

Report to	Standards Committee
Date	27 February 2012
By	Director of Corporate Services
Title of Report	Review of Complaints, Compliments and Comments Policy
Purpose of Report	To inform the Committee about the number of complaints, comments and compliments we have received and agree recommendations for improvements to the Complaints Compliments and Comments Policy and procedural guidance

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to

- 1) note the changes proposed to the policy**
 - 2) agree that the Director of Corporate Services approves the changes required to the policy and procedural guidance**
 - 3) agree to receive an annual report on the complaints, comments and compliments received along with any proposed changes**
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1. Introduction and Summary

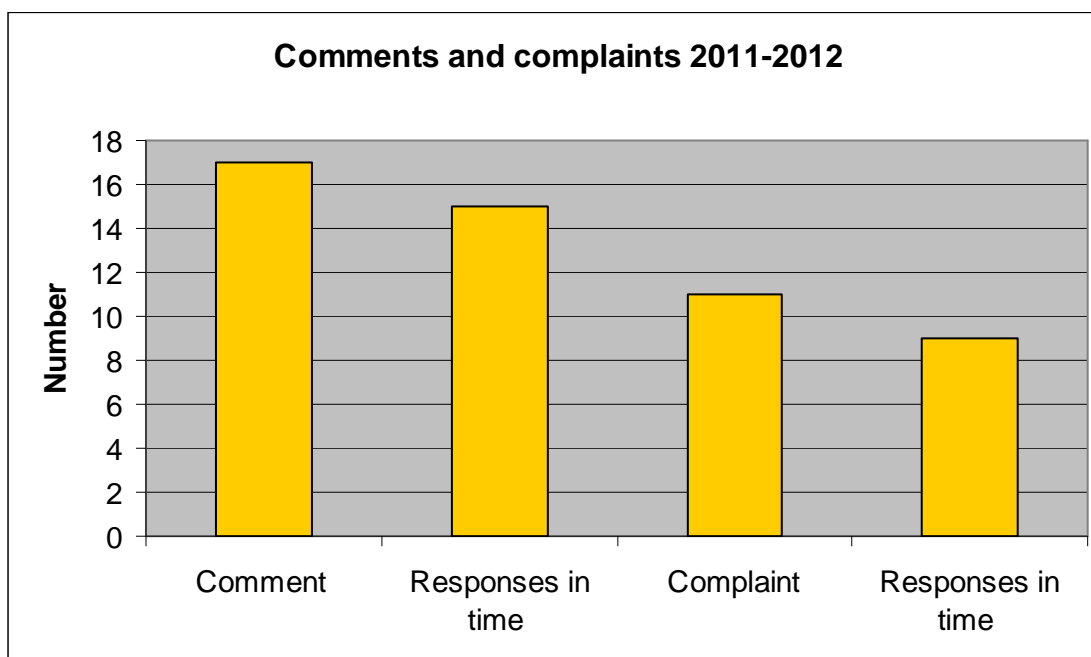
- 1.1 This report reviews the implementation of the complaints, comments and compliments policy. It provides information about the number received and response times. It recommends some non-substantive changes to the policy and procedural guidance documents.

2. Background

- 2.1 On 29 March 2011 the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) approved a range of governance documents including a complaints, compliments and comments policy. The approval was subject to a review of the policy in March 2012. During 2011 a complaints process was drawn up and complaints, comments and compliments recorded and responded to.
- 2.2 The complaints policy is on the SDNPA website. During 2011 processes to implement the policy have been set up. The process is overseen by the Performance and Business Planning Manager. Complaints, comments and compliments are received centrally through a dedicated in-box. They sometimes also arrive directly in other Authority Offices or occasionally through the Info@southdowns.gov.uk inbox. When this happens, staff are asked to send the letter or email through to the ccc-inbox. They are logged and sent out to the most relevant member of staff to provide a response directly. All responses are copied in to the ccc-inbox. The deadline for providing a response is 10 working days.

3. Complaints, comments and compliments received

- 3.1 A total of 28 complaints or comments have been received since the SDNPA was set up, this includes 3 complaints received in the 2010/11 financial year. To date no compliments have been recorded. The table below shows how many of each were received and how many were responded to on time.



- 3.2 Of the responses to comments 2 were late, each by 1 day. Of the responses to complaints 2 are considered to still be open and 2 were late.
- 3.3 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. Ten of our complaints have been dealt with at stage 1. One was dealt with at Stage 2. Two complaints have had no activity for a period of over 6 months and would have been 'timed-out' if the revisions to the policy set out in paragraph 4.3 had been in place.

Complaints and comments received

- 3.4 Three complaints have been about the failure to respond on time to complaints or issues relating to planning applications. Other concerns were also raised but the complaints policy does not cover dissatisfaction with decisions about planning applications. In one instance, an apology was given and the matter rectified with one of the delegated authorities who were in fact responsible for the original source of the complaint. In other cases responses and apologies were sent out.
- 3.5 The stage 2 complaint was about how an interview had been conducted, specifically the release of interview notes. The matter was investigated and a comprehensive reply sent by the Director of Corporate Services. Another was about misspelled words on the website. We also received a complaint about cattle grazing on Mill Hill, which is an operational issue, as the approach is managed by our Ranger Service. A comprehensive reply was sent explaining the reason for the policy. See **Appendix 1** for details of complaints and responses sent.
- 3.6 There have been a number of comments, which are often 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 all of these cases we replied and either explained the situation, or directed the correspondent to the right organisation, or person, to deal with their complaint. For example, two comments were received about the TrailBlaze scheme for managing mass running events on National Trails. It involves placing checkboxes along the routes of the runs. There are twelve on the South Downs Way. The comments were about the detrimental effect of the boxes on the National Trail. A letter of explanation was sent in each case.
- 3.7 Other examples of comments include someone reporting a dead sheep – the farmer was notified by the relevant Area Team; the disturbance caused by gas carbide bird-scarers – a Ranger spoke to the relevant Land Manager to minimise the disturbance as much as possible;

2 were about highways issues which were responded to in some detail and correspondents were also referred to the appropriate Highways Authority.

4. Complaints Policy

- 4.1 The current policy as it appears on our website is the appendix to the report which went to the Authority meeting in March 2011 at **Appendix 2**. There are a number of areas in which it could be improved. The changes are not considered significant and the Standards Committee is asked to recommend that suggested changes to the policy are made and are approved by the Director of Corporate Services
- 4.2 The current policy statement as it appears on the website is a mixture of policy and guidance to officers. It is recommended that they are separated out. It is not best practice to have internal guidance for staff available as part of a policy document which is publicly available
- 4.3 In addition, the policy document uses an inconsistent approach to language. In large part it is phrased in terms of speaking directly a member of the public. However some is phrased in the third person. This should be made consistent and the policy republished on the website.
- 4.4 The guidance to staff could include a statement about when a complaint has deemed to have lapsed once received because the complainant chooses not to respond to SDNPA during the process of our investigation of their complaint. It is suggested that, for stage 1 informal complaints, if no response is received from a complainant for a period of 3 months then, after a suitable request for one, it would be reasonable to consider the matter closed.
- 4.5 For stage 2 and 3 complaints the investigation into the matter should be completed irrespective of communication from the complainant. While this may not be satisfactory in terms of possible learning for the organisation, it would mean that we had come to a determination on the matter.

5. Learning from complaints comments and compliments

- 5.1 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. As there have been so few, and most have been dealt with at stage 1, it is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions from them.
- 5.2 However some useful early lessons have been drawn in response to complaints about late replies. New procedures are being put in place to ensure that all complaints are captured and forwarded quickly to the right person. This will include a dedicated inbox for Planning enquiries and complaints which will allow for better tracking and monitoring of response times.

6. Resources

- 6.1 There are no major resource implications in relation to this policy review. The main resource implications are the staff time in responding to the complaints. The policy does not contain any remedy or redress which requires financial compensation.

7. Risk management

- 7.1 The proposed policy review does not affect risk to the organisation and any risk is mitigated by the correct implementation of it.

8. Crime and Disorder Implication

- 8.1 It is considered that the policy does not raise any crime and disorder implications.

9. Equalities Act 2010

- 9.1 It is considered that the policy does not raise any Equalities Act implications.

10. External Consultees

- 10.1 None.

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Appendices	Appendix 1 – Complaints and Responses Appendix 2 - CCC policy approved March 2011
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive Officer, Director of Corporate Services, Director of Planning, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Head of Operations, Chief Finance Officer, Deputy Chief Finance Officer, Monitoring Officer & Senior Solicitor.
Background Documents	Authority Meeting 29 March 2011 Agenda Item 13 Report 15/11 Governance documents

Complaint	Summary of response
Delay in letting an applicant know the outcome of an interview and complaints about the interview process	Confirmed that the process had been lawful and apologised for the delay in initial response, but explained that it was due to trying to get detailed feedback from one of the interviewers. A copy of notes taken at interview were sent.
Complaint about noise early in the morning in one of the offices used by SDNPA which is part of a residential building	Cleaning company instructed to start work later and Sunday working ceased
Complaint about difficulty finding information on the website	Email sent with links to the relevant part of the website
Disappointment at event marking the start of the National Park at Beachy Head	Reply sent explaining that not all events were organised by the SDNPA and in this case the SDNPA had done what the organisers of the event had requested. Acknowledged the disappointment felt.
A range of complaints about the way in which the NPA was set up and it's functions defined and communicated.	Potentially 'Timed-out'
Misspelled words on website	Matter corrected
No information available	
Non response to emails about a planning application	Telephone conversation confirmed that responses had been sent by email but that the complainant had not received them. Offer made to resend but the matter the complainant was concerned about was dealt with during the phone call
Planning application 11/01907/SFUL - Abbots Worthy House, concerns about process for determining the application and the notification process for public speaking	Response addressed concerns but explained that due process had been followed when the decision was reached. An apology was made for the notification process where there had been a fault. The matter was taken up with the relevant local planning authority under our delegated agreements.
Complaint about cattle grazing on Mill Hill	Detailed response sent outlining the policy and why it was felt to be acceptable.
Failure to reply on time to emails about a planning application	Response sent explaining the process.