



Committee and Date

Cabinet  
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Item

Public

## Annual Customer Feedback (Complaints) Report 2021/22

**Responsible  
Officer**

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### 1. Synopsis

This report analyses customer feedback trends for 2021/22. Complaints have risen and while most response times meet our target, a few long-term outstanding cases push the average to 32 days. Upheld Ombudsman complaints continue to fall and are below similar authorities.

### 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This report gives an overview of formal customer feedback to the Council in 2021/22, covering complaints, compliments and comments as well as MP enquiries and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman ( " Ombudsman ") investigations. In total, the council received 2,743 cases of formal feedback, including 1,442 complaints, 847 comments and 545 compliments.
- 2.2. The annual figure has continued the long-term trend of increasing numbers of complaints received, which have risen 38% since 2016/17.
- 2.3. As complaints in many cases become more complex and many services face continuing service pressures, the average time taken to respond to complaints has gone from 23 days in 2020/21 to 32 days in 2021/22. This now exceeds the Council's own target response time of 30 days for Stage 1 complaints. While most responses are made within the timescale, the median is 24 days, the average figure is significantly impacted by a growing number of long-term outstanding complaints in some service areas.

- 2.4. While the number of complaints progressing beyond Stage 1 remains small compared with the total number, this also increased to 99 in the year, rising for the third year in a row.
- 2.5. The number of upheld Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) complaints at 42% is below the average for similar authorities of 64% and has fallen from 50% the previous year. The number of formal inquiries from county MPs to the council has also risen in the year by 11% to 439.

### **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1. Members are asked to consider the recommendations and actions in the draft Annual Customer Feedback Report to support and improve robust customer feedback performance
- 3.2. Recommend approval and publication of the draft Annual Customer Feedback Report 2021/22 (Appendix 1) on the council's website

## **REPORT**

### **4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal**

- 4.1. Effective monitoring and follow-up of complaints provides the opportunity to manage emerging risks and identify any trends and common issues being raised through customer feedback, make improvements and to help build the council's reputation by demonstrating how it uses customer feedback to shape service delivery..

### **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 complaints, will result in less staff time taken to deal with complaints. Senior managers may use the information to inform actions or interventions for improving service performance and the prioritisation and use of resources.

## 6. Climate Change Appraisal

6.1. There are no direct effects on the council's climate change agenda.

## 7. Background

The Customer Feedback Annual Report for Shropshire Council is prepared by the council's Feedback and Insight Team who handle the corporate process for recording and responding to formal comments, compliments and complaints. For complaints this covers issues dealt with using the council's own complaint processes, as well as those require the 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 2,743 cases of formal feedback in 2021/22, up 5% on the previous year. The breakdown of the feedback by type is as follows
- Complaints 53%
  - Comments 31%
  - Compliments 16%
- 8.2. This marks a return to more normal levels of activity, following the previous year's figures which had been affected by the impact of the pandemic. The number of cases across all three types has reverted to a comparative pre-pandemic pattern.
- 8.3. Of the 1,442 complaint cases received, 1,190 led to investigations. Not every complaint received requires investigation as some may be resolved early or withdrawn without the need for a full investigation. Indeed, 31% of complaints were resolved this way.
- 8.4. 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 complaints procedure. However, in 2021/22 99 cases progressed beyond Stage 1, either to Stage Two or going the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), an increase of 17 on the previous year the previous year. Cases that progress beyond Stage1 or to the LGSCO require additional workload as this starts a separate process involving further oversight from council officers, generally within Legal Services.
- 8.5. Considering complaints by service area, the Place Directorate, which contains most of the Council's public facing services (such as Highways and Transport, Waste and Leisure), received 47% of the

Council's complaints, slightly down on the previous year. Resources received 19% of complaints followed by Adults Services 16% and Children's Services on 12%. All these figures are close to those in the previous year. The two most complained about services are unsurprisingly those with high public visibility and contact - Highways and Transport and Waste. These accounted for 32% and 11% of all complaints respectively and both figures are similar to previous years.

- 8.6. The average number of days to close a formal complaint has risen during the year by nine days to 32. This is now more than double the average time taken in 2018/19. This now exceeds the council's 30-day target for responding to complaints. The average figure is affected by a significant numbers of complex and long running cases exceeding timescales. This can be due to reduced officer capacity within a service or the result of highly complex cases that are difficult to resolve or require significant time to resolve. Equally, complaints investigators increasingly report concerns about their ability to meet complaint timescales as a result of workload and other pressures. It should also be noted that the proportion of complaints progressing beyond Stage 1 or to the LGSCO has again increased and is now more than double what it was in 2019/20, again reflecting pressure on complaint investigators.
- 8.7. In 2021/22 at the end of Stage 1, 33% of complaints were not upheld, 12% were upheld, 18% were partly upheld (often where a complaint might have multiple points within it) and 27% were withdrawn or were a service request rather than a complaint. 10% of complaints had no finding. These rates vary compared to the previous year. In the year, 79 complaints were dealt with by LGSCO, a figure which is below that of many comparable councils. Of these, 42% of complaints were upheld by the LGSCO, an improvement on the previous year, when 50% of LGSCO complaints were upheld.
- 8.8.
- 8.9. In July 2022, the Council received its [annual feedback report from the LGSCO](#), which covers complaints made about social care issues. These are handled outside the council's complaint processes and as such are not covered in this report. The LGSCO, while recognising the pressure on services, said that more than three quarters of complaints were not responded to within the standard 28-day deadline set by the Ombudsman. It recommended the council considers how and if it prioritises such complaints, in terms of visibility and capacity.
- 8.10. 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 council is given same 28 days by the

Ombudsman to respond to an investigation, whether the issue is current or an historical complaint with no immediate implications. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to comply with these timescales given that service areas need to deal with these 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 and leave.

## 9. Conclusions

- 9.1. The recommendations in the Annual Report highlight areas of development designed to improve customer feedback handling. Key areas of focus arising from the 2021/22 annual report include:
- 9.2. Recognising the pressures on services and the Feedback and Insight team to manage rising levels of feedback, particularly for complaints. While the council's budgetary challenge makes this hard to address, support from senior managers can help to better understand areas of pressure and performance issues. This can support risk identification and allow responses to be based on a more informed view.
- 9.3. A swifter process is put in place to identify customers who are persistent and vexatious and to invoke the council's Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure when appropriate. While small in number, these customers can take up a disproportionately large amount of staff time and have been growing in numbers, tripling in the most recent year. Swifter application of the policy would allow staff to focus on other customers.
- 9.4. Reducing the average 'days to close' remains a key focus within complaints handling. Ineffective stage 1 complaint handling increases work across multiple teams/services. Highlighting days to close performance will remain a focus of performance reporting and concerns will be reported through management structures.
- 9.5. More steps are taken so that Senior Managers ensure their staff understand the importance of covering complaints processes and requirements within team leader and manager induction processes and this is communicated through regular directorate or service meetings. The corporate induction process should also be updated so that all staff with a management role understand their responsibilities for investigating and responding to complaints (and understand that this is an integral part of management duties).

**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

**Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)**

Rob Gittins

**Local Member**

All

**Appendices**

Appendix 1 - Shropshire Council Customer Feedback Annual Report 2021/22  
Draft