 7.10 At Teston Bridge Country Park, there are two wardens who patrol in the morning and at the end of the day to collect litter. They also patrol more frequently on busy days to help reduce the amount of litter left in the park.
- 7.11 Car parking charges are made to help towards the cost of running the parks and all the money from the parking machines goes straight back into the country parks budget. However a season ticket is now available for regular visitors which is then valid for use at all of the country parks.
- 7.12 To help alleviate the problem of dogs fouling at the Country Parks, several notices have been put up around the car park and immediate infrastructure leading away from the area asking dog owners to clear up after their dogs. Gloves have also been made available for picking up faeces located in the park and there are several dog waste bins located in many places that are emptied regularly. Local dog wardens from Sevenoaks district Council have also been encouraged to make patrols in the problem areas of the park.
- 7.13 Green Flags have now been awarded to Shorne Woods, Manor, Trosley and Brockhill Country Parks - the Green Flag scheme sets national standards for green spaces and

cover aspects such as safety, access for all, good signage, good management of litter and fouling, involvement of community as well as sustainability and conservation issues.

7.14 In April 2010, E&W successfully passed a Charter Mark health check review of progress which demonstrates their strong customer focus. The review was carried out by an independent external assessor who was very complimentary of the high standards of customer service and progress made by E&W since the last review.

## 8. The number of compliments received

8.1 Across EHW, we received 1655 compliments from April 2009 to March 2010 compared to the same time period in the previous year when we received 941 compliments. This represents a 176% increase in the number of compliments received.

8.2 479 compliments were received in KHS with 275 of them (57%) being received at the end of Q3 and in Q4. Several of the compliments mentioned the excellent service provided by KHS staff during the severe weather conditions.

8.3 Of the 1163 compliments received in E&W, the majority came from two main service areas – Country Parks which received 414 compliments and Countryside Access which received 636 compliments.

8.4 Compliments have provided a valuable source of learning and can be a good indicator of best practice or areas where we are getting things right across the Directorate. An example of this is the increased use of trampers at the Country Parks which supports our equalities and diversity agenda by recognising the need of KCC to consider the aging population in Kent.

8.5 As customer expect more from us, they are less likely to compliment us on what they will perceive as expected service delivery so achieving such a high increase in compliment volumes is a significant achievement.

8.6 Compliments were received across EHW as follows:

<b>Service Area</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>2009/10</b>
Kent Highway Services	359	479
Environment & Waste	576	1163
Integrated Strategy & Planning	6	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>941</b>	<b>1655</b>

8.7 Comments from compliment snippets are outlined in Appendix B

## **9. Valuing Diversity**

9.1 From April 2009, an Equalities Monitoring Form has been issued to every complainant with the acknowledgement letter to ensure that our complaints procedures are open and accessible to everyone and going forward equalities monitoring information will be used to inform best practice.

9.2 In 2009/10, only 32 forms were returned and it has therefore not been feasible to set specific objectives from the feedback received. However the following observations have been made:

- Of the 32 forms returned, 23 were received from people from a white British ethnic origin and 14 forms were completed by people in the age category 46 - 55.
- The gender of the complainant noted on the equalities forms were fairly evenly split with 18 being received from males and 14 from females.
- 27 people identified their religion as Christian on the forms and 27 people recorded their sexual orientation as heterosexual.

## **10. Compensation**

10.1 No compensation was paid to complainants across EHW during 2009/10 under the complaints procedure. However for one complaint, compensation was paid as part of a settlement agreement with the Local Government Ombudsman.

## **11. Local Government Ombudsman Complaints**

11.1 In 2009/10 the Local Government Ombudsman handled 161 enquiries and complaints about KCC overall and made decisions on 120 complaints against the Council. There were 52 complaints where the Ombudsman found no or insufficient evidence of fault by KCC, 21 complaints which the Ombudsman chose not to pursue investigations and 17 complaints which were outside of his jurisdiction.

11.2 In 2009/10 the Ombudsman agreed 29 local settlements with KCC. (A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of the investigation, KCC have taken or agreed to take some action that the Ombudsman considers to be a satisfactory response to the complainant.)

11.3 Of the 29 local settlements, only 2 concerned highways matters. In the first of these, we had not implemented a previous agreement to adopt a highway and we subsequently clarified the timescale for carrying out this work. In the second, we failed to give advance notice of a road closure and agreed to pay £1000 compensation for the negative impact on the complainant's business.

## **12. Conclusion**

- 12.1 In 2009/10, EHW continued to adopt a robust and effective approach to the ongoing management of complaints. All complaints have been reviewed across the service areas and customer feedback has been used to improve our customer service delivery.
- 12.2 Several customer focused improvements have been implemented across EHW in 2009/10 and these are making a difference to the customer experience when they interact with the Directorate and KCC overall.

## **13. Recommendations**

- 13.1 Members of the EHW POSC are asked to:
- Note the content of this report.

### **Contact detail**

Contact: Toni Easdown, Customer Standards Officer  
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Background documents: Annual letter from the Local Government Ombudsman

**EHW complaint snippets from 2009/10 complaints**

*Café was over priced and the service was very poor. (Received by one of the Country Parks)*

*Car parking fees are absolutely extortionate and unjustified. (Received by one of the Country Parks)*

*The café was too expensive and had to wait too long for food. (Received by one of the Country Parks)*

*I do not agree with the banning of walking waste into the sites and do not agree that the 2mtr height restriction being sufficient for most household vehicles. (Received by one of the HWRCs)*

*Customer has recently bought twin axle 7'0" trailer and now can't take it to Tovil re new policies. He wanted to know what public consultation had taken place. He is not happy there was not a full public consultation and feels he has been inconvenienced. (Received by one of the HWRCs)*

*This gentleman works away from home and regularly takes his waste to the Faversham centre for recycling. However, he uses his van and was not aware that he could no long walk the waste in. He stated when he visited the site he felt the member of staff was very rude to him when explaining the new policy. (Received by one of the HWRCs)*

*I would like to make a complaint about the lack of signage which is put out when roadworks are going on. Whether they are emergency or planned the signage always seems to be appalling. (Received by KHS)*

*The road was meant to be totally resurfaced but the contractors have only done the central part of the road leaving potholes and craters down the side of the road where cars park. (Received by KHS)*

*Instead of repairing pot holes every year, year after year, why don't you just re-surface the roads properly in the first place? It stands to reason that if there weren't any seams and cracks for the ice to get into, the pot holes wouldn't appear. (Received by KHS)*

*I've noticed that once again the roads and paths in Deal are not being salted or cleared after a fall of snow. I have heard the usual excuses, lack of staff, lack of money, lack of staff. What happened to the excellent customer service? (Received by KHS)*

*I have read with interest your winter salting routes as displayed on your web page. As an Orthopaedic Consultant I have seen the effects of the winter weather but much more importantly I am frankly shocked by the poor road clearance carried out around Maidstone. (Received by KHS)*

*The Isle of Sheppey is a wonderful example of Kent Highway Services salting and winter services. But does this include assistance to those unable to go about their essential business, like collecting prescriptions, shopping and going to the post office. (Received by KHS)*

*Can you please tell me why one of the steepest hills in Walmer or Deal used by many Driving Schools to test pupils on hill starts, which is also a bus route (82) and has several residences elderly persons has not seen a salting lorry? (Received by KHS)*

*Caller would like a call back to continue her complaint that her road has not been gritted. Her main issue is that she has paid for a parking permit, but is unable to park on the road due to the ice. (Received by KHS)*

*I want to make a complaint about the gritters in the town centre in Folkestone. They are just going round and round doing the same roads which have already been gritted a good few times. They need to be start moving onto the side roads*

**EHW compliment snippets from 2009/10 compliments**

*I am disabled and without the motorised trampers my life would be very different. A big 'thank you' from my husband and I for giving us a lifeline. We cannot begin to even tell you how much it means to us. With sincere gratitude. (Received by one of the Country Parks)*

*I visited the site last Saturday in a group of 12, including my family. Thanks to the use of a 'tramper', I was able to keep up with everyone – even the grandchildren! Enjoyed the walks that I would never have been able to do. Usually I stay behind and mind the bags. (Received by one of the Country Parks)*

*I want to thank you so much for the kissing gate. When I walked across the footpath this morning I couldn't believe my eyes. The gate is so much better to use and we don't get jostled up on to the road. I have two partially disabled friends who feel as free as a spirit as I am when they were actually able to cross the footpath and go on through the gates and across the road at last. Up until then they have only been able to reach the stile and then return the way they came. Thank you once again for your help and may I say Very Well Done. (Received by Countryside Access)*

*The Deal Household recycling centre is very clean and tidy. It is nice to see people taking pride in their job and doing what may be considered more than expected. Well done. (Received by one the HWRCs)*

*One of my constituents had a fall at the Sheerness Waste Centre very recently. His own fault as he was trying to lift something which was too heavy he tells me. However, he says that the help and attention shown to him by the operatives was brilliant. He cannot speak to highly of them. He is not the first person to say how helpful the men 'down the dump' are, so I would appreciate it if you would pass this on for me please. (Received by one the HWRCs)*

*I would like to express my thanks to the gentlemen who came to my assistance when I tripped and fell at the Ashford Waste site. One helped me up and took me to the site office, where the gentleman there helped me mop up the blood flowing from my nose and cheek. The one who helped me up then went to my car and emptied all six of the bags of garden waste that I intended to dump. He then offered to drive me home, which, fortunately, was not necessary. I was eventually cleaned up and some plaster patches applied by the gentleman in the office so that I could get home. We hear so much about how insensitive are careless of others people in this country have become that I think my experience shows there are many good people about who are quite willing to give help when it is needed. (Received by one the HWRCs)*

*Two weeks ago, I broke down at the refuse tip in Herne Bay. I was helped by the staff there, first by trying to fix the problem, then they pushed me to one side and helped me ring for assistance. The staff could not have been any more helpful and they all deserve a pat on the back. This could have been a very stressful situation without their help. Thanks to your staff I could not have wished for a nicer place to break down. (Received by one the HWRCs)*

*I see your trucks pass my living room window and as I drive 50 miles into London every day, it is very reassuring to benefit from such professionalism and dedication. Please pass my thanks onto the drivers and loaders. (Received by KHS)*

*Thanks for doing such an excellent job with helping to clear the town centre of all the snow and ice that we have had over the last couple of days. I feel so safe walking into town on the pavements that I won't be turning to driving in like I did last time. Keep up the good work. (Received by KHS)*

*A special thank you for sending out a gritting team to clear the way for a young Kent girl to get out of her house and go for medical treatment. (Received by KHS)*