

COMPLAINTS REPORT APRIL 2024 - DECEMBER 2024

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Wards affected:	(All Wards);
Appendices (attached):	Appendix 1 – Tables of statistics

Summary

This report details Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints received by the Council from 01 April 2024 to 31 December 2024

Recommendation (s)

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) **Note the contents of the report covering all complaints received by the Council between 01 April 2024 – 31 December 2024**

1 Reason for Recommendation

- 1.1 To bring to the attention of the Committee all complaints received between April 2024 – December 2024 and to advise of any actions taken and lessons learned.

2 Background

- 2.1 A complaint is defined as an expression of dissatisfaction about something we said we would do and didn't, or a poor standard of service. This could either be by us, or a contractor acting on our behalf.
- 2.2 A complaint is not a request for service (e.g., noise problems) or a request for information or an explanation of our policy (e.g. level of Council Tax set). As an example, a one-off missed bin collection would result in a missed bin service request, however, repeated misses of the same bin at the same address would be logged as a complaint.

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- 2.3 In areas where there are independent tribunals for decisions to be referred to, for example, planning application outcomes, housing review applications and Penalty Charge Notices, these matters will be dealt with by the appropriate independent body and will therefore not fall within the Council's two-stage complaint process.
- 2.4 The council has 15 working days to respond to stage 1 complaints and 15 working days to respond to a stage 2 complaint. If a Stage 1 complaint is not responded to within timescales, the complainant can request escalation to Stage 2 without the Stage 1 response being completed.
- 2.5 The timeline for completion for stage 2 complaints has been extended to 20 working days from January 2025, this is in line with the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's new Complaint Handling code. Updates to the Complaint Policy and staff training have been completed to reflect this change.
- 2.6 Complaints fall under three main categories which are: service delivery, staff behaviour/conduct and policy.
- 2.7 Staff within service areas deal with their own complaints with the support of Customer Services, although there are instances where Customer Services will respond to complaints on behalf of a service area if they have the relevant information.
- 2.8 Once a complaint has been through the two-stage Council complaint process and the complainant is still unsatisfied, they are able to refer their complaint to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). This information is always included in the response to the complainant so that they are aware.
- 2.9 Complaints provide the Council with a good opportunity to review the decisions they have made and the service they have provided. Findings in complaint outcomes can be used to bring about service improvement through identifying and sharing lessons learned across all service areas.
- 2.10 Customer Services also work with managers to understand how they are learning from these complaints and how they are communicating complaint outcomes back to the staff, and if necessary, making changes to processes and procedures

3 Complaints Received between 01 April 2024 – 31 December 2024

- 3.1 Appendix 1 contains four tables of statistics which are explained below.
- 3.2 Table 1 shows the total number of complaints broken down by service area and complaint stage, received between April 2024 and December 2024.

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- 3.3 Tables 2.1 and 2.2 show the number of complaints broken down by service area team and complaint stage between April 2024 and December 2024.
- 3.4 Table 3 shows the number of complaints by service area responded to inside and out of time at both stage one and stage two between April 2024 and December 2024.
- 3.5 Table 4 shows the number of complaints upheld and not upheld by service area responded to between April 2024 and December 2024.

4 Operational Services

- 4.1 Due to the volume of work completed by Operational Services (approximately 500,000 collections per month), they often receive the highest number of complaints. The Customer Services team therefore provide additional support and collaborate with Operational Services when responding to complaints. This differs to other service areas who generally respond to their own complaints.
- 4.2 Although Operational Services receive a higher number of complaints when compared with other service areas, they have seen a year-on-year reduction in the percentage share of complaints received in total. Between 01 April 2024 – 31 December 2024, Operational services were responsible for 57% of all complaints received, which is a reduction of 19.5% when compared with the same period last year.
- 4.3 The main reasons for these complaints were missed collections, bins not being set back properly, poor service received and staff behaviour. The complaint category split is service delivery failure 90%, staff behaviour/conduct 9%, and 1% policy failure. The 2023 figures followed a similar pattern with Service delivery failure being the main reason at 86% Staff behaviour/conduct at 13% and Policy failure at 1 %.
- 4.4 The upheld vs not upheld percentage rates for stage 1 and 2 complaints show that the stage 1 figures are very similar YOY. In 2023 82% were upheld and 17% were not upheld, whereas in 2024 78% were upheld and 19% not upheld. The stage 2 percentages have changed with a much lower percentage being upheld compared to last year. This reduction in upheld complaints shows that whilst complaints are received by the Council, there have been fewer findings of fault which could suggest that existing policies and procedures are being followed.
- 4.5 Stage 1 complaints have seen a similar in-time response timescale when compared with the same period last year, however, there has been an increased number of stage 2 complaint responses exceeding the 15 working day timescale, when compared with the same period last year.
- 4.6 A low percentage of stage 1 complaints escalated to stage 2, (8%), this indicates that generally complainants are satisfied with the outcome of their stage 1 complaint.

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- 4.7 An example of a lesson learnt in refuse and recycling is when a complaint was received regarding a missed collection and the need for the resident to put excess in clear sacks to be collected later. The resident contacted the Council where it became apparent that the website mentioned different things on different pages regarding excess rubbish, and it wasn't clear for the customer or our customer services team. The clear sacks that the customer was told to use are harder to come by with most people using black sacks. Customer services gave this feedback to Operational services, who agreed to update the website and their policy to make it clear and to advise that black sacks could be used for excess.

5 Housing & Communities

- 5.1 Housing and Communities received the second highest number of complaints within the Council, which follows from the same period last year.
- 5.2 Housing and Parking are both areas within which high tension situations between Officers and the Public can arise. For example, the issuing of a Penalty Charge Notice in a Council Car Park, or the Council's refusal to house a member of public. In situations such as these, the complaint can be unfairly made against the individual member of staff, rather than the policy or process not being followed.
- 5.3 The total number of complaints received across both stages has seen a 7% increase when compared with the same period last year, going from 13% in 2023 to 20% in 2024.
- 5.4 In addition to the increase in the number of complaints, the total number of upheld complaints is 60% at stage 1 and 33% at stage 2, compared to the previous year when it was 45% for stage 1, and 14% for stage 2. This increase in upheld complaints shows that there have been more findings of fault which could suggest that existing policies and procedures are not being followed.
- 5.5 There was also a reduction in the number of complaints not upheld for both stages from 51% and 86% last year to 37% and 67% this year.
- 5.6 A fair amount of the increase in complaint numbers for Housing and Communities can be attributed to the increase in car park charges that were introduced in April 2024, as well as other car park/parking matters. These attracted many stage 1 complaints, accounting for 81% of the service areas' overall complaints.
- 5.7 Regarding stage 1 complaints 64% of these were responded to in time, with 36% out of time. Of the Stage 2 complaints received, none were responded to on time. Stage 1 response times follow a similar pattern to last year, whereas we saw more stage 2 complaints responded to on time last year.

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- 5.8 The complaint category split this year is as follows; service delivery failure 30%, Staff behaviour/conduct 28% (both increased y-o-y) and Policy failure 38% (reduced), compared to 2023, where it was Service delivery failure 51%, staff behaviour/conduct 43% and Policy failure 6%. Apart from the car park charges issue, the main other reasons for their complaints were staff conduct (mainly in the car parks) and delays in processes.
- 5.9 A low percentage of stage 1 complaints escalated to stage 2, (7%) which would indicate that generally complainants are satisfied with the outcome of their stage 1 complaint.
- 5.10 An example of a lesson learned through complaints is the fee increases made in April 2024 which attracted a high number of complaints. Upon review and taking customer feedback on board, a decision was made to reduce this new £7 fee down to £5, meaning the increase was only from £3 to £5. There were no further complaints regarding this.

6 Place Development

- 6.1 It is worth noting that a complaint cannot be made about a planning application decision. The applicant should appeal directly to the Planning Inspectorate regarding the decision. Similarly, Planning Enforcement complaints are also dealt with separately and work to the process set out in the Council's "Planning Enforcement Plan".
- 6.2 Complaints regarding the service provided by the Planning/Enforcement staff, the process they have followed, or policy failures will be accepted by the Council.
- 6.3 This service area has seen an increase in the number of complaints when compared with the same period last year, increasing from 6% of the organisations total complaints last year to 15% this year. Much of this increase can be attributed to a specific Planning Committee meeting held in April 2024.
- 6.4 Between 01 April 24 and 31 December 24 only 9% of stage 1 complaints were upheld and 5% of stage 2 complaints upheld, compared to 2023 where 35% of stage 1 were upheld and none of the stage 2.
- 6.5 In addition to the increased number of complaints, we have seen a small reduction in the number of stage 1 complaints responded to within timescales, with 36% in 2024 compared with the same period last year which was 40%. There have been several detailed complaints received which do require additional time and consideration, which may explain the drop in stage 1 complaints being responded to on time. In terms of the stage 2 response time, we have seen a good increase in the number responded to in time this year which was 45% compared to 2023 where it was 14%.

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- 6.6 A high percentage of stage 1 complaints escalated to stage 2, (48%) which would indicate that complainants were not happy with the outcome of their stage 1 complaint.
- 6.7 The complaint category split this year is service delivery failure 87%, staff behaviour/conduct 7% and policy failure 4%, compared to last year when it was; service delivery failure 75%, staff behaviour/conduct 5% and Policy failure 20%. As well as the number of complaints regarding the conduct at a planning committee, the main other reason for their complaints was poor service received
- 6.8 An example of a lesson learnt for this area is where a complaint was made regarding an application which was determined prior to the conclusion of the site notice time-period. The outcome was that the application should not have been determined at the time that it was. Case officers have been reminded that they are accountable for adhering to site-notice time periods, and a new procedure has now been created in Uniform for recording the placement of site notices.

7 Policy & Corporate Resources

- 7.1 Complaint numbers remain low for this service area, although there has been an increase in complaint numbers received from 8 in 2023 to 12 in 2024.
- 7.2 The number of complaints upheld at both stage 1 and stage 2 have increased. At stage 1, 73% were upheld and 27% were not upheld. At stage 2, it was 100% upheld. Last year this was, stage 1, 33% upheld, 67% not upheld and at stage 2 100% not upheld.
- 7.3 The complaint category split for this year is service delivery failure 100% and last year was service delivery failure 66%, staff behaviour/conduct 17% and policy failure 17%. The main reasons for the complaints here range from not responding to queries within agreed timescales and longer call waiting times during busy periods.
- 7.4 The percentage of stage 1 complaints responded to on time is slightly less when compared to the same period last year, from 83% in 2023 to 73% in 2024. The single stage 2 complaint received this year was responded to on time.
- 7.5 A fairly low percentage of stage 1 complaints escalated to stage 2, (8%) which would indicate that generally complainants were happy with the outcome of their stage 1 complaint.

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- 7.6 An example of a lesson learnt from the Contact Centre team is when a resident called and had to subsequently call back several times due to being given incorrect information more than once. He eventually spoke to an advisor regarding his PCN appeal and permit, and obtained the correct information, but was unhappy about the number of times he had contacted us. The action from this was that the supervisors made sure all agents understood the correct process for handing PCN appeals and renewal payments for permits, and a reminder that they can contact the parking team with any questions. The offer of additional training was also made and taken up by several agents.

8 Legal, Democratic & Election Services

- 8.1 This service area only received one complaint last year in the same period. This year in the same period, they saw an increase in complaint numbers to 5.
- 8.2 One of these five complaints (20%) was responded to within agreed timescales, 3 complaints were not upheld, and 2 complaints were withdrawn. The complaints were regarding poor service received and administrative errors.

9 Finance, Revenues & Benefits

- 9.1 Finance, Revenues & Benefits services received an increased number of complaints during this period, increasing from 5 in 2023 to 19 in 2024.
- 9.2 This year the complaint category split was 88% service delivery failure and 12% staff behaviour/conduct, compared to last year when it was 80% service delivery failure, 0% staff behaviour/conduct and 20% policy failure. The main reasons for their complaints were that; customers were unhappy with the poor service received from Council Tax and Benefit officers; that unsatisfactory written communication was received and there were errors in admin and information given.
- 9.3 A small number of cases (25%) were upheld at stage 1, which is similar to last year, where at stage 1, 20% were upheld and 80% were not upheld. There were no stage 2 cases in the same period last year. There were only 3 stage 2 cases this year and none were upheld. For this year 69% of stage 1 complaints were responded to on time, and 33% of stage 2. Compared to last year where 80% were responded to on time and 20% out of time
- 9.4 19% of stage 1 complaints escalated to stage 2, which would indicate that generally complainants were satisfied with the outcome of their stage 1 complaint.

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- 9.5 An example of a lesson learned here was when a customer had their Single Person Discount (SPD) removed and backdated from 2022 following a fraud initiative. As the resident paid by Direct Debit, this produced a large and immediately due instalment which was unreasonable. The customer complained to the Council about this, and the lesson learnt was a refreshed procedure whereby an officer would contact the customer in these types of situations, suspend the Direct Debit and discuss manageable payment options. A meeting was held for the billing team who carry out these reviews, to enable them to all understand and confirm the correct process going forward.

10 Property & Regeneration

- 10.1 This team received two complaints this year compared to none last year, they were stage 1 only and one was completed in time and one out. Both were upheld and the complaint category was service delivery failure for both. The complaints were regarding a wall at Bourne hall Car park and Nonsuch park toilets

11 ICT

- 11.1 This team received one complaint this year compared to none last year. The complaint was responded to in time, was upheld and the complaint category was service delivery failure. The complaint was regarding issues with one of the customer facing systems

12 Additional information

- 12.1 The Customer Services team have completed a series of projects including internal team training and complaint handling training for managers tasked with responding to complaints. Training included the provision of templates for managers to complete so that the Customer Services team have clarity on the complaint category, as well as a clear indication of whether or not the complaint is upheld. This ensures that the information recorded is accurate and ensures that the Customer is given all relevant information.
- 12.2 If service areas advise that there will be a delay in responding to the complaint, they are asked to provide a reason and a new timescale for completion, at which point the customer will be updated.
- 12.3 Written procedures have been reviewed and refreshed, and updates to the Complaint Policy have been made to bring the policy in line with the requirements of the new Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

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- 12.4 A key change is the agreement to adopt the Ombudsman's suggested timescales for the completion of a stage 2 complaint, which will see timescales increased from 15 working days to 20 working days for a response. This was explained in training delivered to managers and is effective as of 01 January 2025. The Ombudsman's suggestion that stage 1 timescales should be 10 working days has not been adopted as this would reduce our current timescales. We are a small Authority and this would result in increased pressure for managers to respond. Stage 1 responses should be of a high quality as a result of a full and thorough investigation, with a view to trying to reduce or limit the number of escalations to stage 2. Reducing timescales may lessen the quality of responses at stage 1, therefore increasing the volume of stage 2 escalation requests.

13 Summary

- 13.1 We have spent time listening to our complainants and have taken action to make changes and learn from their complaints. Some examples of these have been given under the various service areas and include making changes to our website, procedures and policies.
- 13.2 Complaints have increased year-on-year, although there appears to be specific issues that have caused this, rather than a general increase in dissatisfaction. There has been a reduction in the number of complaints upheld in both stages of the complaint process when compared with last year. For both stage 1 and 2 complaints there were less completed on time than last year for the same period. The overall complaint category split for 2024 was Service delivery failure 78%, Staff behaviour/conduct 13% and Policy failure 8% compared to 2023 which was almost identical for Service delivery failure at 80%, Staff behaviour/conduct slightly higher at 17% and Policy failure lower at 3%.

14 Risk Assessment

Legal or other duties

- 14.1 Equality Impact Assessment
- 14.1.1 No direct implications
- 14.2 Crime & Disorder
- 14.2.1 No direct implications
- 14.3 Safeguarding
- 14.3.1 No direct implications
- 14.4 Dependencies
- 14.4.1 No direct implications

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14.5 Other

14.5.1 None

15 Financial Implications

15.1 **Section 151 Officer's comments:** This report is for information and does not have any immediate financial implications. With regards to complaints, if upheld complaints result in costs, the Council will need to find this funding from existing budgets or reserves held to cover such unforeseen costs.

16 Legal Implications

16.1 **Legal Officer's comments:** None arising from the contents of this report

17 Policies, Plans & Partnerships

17.1 **Council's Key Priorities:** The following Key Priorities are engaged:

- Effective Council

17.2 **Service Plans:** The matter is not included within the current Service Delivery Plan.

17.3 **Climate & Environmental Impact of recommendations:** No direct implications

17.4 **Sustainability Policy & Community Safety Implications:** No direct implications

17.5 **Partnerships:** No direct implications

18 Background papers

18.1 The documents referred to in compiling this report are as follows:

Previous reports:

- None

Other papers:

- None