

Appendix 1

LEARNING FROM COMPLAINTS 2013/14

Planning Services – case study

What you said (complainant)

Ms X submitted a planning application the content of which was subject to objection by a neighbour. When the neighbour provided a letter of objection this was uploaded on the council webpage and caused distress to the complainant because the letter contained information which was deemed to be inflammatory.

What we did

The complaint was subject to an independent investigation at the final stage of the council's complaints procedure, this was the third time that an incident such as this had happened to the same complainant.

The investigation found that despite revised processes and procedures having been introduced by the administrative support services assisting the Planning Team, there was a lack of a consistent approach in determining when and what to redact in letters of objections. The investigation concluded that there would be no guarantee that the error would not happen again. This matter was discussed with the Head of Planning and the Team Manager where it was agreed that a redefined process would be introduced which would ensure that **any** letters which contained inflammatory content would not be uploaded onto the council webpage. Statements that discriminate on grounds of religion, sexuality or disability will also not be published. The web page will also be updated to include that this approach will be taken will all future planning objections.

How we expect our service to get better

This approach will ensure that the council applies consistency when dealing with all planning objection related matters. This will also reassure residents that they can submit planning applications without concern that any objections do not cause them any further undue distress.

Environment – case study

What you said (complainant)

Mr D complained about continued non collection of refuse from his property. He states that the service provided by the council is sub-standard and that despite continued calls to Thurrock Council he does not receive a return telephone call advising him how the matter will be addressed.

What we did

An investigation into the concerns was undertaken. The service reported that they did experience difficulties when accessing this particular property due to a long standing problem with the dirt track which leads into the location. The service requested that checks be made with Land Registry to determine ownership of the land/track which is currently an unmade track.

There is no access for collection to the front of the properties and the only access is via the rear which is where the residents leave their bins. Additionally, this locality is where all of the garages are and is the only place where cars can be left. The poor weather conditions at the time only served to make the bin collections worse and they were subsequently missed. The condition of the track continued to deteriorate so the service had to make alternative collection arrangements which they subsequently did and informed all residents.

How we expect our service to get better

As a result of the complaint interim arrangements have been put into place to ensure that normal service resumes for bin collections. There have been no further complaints from this resident or other residents in the locality.

Housing Options – case study

What you said (complainant)

Ms H visited Thurrock Council with her elderly vulnerable relative who had been sleeping rough in another borough and was seeking the services of Homelessness in order to consider whether she could be rehoused in Thurrock so that she could be nearer to her relatives.

Ms H stated that not only was her case discussed in an open environment initially, but that she was not treated in the correct way and her experience made her feel that her concerns were of no relevance and that her case was dismissed by the council and that Ms H's relative was told to go back to the borough in which she had a property.

What we did

The initial complaint response did apologise for the fact that the initial meeting was not managed as well as it could have been and an apology was extended to Ms H in this regard.

An investigation undertaken by the Corporate Complaints Team resulted in more detailed information being provided regarding the case, this information should have been sought by the Homeless Team at the point of assessing the case. Whilst at the time of the assessment, Ms H's relative was not homeless and therefore the team were following process, it was nevertheless evident that she was a vulnerable adult and there were justifiable reasons why she could not return to the property in another borough. The case was then transferred for a joint assessment with social care and another housing officer, this resulted in Ms H's relative being offered accommodation within Thurrock.

Thurrock Council Housing Policy gives consideration to 'local connection' for grandparents, but does not give consideration to 'grandchildren.' It was the grandchildren who were concerned regarding their grandmother.

As a result of the investigation, it is recommended that triage guidelines are designed to assist in determining the acuity of a client's needs and the proper action to take when considering cases. The goal of a triage service is to ensure that reasonable and responsible level of care regarding a client's presenting problem is accessible to all clients. The guidelines should include priority levels and this will enable a consistent approach and determination of all cases.

Additionally the policy needs to be changed to ensure that grandchildren are included in the 'local connection' section.

How we expect our service to get better

A clear consistent approach in determining cases will ensure that equality and consistency is applied at all times and that users' experience of this service is much more improved.

Council Tax – case study

What you said (complainant)

Mr D complained regarding his revised council tax bill. He stated that he visited Thurrock Council and spoke with an officer regarding the revised bill and the associated payments and that these would be spread over 5 months which would make the bill more manageable. He later discovered that this did not happen and that in fact Thurrock Council took the full amount due in one payment. Mr D was very unhappy about this as he had been financially inconvenienced as a result.

What we did

The department looked into the sequence of events which took place and informed Mr D that due to the fact that the direct debit mandate had not been processed within the timeframe of 14 days, this resulted in the full amount being taken from Mr D's bank account. An apology was extended for this oversight but the complainant remained dissatisfied and a review undertaken by the Corporate Complaints Team concluded that for this particular case, Mr D should receive a goodwill gesture payment for the inconvenience he had been caused.

How we expect our service to get better

The Corporate Complaints Team have issued an instruction to the department to ensure that mandates are processed in sufficient time thereby ensuring that residents are not further inconvenienced as a result. This will ensure that there are no repeated complaints of this nature.