

**Committee and Date**

Cabinet

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Item

Public



Annual Customer Feedback (complaints)

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Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):	Cllr Robert Macey, Culture & Digital		

1. Synopsis

The report summarises customer feedback covering compliments, comments and complaints. In 2022/23, 2,702 cases of feedback were received, with complaints stabilising and average time to respond to complaints and the number of highways complaints reducing.

2. Executive Summary

This report gives an overview of formal customer feedback to the Council in 2022/23, covering complaints, compliments and comments as well as MP enquiries and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman investigations. In total, the council received 2,702 cases of formal feedback, including 1,796 complaint cases resulting in 1,187 complaint investigations, 470 comments and 436 compliments.

- 2.1. While the long-term trend is of increasing numbers of complaints received, up by 36% since 2016/17, year on year the volume of customer feedback has stabilised, showing a very slight year-to-year reduction for 2022/23.
- 2.2. 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. This had increased significantly in the previous year to 32 days, but this year's data shows that focus on this area has seen the average response time reduce to 26 days, below the target response time for Stage 1 complaints. However, several long-

term outstanding complaints, usually linked to highly complex issues, in some service areas continues to be a concern and one closely monitored within internal customer feedback performance reporting.

- 2.3. 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) remains small at 5% of total complaints and fell slightly year on year to 95.
- 2.4. In total 61 complaints were referred by complainants to the LGSCO in 2022/23. Of these, 20 (33%) were investigated and of those 16 were upheld by the Ombudsman.
- 2.5. The number of formal inquiries from the four MPs covering the Shropshire Council area, increased by 47% between 2021/22 to 2022/23 to 647.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Members are asked to consider the recommendations and actions in the Annual Customer Feedback Report designed to support and improve robust customer feedback performance.

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' opinion of Shropshire Council services, where there may be shortcomings and how these can be rectified. 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

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.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

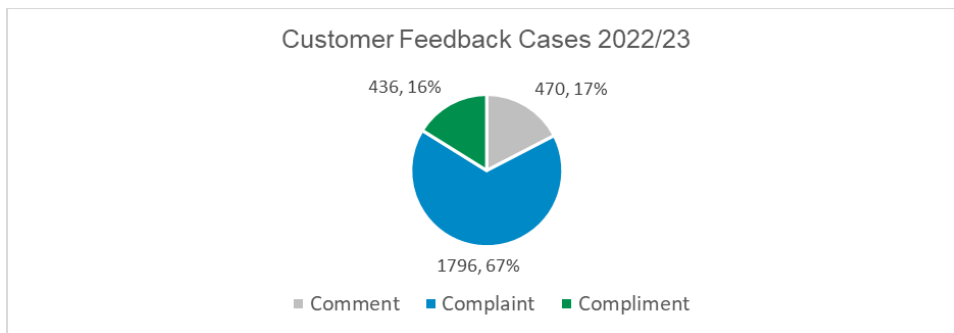
- 6.1. There are no direct effects on the council's climate change agenda.

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 (Legal and Governance lead complaints beyond stage 1). For complaints this covers issues dealt with using the council's own complaint processes, as well as those requiring investigation by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). Processes for adult and children's social care complaints are statutory and are set nationally.

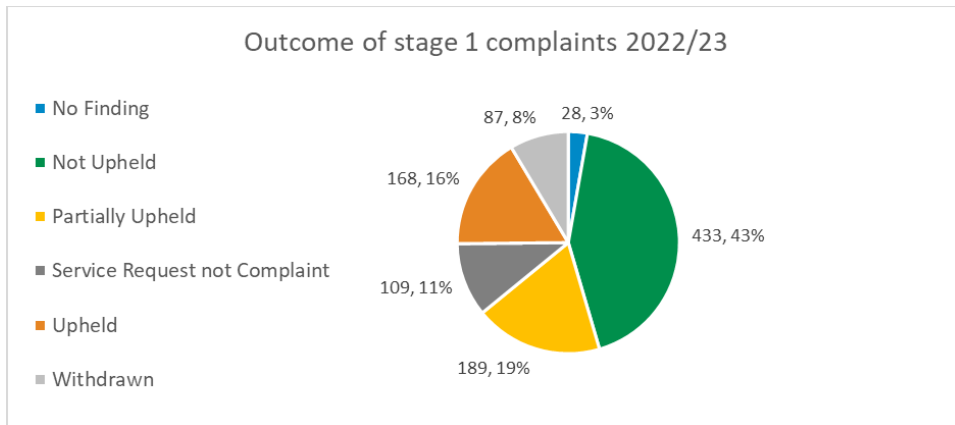
8. Additional Information

8.1. Shropshire Council received 2,702 cases of formal feedback in 2022/23, down 1% on the previous year. The breakdown of the feedback by type is as follows:



- 8.2. This shows a further stabilisation of activity levels following the disruption created during the pandemic and a return to patterns seen pre-pandemic.
- 8.3. Of the 1,796 complaint cases received, this resulted in 1,187 complaint investigations, almost identical 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. Indeed, 29% of initial 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 2022/23 95 cases progressed beyond Stage 1, either to Stage Two or going the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), slightly down on the previous year.
- 8.5. Considering complaints by service area, the Place Directorate, which has most of the Council's public facing services (such as Highways and Transport, Waste and Leisure), received 53% of the Council's complaints. Resources and cross-council issues received 16% of complaints followed by Adult Services 23% and Children's Services on 6%. The two most complained about services are, unsurprisingly, those with high levels of public visibility and contact - Highways and Transport and Waste. There has been a marked reduction in the volume of complaints about Highways and Transport, which now account for 19% of all complaints (down from 27% the previous year), while Waste complaints accounted for 14% up by 3%. The reduction in Highways and Transport complaints has coincided with renewed focus on improving the Council's roads and several changes in that service area.

- 8.6 The average number of days to close a formal complaint fell during the year by six days to 26 days and is now below the target for response. This has reversed the previous year's direction. This is however still nearly double the 14-day average in 2018/19. Considerable work was completed during the year to work with services to address the issue of the rising average days to close figure, which had last year exceeded the council's target response time. The average figure however continues to be impacted by significant numbers of complex and long-running cases exceeding 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.
- 8.7 In 2022/23 at the end of Stage 1, 43% of complaints were not upheld, 16% were upheld, 19% were partly upheld (often where a complaint might have multiple points within it) and 19% were withdrawn or were a service request rather than a complaint. 3% of complaints had no finding and this figure has halved following a focus to reduce this figure as less organisational learning or improvement is likely to emerge from a no finding outcome.



- 8.9 In July 2023, the Council received its annual feedback report from the LGSCO, which covers complaints escalated beyond Shropshire Council's processes for independent investigation. The LGSCO, while recognising the pressure on services has raised concerns about the council's timeliness in responding to LGSCO enquiries and has requested a further meeting to discuss this with the council.
- 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 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.

- 8.11 During the year the LGSCO considered or decided 61 cases. Of these 41 were referred back for resolution, while 20 were decided by the LGSCO of which 16 cases were upheld. This at 80% is above the LGSCO's upheld rate for similar authorities of 72%. The LGSCO reported that the council had 100% compliance implementing its recommendations where these had been made.
- 8.12 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 has risen significantly with the volume now 47% higher than the previous year, with the North Shropshire constituency accounting for almost two-thirds of issues raised.

9 Conclusions

- 9.1 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 2022/23 annual report are detailed below.
- 9.2 Improving customers' experience to reduce the proportion of contacts turning into formal complaints. Two thirds of investigated complaints in 2022/23 were due to service standards. This could for example include a focus on improving customer communications, robust assessment of enquiries to direct the right cases to the right processes without delay or meeting expected response timescales and using information channels to manage customer expectations. The Council's Better Customer Experience transformation programme will help to focus on this and seek to resolve some recurrent issues such as improving customer communications.
- 9.3 A continued focus on reducing the impact of customers who are persistent and vexatious. This follows changes to the council's Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure made in the last year to support swifter application of the policy where appropriate. While small in number, these customers can take up a disproportionately amount of staff time and have been growing in numbers.
- 9.4 More work to further reduce the average 'days to close' must remain a key focus within complaints handling. 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 and value of the complaints processes and effective complaint handling to help prevent failure demand through inadequate complaint responses. This must remain a focus for managers and team leaders so that processes and best practice are communicated through regular directorate or service meetings. A separate review process will look at any further steps to help improve this.

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

Local Member: *All Members*

Appendices

Appendix 1 Annual Customer Feedback and Insight Report 2022/23

Appendix 2 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Review Letter 2022/23