

Report to	Resources & Performance Committee
Date	20 June 2013
By	Director of Corporate Services
Title of Report	Annual Complaints Report
Purpose of Report	To inform the Committee about the number of complaints, comments and compliments we have received and lessons learned

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to :

- 1) note the report and the learning points identified; and**
 - 2) consider any further action or response required as a result of the information in the report**
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1. Introduction

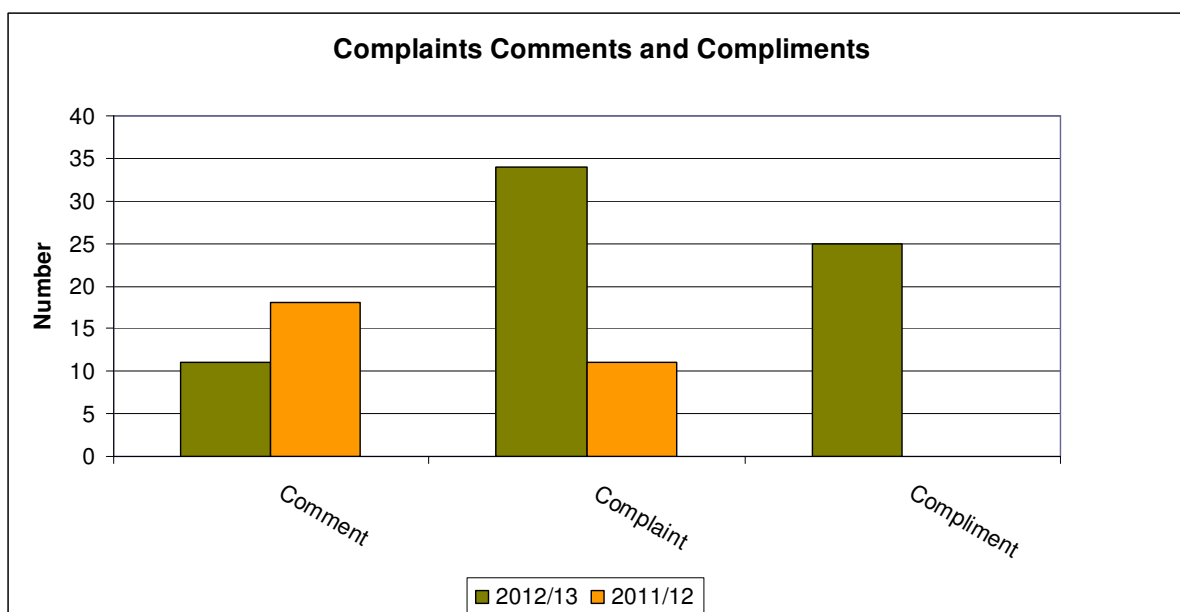
- 1.1 The report provides an overview of comments, compliments and complaints received during the year, comparative information from other National Park Authorities and learning points for service improvement.

2. Background

- 2.1 The first annual report on comments, compliments and complaints was the Standards and Audit Committee in February 2012. The Committee agreed that; *“the appropriate Committee...receive an annual report on the complaints, comments and compliments received...”*.
- 2.2 An important part of improving organisational performance is to review complaints and comments about services and to make sure that any learning or improvement points are noted and acted on by relevant directorates. In that context it is recommended that this Committee is the most appropriate to receive this information.
- 2.3 The complaints policy is on the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) website. Complaints, comments and compliments are received centrally through a dedicated in-box. They sometimes also arrive directly in other Authority offices or through the info@southdowns.gov.uk or planning@southdowns.gov.uk inboxes. However they arrive, they are logged centrally and sent out to the most relevant member of staff to provide a response directly. Replies are logged and held centrally. The deadline for providing a response is 10 working days.

3. Complaints, comments and compliments received

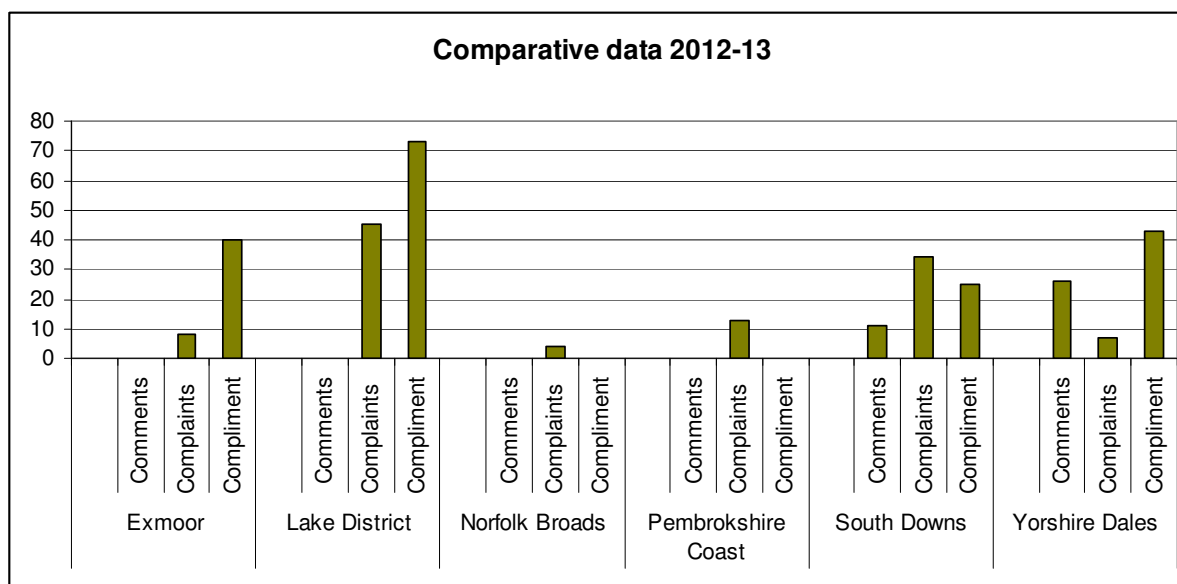
- 3.1 The graph below shows the number of comments, compliments and complaints received during 2012-13 compared to 2011-12. SDNPA received 34 complaints, 11 comments and 25 compliments. As was to be expected there has been an increase across all three areas.



- 3.2 The complaints policy has a three stage process: Stage 1, informal complaints, stage 2 formal complaints and stage 3 which is referral to the Chief Executive. Thirty complaints were dealt with at stage 1. Four were dealt with at Stage 2.
- 3.3 Thirty two of the complaints received related to the planning service. The highest number of complaints (12) related to host authorities. Of complaints about the SDNPA planning service most were about failure to respond to correspondence or dissatisfaction with responses when they were received. A small number (3) were about administrative errors, one was about a perceived failure to take enforcement action. A sample summary is shown in **Appendix I**.
- 3.4 Comments received were varied, the issues raised include the condition of footpaths, units of measurement used in South Downs View, lack of scenic views represented on SDNPA website, dog fouling, the unexpected cessation of 79 Bus to Ditchling Beacon, signage and car parking. Some comments, are complaints about services provided by others or matters where the person contacting us assumed that the SDNPA is responsible for what they are complaining about. In these cases we replied and either explained the situation, or directed the correspondent to the right organisation, or person, to deal with their complaint.
- 3.5 We received 25 compliments about our services or staff. Nineteen were about Planning of those five were about support from link officers, other compliments were about support from officers during the planning application process and attendance and presentations at meetings. Two parish councils appreciated the changes made to the weekly lists that enabled them to find applications relating to their areas easier. Compliments were also received about the work of the Operations teams and presentations given at events.
- 4. Response times**
- 4.1 Five complaints were not responded to within timescales. One was a stage 2 complaint the rest stage 1. In two cases the reason for the delay appears to be in cases where the complaint required co-ordination between more than one directorate. In two other cases there were delays in forwarding the complaint to SDNPA Officers and once that was done it was found that the complaint needed to be referred to a Local Authority to be resolved. Procedures have been tightened and relevant staff have been reminded of the importance of forwarding complaints promptly when they are received. One stage 2 complaint was late by 3 days and this was partially due to extensive correspondence from the complainant.
- 5. Learning from complaints**
- 5.1 As stated in paragraph 2.2 it is important that feedback is used constructively where possible to improve services. Much of our feedback relates specifically to the Planning Service. The key learning points are:

- A more robust process for forwarding and monitoring of planning complaints/comments to minimise or eliminate delays in responding has been introduced coupled with reminders at team meetings about the complaints process to promote staff awareness of correct procedures;
- Cumulative changes and improvements to Idox UNIFORM have reduced administration errors for SDNPA and local authorities, the number of Idox helpdesk enquires has reduced;
- Assistance was given to a host authority to reduce delays in validation;
- Additional training was given to support authorities using Idox UNIFORM;
- A revised process has been put in place with the Communications Team and reception staff so that significant projects or surveys are notified to both teams allowing those staff to correctly direct queries or complaints about those matters when they come in.

5.2 Comparative data for complaints received by other National Parks is set out below.



6. Resources

- 6.1 There are no direct implications from this report, although any assessment of satisfaction with the complaints process and some of the other actions arising from the equality analysis may need resources to implement. The exact requirements will be established as a result of the action plan.

7. Risk management

- 7.1 None of the complaints have resulted in the identification of new risks for the organisation, some of the issues around the planning agency arrangements and the introduction of the UNIFORM – IdoX system for Planning are being actively managed by the Planning team.

8. Human Rights, Equalities, Health and Safety

- 8.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report. An equalities impact assessment of the policy was recently carried out and some options to improved access to the service for people with the following protected characteristics; disability, race and age. The proposed action plan is attached at **Appendix 2**.

9. Sustainability

- 9.1 There are no direct sustainability implications.

10. External Consultees

- 10.1 None.

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Appendices Appendix 1 – examples of complaints and responses
Appendix 2 – equalities impact assessment action plan

SDNPA Chief Executive, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Planning,
Consultees Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Head of Operations, Chief Finance
Officer, Deputy Chief Finance Officer, Monitoring Officer.

Background Documents Report to Audit Committee February 2012 - SC 02/12
SDNPA Approved Complaints Policy
<http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/about-us/compliments-comments-and-complaints/our-complaints-compliments-and-comments-process>

Examples of complaints and summary responses

Complaint	Summary of response
Dissatisfaction with response from Planning Department on issues affecting property following approval of planning permission for a major development by SDNPA	Many of the issues raised were not planning matters and the complainant was directed to other Authorities for assistance. There were no problems with the process followed despite the unhappiness of the complainant with the outcome. A complaint about unprofessional behaviour by a member of staff was not upheld.
Lack of response to a complaint	Complainant telephoned and the matter was settled.
Dissatisfaction with no response from Planning Department regarding two planning applications which have been received but not validated	Letter of response from the relevant authority was sent explaining the issues with the introduction of new IT systems. An apology was offered. A general communication was sent to planning agents about the teething issues with the new system.
<p>A number of complaints were received about the time taken to process applications by local authorities</p> <p>Concern about a contractor working for SDNPA taking photos of their property.</p>	<p>Each case was responded to on its merits with apologies, where necessary and referral to a host authority if appropriate.</p> <p>The survey being undertaken was explained to the property owner. An apology was offered. This complaint was partially exacerbated by the fact that staff on reception were unaware that the survey was taking place so could not advise or explain to the complainant what the contractor was doing at their property. A new process has been put in place to make sure that reception staff are aware of such things in future.</p>

Equalities analysis action plan for the Complaints process

Protected Group	Issue Identified	Action/Justification	Timescale	Lead person
Disability	Access to the function support to make a complaint	Revise the policy to state explicitly what support could be given to users with different disabilities	Q2	AR
Disability	Access to the function information in alternative formats	Find out about how to get information produced in different formats if required and how this would be paid for	Q2	AR
Race	Access to the function information in alternative formats	Find out about how to get information produced in different formats if required and how this would be paid for	Q2	AR
All	Access to the function options for information to be made available other than on the website	Explore options for making information about how to complain available other than via the website	Q3	AR
All	How to get feedback on the complaints process from users	Explore the potential use of surveys after a complaint has been completed to gauge satisfaction	Q3	AR/Complaints officers
All	Collection of diversity data for complainants	Amend online form to collect this information if necessary	Q2	AR