

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – TUESDAY, 20
FEBRUARY 2024



Title of Report	CUSTOMER SERVICES ANNUAL REPORT	
Presented by	Nichola Oliver Customer Services Team Manager	
Background Papers	LGSCO 2022/23 annual review Customer Experience Strategy 22-25	Public Report: Yes
Financial Implications	Day to Day financial issues are addressed by the normal operating budgets for the service.	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	None directly arising from this report.	
	Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	None bar those addressed in the day to day management of the service.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Reason Agenda Item Submitted to Scrutiny Committee	This report has come before the Committee following an agreement to add an update report on Customer Service and Complaints to the work programme on an annual basis.	
Recommendations	<p>1. THE COMMITTEE IS ASKED TO MAKE ANY COMMENTS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF THE COMPLAINTS PROCESS WHICH WILL BE FED INTO THE ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE PROCESS.</p> <p>2. THE COMMITTEE REQUESTS THAT A FURTHER ANNUAL REPORT IS PRESENTED TO THE COMMITTEE IN 2025</p>	

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. This report has come before the Committee following an agreement to add an update report on Customer Service and Complaints to the work programme on an annual basis. The scoping request was for the item to be focused on the overall levels of performance, the performance metrics used and what action has and is planned to be taken to address any areas of concerns.
- 1.2. The report sets out a summary of the customer service provision in the Council, the current strategies and recent history of changes impacting on the service. The report moves on to then consider the current and historic performance, comparison to other councils, corporate complaints performance and concludes with recent actions and those planned in the coming period.

2. POLICY & STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

2.1 The adopted Customer Experience Strategy (which was considered by this Committee in 2021 and adopted by Cabinet in 2022) sets the context for the consideration of Customer Service and its operation in the Council. The adopted Council Delivery Plan also sets out expectations for the Customer Service Team and overall across the Council.

2.2 In summary, the Strategy makes several key statements which provide the policy context for this report:

- I. “Effective management of a customer relationship is not only about how responsive, efficient and technologically advanced services are, but is equally about the emotion, feeling and impression that an individual experiences.
- II. This strategy starts the journey of the Council moving away from a view that customer service is the responsibility of a team or department, but instead recognises that it is a cross cutting theme that spans the whole organisation and links intrinsically with our wider plans, behaviours and values.
- III. Emphasizes the importance of digital experience, both to meet customer demand (and often preference), fits the Council’s future resources, but also to free up resources to help those who need more help, or need to access services in different ways
- IV. Begins the movement of the Council to one of customers being at the heart of what we do.”

2.3 The Strategy also outlines a set of principles that the development of customer service (in all areas of the Council) will draw upon:

- “Customer First: Placing customers at the heart of the organisation. Empowering our staff to provide their very best customer experience in a way that customers tell us that they want to.

- Customer Access: A modern, fresh approach to customer experience and spaces, whether physical or digital. Light, clean and welcoming environments.
- Digital by Default: Digital experiences so good that they are the channel of choice.
- Inclusion: Recognising customers' unique circumstances and in doing so ensuring that those that need Council services are not excluded.
- Customer Insight: Consistently measuring customer experiences. Knowing customers and their needs. Understanding why things go wrong and learning from this to improve services.
- Value for Money, Efficiency and Return on Investment: Recognising the financial climate, benefit focused outcomes and business minded decision making”.

2.4 These principles are driving the changes to customer provision up to 2025.

3. CUSTOMER SERVICE DELIVERY

3.1 When the Council considers customer service provision, all staff provide customer service in some way. Whilst the Customer Service team provides a common front door to the Council, a number of services provide a high degree of customer contact. Set out below is a summary of the main areas of sizable customer interaction – however, all areas of the Council have some level of customer contact:

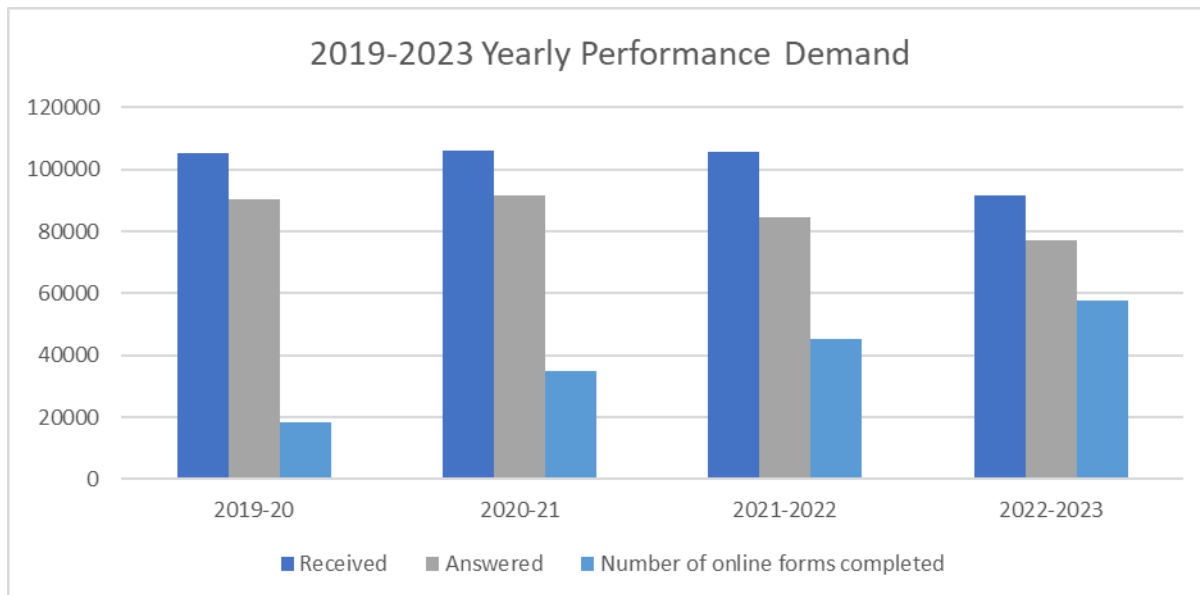
- Customer Services –Customer Services is the main support providing the front-end contact for many Council services with much of the initial customer contact coming through this team either face-to-face or by phone and email.

Customer Experience Team –This team captures, analyses and acts upon customer feedback, data and insight at every stage of the customer journey and then shares this with the relevant service area. They work with back-office teams to capture the customer journey and look at ways they can improve this both for the customer and the service. The team has worked with several services to digitalise processes whilst being the voice of the customer.

- Housing Repairs Team - This team takes the initial calls from tenants who are reporting and chasing either responsive or planned works.
- Housing Choices – This team takes the initial calls from customers who are in need of social housing either through homelessness or wanting to be on the choice-based lettings register.
- Waste services – calls for waste services are answered by the Customer Services Team with an aim to resolve them at the first point of contact. These include dealing with a missed bin report, ordering new or additional waste containers, bulky waste collections, advice on collections and promotion of all waste services and initiatives. Calls may be transferred to the waste team if the enquiry needs escalation or customer services is unable to answer the question presented.
- Planning - calls for planning are answered by the Customer Services Team with an aim to resolve them at the first point of contact or to signpost them to an appropriate digital form or resource where applicable. Where calls are for specific officers or related to certain applications these calls are transferred to the planning support team.

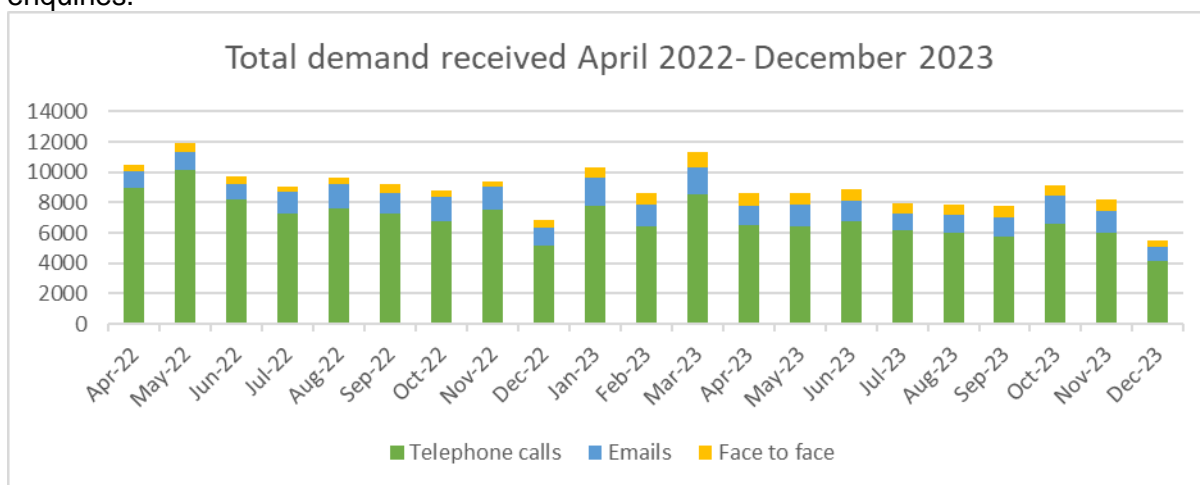
4. PERFORMANCE DATA

2019 – 2023 Performance Demand



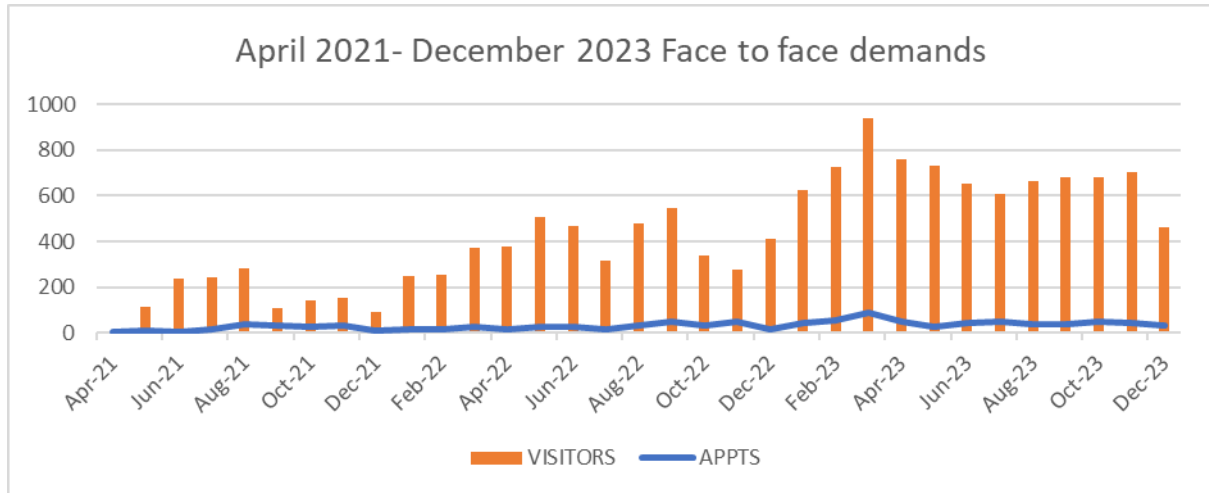
4.1 In 2022/23, the number of calls received by Customer Services has reduced. This could be due to several factors including the way in which residents are now choosing to access services as although the number of calls has reduced the total number of interactions of all demand remains consistent.

Customer Services now deal with more enquires at the first point of contact. This could indicate the total number of calls being more unique callers and not repeat callers and therefore the total number of calls is now more accurate as it reflects the number of enquiries.

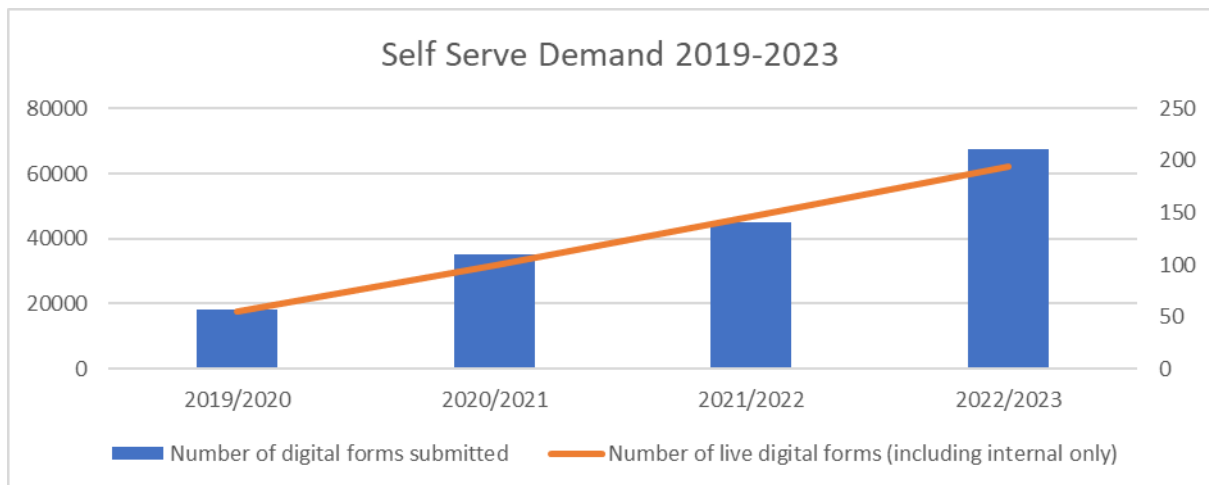


4.2 Since the opening of the Customer Centre in December 2022, there has been a shift in customer behaviour with regards to face-to-face contacts. There has been a significant increase in the number of residents ‘dropping in’ compared to the previous year. This was to

be expected given the opening of the Customer Centre which gives residents a more accessible location. In the main, face to face enquiries are of a more in-depth nature and appear to be accessed by residents with more complex needs. The Customer Centre provides a much greater opportunity to inform face-to-face attendees about options for using digital services in the future if they can.



4.3 2022/23 saw call handing times remain higher than previous years at an average increase of one minute per call meaning the average call handling time is now 5 minutes 48 seconds. This is to be expected as there has been an increase in digital self-service demand and therefore, the remaining enquiries are typically more detailed and require more time to handle. This means the 'new' routine enquiries officers receive from customers are more complex and often involve dealing with more vulnerable residents. As a result, call times rise and therefore call wait times and abandoned calls tend to rise also. This is a trend also noted by neighbouring councils.



4.4 Over the last four years, the availability of the Council's digital online self-service platform has increased with 2022/23 seeing 194 forms available across a multitude of service areas both for internal use only and Customers. A big increase in this area is due to the demands of Covid-19 but more generally services have been increasingly working to provide services digitally and utilising online forms to improve access channels to services for customers. As shown above, along with the increase in digital forms available the number of customers accessing this channel has increased, doubling in the last three years.

4.5 Benchmarking against other local authorities with comparative data within Leicestershire, as shown in the graph in annex 2, shows that the Council is performing relatively the same as one local authority and better than two others.

4.6 Benchmarking against other local authorities has also shown a move away from traditional Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) of calls answered within 60 seconds and 90% call answering and instead working towards calls being dealt with right first time and taking a holistic approach to how you deal with enquiries i.e. if customers are calling regarding a Council Tax reminder are they getting the right benefits, do they have other debts and need referring for debt advice. This is the approach being consistently taken within customer services.

5 Corporate Complaints

The Council is committed to being open and accountable, listening to the views of residents and communities and placing them at the heart of its services. Customer feedback through formal complaints and the way that the Council responds to complaints are vital indicators of the overall performance of the organisation. When a problem cannot be resolved straight away, residents have the safety net of a formal complaint procedure through which they can request a resolution.

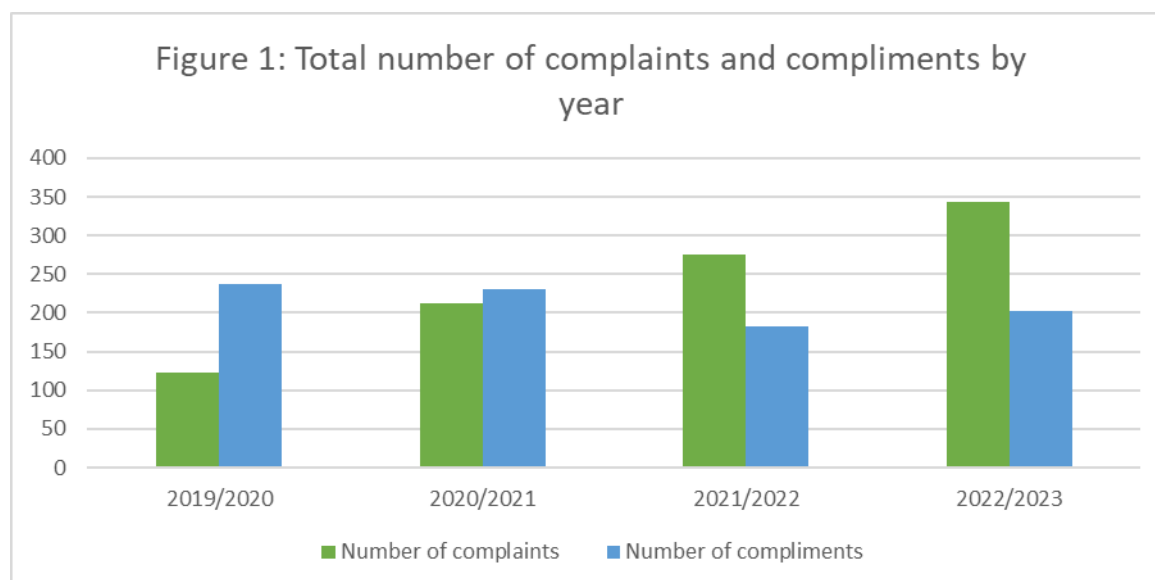
The complaints' procedure was reviewed in late 2022 by the Chief Executive to ensure there was strengthened senior oversight of the complaints being raised.

As of 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 a complainant seeking independent review by the Local Government or Housing Ombudsman.

A complaint is defined within the Council as: "an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, action or lack of action by the Council, or its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers."

Although customer feedback provides a valuable insight into how the Council is performing, complaints and compliments. Overall, in terms of the complaints' procedure, the Council has continued to maintain a high level of performance and strives to improve the quality of service offered to residents. There is a continued commitment to providing high quality, timely responses to formal complaints, and the Council continues to learn and improve based on the feedback received.

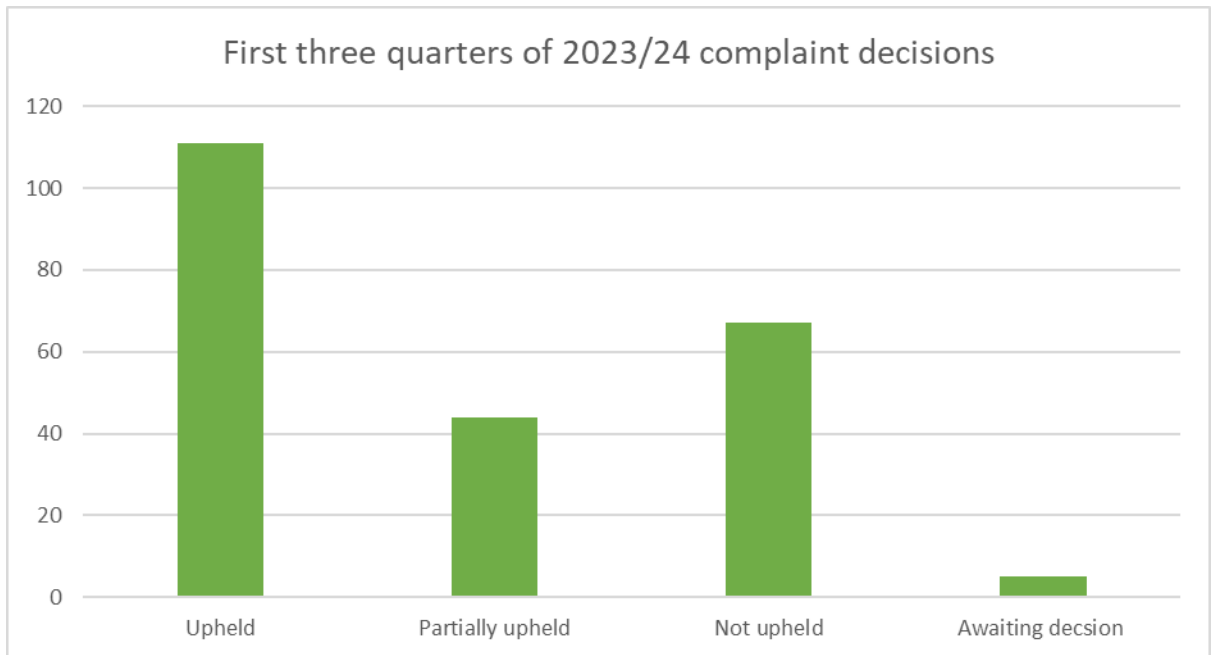


In 2022/23, the overall number of complaints received by the Council increased by 25%, going from 276 in 2021/22 to 344. So far, the first three quarters of the current year are indicating a possible reduction compared to last year. At present at the end of quarter 3 227 complaints have been received.

When a complaint is fully investigated it is closed with one of the following determinations:

- Complaint upheld- the investigation has found in favour of the complaint and the Council are at fault.
- Complaint Partially upheld -the investigation has found that some elements of the complaint the Council are at fault and other elements they are not.
- Complaint not upheld- the investigation has found that the Council are not at fault.

Below shows the decision status of the complaints for the first 3 quarters of 2023/24. This shows that around 50% of complaints that are received are fully upheld.



The Council provides a wide variety of services to over 97,200 residents. In this context, 344 complaints are only a fraction of the number of customer interactions occurring each year (for example, the Council's Customer Service team received 112,820 customer interactions alone in 2022/23).

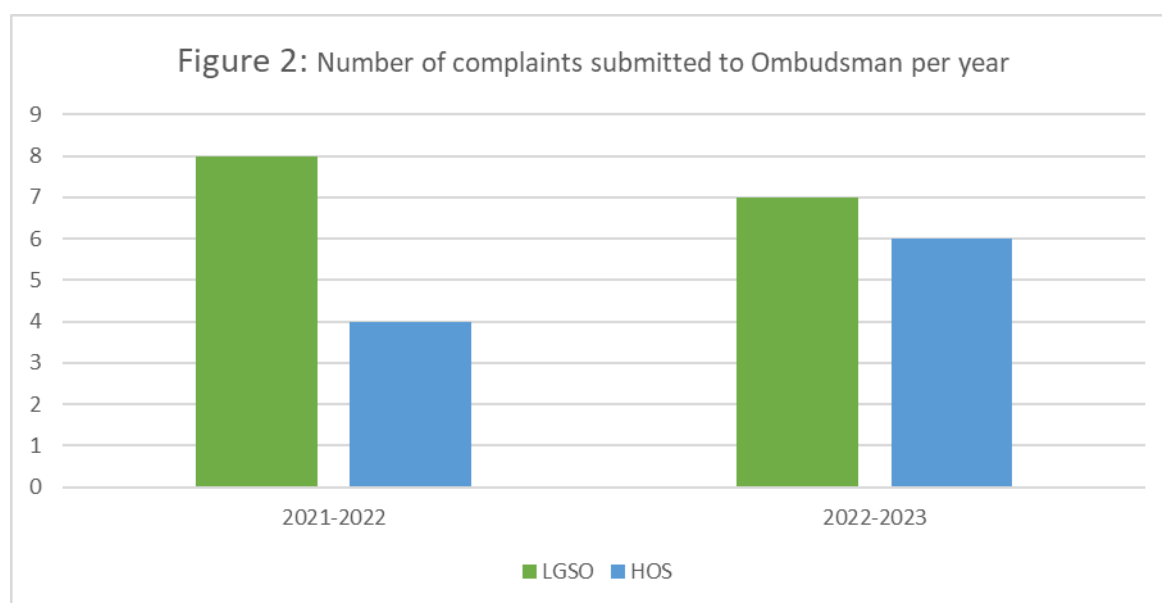
The number of compliments recorded by the Council also increased, from 182 in 2021/22 to 202 (an increase of 11%). Improved efforts by Council departments to capture more of the positive feedback of residents is reflected in this increase and so far, the first 3 quarters of this year indicate a potential increase compared to last year too.

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 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) or the Housing Ombudsman if the complaint is from tenants regarding social housing. The complaints process as a whole has to comply with guidance from the Ombudsman, and a new code is under consideration by both bodies. Once published the Council's complaints process may be updated to ensure compliance.

The audit and governance committee report reviewing the LGSCO annual review letter for 2022/23 can be found via the background papers at the top of this report.

Annex 1 shows an overview of the Housing Ombudsman Service complaints.

Figure 2 shows the total number of complaints submitted to the relevant Ombudsman's over the last two years. So far at the end of quarter 3 for 2023/24 there have been seven complaints escalated to the ombudsman which indicates a reduction this year compared to previous.



6 Recent Changes, Challenges, and achievements.

6.1 Over the last year there have been considerable changes to how we work and how customers interact with services. These all stem from the Customer Excellence Strategy and its core principles. In summary these are:

- A. A change in location and style of provision for the Customer Centre – moving from an edge of town to centre of town site and providing a more welcoming and modern customer service provision. The Customer Centre has now been open a full year and the positive impact on customers is reflected in the performance data shared earlier in this report.
- B. Linked to the above a better drop-in provision for self-service for customers, and a focus on supporting face-to-face customers to be able to self-serve and remote serve.
- C. Introduction of the Citizens Advice being at the Customer Centre for drop ins on a Friday. Following feedback from Customers that they were not able to engage successfully with the Citizens Advice customer services worked with them to introduce the drop-in sessions.
- D. Improvements to the communication and information flow/awareness of other services and their impact on customer services provision, and vice versa. For

example, regular meetings with back-office services are taking place to ensure awareness of planned activity which may have impacts on customer delivery.

- E. Customer Services has been instrumental in the delivery of the Household Support Fund from the government with 1,112 applications being assessed by customer services between April 2023 and December 2023. A total of 675 applications met the criteria of financial hardship and were referred to Leicestershire County Council (LCC) for the fund to be administered. LCC have confirmed that between April-September 2023 NWL residents received £160,810 in food and fuel vouchers from the Household Support Fund.
- F. In December 2023, Customer Services went through the Customer Service Excellence Standard accreditation which tests in great depth those areas that research has indicated are a priority for customers, with particular focus on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism, and staff attitude. There is also emphasis placed on developing customer insight, understanding the user's experience and robust measurement of service satisfaction. To pass the accreditation you must achieve full compliance in a minimum of 46 of 57 elements and there is a chance to demonstrate compliance at a plus level where you demonstrate that you are over and above. Customer Services passed with 53 fully compliance elements and two of compliance plus. The compliance plus elements were for corporate commitment to the customer and also Customer Service (CS) staff feeling empowered to deliver and do the right thing for the customer and wanting to do it right first time.
- G. We have introduced a 'secret shopper' survey across all customer service provision to give an external view and feedback on how customers are served. This feedback will inform improvements to customer interactions. This commenced initially in Customer Services from 8 January 2024.

7 Conclusion

The Council's customer service provision has been through a journey of change over the last few years, from a traditional service, through radical change during the Covid pandemic, and is now settling into a new normal.

The demand and type of service provision is changing, and the Council is reacting to this. In turn, this means that there is a need to revisit both the physical provision of services which have been achieved by the new Customer Centre, and the digital offer. This is an area that is developing well but will need continual focus and will form part of corporate transformation program.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning and regeneration - Clean, green and Zero Carbon - Communities and Housing - A well-run council
Policy Considerations:	Customer Excellence Strategy
Safeguarding:	None directly, but safeguarding is a consideration in some customer interactions.
Equalities/Diversity:	Equality Impact Assessments are undertaken when major changes are planned.
Customer Impact:	Detailed in the report.
Economic and Social Impact:	Indirectly interactions with customers can make real impacts and changes to residents and businesses, but nothing specific from this report directly.
Environment, Climate Change and Zero Carbon:	None specific.
Consultation/Community Engagement:	None for this report but they are undertaken when significant change is proposed.
Risks:	These are covered in operational policies for customer contact. Other issues are addressed in service and corporate risk management approaches.
Officer Contact	Nichola Oliver Team Manager Customer Services Nichola.Oliver@nwleicestershire.gov.uk

Annex 1- Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS) 2022/23 (Last full year to be comparative to the LGSCO report)

The HOS complaint findings are categorised into the following determination definitions:

- **Maladministration** – this could be a finding of service failure, maladministration or severe maladministration, depending upon the seriousness of the failure and the impact on the resident.
- **Reasonable redress** - There is evidence of service failure or maladministration however the landlord has identified and acknowledged this, either as part of our early resolution process or on its own initiative. It has taken steps, and/or made an offer of compensation, which puts things right.
- **Partial maladministration** -If several issues are raised within one complaint, we will investigate and make a finding for each issue. This may mean that there is partial maladministration, where maladministration is found in relation to one or more elements of the complaint, but not all.
- **No maladministration** - is made where the evidence demonstrates that the landlord acted in accordance with its obligations and there is no evidence of any significant failing or detriment to residents.
- **Outside Jurisdiction** - The complaint falls outside of the housing ombudsman's services and therefore the complaint is not investigated.
- **Referred**- back to landlord as complaints process not exhausted by complainant.

In the year April 2022 – March 2023 we received six HOS cases which were categorised as follows:

Determination Category	Total
Outside Jurisdiction and therefore not investigated by HOS	3
Referred back to landlord as complaints process not exhausted by complainant.	1
Maladministration	1
No Maladministration	1

The maladministration case set out in the table above was an electrical property fire the determination was as below and £300 compensation.

- In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was maladministration in the landlord's response to the fire in the property.
- In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was maladministration in the landlord's handling of repairs in the property following the fire.
- In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was no maladministration in the level of support and financial assistance from the landlord.
- In accordance with paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme, there was service failure in the landlord's complaints handling.

Paragraph 52 of the Housing Ombudsman Scheme can be viewed here [Housing-Ombudsman-Scheme-1.pdf](#). Actions have been taken in reaction to this case to take on learnings from the process to help avoid a similar recurrence of the particular findings of this case.

Annex 2- Benchmarking other comparable local authorities.

