

Title of Report	CORPORATE COMPLAINTS AND FEEDBACK	
Presented by	Nichola Oliver Customer Services Team Manager	
Background Papers	None.	Public Report: Yes
Financial Implications	There are no financial implications in respect of this report.	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	There are no legal implications arising from this report.	
	Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	There are no direct staffing or corporate implications arising from this report.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Reason Agenda Item Submitted to Scrutiny Committee	<p>This is the Council's annual complaints report for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. It includes information in respect of complaints across all directorates. It also provides information for decisions issued by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman (HO) in the same period.</p> <p>The report contributes to the Council's aspirations in the Corporate Delivery Plan of being customer focused by acknowledging that complaints and formal enquiries provide a regular and rich source of feedback from residents that inform the Council when things have gone wrong. Learning from this provides the opportunity to improve services to support residents.</p>	
Recommendations	THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE IS ASKED TO CONSIDER THE REPORT AND MAKE ANY RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET.	

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Each year, the Council is required to prepare an annual summary of complaints dealt with under the formalised Complaints Policy (the year runs from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024).

- 1.2 A complaint is defined within the Council as: *'an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions, or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf affecting an individual/resident or a group of individuals/residents'*.
- 1.3 The Council provides a wide range of services to its residents and receives relatively few complaints, the Council seeks to learn from them and look for patterns of service failure. The Council continues to use the feedback it receives from its complaints to generate ideas for service improvements both in the short and long term.
- 1.4 The Council works hard to view the complaints it receives as a positive opportunity, whilst remaining focused on trying to resolve them to the satisfaction of residents as quickly as it can.
- 1.5 This is a report on all Council services' formal enquiries which are:
- Complaints
 - Member Enquiries
 - MP Enquiries
- 1.6 Many service requests and enquiries are resolved informally by officers and managers every day without the need for the formal complaints process to be followed. Officers are urged to address customer grievances and proactively rectify issues as part of their normal business. These are not all formally logged or reported on, though services are encouraged to record these informal enquiries in some way to inform the way they deliver and improve their services in the future. Managing complaints informally as soon as possible represents best practice.
- 1.7 Where a request for service has been sent via the complaints process but is not deemed as a corporate complaint these are logged as a 'Request for service' and are recorded and reported on quarterly basis.
- 1.8 The Council's complaint's procedure is designed to address those issues that necessitate a formal reply and, as such, could not be resolved during the earlier stages of the process. The Complaints Policy and procedure can be found here:

Corporate Complaints Policy

- 1.9 As of the 1 January 2023, all stage 1 complaints are now signed off by a Strategic Director. Stage 2 complaints are signed off by the Chief Executive to ensure that everything that could have been done to resolve the matter has been investigated prior to the complainant seeking independent review by the relevant ombudsman. Complaints are determined with one of the following statuses:
- Upheld- following investigation – the Council has found in favour of the complainant.
 - Not upheld- following investigation the Council has not found in favour of the complainant.

Sometimes complaints have more than one issue to be investigated on occasion these can have a mixture of the two above determinations.

- 1.10 This report focuses not only on volumes and timeliness of responses but also aims, when it is possible, to identify themes and lessons learnt that result in service improvements.

1.11 The Council has a commitment to learning and improvement. Complaints and other formal enquiries are important information, providing an opportunity to understand where and why things sometimes go wrong and provide a basis for the Council to make positive changes, informed by data and the resident voice.

2.0 Complaints overview

2.1 Number of Complaints and Enquiries - all stages

Level	2022/2023	2023/2024
Stage 1	274	263
Stage 2	70	74
Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (that have reached formal investigation stage)	14	11
MP enquiries	197	131
Member enquiries	518	634
Compliments	202	240

2.2 There was a total of 263 stage 1 complaints which is a 4% decrease on the previous year. There was an increase of 5% on the previous year in stage 2 complaints with a total of 74.

2.3 The Council provides a wide variety of services to over 97,200 residents. In this context, 377 complaints (stage1 and 2 combined) are only a fraction of the number of customer interactions occurring each year. For example, the Council's Customer Service team received 99,455 customer interactions alone in 2023/24.

2.4 The number of compliments recorded by the Council also increased, from 202 in 2022/23 to 240 (an increase of 19%). Improved efforts by Council departments to capture more of the positive feedback of residents is reflected in this increase. There is better engagement of staff in the process of recording the compliments they receive.

2.5 The number of stage 1 complaints received can be broken down by service as follows:

Service	Number of Complaints	As a % overall
Waste Services	38	14.43
Environmental Health and Protection	8	3.04
Leisure Services	3	1.14
Community Safety	4	1.5
Customer Services	3	1.14
Finance	1	0.4
Housing Assets	26	9.88
Housing Repairs	98	37.26
Housing Management	27	10.26
Housing Strategy and Systems	13	4.93

Human Resources	1	0.4
Legal and Support Services	1	0.4
Planning and Infrastructure	23	8.74
Revenues and Benefits	16	6.08
Democratic Services	1	0.4
Stage 2 escalations from the stage 1 level complaints	74	28.1

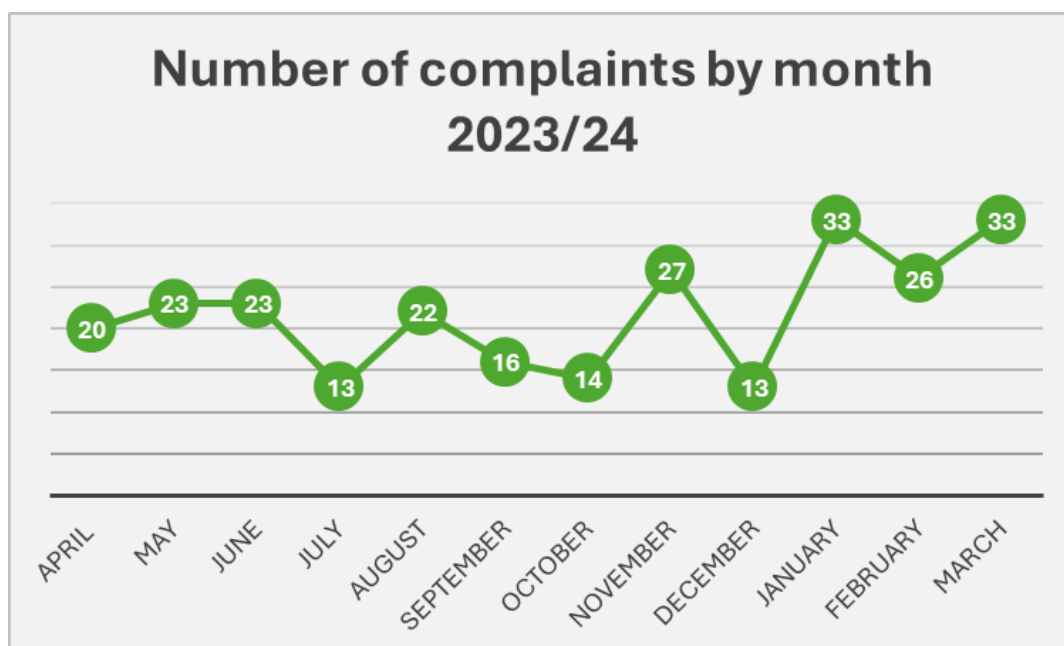
2.6 The number of complaints for each service does not, necessarily provide a direct correlation with the standard of customer service provided, and these overall results

cannot be treated in isolation. Each of these service results are heavily influenced by the type of business transacted by that service, for example, the number of customers facing transactions carried out, the public profile of the actions carried out by that service, and whether the customer has alternative formal routes for redress or appeal.

2.7 Housing Repairs receives the highest number of complaints, but when considering the number of interactions, it has with the tenants, this is to be expected. For example, in 2023/24, Housing Repairs had 34,342 contacts with tenants. Against this background, the figures show that the number of complaints received against the volume of work undertaken by the Housing Repairs equates only to approximately 0.28% of the transactions completed.

2.8 Waste Services receives second highest number of complaints, but these are very low when considering the number of interactions, it has with residents. In 2023/24, Waste Services provided waste and recycling collections to around 48,640 properties within the District each week. This totals around 3,720,960 collections a year. Using this example, the number of complaints received as a proportion of total collections equates to just 0.001%.

2.9 Stage 1 complaints received by month for the Council.



2.10 The number of complaints received per month averages around the range of 20-23 with some months considerably lower. In the last quarter of 2023/24 the Council saw a significant increase in the number of stage 1 complaints received. This increase was primarily in the housing repairs and planning and infrastructure service areas. Planning and infrastructure received a number of complaints about one application, all of which were not upheld. The housing repairs increase was mainly due to damp and mold complaints which can be due to seasonal changes.

2.11 The number of stage 1 complaints upheld and responded to within timescales broken down by service are as follows:

Service	Stage 1 upheld	% upheld	Stage 1 responded to within deadline
Waste Services	33	87%	74%
Environmental Health and Protection	2	25%	88%
Leisure Services	0	0%	100%
Community Safety	0	0%	100%
Customer Services	1	33%	100%
Finance	0	0%	100%
Housing Assets	10	38%	73%
Housing Repairs	68	69%	72%
Housing Management	6	22%	92%
Housing Strategy and Systems	4	31%	100%
Human Resources	0	0%	100%
Legal Services	0	0%	100%
Planning and Infrastructure	1	4%	65%
Revenues and Benefits	6	37%	100%
Democratic Services	0	0%	100%

2.12 49% (131) of complaints were upheld when investigated at stage 1 of the complaints process.

2.13 The Council's service standard is to respond in full to a complaint within 10 working days of receipt, or if this is not possible within that time (for example, because of the complexity of the complaint, the number of parties involved or awaiting additional information), a holding response is sent to the customer. This standard was met in 80% of complaints at stage 1 (210 complaints), processed in the year 2023/24.

2.14 When a complaint is escalated to stage 2, the investigating head of service has 10 working days to respond. This standard was met in 73% of escalated complaints.

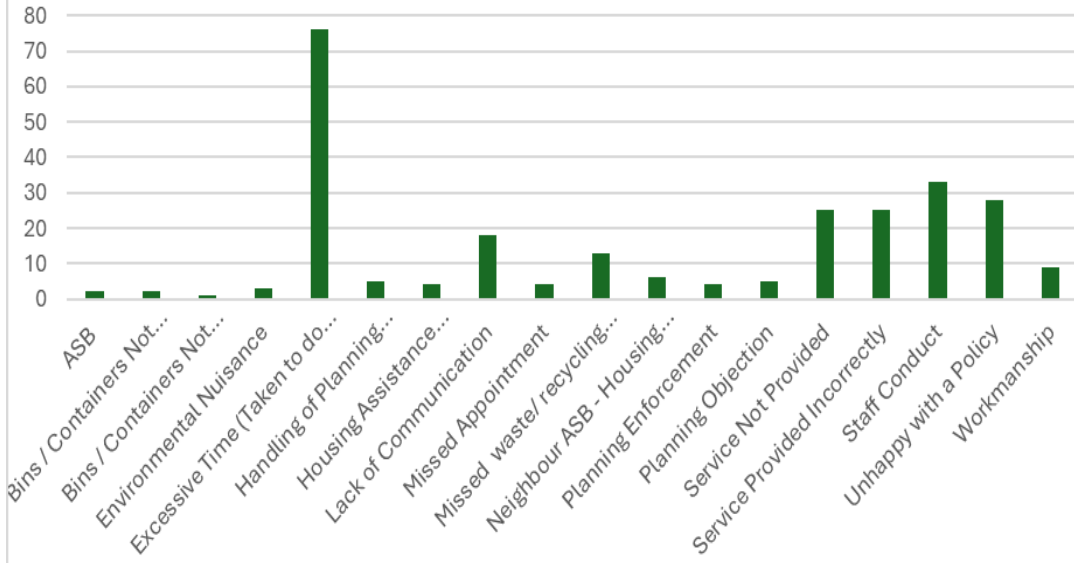
2.15 All services endeavor to focus on providing a high-quality response that resolves all the issues raised and finding a suitable outcome in a timely way, whilst keeping the complainant informed and up to date with progress. Responding to complaints within the timeframe is a key performance indicator within the corporate delivery plan and something that is being highlighting as an area for improvement in 2024/25.

3. Complaint Trends

3.1 As part of the process of monitoring and handling customer feedback, the Complaints Team is responsible for categorising complaints based on the subject matter. The following diagram outlines the categories of complaints received in 2023/24.

3.2 Stage 1 - Types of Complaint - 2023-24 Whole Council

Stage 1 - Types of Complaint - 2023-24 Whole Council



- 3.3 76 (29%) of all complaints were categorised as excessive time taken to carry out a service. Complaints within this category have increased from 51 in 2022/23. (an increase of 49%)
- 3.4 Staff conduct accounted for the second highest category of complaints, with 33 (12%) complaints. Complaints within this category have decreased slightly from 36 in 2022/23. These are where the complainant considers that an employee has behaved poorly either in person or on the phone. These are front facing roles such as repair operatives, housing officers, community safety officers, customer services officers and are usually related to a disagreement over a decision or action taken.
- 3.5 Although the numbers of complaints in the categories of excessive time taken and staff conduct were seen as reasons across all services, the majority of the complaints categorised as excessive time taken were attributed to Housing Repairs Service, with 62 of the 76 complaints in this category. This directly correlates with the number of repairs identified as outstanding in the housing improvement plan. Housing Services as whole are undergoing significant change as reported already to this Committee, Cabinet and through the Housing Improvement Board.

4 **External Bodies**

- **Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)**
- **Housing Ombudsman (HOS)**

- 4.1 If complainants are not satisfied with the outcome of their complaint as investigated through the Council's complaints' procedures, they can escalate their complaint to the Ombudsman. This section of the report provides information on cases that the Ombudsman has made decisions on in the 2023/24 period.
- 4.2 The Housing Ombudsman (HO) manages enquiries and complaints that are related to services provided by the Council as a social landlord e.g., repairs to properties.
- 4.3 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) handles enquiries and complaints that are related to all other Council services. This includes non-landlord housing issues such as housing allocation, homelessness and temporary accommodation which is categorised in LGSCO reports as "Housing".
- 4.4 The HO and LGSCO produce annual review reports and the data, feedback and recommendations and remedies made in these are reviewed by the feedback team who ensure the relevant service areas act on them in a timely manner.

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

- 4.5 In February 2024, the LGSCO introduced a complaint code as "advice and guidance" for all local councils in England under section 23(12A) of the Local Government Act 1974. This means that councils should consider the Code when developing complaint handling policies and procedures and when responding to a complaint. The complaint code can be found at: [LGSCO Complaint code](#)
- 4.6 The LGSCO has not yet published its annual Report for 2023/2024 therefore all data presented below is from the Council's systems.
- 4.7 In 2023/2024, the LGSCO formally investigated one case, which was not upheld. There were a further three cases received by the LGSCO but did not reach formal investigation

stage as the feedback officer work with the investigators at an early stage to ensure that only valid cases go to formal investigation. The LGSCO produces an annual letter each summer with reference to the previous year's complaints, this is taken to the next available Audit and Governance Committee by the monitoring officer.

Housing Ombudsman

- 4.8 The Housing Ombudsman Service is set up by law to look at complaints about the housing organisations that are registered with them. It resolves disputes involving the tenants and leaseholders of social landlords (housing associations and local authorities) and voluntary members (private landlords and letting agents who are committed to good service for their tenants).
- 4.9 On the 1 April 2024, the HO published its revised Complaint Handling Code which was first introduced in June 2020. This sets out requirements for member landlords that will allow them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly.
- 4.10 The Code ensures complaint handling data is being used consistently across landlord members, promotes engagement at different levels within a landlord and sets out expectations for boards or equivalent governance, senior executives and frontline staff.
- 4.11 Compliance with the Code forms part of the membership obligations. Members are obliged to complete a self-assessment to measure the level of compliance. The Council's latest self-assessment based upon the latest code can be found in appendix 1 of this report.
- 4.12 When carrying out a complaint investigation the Ombudsman will consider whether the landlord addressed the complaint in accordance with the Code. Any failure identified could result in a finding of:
- Severe maladministration
 - Maladministration
 - Service failure.
 - Mediation
 - Redress

Following an investigation where some level of maladministration has been found the HO could put an order and or recommendations in place to correct matters. The HO can also make recommendations on any case that has been investigated and determined by them to help improve service delivery and promote learnings from outcomes and ensure compliance with the Code.

- 4.13 The HO's Complaint Handling Code for 2024/25 can be found at: [Housing Ombudsman complaint code](#)
- 4.14 The Housing Ombudsman has not yet published its Landlord Reports for 2023/2024 so all data presented below is from the Council's systems.
- 4.15 In 2023/2024 the HOS formally investigated 11 cases. The 11 cases are not all from the financial year of 2023/24 due to the HOS having a backlog on their investigations of up to 18 months. The determinations found by the HOS on the 11 cases are as separated into years and are as follows:

2021/22

- One case of maladministration

2022/23

- Three cases of maladministration
- One case of service failure
- Three cases of no fault found, and the complaint was not upheld
- One case HOS did not reach formal investigation.

2023/24

- Two cases of maladministration

The Council also has two further cases currently under investigation from 2023/24 which it is awaiting a decision and therefore will form part of the HO annual report for the following year of 2024/25.

- 4.16 In 2023, the HO introduced a portal for all their complaints which is where the Council is notified of any formal complaint investigations as well as where the Council uploads any evidence requested by the HO. The portal also allows the Council to see any complaints that they are yet to look at and determine if they will carry out formal investigations. The portal suggests that there are 10 complaints awaiting this determination for 2023/24 however this can change as the Ombudsman considers each case. If any of these are investigated as formal complaints these determinations will form part of 2024/25 annual report.
- 4.17 As a result of the HO determinations a number of recommendations and orders were put in place by the HO some of which were:
- The landlord is to carry out safeguarding training with all officers dealing ASB.
 - The landlord should consider increasing knowledge on external support services such as bereavement, adult social care etc. to ensure officers know who they can seek assistance from when required.
 - The landlord should consider the effectiveness of unannounced visits on tenants and the impact these unannounced visits may have on residents.
 - The landlord should review its compensation policy to ensure it is in line with good industry practice and the Ombudsman's established approach.
 - The landlord should provide bereavement training.
 - The landlord should improve record keeping.

5 Learning points

- 5.1 The Council treats every complaint as an opportunity to identify learning outcomes and improve service provision. Complaints are valuable not only in identifying service improvements but in improving public perception and satisfaction with the Council as a whole. Each complaint can be an opportunity to make changes or service improvements on a small or greater scale.
- 5.2 Examples of some of the learning points and improvements made as a result of complaints during 2023/24 include:
- Ensuring continuity in communication for ongoing complaints and keeping the complainant informed on updates.
 - Speaking directly to customers to outline any potential delays in dealing with their request, whatever the reason might be.
 - Supporting staff to raise awareness of how to handle sensitive and confidential matters.
 - Seeking to understand the wider context relating to a customer's situation.

- Raising staff awareness of appropriate communication and behaviours when dealing with members of the public
 - Undertaking mandatory complaints training for all officers.
 - Feedback survey of customers who have been through a corporate complaint.
 - Introducing new corporate KPI's and reporting on complaints quarterly.
 - Producing a quarterly complaints report to corporate leadership team and portfolio holder.
 - Establishing a housing improvement board and Improvement Plan.
- 5.3 Looking back to the last years HO cases, there are a number of themes that have come forward when we consider these cases. Whilst each is unique there are some common threads which we are addressing -
- 5.4 **The timeliness of repairs** – a broad theme around repairs times which largely stems from the issues of service interruption around COVID. We are addressing this through our service review of housing and its associated Improvement Plan. This Committee has seen and commented on this Plan, and it is also being tracked through the Cross-Party Housing Improvement Board. There are a number of interventions specially aimed at timeliness, the largest of which related to the appointment of a 'Whole Home' contractor to help address these issues.
- 5.5 **Training** – there are a number of instances where the HO has asked us to refresh training on specific issues in the service. This has included ASB, bereavement, safeguarding, and the new regulatory standards. These have been added to our renewed focus on skills and training of our staff which now occur quarterly.
- 5.6 **Policy updates** – as part of the Housing Improvement Plan we have undertaken a review of a number of policies to bring them up to modern standards. Community Scrutiny and Cabinet has approved the first tranche of these including ASB, a revised repairs policy, compensation policy and tenancy.
- 5.7 **Record keeping** – a number of changes to our systems have taken place to help us improve our records of interactions with tenants. These range from Tenancy Audits, through to Stock Condition and the increased use of our hand held devices to enable greater on-the-spot reporting and record updating. This will continue to be a focus of the Improvement Plan going forwards.
- 5.8 The planned update to this Committee later this year will include an updated Improvement Plan and details of the work we have completed and are still to address.
- 5.9 Improvements for the forthcoming year of 2024/25 are:
- Focusing on the timeliness in responding to complaints to accord with the Councils Delivery Plan targets of 100% within timeline.
 - Developing a communication plan on importance of complaints across the council.
 - Working with the housing improvement board to provide both a greater understanding of the service and also to provide a cross-party consideration to the actions the service is focusing on in the moment

6 Member and MP enquiries

6.1 Member and MP Enquiry data is included in the annual formal enquiries report as it is acknowledged that there is great similarity between the types of complaints submitted and the types of Member/MP enquiries received. It is not uncommon for a resident to make a complaint and then contact their Councillor about the same issue.

6.2 For the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, the total number of Member Enquiries received was 634, compared with 518 in the previous period. This is a 22.5% increase in the number of Member Enquiries compared with the previous year's figures.

6.3 For the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, the total number of MP Enquiries received was 131, compared with 197 in the previous period. This is a 33% decrease in the number of MP Enquiries compared with the previous year's figures.

6.4 Member and MP enquiries by service.

Service	Number of Member enquires	Number of MP enquires
Community Services	278	22
Customer Services	6	2
Economic Regeneration	9	0
Finance	2	2
Housing services	204	68
Human Resources	1	1
Legal and Commercial Services	8	3
Planning and Infrastructure	82	13
Revenues and Benefits	8	12
Not NWLDC function	36	8
Totals	634	131

7 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

7.1 The reporting of complaints is embedded in the Council's performance management process, giving further opportunity for issues to be raised throughout the year, and for wider corporate trends to be identified should they arise.

7.2 A robust and effective complaints process ensures the Council is able to meet its vision, working collaboratively to deliver high quality services that support all communities in the District.

- 7.3 Reviewing and learning from complaints ensures the Council is committed to delivering its values. Delivering high standards in everything the Council does which shapes behaviours and builds trust with its residents.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 Complaints at service level remain low, particularly when compared to the overall volume of interactions the Council has had with the public in the same period, this does not negate from the fact that the Council takes each complaint seriously when investigating and act upon any learning that has been identified. The Council is not complacent about the matters raised.
- 8.2 The consistency of complaints reporting suggests that the complaints process continues to work effectively, and that the public can make a complaint with ease. Where necessary, trends are identified by the feedback team and managed by individual services. The Customer Services Team Manager and Customer Experience Team Leader will continue to work closely with Services to identify ways to effectively manage and resolve complaints.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	A well-run council
Policy Considerations:	Corporate complaints policy
Safeguarding:	None.
Equalities/Diversity:	None
Customer Impact:	<p>Customer feedback, particularly from complaints, is an invaluable resource for the Council in seeking to enhance its processes.</p> <p>By actively listening and responding to this feedback, the Council can identify specific problems, understand the customer's perspective, and take targeted actions to improve.</p>
Economic and Social Impact:	None.
Environment, Climate Change and zero carbon:	None.
Consultation/Community Engagement:	None.
Risks:	Complaints provide valuable feedback that can help the Council improve its services. Ignoring this feedback can lead to missed opportunities for improvement.
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