



Committee and Date

Transformation & Improvement Scrutiny
9th September 2024

Cabinet
11th September 2024

Item

Public



Annual Customer Feedback (Complaints) Report 2023/24

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1. Synopsis

The report summarises the customer feedback (compliments, comments and complaints) received by Shropshire Council in 2023/24 as well as the potential impact of the LGSCO Complaint Handling Code from 2026. Overall numbers remain similar for complaints but average time to respond and the proportion of upheld cases have increased.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This report gives an overview of formal customer feedback to the Council in 2023/24, covering complaints, compliments and comments as well as MP enquiries and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman investigations. In total, the council received 2,629 cases of formal feedback, including 1,934 complaint cases resulting in 1,187 complaint investigations, 220 comments and 475 compliments.
- 2.2. While the long-term trend is of increasing numbers of complaints received, up by more than a third since 2016/17, year on year the volume of customer feedback has continued to stabilise. There is however a continuing trend of greater complexity in the complaints recorded, with many cases now requiring greater staff input and resource due to the nature of the issues raised.

- 2.3. A key benchmark in measuring how the council handles complaints is the average time taken to respond to a complaint. The council sets its corporate standard of responding to complaints within 30 working days for Stage 1 complaints. The data for 2023/24 shows this figure has risen and is now at 31 days which is above the corporate standard (as it had been two years ago). The average response time is affected by a number of complaints which take far longer to resolve. These are usually linked to highly complex issues. In some cases, service area performance is a concern. This is reported in internal quarterly and other more frequent customer feedback performance reports and data sharing. Considering the current focus on transforming the council to address the budget situation and implementing new ways and models of working, the current situation is not expected to alter significantly in the short to medium term.
- 2.4. A new LGSCO [Complaint Handling Code](#) which comes into effect from April 2026 seeks to reduce Stage 1 complaint response times to 10 days, although this can be extended by a further 10 days if there is good reason and these reasons are explained to the customer. To achieve this will require considerable planning and it is envisaged that a further report will be presented to Cabinet in due course outlining what the implications of complying with the new Code may be.
- 2.5. The number of complaints progressing beyond Stage 1 through either the council's own processes or to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) represents 11% of complaint investigations at 129.
- 2.6. In total 81 complaints were referred to the LGSCO in 2023/24. Of these, 24 were investigated and of those 19 were upheld by the Ombudsman.
- 2.7. The number of formal inquiries from the four MPs covering the Shropshire Council area, saw an increase of 7% year on year

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Members are asked to consider the Annual Customer Feedback Report and approve the 15 recommendations within it, and actions to support and improve robust customer feedback performance.
- 3.2. Members are asked to note that from April 2026 the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman will start to use the complaint handling code within its decisions and reporting (any non-compliance will be highlighted publicly from this time).

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. Effective monitoring and follow-up of complaints provides the opportunity to manage risks and identify any trends and common issues being raised through customer feedback and make improvements.
- 4.2. The complaints process also plays an important part in capturing residents' opinions of Shropshire Council's services, where there may be shortcomings and how these can be rectified or improved. Having an effective and open comment, complaint and feedback process

is an important part in one of the key objectives of The Shropshire Plan, creating a Healthy Organisation.

4.3. General annual report risks:

| <i>Risk</i> | <i>Mitigation</i> |
|---|---|
| Reporting customer feedback and complaints performance can lead to the risk of misinterpretation, particularly since benchmarking data is not available for comparison with other local authorities (only Ombudsman cases can be compared). | Steps have been taken to provide context and explanation within the full report such as the inclusion of performance over the last few years for context. |
| Implementing improvement recommendations may be challenging in a context of growing service pressures. | This report and the next annual report will show progress and comments against planned actions. This means any implementation challenges can be explained. |
| Shropshire Council is currently undergoing a programme of transformation and public consultations on service changes. This may lead to a changing picture of customer feedback during the coming year. This may also hamper some service's ability to prioritise complaint responses and some response may take longer than usual | Quarterly reporting is in place internally (with other reports also provided where needed). This allows changes to be identified early and any action taken to address changes in performance. Regular monitoring of response times will also help to identify any problem areas. |
| The report highlights that more complaints are progressing beyond stage 1 or being upheld. This presents the risk that complaints are taking longer to address and action/budget to remedy issues is becoming more challenging. | Performance measures are in place to monitor impact of changes. Plans are in place to design system changes to help monitor actions resulting from complaints. |

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. This report presents information to support decision making and does not itself carry any direct financial implications. However, systems that help prevent complaints escalating, particularly to Stage 2 or LGSCO complaints, will result in a reduction in the staff time required to deal with complaints. Accountable officers and senior managers may use the information to inform actions or interventions for improving service performance and the prioritisation and use of resources.
- 5.2. Although there are no direct financial implications it is worth noting that the Ombudsman has recently responded to local authorities highlighting concerns that the implementation of the new Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code has financial implications including requiring IT system changes. Shropshire Council is not impacted in the same way because planned IT system changes are already underway as part of the Digital Delivery Unit transformation project. Direct impacts are on staff time.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. Neutral impact. There are no direct effects on the council's climate change agenda. However, it should be noted that there is a risk that climate change will lead to more

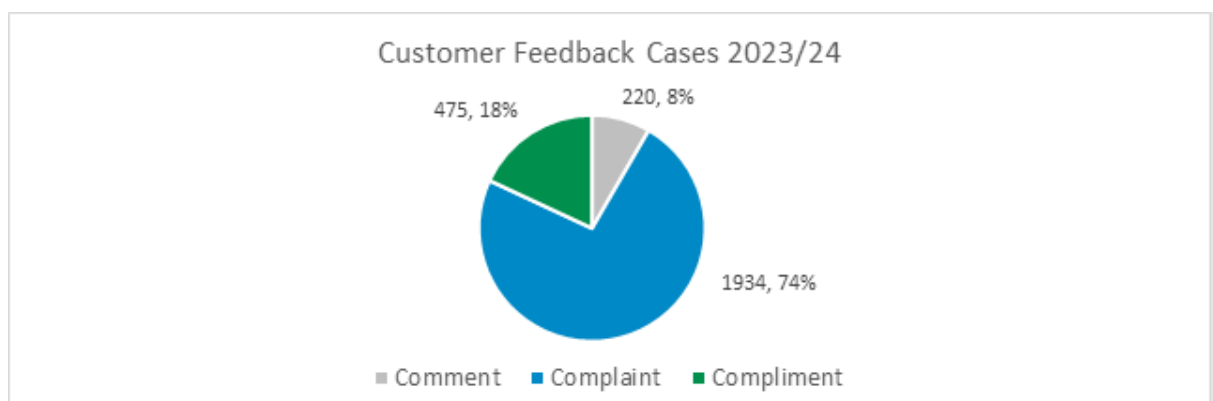
severe weather events and these increase the number of complaints received by Shropshire Council (e.g. flooding, snow/ice on roads, problems caused by extreme heat). 2023/24 did not see these peaks in weather related complaints but this has been a noticeable issue in previous years.

7. Background

- 7.1. The Customer Feedback Annual Report at Appendix A is prepared by the Council's Feedback and Insight Team, who handle the corporate and statutory processes for recording and responding to formal comments, compliments and complaints (the Assistant Director - Legal and Governance lead complaints beyond Stage 1 (i.e. Stage 2 and Ombudsman)). For complaints this covers issues dealt with using the council's corporate complaints processes, as well as those requiring investigation by the LGSCO. Processes for adult and children's social care complaints are statutory and are set nationally.

8. Additional Information

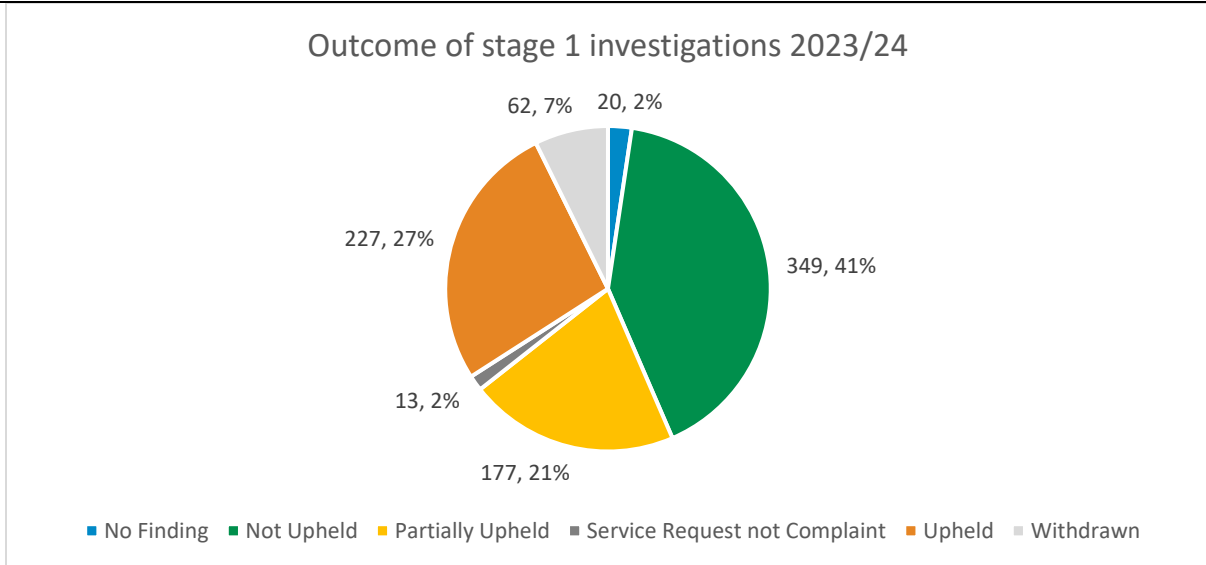
- 8.1. Shropshire Council received 2,629 cases of formal feedback in 2023/24, down 3% on the previous year. The breakdown of the feedback by type is as follows:



- 8.2. Of the 1,934 initial complaint cases received, this resulted in 978 complaint investigations, a 17% reduction on the previous year. Not every complaint received requires investigation as some are resolved early without the need for a full investigation, for example because the complaint is withdrawn or is recorded as a request for a service.
- 8.3. Effective Stage 1 complaints handling reduces the number of complaints escalating to Stage 2. Most complaints continued to be addressed and closed at Stage 1 of the corporate complaint procedure. However, in 2023/24, 129 cases progressed beyond Stage 1, to Stage 2 or beyond to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). This total is up on the previous year.
- 8.4. Considering complaints by service area, as in previous years, the Place Directorate, which is responsible for the Council's more visible public facing services (such as Highways and Transport, Waste and Leisure), received 31% of the Council's complaints, a significantly smaller proportion than in previous years. Resources and cross-council issues received 24% of complaints, followed by Adult Services 22% and Children's Services on 20%. There has been an increase in the number of complaints

about Children's Services, reflecting the growing pressure in this service area particularly around children with Special Educational Needs and reflecting a significant increase in the number of Educational Health Care Plans increased by 154% in 2023. While services with high levels of public visibility and contact, notably Highways and Transport and Waste, feature prominently, Children's Social Care and Adult Services Community Social Care account for a growing number of complaints. There has been a further reduction in the volume of complaints about Highways and Transport, which now account for 17% of all complaints (down from 27% in 2021/22). This reduction reflects continued focus on improving the Council's roads and several changes in that service area, while the greater prominence of complaints in social care reflects the growing pressures across this area, which now accounts for almost £4 in every £5 the council spends.

- 8.5. The average number of days to close a formal complaint rose during the year by five days and now stands at 31 days, one day above the 30-day corporate target for responding to Stage 1 complaints. This reflects a continuation of a trend of average response times becoming longer and is more than double the average of five years ago. In total, 59% of Stage 1 complaints are responded to within the corporate standard of 30 days, and the average days to respond is affected by a small number of typically complex and long-running cases exceeding timescales that can take many more than 30 days to respond to. For example, six cases took more than 150 days to close during the year. Considerable work is undertaken with services to help them achieve the target days to close figure. The new shorter response times in the LGSCO Complaint Handling Code of 10 days for Stage One (with the possibility to extend by a further 10 days if the customer is informed of the reason for this) will require considerable effort corporately and by services to meet the new lower response time target from April 2026. A further report addressing the impact of the Code will be presented to Cabinet in due course.
- 8.6. In 2023/24 at the end of Stage 1, 41% of complaints were not upheld; 27% were upheld (up 11 percentage points on the previous year). This is a further reflection of the pressures that many services are facing. 21% were partly upheld (often where a complaint might have multiple points within it) and 7% (19) were withdrawn or were a service request rather than a complaint; 2% of complaints had no finding and this figure has again fallen following focused work through performance monitoring to reduce this as less organisational learning or improvement is likely to emerge from a no finding outcome.



- 8.8 The most common problem categories in upheld complaints are ‘Service standards – communication (failure/poor)’ and ‘Service standards – failure to provide a service/take action’.

9. Ombudsman Annual Reporting

- 9.1 Each year, all councils receive an [annual feedback report from the LGSCO](#) (Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman) which covers complaints made in relation to the services provided by, or commissioned by, Shropshire Council. The annual letter is included within the full annual report (Appendix A).
- 9.2 LGSCO enquiries range from straightforward requests for more information about a complaint to detailed investigations which require extensive research and collation of considerable volumes of information. Generally, the Ombudsman allows 28 days by for an investigation, whether the issue is current or an historical complaint with no immediate implications. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to comply with timescales set by the Ombudsman given that service areas need to deal with Ombudsman’s enquiries on top of day-to-day responsibilities to the public and local communities. When additional time is needed, the council will seek an extension, although this can still prove challenging for many similar reasons behind the increase in average complaint response times, including complexity of the issues, the volume of documentation involved and key staff sickness/absences. During the year, 44% of cases investigated by the Ombudsman were not responded to in time, further reflecting the pressures on services and complexities often seen in these cases.
- 9.3 During the year the LGSCO considered 79 cases, of which 24 were decided by the LGSCO of which 19 were upheld. This reflects 79% of cases decided by the LGSCO and is identical to the LGSCO’s upheld rate for similar authorities. The LGSCO reported that the council had 100% compliance implementing its recommendations where these were made.

10. Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

- 10.1 During the year, the LGSCO also consulted on a new [Complaint Handling Code](#) which the Council responded to in November 2023. The LGSCO subsequently made some alterations to the Code which is guidance for councils and is expected to be applied to

the LGSCO's case work from April 2026. The Code confirms that there must be a lead member with oversight for complaints who will support a positive complaint handling culture. .

- 10.2 The Code outlines a standardised approach to complaint handling across all councils. Its recommendations would make several changes to the current corporate complaint handling processes particularly around the timescales for handling complaints. Under the Code, this would reduce the standard responses times for complaints at both Stage 1 and Stage 2. Given the challenges we have in complying with the existing corporate response timescales at 8.5, this will create an additional pressure for services to comply with the Code.
- 10.3 As part of the preparations for the implementation of the Code, the LGSCO asks that councils publish a self-assessment document that details their readiness to adopt the Code using a "traffic light" red/amber/green system to evaluate preparedness and actions required to do so. The self-assessment is included in the annual report at section 14. The LGSCO has indicated that it will publish further details on the new code during the next year following a trial period with several other councils.
- 10.4 The Council has until at least April 2026 to prepare to implement the new timeframes and, as explained above, a further report will be presented to Cabinet in due course to discuss the Code in more detail.

11. MP Enquiries

- 11.1. The report also shows the number of MP enquiries the Council receives from the four MPs representing Shropshire. The latest figures show that the number of MP enquiries rose again year on year by 7% on the previous year.

12. Conclusions

- 12.1. The 15 recommendations in the Annual Report highlight areas of focus designed to improve customer feedback handling and performance. Key areas of focus arising from the 2023/24 annual report include:
 - A. Improving customer experience supported by the Digital Delivery Unit transformation programme to improve the ease of raising customer feedback, reporting and providing updates to reassure customers that the appropriate action is underway. This will also harness new technology and IT systems to make this easier for customers and services responding.
 - B. Fostering a feedback culture with a positive complaint handling approach among staff and individuals, as envisioned by the LGSCO Complaint Handling Code. This will encourage constructive feedback and learning from complaints through further staff training and reporting of compliments centrally so that Shropshire Council has a rounded view of both positive feedback and complaints.
 - C. Developing a better understanding of the impact of the LGSCO Complaint Handling Code in good time prior to April 2026.
 - D. Clarifying exclusions to ensure customers and members of staff understand the most appropriate way to respond to enquiries and complaint process exclusions.

Using the correct processes and clarifying when a complaint cannot be taken will avoid case handling where cases are outside of the council's jurisdiction or better handled through an appeal or other process.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Shropshire Council Customer Feedback Annual Report 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23
[Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code](#), Cabinet report, 22.11.2023

Local Member: N/A

Appendices

Appendix A - Shropshire Council Customer Feedback Annual Report 2023/24