

Annual Corporate Complaints Report – 2022-23

Report of the Head of Strategy and Innovation

Recommended:

That the complaints report be reviewed and endorsed ahead of publication.

SUMMARY:

The Committee is requested to consider and discuss background and learning from complaints across all services for the period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023.

1 Introduction

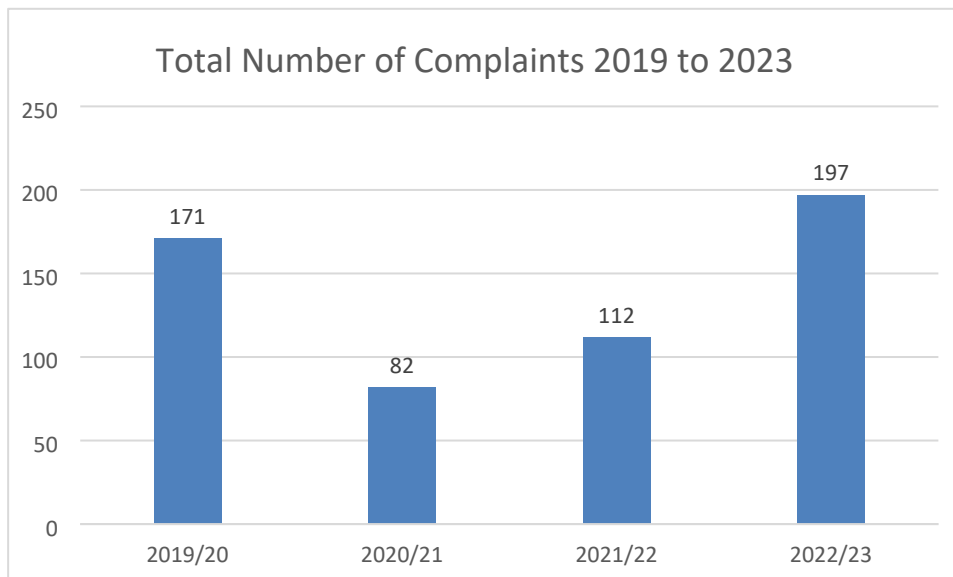
- 1.1 Each year, the Council is required to prepare an annual summary of complaints dealt with under the formalised complaints procedure (the year runs from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023).

2 Background

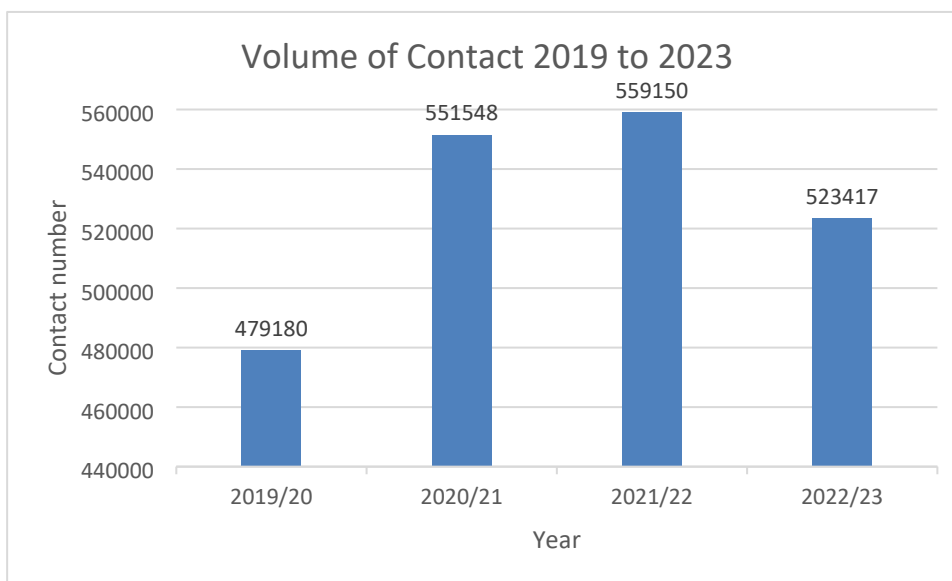
- 2.1 A complaint is defined within the Council as: “an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, action or lack of action by the Council, or its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers.”
- 2.2 Service level complaints are dealt with under stage one of the complaints process, with a response being sent from a relevant manager or head of service. If the complainant is dissatisfied with this response, they can escalate the complaint to stage 2 of the process, which is investigated and responded to by the Chief Executive. If complainants remain dissatisfied with the response, they are able to escalate to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).
- 2.3 Complaints recorded under the formal procedure (and dealt with in this summary report) do not include those ‘first time’ representations which were effectively requests for a service and dealt with as such. Accordingly, a new report of a missed bin, or a broken swing, for example, would not be registered and dealt with as a complaint, but as a request for action. Of course, in the event that the Council failed to respond to the ‘request’ appropriately, then that may generate a complaint.
- 2.4 Appeals against the level of Housing Benefit or Council Tax Support awarded are not treated as complaints but are dealt with under a separate appeals route.

3 Complaints overview

- 3.1 In the year 2022/23 there were 197 service level complaints (those dealt with by more than one service at the same time are counted as one complaint). From these 197 complaints, 38 were escalated to the Chief Executive and eight were the subject of LGSCO enquiries, with two being investigated.
- 3.2 This year sees an increase of 85 complaints against the number received in the previous year (112 in 2021/22).



- 3.3 The number of complaints has increased this year, following an increase in the previous year and a significant decrease in the year prior, which has been attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst all complaint types have increased this year, there is a significantly larger increase in those complaints identified as 'unhappy with decision / action taken'. When placed in context with a population of around 136,000, the 197 complaints represent a very small number of the population who have raised a complaint.
- 3.4 Customer Service Unit figures for the year indicate that they received 65,387 telephone calls, which has decreased from 79,625 (a decrease of almost 18%) against the previous year. The number of face-to-face contacts for the year was 6,468, a significant increase from the 3,357 in the previous year (and 992 in the year before that). However, it remains significantly lower than the year prior to the pandemic, where 11,671 visits were made to CSU, again, attributed to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. There was a slight decrease in email contacts, 7,062 in 2022/23, compared to 7,168 in 2021/22.
- 3.5 The website received 444,500 unique visitors in the year (469,360 in 2021/22) (a unique visitor is an individual that uses the website). When combined with the number of contacts via the Customer Service Unit, the number of contacts with the council has decreased by 6.4% in the year, as illustrated in the chart below.



3.6 The following table gives a breakdown of the number of complaints received. At seminars arranged by the LGSCO, representatives of the Institute of Customer Service have previously advised on the Customer Satisfaction Index and accepted customer service industry standards. The number of complaints account for less than 0.1% of overall transactions and this falls well within these industry standards.

Stage of complaints process	Number of complaints
Service level (Stage One)	197
Chief Executive escalations (Stage Two)	38 (from the 197 above)
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman	8 (the LGSCO went on to investigate two of these)

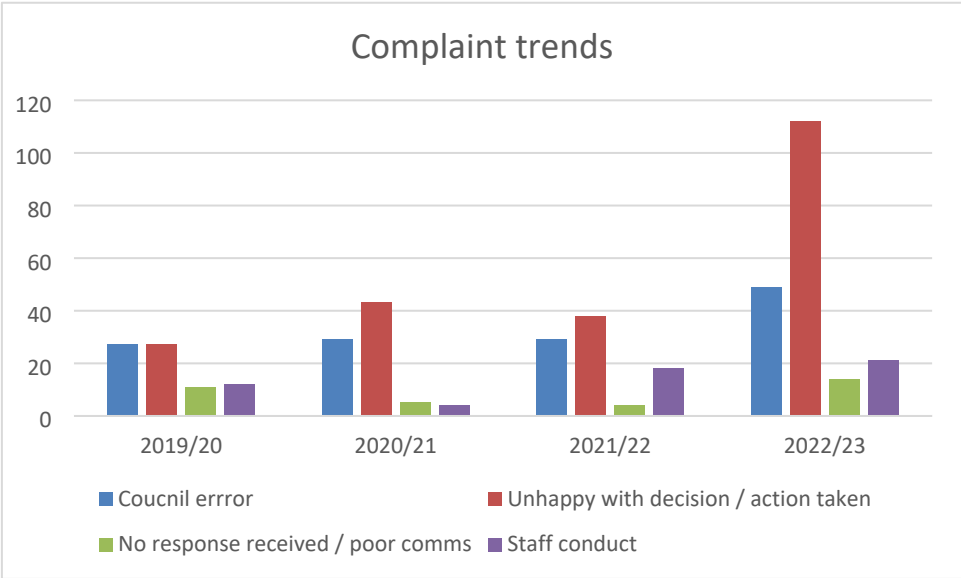
3.7 The annual complaints logs contain personal information that should not be published. This corresponds with the Ombudsman's view that it is neither necessary, nor desirable, for the Council to make such details public. As a result, the information provided in this report is largely statistical in nature. Councillors should refer to the Policy Manager if they require more details about a specific case. Full details of all the complaints are available and these can be provided to committee members on request. However, this information is strictly confidential.

3.8 The number of complaints received can be broken down by service as follows:

Service	Number of complaints	As a % overall
Environmental Services	57	28.9
Planning and Building	51	25.9
Finance & Revenues	30	15.2
Community and Leisure	23	11.7
Housing and Environmental Health	20	10.2
Property and Asset Management	4	2
Legal and Democratic	3	1.5
Strategy and Innovation	1	0.5
Planning Policy & Economic Development	1	0.5
IT	0	0
Multi service	7	3.6
Chief Executive escalations from the 197 service level complaints	38	19.3

- 3.9 The number of complaints for each service does not, of course, 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.
- 3.10 In addition, the council also receives positive feedback from residents and the mechanism for capturing and reporting on these is being developed for inclusion in future reports. Environmental Services received 72 positive comments in the year, and other services receive positive feedback and are putting in place measures to record this feedback. The volume of compliments or positive feedback received is often linked to the visibility of the service being provided, and some services are less visible to the public and therefore less likely to receive positive feedback, but this has no reflection on the standard of service being provided.

- 3.11 Environmental Services receives the highest number of complaints, but these are very low when considering the number of interactions, it has with the public. For example, in 2022/23, Environmental Services provided waste and recycling collections to around 58,000 properties within Test Valley each week. This totals around 3 million collections a year. Using this example, the number of complaints received equates to just 0.002 per cent of collections alone.
- 3.12 In 2022/23, the Planning and Building Service dealt with 3,985 planning related matters, comprising of 1,736 planning applications, 410 pre-app enquiries, 597 condition discharge applications, 688 tree applications and 554 planning enforcement cases. Against this background, the figures show that the number of complaints received against the volume of work undertaken by the Planning and Building Service equates only to approximately 1.3% of the work carried out.
- 3.13 An analysis of the root cause of complaints received has shown that the majority of complaints can be categorised into four main types below (council error, unhappy with a decision of the council, no response or poor communications and staff conduct). Staff conduct is often listed by the complainant as the issue, but when undertaking an investigation, the cause of the complaint might be more aligned with the complainant being dissatisfied with a decision made by the council, and therefore being unhappy with a council action rather than staff misconduct.



4 Learning points

- 4.1 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.

4.2 Examples of some of the learning points and improvements made as a result of complaints during 2022/23 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.
- Ensuring that all relevant parties are kept informed of progress on planning applications.
- 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

5 Time taken to respond.

5.1 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 third parties involved or awaiting additional information), a holding response is sent to the customer. This standard was met in 62% of service complaints at Stage One (122 complaints), processed in the year 2022/23.

5.2 When a complaint is escalated to Stage Two, the Chief Executive has 15 working days to respond. This standard was met in 100% of escalated complaints. Where it is not possible to respond within this time frame, the complainants are made aware that there will be a delay.

6 Unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants

6.1 There are currently no complainants determined as vexatious.

7 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

7.1 The number of complaints or enquiries received by the LGSCO does not necessarily match with the number of complaints progressed to the LGSCO by the Council. This is because in some cases, complainants approaching the LGSCO directly may be given advice or be referred to another organisation and the Council may not be aware of this. The LGSCO will also refer a complainant back to the Council if the complaint has not completed the local authority's complaints procedure and in some cases, the complainant may choose not to come back to the Council.

7.2 During the year 2022/23 the Council received eight initial complaint enquiries from the LGSCO, of which the LGSCO opted to investigate two.

Investigated			
Date	Details of Complaint	Action Taken	LGSCO Outcome
09/08/2022	Councillor complaints process	LGSCO decision was that the council was not biased or discriminatory and that the council followed due process. However, the LGSCO found that the process took too long and that action should be taken to review the reasons for the delay and identify what improvements can be implemented.	Upheld. At fault and injustice
07/04/2022	Housing register application	LGSCO decision stated that the Council has now added the complainant to the housing register and backdated their registration date. As such, they discontinued their investigation as they were unlikely to achieve anything further.	Not upheld

Not investigated			
Date	Details of Complaint	Action Taken	LGSCO Outcome
07/07/2022	Dissatisfied with refusal of Right to Move request	A subsequent review of the decision led to the complainant being accepted onto the Housing Register. On this basis, the LGSCO discontinued their investigation.	No investigation
17/08/2022	Complainant sought to join the housing register following eviction. Homeless application was declined.	Coinciding with the LGSCO complaint, housing were able to obtain further information from external organisations which meant that the complainant was eligible for a homelessness duty. On the basis the complainant was placed on the Housing Register, the LGSCO discontinued their investigation.	No investigation

Not investigated			
Date	Details of Complaint	Action Taken	LGSCO Outcome
20/01/2023	Dissatisfied with decision on Discretionary Rate Relief	LGSCO did not investigate as there was not enough evidence of fault by the Council causing the complainant injustice.	No investigation
01/03/2023	Funding stopped for Ukrainian guests staying at property. Dissatisfied with how Housing managed statutory duties	LGSCO did not investigate as funding was the responsibility of an external organisation. Additionally they could not say the Council's actions have caused a significant injustice.	No investigation
09/03/2023	Unhappy with how TVBC have handled C-Tax arrears, believes the council should be providing more financial support.	LGSCO did not investigate as some matters complained about are late and there are no good reasons to exercise discretion to consider the late complaint. In addition, there is insufficient evidence of fault to justify an investigation.	No investigation
01/12/2022	How the Council dealt with a breach of planning control and its decision not to take enforcement action.	The LGSCO did not investigate as the complainant is complaining on behalf of a parish council and not as a member of the public.	No investigation

- 7.3 The LGSCO publishes the statistics for all local authorities each year. This enables a comparison to be made between comparable authorities based on the CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) 'Nearest Neighbours Model'. The model provides a "family group" of local authorities that are comparable for bench-marking purposes. However, it is important to note that this is not an exact comparison due to the unique nature of each authority and the services they provide,
- 7.4 as well as the geographical area and related issues. It can therefore only be used for ascertaining an approximate and informal benchmark.
- 7.5 The LGSCO has published the total number of complaints assessed for each authority, as illustrated below:

Authority name	Total complaints assessed	Decision: Complaint not upheld	Not Investigated	Decision: Complaint upheld
Test Valley Borough Council	10	1	8	1
Ashford Borough Council	16	1	15	0
East Hampshire District Council	18	2	15	1
South Oxfordshire District Council	11	2	8	1
Vale of White Horse District Council	14	1	12	1

8 Other matters

- 8.1 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.

9 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 9.1 A robust and effective complaints process ensures we are able to meet our vision, working collaboratively to deliver high quality services that support all communities in Test Valley to thrive.
- 9.2 Reviewing and learning from complaints ensures we are committed to delivering our values. Delivering high standards in everything we do which shapes behaviours and builds trust with our residents.

10 Communications

- 10.1 The complaints report will be published on the TVBC website.

11 Resource implications

- 11.1 None

12 Conclusion

- 12.1 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. An increase in recent years demonstrates that volumes of complaints have returned to 'pre-covid' levels.

- 12.2 The consistency of complaints reporting suggests that the complaints process continues to work effectively, and that the public are able to make a complaint with ease. Where necessary, trends are identified and managed by individual services. The Policy Manager will continue to work closely with Services to identify ways to effectively manage and resolve complaints.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	None		
Author:	Hollie French	Ext:	8123
File Ref:	N/A		
Report to:	Audit committee	Date:	12 December 2023