

Customer Feedback Annual Report Shropshire Council 2022/23

Feedback and Insight Team, Shropshire Council
June 2023



1. Introduction

Shropshire Council's annual customer feedback report presents an overview of the formal feedback received, and responded to, by Shropshire Council between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023.

The report includes performance data for complaints, compliments and comments. The annual customer feedback report is made available to members of the public, councillors and council staff. The report complements the quarterly reporting and regular service-based monitoring reporting that takes place within the Council during the year. This more regular reporting is used to gain an understanding of customer experiences and the identification of any patterns in feedback. It supports the work that takes place to identify learning and actions designed to prevent further complaints and generate improvement.

Complaints containing an element of social care fall under the statutory guidelines. These are classed as statutory complaints for either adult or children's services and are handled in line with the national statutory complaint procedures. The remainder of complaints are corporate complaints. Corporate complaints relate to administration or other types of services that do not provide social care. These are handled under the Council's corporate complaints procedure, set locally. You can find out more on Shropshire Council's website.

This report provides a council-wide view of formal customer feedback. Annual reports are also prepared for Adult Services and Children's Services allowing for a more detailed consideration of feedback for those service areas. Those reports are also published on Shropshire Council's website and are used to support key performance and inspection processes.

Complaint

We aim to make it as easy as possible to make a complaint. A complaint is a written or verbal expression of dissatisfaction about a service provided. Family members and advocates may also make a complaint on behalf of one of our customers. We will ask for consent to ensure that the complaint is not being made against the customer's wishes.

Compliment

Many people get in touch with a compliment when the information or support they have received has exceeded their expectations. It is helpful to learn when a service has been provided well or when a member of staff has done a great job. We like to recognise compliments alongside any complaints. It is good for us to say 'thank you' to our teams and staff members too.

Comment

Feedback about a service could be:

- a suggestion to improve it.
- a question as to whether something could be done differently.
- an idea for delivering a service differently.

2. The Complaints Process

Feedback Received

Shropshire Council encourages users of our services, their family members and carers to give feedback and highlight any concerns so that they may be addressed as quickly as possible. If problems cannot be resolved and the customer wishes to make a complaint, staff members can offer advice on how to make a complaint. Support is also available from complaints officers based within Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team.

Telephone: 0345 678 9000

Email: customer.feedback@shropshire.gov.uk

Website: <https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/feedback/>

Online: Log into the My Shropshire portal



Acknowledgment

Complaints will be acknowledged within 5 working days of being received and we let the complainant know how their complaint will be handled.



STAGE 1

An appropriate Investigating Officer will be allocated to the case and asked to investigate the complaint. This is usually a manager within the service area the complaint relates to. The complainant will be provided with a written response within approximately 6 weeks (12 weeks is the timescale for stage 1 and stage 2 responses and 6 weeks is usually allocated to each). In some complex cases it may take longer than 6 weeks at stage 1 but we let the customer know if this extra time is needed and why. The Investigating Officer will write to explain the outcome of their investigation, any learning or actions and information outlining how to progress the complaint if the customer is not satisfied with the outcome.



STAGE 2 - Review

The complaint will be reviewed by a more senior manager, commissioner, or in most cases, the Complaints Monitoring Officer. They will review the Stage 1 complaint and decide if there is more the service can do to address the concerns raised. If the reviewing officer believes the service has done all they can reasonably do, the customer will be written to and advised of this. They will also be given information about the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.



Ombudsman If a complaint cannot be resolved locally it can be investigated by the Ombudsman. The Council has a timescale of 28 calendar days to provide a response to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO). Responses are often complex, lengthy and require a large volume of appendices to be collated, catalogued and returned to the LGO. Complainants can request to go to the Ombudsman without a review if they choose to.

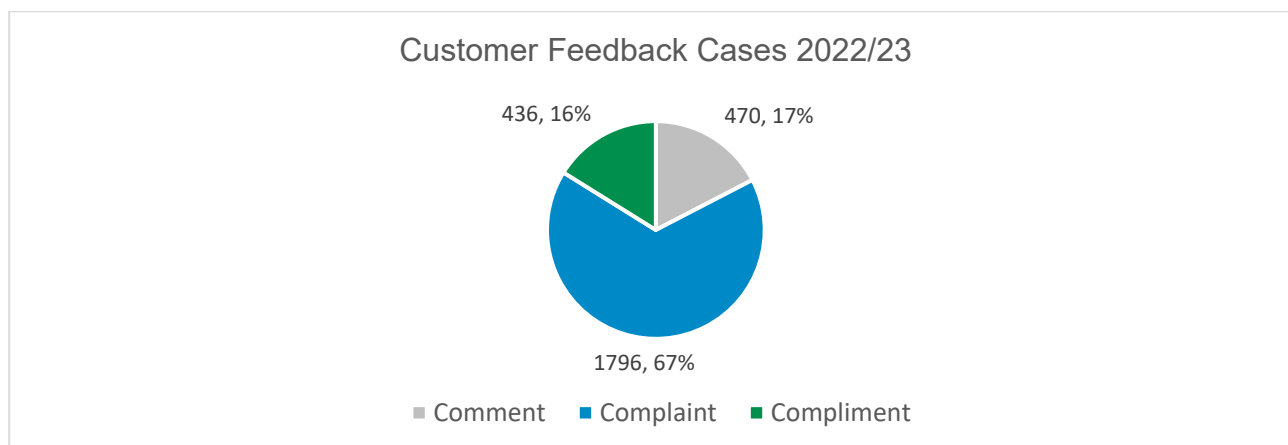
The Feedback and Insight Team coordinates the complaints process, recording and allocating complaints for investigation, monitoring response dates and overseeing performance. We cannot promise to get the result complainants want, but we do make sure that complaints are dealt with in line with the complaints procedures. We aim to keep customers informed of what is happening and the progress being made.

3. Customer Feedback 2022/23

Within the year 2022/23 Shropshire Council received and recorded 2,702 cases of formal feedback. There were:

- 1,796 initial complaint cases
- 470 comments
- 436 compliments

In addition, there were also 646 MP enquiries recorded between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023. MP enquiries are covered separately later in the report. MP enquiries often relate to complaints and inclusion in the figures for feedback would result in some double counting and the over reporting of concerns raised by individuals.

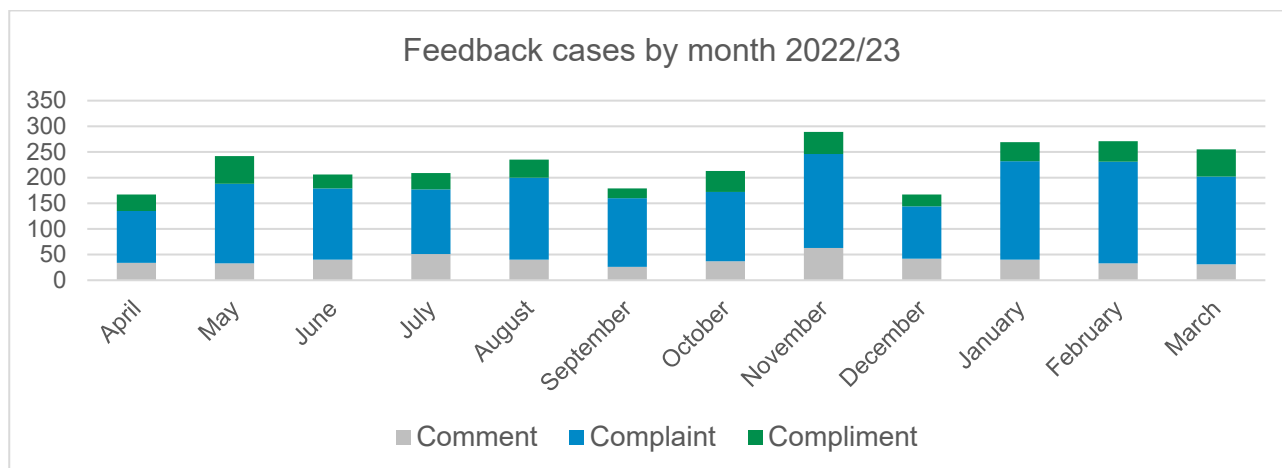


Comments and other enquiries formed 17% of all feedback cases and 16% of all customer feedback cases were compliments. The 1,796 complaint cases formed 67% of all formal feedback and resulted in 1,187 complaint investigations.

The 1,187 complaint investigations were handled under the different statutory and corporate complaints processes. There were:

- 1,007 Corporate complaints
- 150 Adult Services statutory complaints (including provider complaints and multi-agency complaints)
- 30 Children’s Services statutory complaints

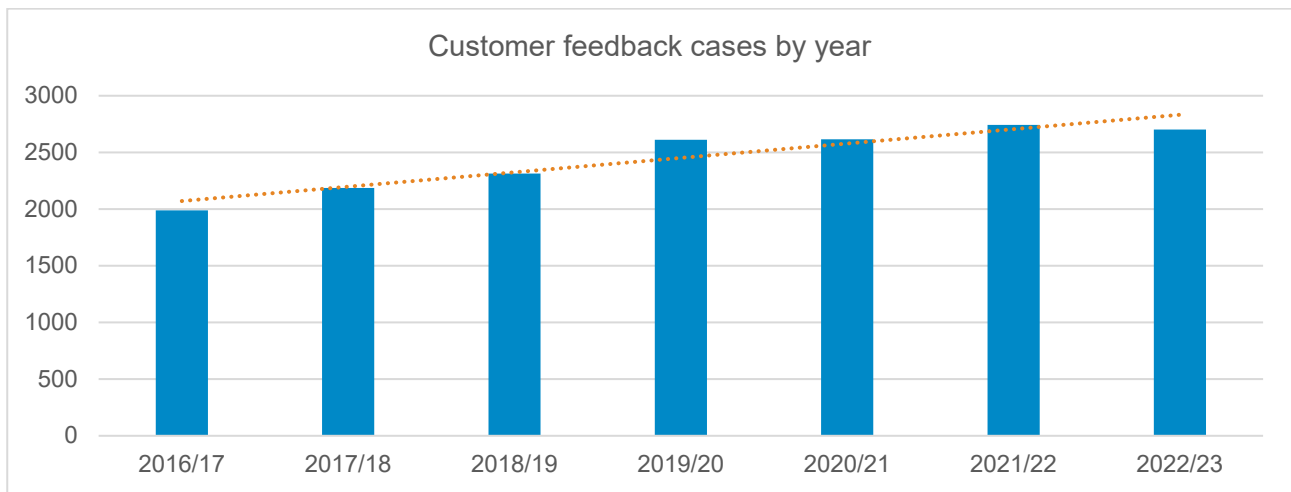
Feedback levels can vary over the year with slight fluctuations influenced by changes in weather conditions (e.g. heavy rain or snow and ice can lead to place-based complaints) or other factors. Overall, 2022/23 didn’t see any dramatic increases or fluctuations due to weather conditions.



Over the year, the monthly average was 225 customer feedback cases (similar to the previous year). Customer feedback cases were relatively steady across the year with slight decreases in April and December. November (289), February (271) and January (269) saw the greatest number of feedback cases. Looking across the years, September is often a busy month but in 2022/23 it did not result in the same high levels of feedback. There were 167 customer feedback cases in December, and this is commonly the month with the fewest cases (April had the same low numbers in 2022/23 and this may have been influenced by the Easter holiday period).

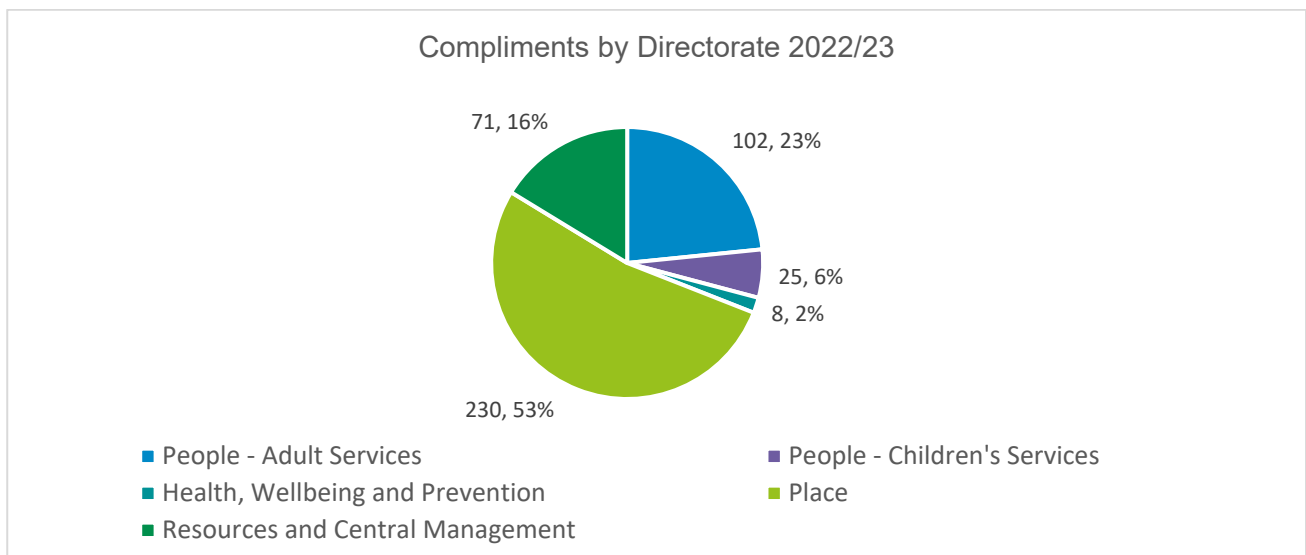
Performance data is considered by quarter. In 2022/23 quarter 4 (January to the end of March) and quarter 3 (October to the end of December) saw higher case numbers (732 on average) compared to the first half of the year (619 on average). If the pattern continues it is possible that numbers will increase again during quarter 1 2023/24.

Overall customer feedback case volumes have increased over recent years. There has been a 36% increase in customer feedback since 2016/17 and the chart below shows the upward trend line for customer feedback. Despite this, numbers in 2021/22 and 2022/23 are very similar so it may be possible that the upward trend is levelling off.



Work takes place to monitor the proportion of complaints within annual customer feedback totals. There is some fluctuation annually, but overall, the total has remained relatively similar over the last 3 years.

A closer look at compliments shows that the Place directorate received the largest number of compliments (230 compliments, 53%) followed by People Adult Services (102, 23%).

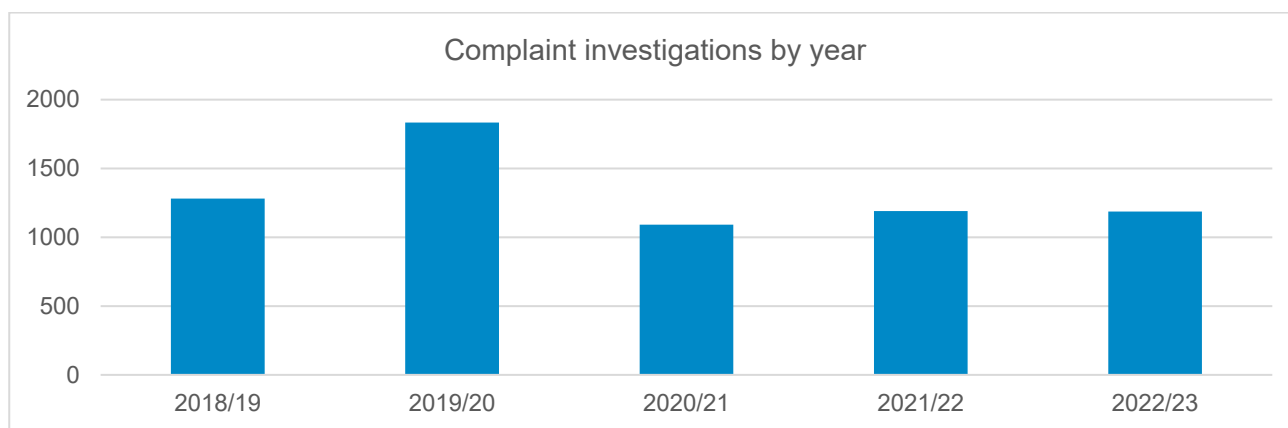


Although Shropshire Council has brought Adult Services and Children's Services together into the People Directorate, for this report the data is presented separately due to the different complaint procedures for statutory cases and the need to provide some comparison year on year. There are ongoing changes that need to be made to accurately reflect changing Council structures (particularly at team level). Work has taken place through the year and will need to continue.

Complaints (and some comments) are explored at greater depth than other types of feedback and may result in investigations. There may be multiple investigations for each complaint case, or a complaint case may be closed before it reaches investigation stage (for example it may be outside of the council's jurisdiction or the complainant may decide to withdraw their complaint because they have received a response/service). A complaint may refer to the services provided by more than one council department, in which case there will be more than one investigation. Investigations are led by officers (usually team or service managers) with a detailed knowledge of the service area. In 2022/23 there were 1,796 complaints cases and 1,187 complaints investigations.

Complaint investigations do not always result in a complete investigation and outcome. Once a complaint case is explored in more detail, it is possible that a different course of action is required (e.g. an insurance claim or appeals process), or once the complaint is more fully understood it may be concluded that the complainant is merely asking for a simple remedial action to resolve a concern rather than wishing to proceed through a formal complaint investigation (a request for a service). Of the 1,796 complaints cases, 526 had an early closure reason allocated to indicate that the complaint did not result in a full investigation. Reasons for early closure may be that the complainant did not want to provide contact details or details to allow an investigation to proceed, the issue may not have been concerning a council or commissioned service, or a more appropriate process may have been available (such as an appeal). Of the 526, 244 cases (46%) had to be early closed because the complainant chose not to provide contact details (anonymous complaints cannot be investigated). Complaint outcomes are explored in more detail later in the report and this is picked up within the report recommendations.

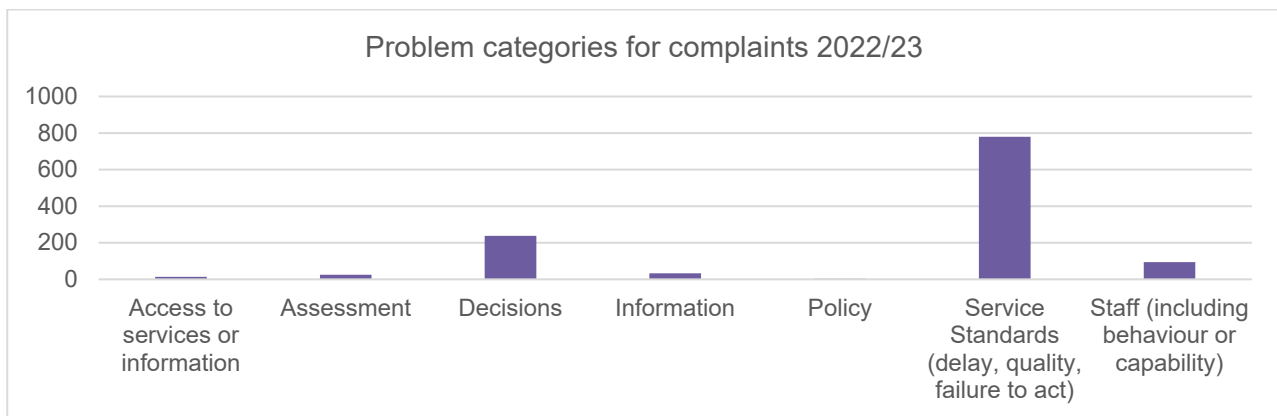
The following paragraphs are based on complaints investigations against which more detailed information is captured. The performance measures Shropshire Council uses to monitor complaints are largely based on complaints investigations.



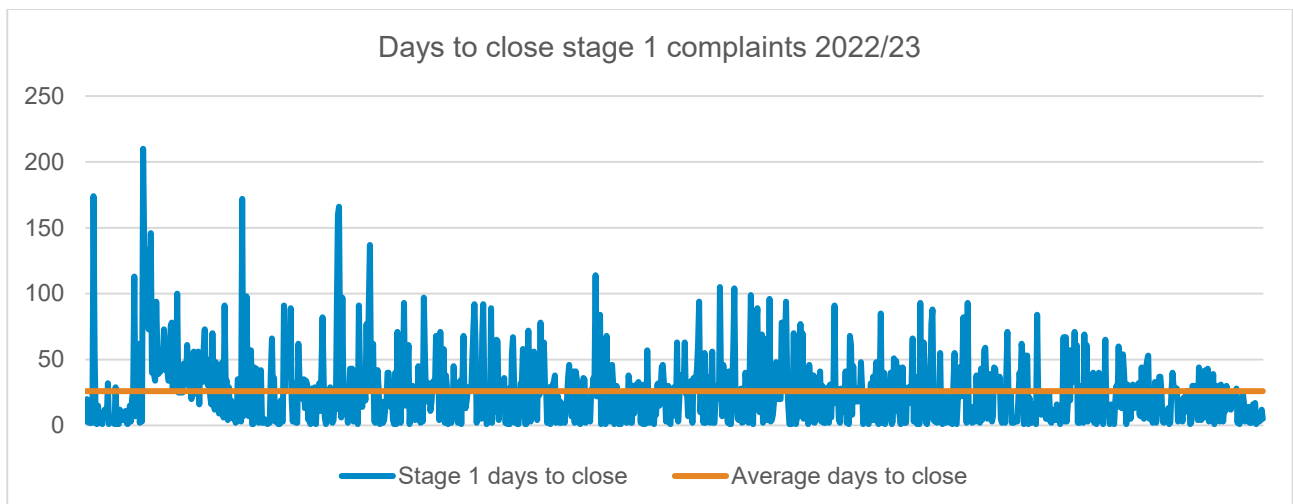
The chart above illustrates that in 2019/20 there were a large number of complaint investigations, out of line with other annual totals. Closer investigation found that too many requests for services were being wrongly categorised as complaints (for example, people saying their bin had been missed were not making a formal complaint but were really requesting a service i.e. a bin collection). Within the last few years considerable effort has been made to assess and 'triage' feedback prior to implementing the complaints process (where the process of incoming feedback makes that possible e.g. it is not possible through the portal online customer recording). This has avoided certain issues becoming complaints when they are a request for a service or can be remedied quickly, such as a request to cut back foliage or replace a street light. Complaints should

be made when there are concerns about the quality of service or other action taken by the council and not before services have had the opportunity to respond or have not been previously aware of an issue. An effective complaints process requires support across the organisation to manage incoming issues and enquiries effectively.

The complaint investigation data collected highlights the reasons for complaints. ‘Service standards’ was the main category under which complaints were made in 2022/23. Within ‘service standards’ there are a number of sub-categories and analysis highlights that ‘service standards – failure to provide a service/take action’, ‘service standards – communication (failure/poor)’ and ‘service standards – inappropriate/incorrect action’ were the dominant sub-categories. ‘Decisions’ was the second main category under which complaints were recorded. Complaints under the category decisions are usually made because someone is dissatisfied with a decision made. Complaints related to decisions seem to have been growing over the last year, across multiple departments.

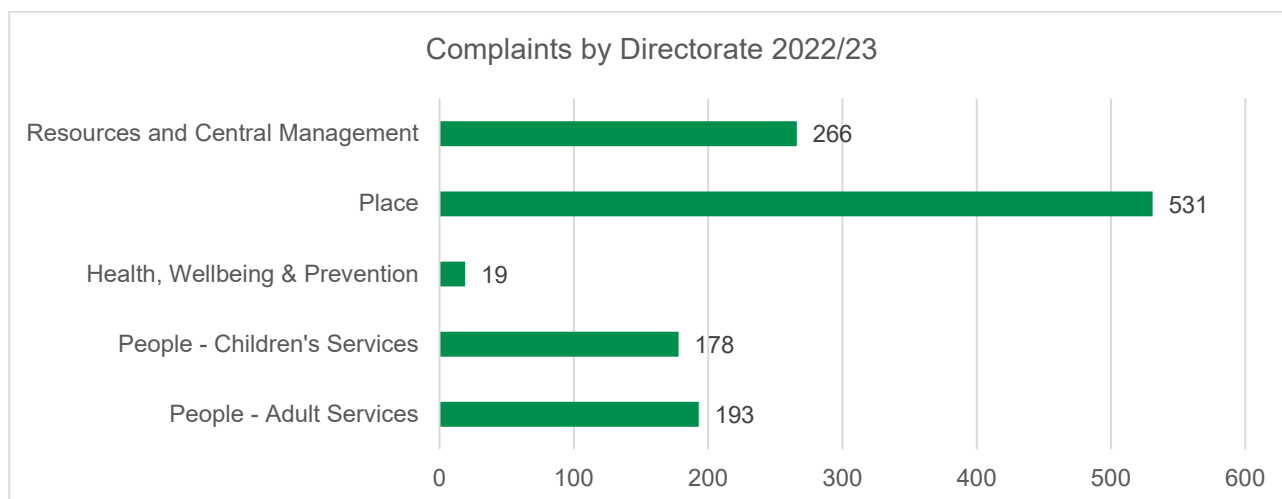


During 2022/23 Shropshire Council took an average of 26 working days to respond to stage 1 complaints (against the 30 working day timescale). This has been the dominant performance issue through the year and resulted in improvement compared to the 2021/22 average. Quarterly performance reporting has been focusing on the average time taken to respond to stage 1 complaints. The average in 2021/22 was 32 working days (a noticeable increase on the 14 working days average in 2018/19). The trend has been for longer response times over the last few years and focus was required to achieve the 2022/23 improvement. The Council has 60 working days in total to respond to corporate complaints, 30 working days for each stage (stage 1 and stage 2). Days to close is a key measure within ongoing performance monitoring. Feedback and Insight Team officers report increasing complexity within complaints cases and this, alongside service pressures, appears to be contributing to longer-running cases. Too many long running cases negatively impact average performance.



Some types of service are more likely to result in complaints than others and the chart below highlights complaints by directorate. Shropshire Council's Place Directorate handles the largest proportion of complaints compared to other directorates within Shropshire Council (45% of all complaints) followed by Resources (22%) and Adult Services (16%). The proportions are very similar to 2021/22.

Complaints relating to Adult Services form 16% of all complaints and complaints relating to Children's Services 15%. Data for Adult Services and Children's services is explored in more detail throughout the year and within the annual reports for these services.



Taking a closer look at the breakdown of complaints by service highlights that Highways and Transport received 19% of all Shropshire Council's complaints in 2022/23 (a significant decrease from the 27% in 2021/22). Waste services accounted for 14% of all the complaints. These are services used by all residents.

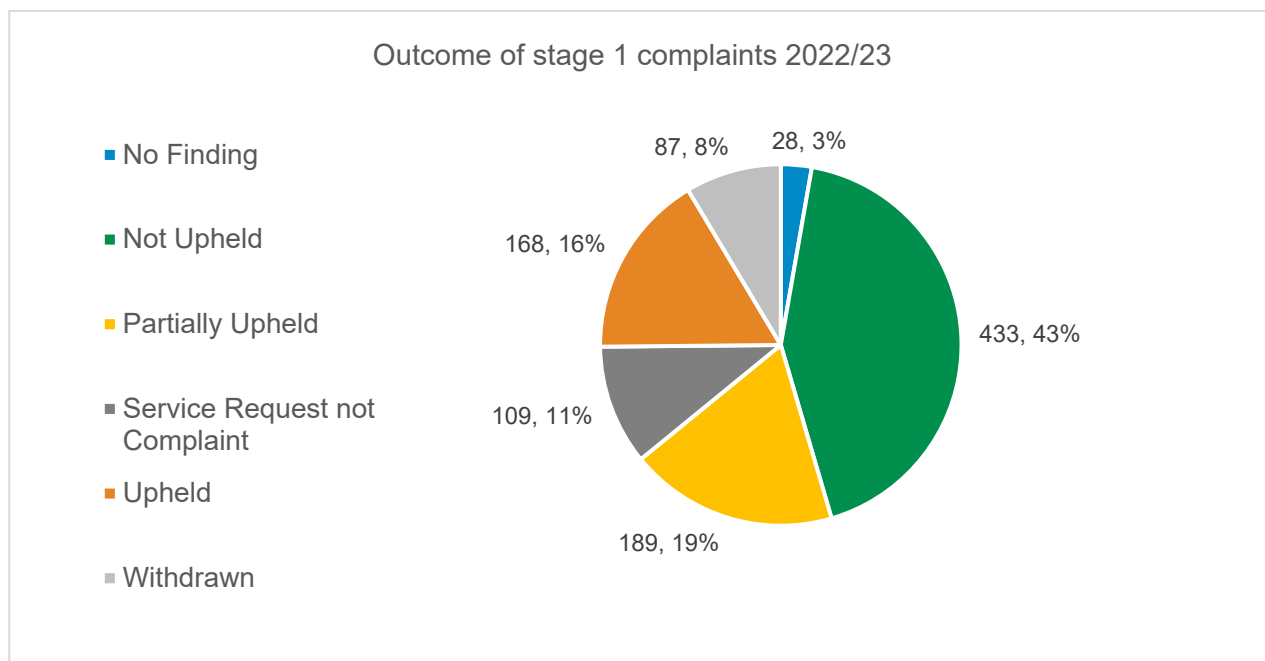
Revenues and Benefits received more complaints than usual in 2022/23 (8% of all complaints compared to 4.8% in 2021/22). It is very likely that this increase is not due to changes in service standards but has been influenced by increased demand related to the cost of living crisis and the response.

The Resources directorate includes a smaller number of customer-facing services (many providing services to other council departments). A significant proportion of the complaints allocated to Resources are not related to its own services but to those of other departments. An example of this is that the finance department may deal with a complaint relating to the financial arrangements in a different service or, for example a complaint may be made to progress an insurance claim. Legal services will be allocated complaints at the second stage of the corporate complaint process so the complaints allocated to Legal Services are not about the services provided by Legal Services.

Considering detailed data by service it is worth noting that some service areas with slightly higher volumes of complaints reflect the national picture across other local authorities. Children's social work case management, Housing and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) complaints are among some of the service themes highlighted by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman as areas of service nationally where there are growing demands and pressures leading to complaints. Some of the reasons for this are linked to national economic and social changes and cost of living pressures. Numbers of complaints for these services in Shropshire are not particularly high but do reflect the national data and challenges highlighted and as a result will remain an area of focus (see recommendations).

When considering complaints performance, the outcome is very important. The data for 2022/23 shows that:

- At the end of the 12-month period 2022/23, there were 1014 closed stage 1 complaints.
- Of the closed stage 1 complaints 16% were upheld (168 complaints), 19% were partially upheld and 43% were not upheld.
- Considering the complaints that were upheld, 14% were with Highways and Transport (a significant improvement compared to 2021/22 at 32%) and 18% were with Waste Management. Note that these were relatively small numbers.
- Although only relatively low numbers, there were also a higher proportion of cases upheld within Adult Services Business Support (10%). The cases managed by Adult Services Business Support include complaints about residential and domiciliary care (commissioning) and financial assessments and contributions.
- A theme within upheld complaints tends to be customer care. Customer care can relate to a lack of communication or information leaving the customer to feel as though their concerns are being neglected. Work by the Feedback and Insight Team is undertaken to keep complainants informed of any delays and progress, but often more detailed and specialist knowledge is requested from service areas.
- 3% of stage 1 complaints investigations resulted in no finding. A complaints investigator may find that not enough evidence or information is available to draw a conclusion, or they may be unable to obtain enough information from the complainant to fully complete the investigation. Occasionally it may be a sign of failure to investigate. The proportion of 'no finding' outcomes has reduced for 2022/23 following a focus within performance reporting.

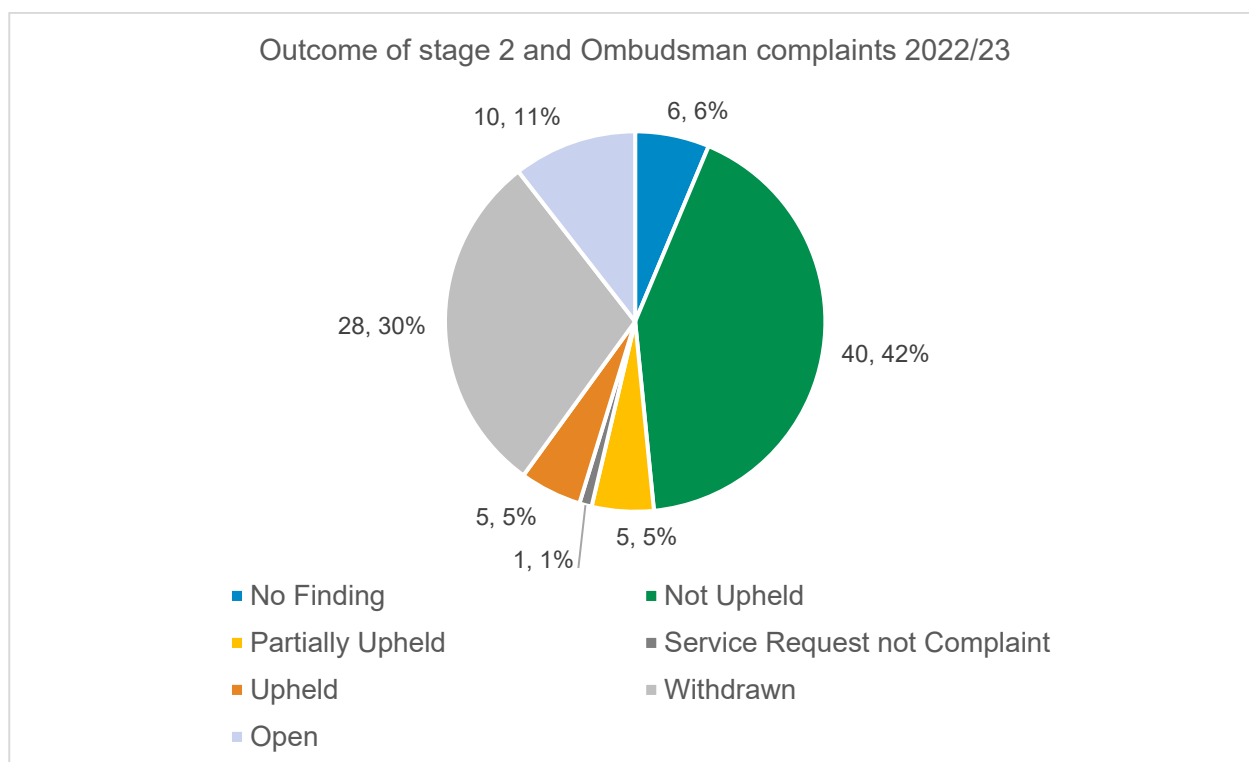


4. Progression of Complaints

Effective stage 1 complaint handling can reduce the number of stage 2 complaints. It is important to understand how many complaints progress beyond stage 1 and this is a measure included within regular performance reporting. During 2021/22 only a small proportion of all the complaints Shropshire Council received progressed beyond stage 1. The number of cases progressing beyond stage 1 in 2022/23 is very similar to the previous year (95 this year and 99 in 2021/22) but the numbers of investigations progressing beyond stage 1 has approximately doubled in the last 4 years.

In total, 95 complaint investigations were at stage 2 or with the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) in 2022/23. Occasionally some complaints may progress prematurely to the Ombudsman without a stage 2 investigation and these will be referred back where appropriate. The table below shows the number of complaints investigations beyond stage 1 and the chart below highlights the outcome of those complaints (10 remained open).

Stage 2	Ombudsman	Total investigations beyond stage 1
50	45	95



The Shropshire annual report from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman highlighted that 60 complaints were received by the Ombudsman for Shropshire Council in 2022/23 and 61 cases were considered/decided (20 of those with an outcome). This total will include complaints received by Shropshire Council in previous financial years, so the data is not comparable with local data covered in this report (looking at cases received within the financial year).

Of the 61 cases decided, 4 were not upheld, 16 were upheld and the remainder resulted in other actions such as referring back for local resolution, offering advice, or closure after initial enquiries. The LGO reports Shropshire Council's upheld rate at 80%. The LGO upheld rate for similar local authorities is reported as 72%. Available data from the Ombudsman is used within a separate,

performance report to track annual performance over the years and for benchmarking with the local authority family group.

Ombudsman Complaints and Enquiries

Category	Number received
Adult Care Services	15
Benefits & Tax	3
Corporate & Other Services	1
Education & Children's Services	12
Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation	5
Highways & Transport	10
Housing	3
Planning & Development	11
Grand Total	60

Outcome of Decisions Made

Advice given	Closed after initial enquiries or incomplete	Incomplete/ Invalid	Referred back for local resolution	Detailed Investigations			Grand Total
				Not Upheld	Upheld	Upheld rate (%)	
1	22	3	18	4	16	80	61

Within the Ombudsman's annual complaints letter and report for Shropshire Council 2022/23 the Ombudsman repeated concerns highlighted over the last 2 years concerning the resourcing and application of local authority complaints functions. *"In last year's letter, concerns were highlighted about your Council's timeliness responding to our enquiries. Unfortunately, the issue has persisted during the year with delays."* The Ombudsman suggested a meeting with Shropshire Council to discuss this further and that is planned through the Chief Executive. The annual letter also emphasises a future consultation on a new code (see recommendations):

"I know that complaints offer organisations a rich source of intelligence and insight that has the potential to be transformational. These insights can indicate a problem with a specific area of service delivery or, more broadly, provide a perspective on an organisation's culture and ability to learn. To realise the potential, complaints have to support service improvements, organisations need to have the fundamentals of complaint handling in place. To support you to do so, we have continued our work with the Housing Ombudsman Service to develop a joint complaint handling code that will provide a standard for organisations to work to. We will consult on the code and its implications prior to launch and will be in touch with further details."

Appendix 1 displays the Ombudsman performance measures. Appendix 2 highlights findings and recommendations made by the Ombudsman for upheld cases. All recommendations are monitored and actioned by the Shropshire Council service area responsible for the complaint, and in most cases overseen by the service area's Director.

5. Annual Comparisons 2020/21 to 2022/23

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
<p>Number of compliments – return to average</p> <p>In 2020/21 Shropshire Council received 614 compliments. This was an unusually high number and reflected feedback on the actions taken by Shropshire Council to respond to the pandemic. Compliments have now returned to more average numbers. The number of compliments in 2022/23 was similar to the year before 2021/22 and slightly above the 2019/20 figure.</p>	614	454	436
	Performance is in line with expected numbers.		
<p>Complaints investigations – in line with expected number</p> <p>The number of complaint investigations recorded by Shropshire Council totalled 1,187 in 2022/23 and 1,190 in 2021/22. Overall, there has been a clear upward trend shown in the last 5 years of data, but increases have slowed over the last 3 years and may be levelling off. Work has been taking place to triage cases and ensure service requests are not taken forward as complaints prematurely.</p>	1,091	1,190	1,187
	Performance is in line with expected numbers.		
<p>Days to close – Average days to close reduced</p> <p>The average number of working days taken to respond to a stage 1 complaint during 2019/20 was 22 working days. That average increased to 32 working days in 2021/22 but has since dropped again to 26 working days in 2022/23. Performance is better but data shows that too many complaints investigations are exceeding the 30 working days total for stage 1 corporate complaints. Complaints investigators increasingly report concerns about their ability to meet complaint timescales as a result of workload and other pressures.</p>	23 working days	32 working days	26 working days
	Average performance has improved but there are still too many complaints investigations exceeding timescales.		
<p>Outcome at stage 1 – Small increase in upheld cases</p> <p>When considering the proportion of complaints upheld, performance overall is relatively steady and suggests that standards are being maintained. It would be a concern if performance monitoring highlighted too few cases being upheld (it is important that Shropshire Council accepts where things have gone wrong and strives for improvement). The slight increase from 12% in 2020/21 to 16% in 2022/23 will be monitored.</p>	12%	14%	16%
	Performance has remained steady. Close monitoring of upheld and partially upheld complaint numbers has taken place through the year and that suggests performance remains in line with expected values.		
<p>Complaints progressing beyond Stage 1 – Similar</p> <p>In 2019/20 2.7% of cases progressed to stage 2 or the Local Government Ombudsman (47). In 2020/21 82 cases progressed beyond stage 1, in 2021/22 99 (8.3%) and in 2022/23 95 (8.7%). This may indicate growth over time but without significant change in the last year. The Ombudsman upheld rate increased from 42% in 2021/22 to 80% in 2022/23 but it should be noted that the way the Ombudsman works to calculate this rate has changed.</p>	7.5%	8.3%	8.7%
	There is little change in the last year for complaints progressing beyond stage 1. Numbers remain small (95 in 2022/23) but cases can be complex and time consuming.		

6. Example Compliments

Shropshire Council received 436 compliments during 2022/23. Example compliments are included below to illustrate the range of compliments received by different services. Receiving a compliment can make a big difference to a member of staff working hard to provide support for others and deliver services as effectively as possible. Although compliments are not given the same attention as complaints, they are used within the Council to understand where things are working well and to recognise the additional efforts made by individual members of staff.

Compliment received for Waste Services:

"I would like to thank the dustmen who very kindly saw I had not put my plastic, metal and the blue paper bins outside with the black bin and glass bins. I had brought them inside my gate as didn't want them to be scattered by the wind. I am disabled so this was such a kind and thoughtful act. Please do let them know I appreciated this greatly."

Compliment for Planning Services: *"It's been a real pleasure to deal with Z, she is credit to the planning team and the local authority as a whole and I just wanted to make sure that this was formally noted."*

Compliment for Libraries Service: *"The Shropshire Community Directory has been so invaluable to me as a Care Co-ordinator for many years now. Thank you."*

Compliment for Highways Team: *"Yesterday while visiting a friend I met two of the loveliest workers you have. They were driving one of your Shropshire Highways lorries and were working on Long Lane, Cosford...I never did get their names, but I just wanted to write and tell you what a pleasure it was to meet them. They were so courteous and helpful towards me and my friend when we were having a bit of bother. I felt I just had to write and let you know what a pleasure it was to meet them and thank them for their help."*

Compliment for the Hospital Interface Team: *"X was very supportive throughout the process of finding a Care Home Placement and understood the anxiety I felt regarding moving mum out of her home and into a care home environment, she provided the information we required in a timely manner and was always polite and understanding in all our communications. Although this has been a difficult few months X's support has helped us get to a satisfactory conclusion. I have been very impressed with her professionalism and level of empathy and would like to put on record how pleased we have been with the service we received from the council."*

Compliment for the Welfare Support Team: *"I just wanted to thank you so very much for your kind help in offering me a discretionary funds award last month. Thank you also for all the time and kindness members of your team showed me during phone calls. I am so very grateful. "*

Compliment for the Financial Assessments Team (Adult Social Care): *"I wanted to thank you for explaining the charges to us. I think we are fortunate to have had our queries and issues dealt with by yourself, we genuinely appreciate all your help. Thank you."*

Compliment received for School Admissions: *"I must commend you on an extremely straightforward and efficiently run process of school selection and allocation. Although I won't be making use of my child's place next year, I have found the whole experience simple and painless, which considering the size of the task, is no small achievement."*



7. Example Complaints

Shropshire Council received 1,796 complaints during the year 2022/23 and carried out 1,187 investigations. Some example complaints have been included below to highlight the type of feedback Shropshire Council receives. These examples were not all upheld. Some complaints arise from a lack of understanding of the service Shropshire Council can provide. Where necessary wording within complaints has been removed within the examples to ensure anonymity. The next section of this report looks more closely at learning and the actions taken following complaint investigations.

"My car wheel has been damaged as a result of one of your potholes, apart from me having to replace it could have been much worst and caused a serious accident."

"The team that collect the bins and recycling are usually very kind and considerate, but I wasn't too pleased yesterday with how the recycling bins were left, obstructing the path and blocking access for wheelchair users, as well as it looking a mess."

"I have been reporting an issue regarding trees overhanging my house/garden for well over a year, nearly 2 years now and it is becoming unbearable, the trees have completely blocked my garden, and are still continuing to grow into my drain pipes and around the roof of the house. I have zero sun in the summer/day time and in the winter the leaves end up filling the little space I have in my garden, the house was a new build 3 years ago and grass has never been sustainable due to no natural light, and no drainage, any options I have tried to do to 'renovate' the garden get ruined every winter by the leaves and branches falling and the poor drainage dragging everything up from underneath and I have had enough..."

The customer has called in respect of his outstanding complaint which was due for response in March. He is complaining that the complaint procedure is not being followed and that the investigating officer is not taking responsibility for the complaint and response. He has made it clear that the lack of response is holding up his legal team.

"I have been trying to get in touch with the Council office for 3 weeks now without success. Short of driving to the office what am I supposed to do to be able to speak to you? My landline number is [number removed] or mobile is [number removed] I would be grateful for a call please."

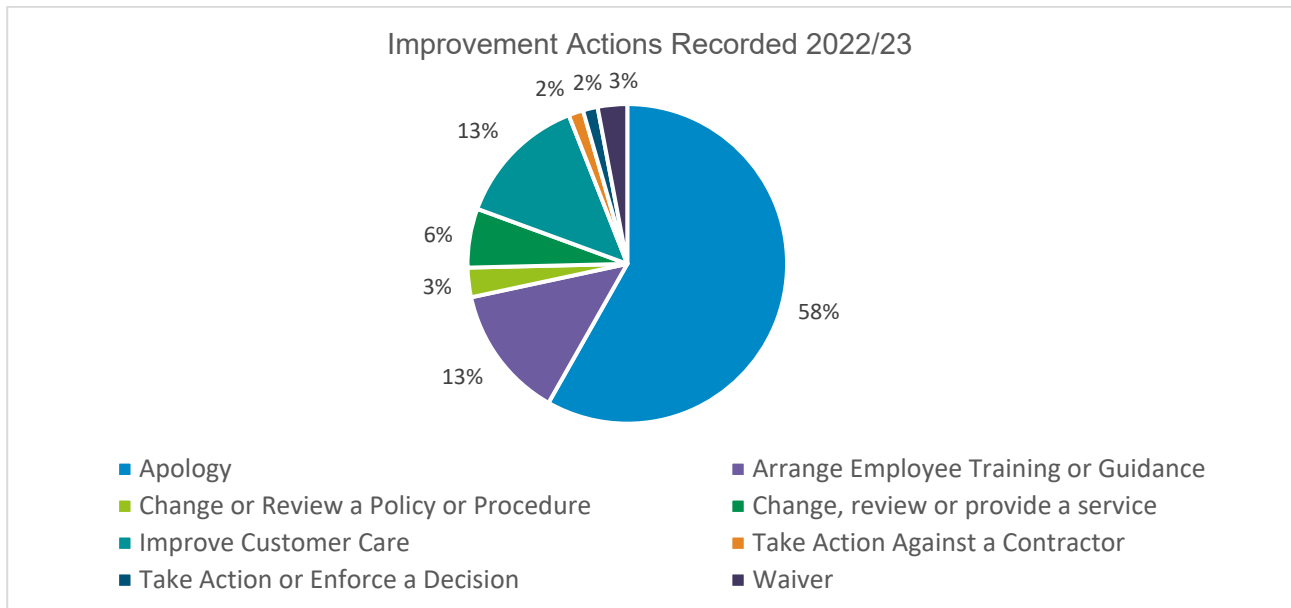
"I wish to complain about a Children's social worker who, in my opinion, has handled a delicate situation in an unnecessary and inappropriate manner. At the time I brought my concerns to this individual's attention but he said he was allowed to do this. When he got to school he was asked the very same thing by the head teacher who also deemed it inappropriate but he carried on regardless."

The complainant (daughter) wishes to complain about the lack of care and urgency in getting night-time care back in place for her Mum, after a long hospital stay. She says: *"I can't express my disappointment, disgust, and dismay at the lack of urgency to find night-time carers for Mum who is currently bed bound in a hospital bed in her living room, being cared for by my 84-year-old dad who is completely exhausted. My sister and I are being called out to help him in the early hours of the morning most nights, whilst trying to hold down full-time jobs and care for our own families."*

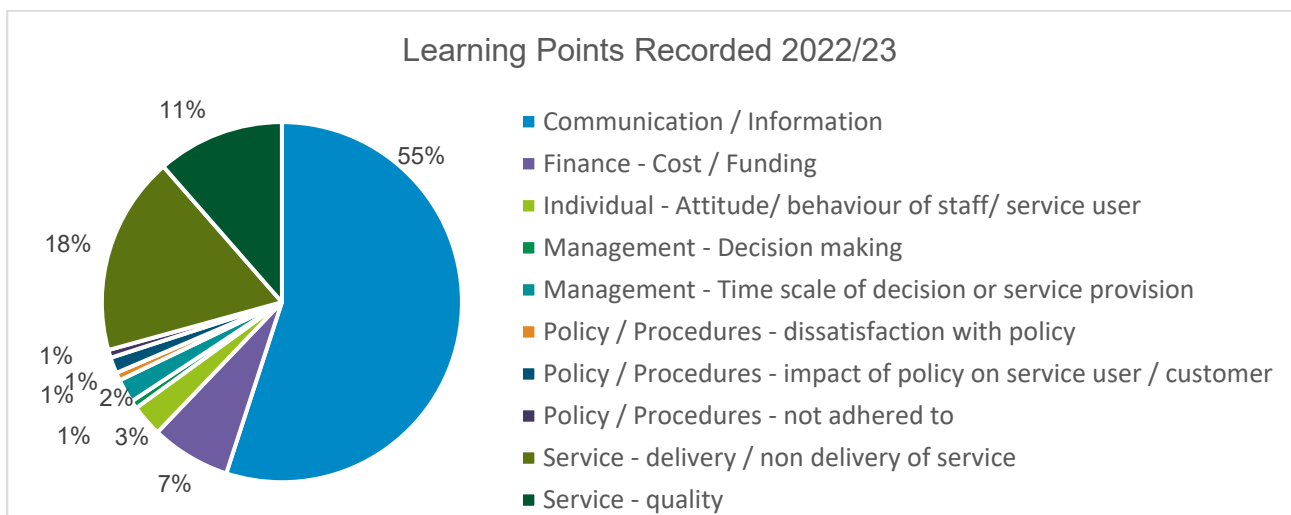


8. Learning and Actions

Shropshire Council recorded learning, action or outcome notes against 758 complaints in 2022/23 (and 140 of those included detailed actions or lessons). Actions and lessons are usually made when complaints are upheld or partly upheld. If only a small proportion of complaint investigations result in a finding of fault there will be fewer remedial actions or learning. However, this recording of learning and actions should be an area for ongoing improvement (currently around 38% of all partly upheld or upheld closed cases). This is referred to in the recommendations in section 13. The charts below highlight the primary action and learning point recorded.



Of the actions that were recorded against complaints closed in 2022/23 58% were to provide an apology. 13% of actions included arranging employee training or guidance and a further 13% were actions related to improving customer care.



55% of learning related to communication or provision of information. Communication is consistently a common and dominant theme within complaints. Complainants often highlight their disappointment that they were not contacted, were not communicated with enough, or information was not shared effectively. More effective communication at an earlier stage can lead to a better understanding of the issues or the processes council staff work to and prevent the development of a formal complaint.

9. Example Learning and Actions

The recording of learning is strongly encouraged following the completion of a complaint investigation. Acknowledging and acting on learning from complaints can avoid any mistakes from being repeated and lead to ongoing improvement. Examples are shown below to highlight the type of learning and actions recorded. This is one element of wider work undertaken to focus on quality, and ensure customers receive a good standard of service. Wording within the examples has been altered slightly for simplicity and to ensure confidentiality.

An apology was made for the way that the call was handled. It appears the advisor did not pass on the information to the Sales Ledger Team, so they were not aware of the case and need to return the call. The issue has now been addressed and learning has been taken from the complaint.

The complaint investigation found that an administrative error had caused more than one letter to be issued. The mistake has now been explained and an apology issued to the complainant.

The complaint investigation identified that paperwork had not been provided in a timely manner. Although individuals and the team had been doing their best to comply with all requirements, staffing levels had not been adequate to keep up with all requests. To address the complaint, a review of needs has been actioned. Assessment of risk will be ongoing with external support also arranged.

The street lighting concerns referred to within the complaint are now being resolved. New lanterns will be fitted within the next week and communication with the manufacturer will be made to report the faults that occurred. An apology has been issued to the complainant.

A site visit has now been undertaken and this included an in-person apology. The delays were caused, in part, due to weather conditions preventing the works from being carried out on the planned date. The work has now been re-scheduled and the customer informed.

An apology has been issued to the complainant regarding the delay in allocating a social worker to meet her daughter's current support needs. Demand has been very high, and this has led to some delays, but a social worker has now been allocated and a reassessment will be organised as soon as possible.

The complaint was caused due to an account name being incorrect. This has been corrected and the complainant telephoned with an explanation and an apology. The complainant has communicated that they are happy with the actions taken to resolve the issue and agree that the case can be closed.

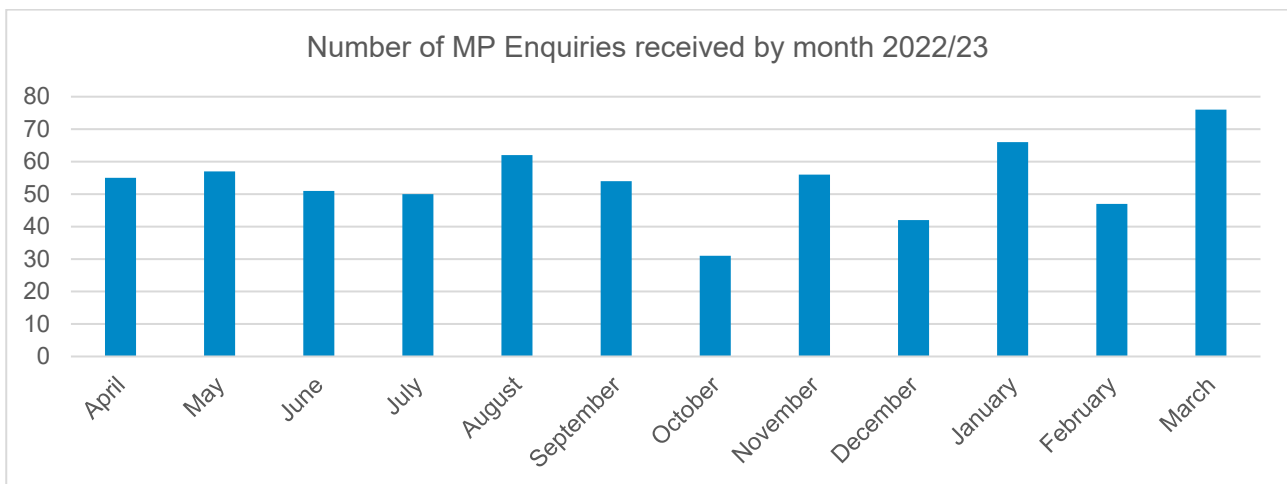
The complaint investigation found that the explanation over different bandings had not been made clear. This had led to confusion and meant that the customer felt that her needs were not being adequately considered. The resulting complaint was resolved through contact with the customer and a much more thorough explanation of the service and how decisions are made.

The Ombudsman requested that a complaint was initially considered by Shropshire Council (sent to the Ombudsman prematurely). The complaint process has been completed, an apology provided, and a small sum of money provided to cover resulting costs.

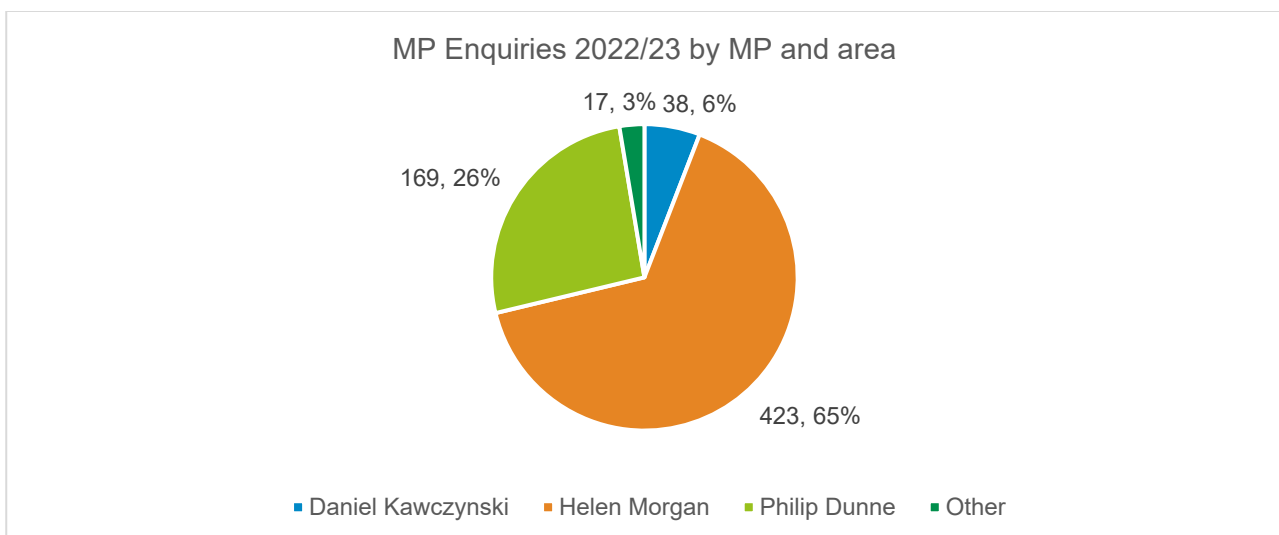
10. MP Enquiries

MP enquiries can be made in addition to a complaint and can duplicate cases received by Shropshire Council. Often a complainant will choose to make their local Elected Member, MP, Shropshire Council and sometimes the Local Government Ombudsman aware of a complaint at an early stage. For this reason, data concerning MP enquiries is considered and reported separately. Wherever possible Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team will work closely with the Directors' support staff and complaint investigators/service managers to coordinate complaint and MP enquiry responses to minimise duplication.

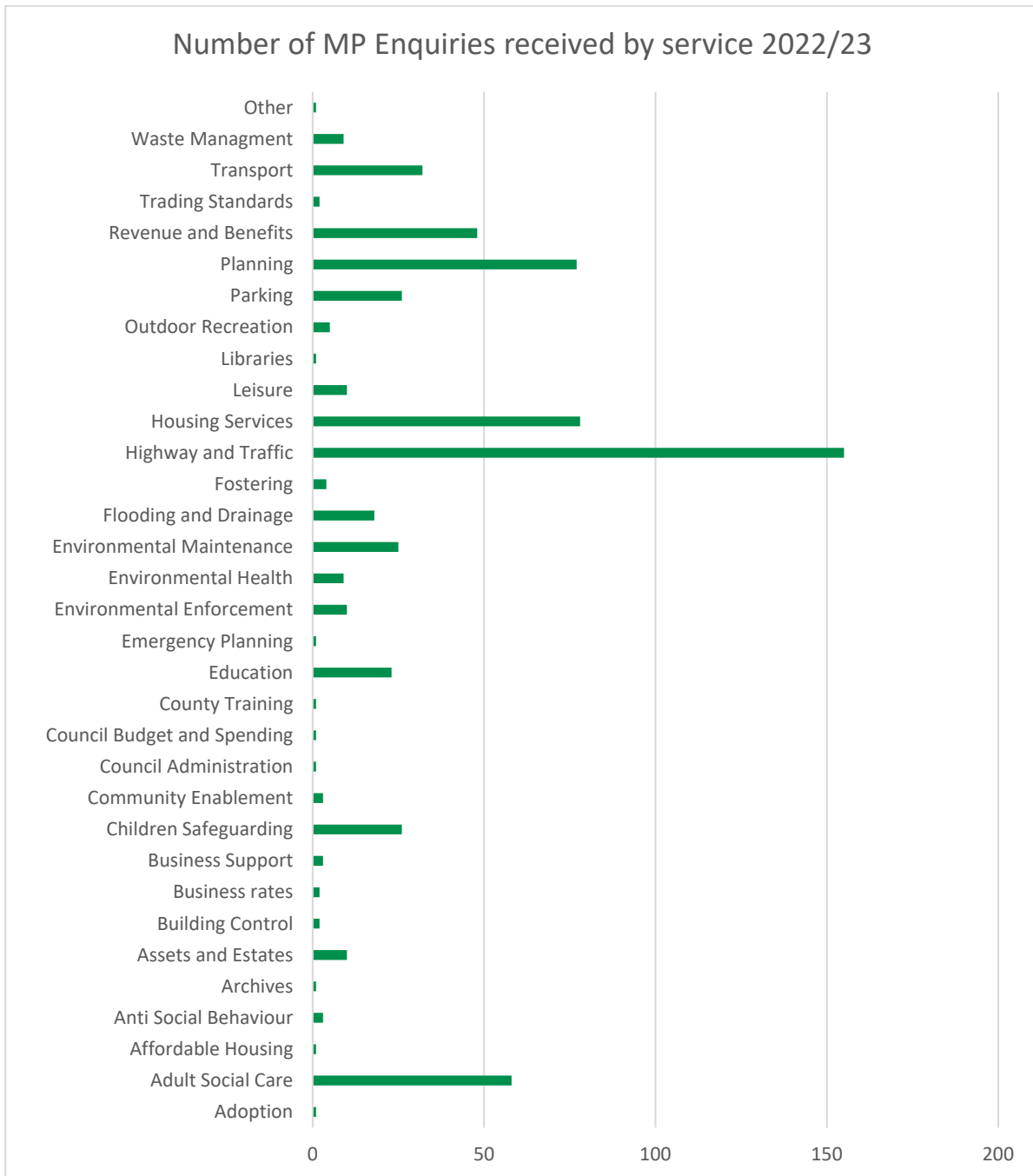
During 2022/23 647 MP Enquiries were received and reported compared to 439 in 2021/22, 397 in 2020/21 and 291 in 2019/20. In 2022/23 there was a 47% increase on the previous year. The pattern suggests an ongoing increase in MP enquiries and some impact of changes in MP and ways of working. In 2022/23 an average of 54 MP enquiries were received a month compared to 37 the year before. In the same way as complaints, there can be seasonal fluctuations caused by seasonal issues such as the impact of winter conditions on the roads or waste collections. In 2022/23 March 2023 saw the greatest number of enquiries.



MP enquiries are received from Shropshire's three MPs, Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham), Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) and Philip Dunne (Ludlow constituency, South Shropshire). The chart below highlights that 65% of all MP enquiries received by Shropshire Council relate to the North Shropshire constituency and 26% to the South Shropshire constituency. It should be noted that MPs may work differently, and some may prefer to raise informal enquiries.



A consideration of MP enquiries by service category suggests that there are 2 big clusters of topics. 24% of all MP enquiries cover highway and traffic issues, 12% relate to housing issues, 12% relate to planning issues and 9% to adult social care. These proportions are similar to complaints at stage 1 (housing issues are raised more through the MP enquiry process).



11. Conclusions

The 2022/23 customer feedback data demonstrates sustained volumes of formal customer feedback received by Shropshire Council in the last few years (following a period of growth). There have been some fluctuations year to year but over the last 5 years feedback cases have increased by 17%. Complaints investigation numbers were very similar to the previous year. Complaint investigation numbers have returned to more average levels following significant growth in 2019/20. Work has taken place to ensure complaint figures do not include initial requests for a service (which can be worded as though a complaint). MP Enquiries increased by 47% compared to 2021/22 numbers, but this appears to be more reflective of a change in ways of working with the local authority.

The nature of complaints remains similar with the allocation of cases across service areas showing similar patterns to previous years. One noticeable change has been an increase in complaints relating to decisions. This is not restricted to some services but can be seen across the local authority, suggesting greater levels of customer dissatisfaction over decisions taken. Decisions form the second largest 'problem category' at 20%. Service standards (for example delays, quality, failure to act) is top at 66%.

Although a small proportion of complaints progress to Stage 2 the number of cases progressing beyond stage 1 has continued to increase as a proportion of overall investigations (with actual numbers similar to the previous year). This may be partly due to cases exceeding timescale and increasing in complexity. Overdue cases are more likely to result in complainants keen to progress to the next stage of the process.

Due to focused attention over the last 12 months the average number of working days taken to respond to stage 1 complaints has reduced from 32 working days to 26 working days. This improvement may positively impact complaint progression over coming months. However, it is important that this overall average improvement does not mask the number of complaint investigations exceeding timescales. (270 corporate stage 1 complaint investigations exceeded the timescale provided in 2022/23).

Complaint outcome performance remains similar to the previous year but will continue to be monitored regularly. 16% of stage 1 complaint investigations were upheld, and 19% partially upheld. Reading complaints case summaries highlights that complaints are often generated due to a lack of clear communication, provision of information and delays rather than any fault in process or service quality. Feedback from complaints investigators suggests that pressures remain within service areas and comments within complaint outcome notes frequently feature staffing pressures as a cause of delays or missed communications leading to complaints.

A close analysis of complaints by service area highlights the main themes for services receiving the greatest number of corporate complaints. Please note that these are reported issues and not necessarily upheld complaints:

- Highways & Transport – Highways and Transport complaints performance has improved. In 2021/22 Highways and Transport complaints formed 27% of all complaint investigations, reducing to 19% in 2022/23. It should be noted that few complaints relate to transport and most were generated from concerns about lack of communication following reports of highways issues. 24% of MP enquiries relate to highways and traffic issues, similar to the year before. Service changes are resulting in improved customer feedback performance and the impact of those changes may continue to be seen over future months within quarterly reporting. An issue which must remain in focus are the number of highways complaints exceeding the stage 1 corporate complaint investigation deadline of 30 working days.

- Waste & Recycling – Waste Management complaints have increased from 8% in 2021/22 to 14% of all complaints in 2022/23 (from 104 to 163 investigations). These complaints are handled efficiently by the department and complaints performance is not a concern (none of the stage 1 complaints exceeded the timeframe). Themes include repeated missed collections, mess caused by rubbish not contained by bins, not returning bins or recycling containers to properties after emptying. The service is responsive to feedback and seeks to apply remedies efficiently. In many cases customers make a formal complaint prematurely (using online forms/portal methods). It is important to communicate to customers that it is important to give the council opportunity to address an issue before complaining (e.g. the report of a missed bin is a request for a service, if missed twice or not responded to it may become a complaint). MP Enquiries rarely focus on waste as a theme. There are relatively small numbers of issues considering that waste services are used by all households.
- Planning Services – Although only 5% of complaints relate to Planning Services, they form 9% of the complaints cases exceeding timescales and 21% of all cases progressing beyond stage 1 (stage 2 or the Ombudsman). These cases are usually complex in nature, linked to planning processes, and are not easily remedied. Planning complaints feature significantly in the cases progressing to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. In addition 12% of MP Enquiries relate to Planning Services. For these reasons, Planning Services complaints are recommended as an area of focus for performance monitoring.
- There are some new and emerging service and complaint themes for 2022/23, not previously featured within the annual reports:
 - Housing and homelessness complaints form only 3% of the council's complaints. These complaints are small in number but they are complex in nature and appear to be a national area of concern for the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. Housing needs are closely linked to the current cost of living pressures and as a result should be a focus for the next year. Despite the small numbers, 7% of overdue stage 1 corporate complaints are housing related and housing issues also feature strongly as a theme within MP enquiries (12%).
 - Revenues and Benefits complaints are handled efficiently by the department. Despite being complex in nature they are responded to robustly and few progress beyond stage 1 of the complaints procedure. However, 13% of overdue stage 1 corporate complaints are Revenues and Benefits complaints and the cost of living pressures and responses have impacted this service area. There are no current performance concerns but pressures in this area should be considered within future monitoring and reporting.
 - Children's social care and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) complaints are also complex in nature and currently forming an area of focus for the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. Shropshire Council appears to perform well in that numbers of complaints are low. However, these complaints are more likely to escalate through the complaints process to stage 2 and beyond. The national focus and increased needs linked to cost of living pressures should mean these complaints are monitored robustly and effective team working across departments remains in place to prioritise these cases as they develop.

Overall, the LGO made 61 decisions relating to Shropshire Council in 2022/23. 16 complaints were upheld and 4 were not upheld (uphold rate 80%). A large proportion were not progressed or were referred back to the Council for local resolution (e.g. premature complaints). Due to the relatively small numbers of cases the upheld rate can fluctuate significantly each year and comparison is difficult, however, performance is not quite as good as the average upheld rate for similar local authorities (72%).

12. Progress Update

Key actions and achievements over the last 12 months are summarised against a brief description of the recommendations made last year. Some of the recommendations require continued ongoing action and longer-term focus.

	Action Last Year	Progress Made
1	In 2021/22 it was recommended that ongoing increases in customer feedback were addressed by work to reduce the proportion of contacts turning into formal complaints.	2022/23 has not seen the same increase in customer feedback and complaints (with the exception of a significant increase in the volume of MP enquiries). Management of cases and processes has been possible as a result of a steady level of demand but there is further work required to improve customer experience to the extent that it will reduce complaint numbers. A review has been undertaken to identify common causes of complaints and known issues and challenges, but council-wide action will be necessary to achieve more widespread results.
2	In the annual letter 2021/22 the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman highlighted concerns that local authority complaint handling functions are not being well resourced and are not effectively responding to increases in demand. This was included in the annual report recommendations.	It was acknowledged that, in the context of limited resources, the Ombudsman's concern was a difficult issue to address. A wide range of activity has taken place (detailed in the Feedback and Insight Team's Team Plan) to take steps to better understand and respond to the concerns raised. This has included research into customer feedback and complaints practice within other local authorities. Some good practice has been identified and actions planned for 2023/24, but predominantly Shropshire's complaints processes and practice is in line with other local authorities, the difference is staffing levels. Without resources to increase staffing levels a focus must be placed on reducing complaint numbers. As the performance data shows, some organisational complaints improvement has been possible without any increase in levels of resources.
3	In relation to the application of restrictions under the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure, it was recommended that more rapid identification of cases and faster decision making could reduce the time and emotional burden on staff and free up resources to handle other work.	A review and update of the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure has been undertaken and this has been communicated to staff across the organisation. This has resulted in an increase in the use of 'warnings' in response to an increase in reported incidents of challenging customer behaviour. Where warnings have been issued, these have been largely effective and have, in many cases, meant further action (and the application of restrictions) has not been necessary. In addition, a task and finish group led by Adult Social Care for the organisation named 'Managing Threats and Aggression' has been effective at increasing awareness of concerns, promoting reporting processes and support available. Further work is planned to ensure internal communications are ongoing.
4	It was recommended that increased case follow-ups and recording of actions (compliance) against Ombudsman recommendations continue alongside improved recording of learning and actions.	Focused work continues to ensure recommendations are recorded and monitored until completion. The compliance rate for 2022/23 was 100%. There have been some delays for service confirmation of action and there has been limited improvement in the identification of learning and actions at stage 1. Further work will be required to encourage complaint investigators to more clearly, and consistently, identify the learning and actions from complaints. This work is also important for inspection and governance.

	Action Last Year	Progress Made
5	Internal restructuring and changes within Shropshire Council had generated problems accurately reporting customer feedback performance by service, unit and directorate. A system data review of hierarchy structures within the Dynamics system was recommended.	A review was undertaken by the Feedback and Insight Team and changes made to more accurately capture and report team, service level, unit and directorate. Improvement has been achieved and issues have not since been identified within quarterly performance reporting. However, it is recognised that there is still some more work to do because organisational change is ongoing. This work need not form a main recommendation for 2022/23 but further action will be required over the coming year and beyond.
6	In 2021/22 it was recommended that 'days to close' formed the top area of focus within complaints handling.	Average performance has improved with a new 26 working day average for corporate complaints compared to 32 working days in 2021/22. Although this improvement demonstrates some success, there are still too many cases exceeding timescales (270 stage 1 corporate complaints in 2022/23). The impact of delay often means complainants remain dissatisfied and cases are more likely to escalate. As a result, the close monitoring and reporting of overdue complaints will continue with the aim of achieving a reduced number of overdue cases in 2022/23.
7	It was recommended that some additional and frequent complaints reporting continue, where needed, to maintain focus on performance measures and improvement.	The 2022/23 data demonstrates that there have been areas of improved performance over the last 12 months. In particular the impact of fortnightly reports used by the Place Directorate have been effective in reducing the number of overdue complaint responses. Ongoing regular reporting will continue, where needed, and offers an effective way of ensuring complaint due dates are well communicated.
8	The last annual report highlighted concerns about the quality of some complaints responses and recommended an ongoing focus on learning and actions from complaints.	Quality of complaint responses tends to vary significantly, even within departments, but overall there seems to be a link between quality and areas of significant service pressure. Over the last 12 months the Feedback and Insight Team Officers have tried to offer more support and comment on draft responses to try to positively impact quality. This has been partly effective, but it is recommended that further work is required in 2022/23 in the form of additional communication, training and monitoring.
9	It was recommended that responsibility for complaints responses was made clear within team leader and manager induction processes.	Human Resources has supported this recommendation by including reference to complaints within updated job description templates. This helps to clarify responsibilities. In addition, coverage of complaints performance within Directorate management meetings has further helped to communicate expectations.

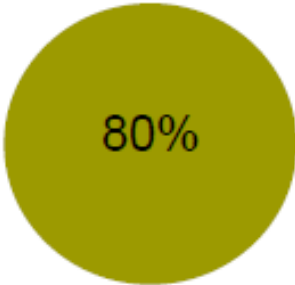
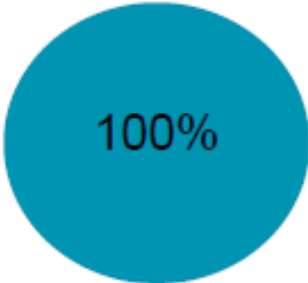
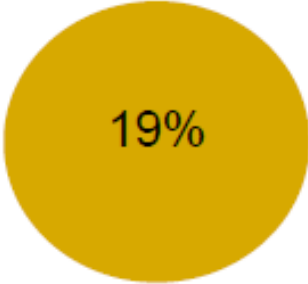
13. Recommendations

The following recommendations for the year ahead are designed to allow for ongoing improvement in the application of Shropshire Council's complaints procedures and in the work undertaken to obtain and respond to customer feedback.

1. There has been a growth in the number of teams raising concerns about customer behaviour and making enquiries related to the persistent or vexatious customers procedure. Ongoing work will be needed over the coming year to communicate expectations to staff and customers concerning acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and the actions Shropshire Council may take when incidents or ongoing issues are identified.
2. A priority aim must be to improve customer experience to reduce the proportion of contacts turning into formal complaints. Improvement could include a focus on customer communications, robust assessment of enquiries to direct the right cases to the right processes quickly and without delay, a focus on meeting expected response timescales and using information channels to manage customer expectations. It is recommended that issues and evidence is shared with Shropshire Council's transformation project referred to as 'Accelerating channel shift, managing demand better and improving our customer journey' or the 'Best Customer Experience Programme'.
3. Linked to the points above is the concern highlighted within the report that 46% of the complaint cases that were early closed in 2022/23 were closed early because the complainant chose not to provide contact details (anonymous complaints cannot be investigated). It is easier and faster to raise an anonymous complaint online, but anonymous complaints cannot be investigated and result in little benefit to either the complainant or Shropshire Council. The system and IT tools will need to be reviewed as well as communication with customers so they understand how sharing details can result in an investigation, learning and resolution. It is also recommended that this issue is shared with the transformation project on the customer journey (as described above).
4. Although it is important to recognise improvement in the average number of days to close stage 1 complaints, concerns remain that too many cases are exceeding deadlines. Overdue complaints are more likely to escalate and lead to greater costs and time for complaints management and response. It is recommended that this issue is addressed as a priority for 2023/24.
5. It is recommended that the identification and recording of learning and actions should be an area for ongoing improvement. A target will be to increase the proportion of upheld cases with learning and improvement actions identified within complaint responses (and therefore recorded on the council's system). Use of learning and recommendations will be increasingly important to evidence the council's improvement work for internal and external processes.
6. Quality of complaints responses is a growing concern as teams and services across the organisation report conflicting demands and increasing work pressures. This is a difficult issue to address because it does not clearly link to teams or services but to individuals and can be influenced by a range of different circumstances. It is recommended that careful consideration and sensitive approaches will be required over the year to work towards improvement. It is important to note that this is not an isolated issue and some local authorities have gone as far as implementing quality checks on all complaints before issue (that approach is not recommended currently due to the potential financial impact).
7. The Ombudsman has suggested a meeting with Shropshire Council within its annual letter and referred to its intention to publish a joint complaint handling code setting out a standard for authorities to work to. It is recommended Shropshire Council work to ensure a robust understanding of the Ombudsman's expectations and participate in the consultation once it is announced.

Appendix 1 Ombudsman Cases 2022/23

Shropshire Council
For the period ending: 31/03/23

Complaints upheld		
	<p>80% of complaints we investigated were upheld.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 72% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>16 upheld decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 20 investigations for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023</p>
Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations		
	<p>In 100% of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 99% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>Statistics are based on a total of 11 compliance outcomes for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Failure to comply with our recommendations is rare. An organisation with a compliance rate below 100% should scrutinise those complaints where it failed to comply and identify any learning.		
Satisfactory remedy provided by the organisation		
	<p>In 19% of upheld cases we found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 13% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>3 satisfactory remedy decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 16 upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023</p>

Appendix 2 Ombudsman Recommendations 2022/23

This table covers complaints that were **upheld** by the Ombudsman during 2022/23.

Category	Decided date	Ombudsman recommendation	Agreed action	Recommendation achieved date
Planning & Development	16/06/2022	Apology. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Procedure or policy change/review. Provide information/advice to person affected.	The Council will consider amending its planning enforcement process to include updating complainants on its progress, where it is unable to issue its decision on the complaint within eight weeks. It will inform the Ombudsman of the outcome of its consideration, its reasons for this outcome and any timescale for change.	29/09/2022
Education & Children's Services	03/11/2022	New appeal/review or reconsidered decision, Procedure or policy change/review.	The Council will amend its school transport policies to reflect the relevant statutory guidance on school transport and the safety of walking routes. A route safety assessment will also be completed.	24/03/2023
Adult Care Services	29/09/2022	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble.	Letter of apology and financial remedy issued.	21/10/2022
Adult Care Services	08/11/2022	Apology. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide training and/or guidance.	Remind relevant Council officers of the importance of carrying out the yearly reconciliations and the importance of clear communication. Remind the Agency to provide the monthly breakdown to service users. Letter of apology, new invoice and financial remedy issued.	21/12/2022
Housing	17/10/2022	Apology. Financial redress: Loss of service. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide training and/or guidance. Provide services to person affected.	The Council should provide training or guidance to its housing team to ensure they understand the Council's duties to provide accommodation to homeless people, under the Housing Act 1996. Letter of apology issued along with financial redress.	23/11/2022
Adult Care Services	21/11/2022	No further action organisation already remedied	Not applicable	-
Adult Care Services	01/09/2022	Apology	Apology	07/09/2022
Adult Care Services	27/03/2023	Financial Redress: Quantifiable Loss. Improved BinJ remedy. Provide training and/or guidance. Reassessment. Provide information/advice to person affected. Provide services to person affected.	The Council has agreed to ensure staff are trained in autism in accordance with the guidance to the Autism Act 2009. A range of actions were completed.	19/05/2023

Category	Decided date	Ombudsman recommendation	Agreed action	Recommendation achieved date
Adult Care Services	24/01/2023	Apology. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide training and/or guidance.	The Council will remind staff to ensure a receiving care home confirms it has received sufficient information about a potential resident, and has agreed it can meet their needs, before confirming a placement. The Council will remind staff to ensure that representatives are involved in decisions about future care home placements and that this is noted in the case records, particularly in cases where there is a Lasting Power of Attorney in place for a person who lacks capacity.	02/03/2023
Education & Children's Services	17/02/2023	Apology. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. New appeal/review or reconsidered decision. Provide training and/or guidance, Procedure or policy change/review.	The Council is updating its policy on safe walking routes for home to school transport to ensure it is compliant with statutory guidance and Road Safety GB guidelines and to ensure officers conduct assessments of the whole route, including large roads and road crossings, which to date have wrongly been excluded from its policy. The Council will revisit how it handles school transport appeals to ensure they are conducted fairly and impartially in line with statutory guidance and each case is considered on its own merits.	08/03/2023
Adult Care Services	23/02/2023	No further action organisation already remedied.	Not applicable	-
Education & Children's Services	13/12/2022	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, New appeal/review or reconsidered decision.	Injustice remedied during LGO consideration.	13/01/2023
Education & Children's Services	27/03/2023	Apology	Apology	27/04/2023
Adult Care Services	27/02/2023	Apology	Apology	21/03/2023
Adult Care Services	14/02/2023	Injustice remedied during organisation's complaint processes.	Not applicable	-
Education & Children's Services	22/03/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide services to person affected. Injustice remedied during LGO consideration.	The Ombudsman progressed the complaint into a new complaint/stage of complaint in May 2023.	-