

**Committee and Date****Cabinet
9th July**

Item

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Public



Annual Customer Feedback Report 2024/25

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| Responsible Officer: | Tim Collard | | |
| email: | Tim.Collard@shropshire.gov.uk | Tel: | 01743 252756 |
| Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder): | Cllr Alex Wagner | | |

1. Synopsis

The report summarises the annual customer feedback for 2024/25. In 2024/25, 3,079 cases of feedback (comments, compliments and complaints) were received, with 952 complaints progressing to investigation and 144 complaints considered beyond stage 1. There has been some improvement in average response times, but challenges remain linked to increasing complexity and growing customer demand.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Formal feedback and complaints provide valuable information related to the health of the organisation and as such fit within the Healthy Organisation priority within the Shropshire Plan. The Strategic objective of most relevance is: 'We will put our resources in the right place using accurate data, insights and evidence to support the delivery of the organisation's priorities and balance the books'.
- 2.2 This report gives an overview of formal customer feedback received and recorded by Shropshire Council in 2024/25, covering complaints, compliments and comments. Ombudsman's annual data is also included alongside information on the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code ("the Code") (which is due to be fully implemented in April 2026) and a self-assessment. In total, the council received 3,079 cases of formal feedback, including 2,386 complaint cases resulting in 952 complaint investigations, 245 comments and 448 compliments.
- 2.3 While the long-term trend is of increasing numbers of cases received, up by 55% since 2016/17, year on year the volume of complaint investigations has stabilised.

There is a concern that this could be linked to resourcing of the process rather than any improvement in customer satisfaction or early action to remedy cases prior to investigation.

- 2.4 A key benchmark in measuring how the council handles complaints is the average time taken to respond to a complaint. The council currently has a corporate standard of responding to complaints at stage 1 within 30 working days. This had increased significantly in previous years, but this year's data shows that focus on this area has seen the average response time reduce to 23 days. Despite this average improvement 28% of stage 1 responses were overdue.
- 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) has increased. 15% of all complaint investigations are now stage 2 or beyond (double the proportion 2 years ago).
- 2.6 In total 79 complaints were referred to the LGSCO in 2024/25. Of these, 31 cases were decided and 15 investigated. 9 cases were upheld. Appendix 2 of the Annual Report details the actions required when fault was identified.
- 2.7 As part of annual reporting, local authorities are asked to complete a self-assessment to demonstrate compliance with the Code. Organisations should also carry out a self-assessment following a significant restructure, merger and/or change in procedures.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Members are asked to consider the recommendations and actions in the Annual Customer Feedback Report (pages 30 and 31) to support and improve customer feedback performance within Shropshire Council.
- 3.2. Members are asked to note that a paper on the adoption of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code will be prepared for a future Cabinet Meeting (September 2025).

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. Effective monitoring and follow-up of complaints provides the opportunity to minimise risks through the identification of themes, areas of concern and opportunities for remedial actions, learning and improvements.
- 4.2. The complaints process plays an important part in capturing residents' opinion of Shropshire Council's services, where there may be shortcomings and how these can be rectified. Having an effective and open comment, complaint and feedback process is commonly referred to within external assessment and inspection processes including Ofsted, CQC, Corporate Peer Reviews and the recent Best Value Guidance.

4.3. Risk table:

| <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 embedding a new structure and operating model. 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. 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. Shropshire Council continues to manage unprecedented financial pressures as detailed within the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) approved by Council on 27 February 2025 and subsequent updates. It is also addressed in our monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. Significant management action has and continues to be undertaken to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all reports provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. Where non-essential spend is identified within the Council, this will be reduced. This may involve
- scaling down initiatives,
 - changing the scope,
 - delaying implementation, or
 - extending delivery timescales.
- 5.2. This report presents information to support decision making and does not itself carry any direct financial implications. However, investment is required to enable Shropshire Council to implement and comply with the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. This will be covered within a future report. The self-assessment identifies some of the main actions required but detailed guidance produced by the Ombudsman highlights further suggested action.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

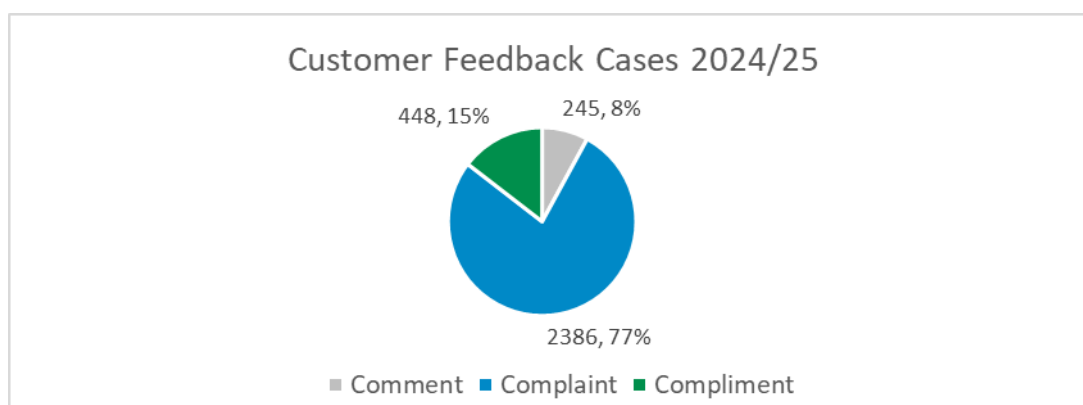
- 6.1. There are no direct effects on the council's climate change agenda. Complaints processes are predominantly carried out through electronic communications with limited environmental impact.

7. Background

- 7.1. The Customer Feedback Annual Report 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 Complaints Monitoring Officer leads corporate stage 2 complaints and takes on the role as the Ombudsman link officer). Processes for adult and children's social care complaints are statutory and are set nationally. These processes are not impacted by the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- 7.2. Annual reports are prepared and presented to Members to provide an overview of customer feedback performance for the year. A new requirement by the Ombudsman means that annual reports must now also include a self-assessment against implementation of the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code (the September 2025 report will cover this in more detail).

8. Annual Performance

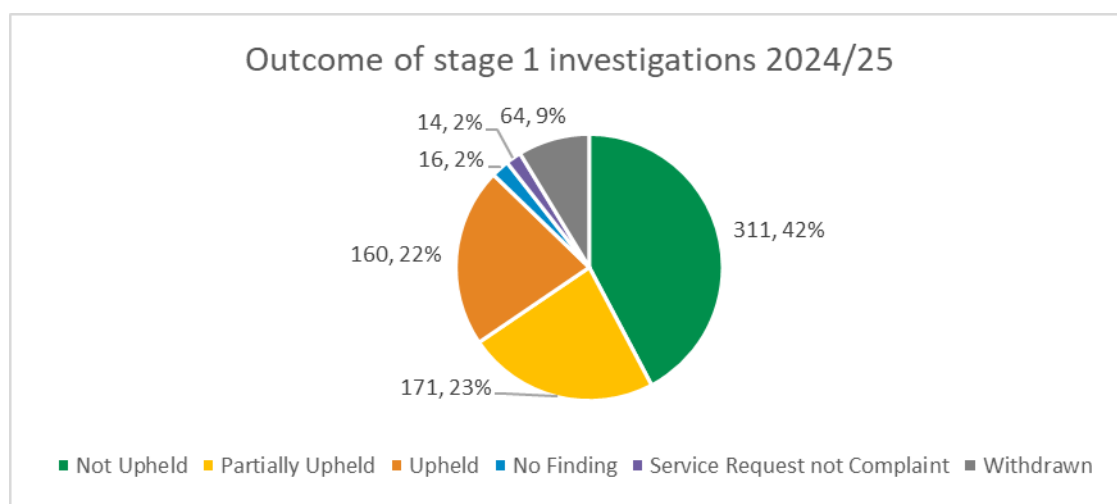
- 8.1 Shropshire Council received 3,079 cases of formal feedback in 2024/25, a 17% increase on the previous year. The breakdown of the feedback by type is as follows:



- 8.2 At investigation stage there were 749 corporate complaints, 162 Adult Services statutory complaints (including provider complaints and multi-agency complaints) and 41 Children's Services statutory complaints. Statutory complaints are considered in more detail within other reports to ensure statutory reporting requirements are fulfilled.
- 8.3 The initial 2,386 complaints at case level resulted in 952 complaint investigations in total (as described in 8.2 above), similar to the previous year. Not every complaint received requires investigation as some may be 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. However, the volume of cases identified as complaints and then early closed has increased and now seems disproportionate, suggesting problems in the customer journey. Of the early closures, 397 cases (55%) had to be early closed because the complainant chose not to provide contact details (anonymous complaints cannot be investigated). 13% were outside of the council's jurisdiction and 8% were insurance claims. Analysis by the Feedback and Insight Team suggested 42% of complaints raised at case level should have been considered as service requests and not directed to the complaint processes. This is a significant figure requiring further consideration and action.

- 8.4 It should be noted that customer feedback data for 2024/25 does not reflect the recent council re-structure as part of the new operating model and work is required to bring reporting and systems in line with it. Considering complaints by service area, the Place Directorate (as was), which had most of the Council's public facing services (such as Highways and Transport, Waste and Leisure), received 33% of the Council's complaints. Resources and the Office of the Chief Executive received 24% of complaints followed by Adult Services 22% and Children's Services on 21%. Children's Services has seen a significant increase in the last 2 years.
- 8.5 The most complained about services are Highways, Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care and Waste. A closer look at upheld complaints (a better measure for performance) shows that 21% were with Highways and Transport (a significant improvement compared to 2021/22 at 32% but more than the 17% in 2023/24). 18% were for Special Educational Needs and Disability within Learning and Skills, 14% Adult Social Care Operations - Community and 9% were with Waste Management.
- 8.6 During 2024/25 Shropshire Council took an average of 23 working days to respond to stage 1 complaints (against the 30 working day timescale). This has been the dominant performance issue over the last 2 years. The Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code requires corporate complaints to be responded to within 10 working days in future (with a 10-day extension for the most complex cases). Although Shropshire Council's average has reduced, suggesting some improvement, this is due to very short response times within some service areas. There are still too many cases exceeding the timescales, this may be due to reduced officer capacity within a service or the result of cases that are difficult to resolve or require significant time to resolve. Additional analysis shows that of the 565 stage 1 corporate closed complaints, 156 were late and 409 (72%) were on time.
- 8.7 In 2024/25 at the end of Stage 1, 42% of complaints were not upheld, 22% were upheld, 23% were partly upheld (often where a complaint might have multiple points within it). 2% had no finding and 11% were withdrawn or were a service request rather than a complaint. Slightly more complaints are resulting in some finding of fault, but this should not be viewed too negatively, and very low upheld rates can be considered as a sign of poor complaint handling and lack of acceptance of fault and learning.



- 8.8 Effective Stage 1 complaints handling reduces the number of complaints escalating to Stage 2 or beyond. Over the last few years there has been a steady increase in escalations. In 2024/25 144 cases progressed beyond Stage 1, either to Stage Two, Stage 3 (children's statutory) or going to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) (significantly more than the 95 in 2023/24 and 126 in 2023/24).

9. Ombudsman's Annual Report

- 9.1 In May 2025, the Council received its [annual feedback report from the LGSCO](#). In total 79 complaints were referred to the LGSCO in 2024/25 and of those, 31 cases were decided and 15 investigated. 9 cases were upheld. Appendix 2 of the Annual Report details the actions required when fault was identified.
- 9.2 The Ombudsman reports Shropshire Council's upheld rate at 60%. The LGO upheld rate for similar local authorities is reported as 80%.
- 9.3 Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations was 100% in 2024/25. The rate of complaints per 100,000 population is 2.7% for Shropshire Council in 2024/25 against an average of 5.3% for all authorities.
- 9.4 The Complaint Handling Code ('the Code'), sets out a process for organisations that will allow them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The purpose of the Code is to enable organisations to resolve complaints raised by individuals promptly, and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals. A report will be brought to Cabinet on the adoption of the Complaint Handling Code.

9. Self-Assessment

- 10.1 The Complaints Handling Code includes a requirement for local authorities to undertake a self-assessment against the Code and to report progress within an annual report. A self-assessment is included within the annual report on pages 24 to 29. The Code states *'The annual complaints performance and service improvement report should be reported through the organisation's governance arrangements and published on the section of its website relating to complaints. The response to the report from the relevant governance arrangement should be published alongside this'*.
- 10.2 The self-assessment, carried out by the Feedback and Insight Team Leader concludes compliance with that 27 elements of the code (green colour coded), 23 elements are considered partly in place (yellow) and it is considered that Shropshire Council is not complying with 16 elements (orange). There is significant work required before Shropshire Council could report compliance with all areas of the Code. There is additional work required to implement 7 guidance documents published alongside the Code (including commissioned services complaint handling, effective scrutiny of complaints, oversight of complaints systems and adult social care complaints and appeals).

11. Conclusions

- 11.1 The customer feedback data for 2024/25 highlights a number of challenges for the year ahead, particularly in relation to the significant performance improvements that will be required under the Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code. Over the year, the monthly average was 257 customer feedback cases (more than the previous year at 219). This is also reflected in quarterly totals and in 2024/25 each quarter saw an increase in the number of customer feedback cases being raised. There has been a 55% increase in customer feedback from 2016/17 whilst the level of resources available to manage the complaints process has remained the same.
- 11.2 The recommendations in the Annual Report highlight areas of focus designed to improve customer feedback handling and performance. Key areas of focus arising from the 2024/25 annual report include:
- A. The need to develop new guidance on remedies and reasonable adjustments (the latter ensuring application of the Equality Act 2010).
 - B. The need to review and consider complaint handling by third-party providers.
 - C. The importance of improving customer experience and reducing the number of customer feedback cases being raised as complaints when customers are requesting a service or action to resolve a concern.
 - D. More work to address increases in the number of cases progressing to stage 2 and beyond of the complaints processes. A focus on improved quality of response at stage 1 should help to reverse this trend.

- E. Support for staff in dealing with increasingly complex complaint cases and cases where customer behaviours can be challenging or abusive (including application of the unreasonably persistent and vexatious customers procedure).
- F. A focus on learning and actions so that service improvement may be generated. It is important for senior managers to ensure their staff understand the importance and value of the complaints processes and effective complaint handling to help prevent failure demand through inadequate complaint responses and a lack of action to remedy and resolve concerns.

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

Local Member: All

Appendices

Shropshire Council's Customer Feedback Annual Report 2024/25