



Summary of our report

Auckland Council: How it deals with complaints



Complaints can be a valuable source of information for improving services and systems. How well an organisation deals with complaints can show how committed it is to providing a high-quality service to people.

When Auckland Council (the Council) was set up in November 2010, it brought together eight councils that each had their own approach to handling complaints. The Council set up a single organisation-wide system to manage complaints at that time.

In 2013, the Council began a project to build on this complaints system, taking into account best practice guidelines published by the Office of the Ombudsman.

As part of our periodic reviews of the Council's service performance, we audited the results of the work the Council has carried out to improve its complaints-handling process since 2013. At the time of our audit, the Council still had to finish implementing some aspects of its project, including introducing a new customer relationship management system that would better handle complaints information (the new system).

The Council makes it easy for people to complain in various ways, including to any Council staff member or elected member. Staff will try to deal with the issue straight away. If that is not possible, the complaint will be logged and dealt with according to the Council's complaints process.

The Council has designed a process that is flexible enough to record all complaints, regardless of how they come into the Council and which department manages them, while trying to handle all complaints to a consistent standard.

The Council has a focus on resolving complaints, and most are dealt with in a timely manner.

The Council has used complaints information to identify patterns and persistent or systemic issues so that it can investigate and fix them. We found many examples of the Council changing its practices to improve services as a result of complaints and other comments.

The Council could do better in some aspects – in particular, collecting information from the complainant's perspective.

Vital statistics:

- 40 pages
- Presented to Parliament on Thursday 25 August 2016
- Contact: reports@oag.govt.nz

Recently, the Council carried out research that consisted of 12 in-depth interviews with people who had made a complaint in December 2015 or January 2016. This provided some valuable insights from the complainant’s perspective about how the Council handled their complaint. To handle complaints more effectively, the Council could do more of this type of work.

Also, the Council acknowledged that its current complaints system has limitations. For example, the system does not allow the Council to easily track and report on complaints that have been passed between departments or escalated to a higher level.

With the introduction of the new system, the Council expects to be able to carry out more sophisticated tracking and analysis of complaints, including any that are transferred between multiple departments and that take too long to resolve. We encourage the Council to take advantage of this new opportunity.

In our view, the Council should systematically collect and review enhanced performance information, including information from a complainant’s perspective and information that will be more readily available with the new system. It should use this information to assess how effectively it deals with complaints and identify potential improvements to its complaint-handling process.

The Council could also do more to inform the public and staff about improvements it makes to its services as a result of complaints and other information. This would increase confidence that the Council takes complaints seriously and acts on them.

Our recommendations

We recommend that Auckland Council:

- collect and review information that is more comprehensive, including information from a complainant’s perspective, and use it to assess how effectively and efficiently the Council handles complaints and identify potential actions to improve the complaints process; and
- report publicly about the effectiveness of the Council’s complaints-handling performance and how it has used complaints information to improve its services.

Figure 1: Numbers of complaints, from November 2010 to December 2015

