

Customer Feedback Annual Report **Shropshire Council** 2023/24

Feedback and Insight Team, Shropshire Council
September 2024



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 2023 and 31 March 2024. 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.

For the first time this year, this council-wide report also covers additional reporting requirements set out by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman within the Complaints Handling Code published in 2024. The Complaint Handling Code ('the Code'), sets out guidance for a process for organisations that will allow them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The purpose of the Code is to enable organisations to resolve complaints raised by individuals promptly, and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. The Ombudsman also hopes the Code will help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals. The Code does not replace any existing statutory complaint processes such as The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006 or Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009. The Ombudsman has issued the Code as "advice and guidance" for all local councils in England under section 23(12A) of the Local Government Act 1974.

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 30 working days. This timescale will be changing in 2024/25 under the new Complaint Handling Code to 10 working days. In some complex cases it may take longer than this, but we let the customer know if this extra time is needed and why (extensions must be agreed). 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.

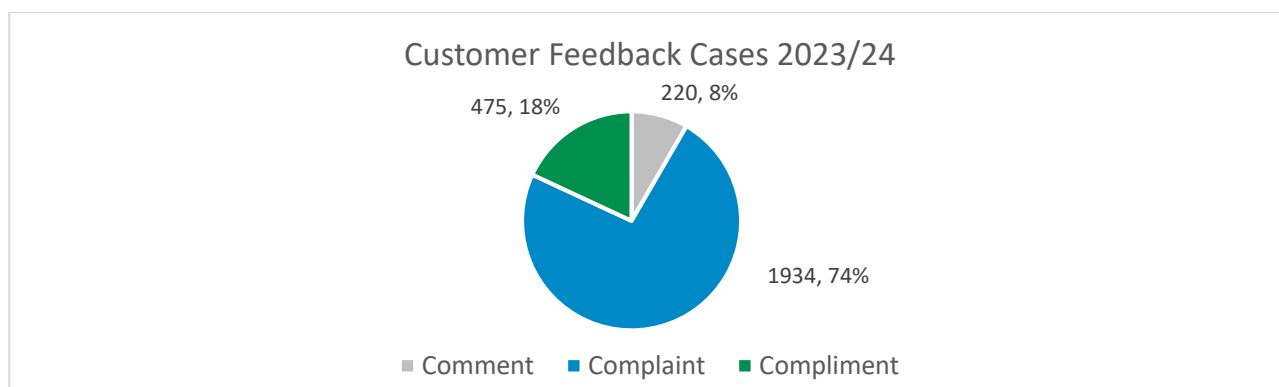
The Feedback and Insight Team coordinates the complaints process, recording and allocating complaints for investigation, monitoring response dates and overseeing performance. We cannot promise to get the result complainants want, but we do work to ensure that complaints are dealt with in line with the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

3. Customer Feedback 2023/24

Within the year 2023/24 Shropshire Council received and recorded 2,629 cases of formal feedback. There were:

- 1,934 initial complaint cases
- 220 comments
- 475 compliments

In addition, there were also 693 MP enquiries recorded between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. 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.

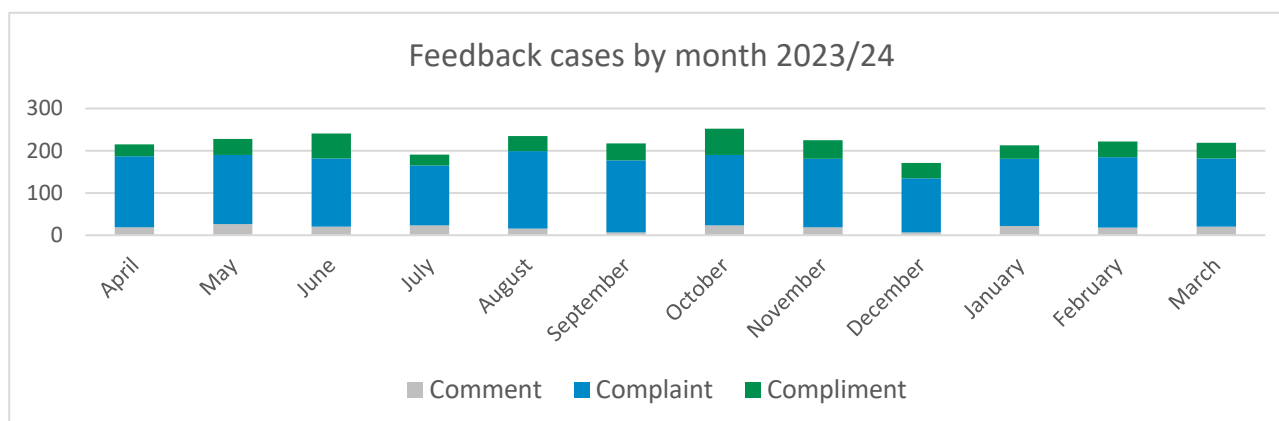


Comments and other enquiries formed 8.4% of all feedback cases and 18.1% of all customer feedback cases were compliments. The 1,934 complaint cases formed 73.6% of all formal feedback and resulted in 978 complaint investigations. Not all complaints cases will result in an investigation. There are a wide range of reasons a complaint may be closed before investigation such as it was a service request, anonymous, outside of the Council’s jurisdiction, redirected to another process such as an appeal or claim, withdrawn or early resolved.

The 978 complaint investigations were handled under the different statutory and corporate complaints processes. There were:

- 751 Corporate complaints
- 191 Adult Services statutory complaints (including provider complaints and multi-agency complaints)
- 36 Children’s Services statutory complaints

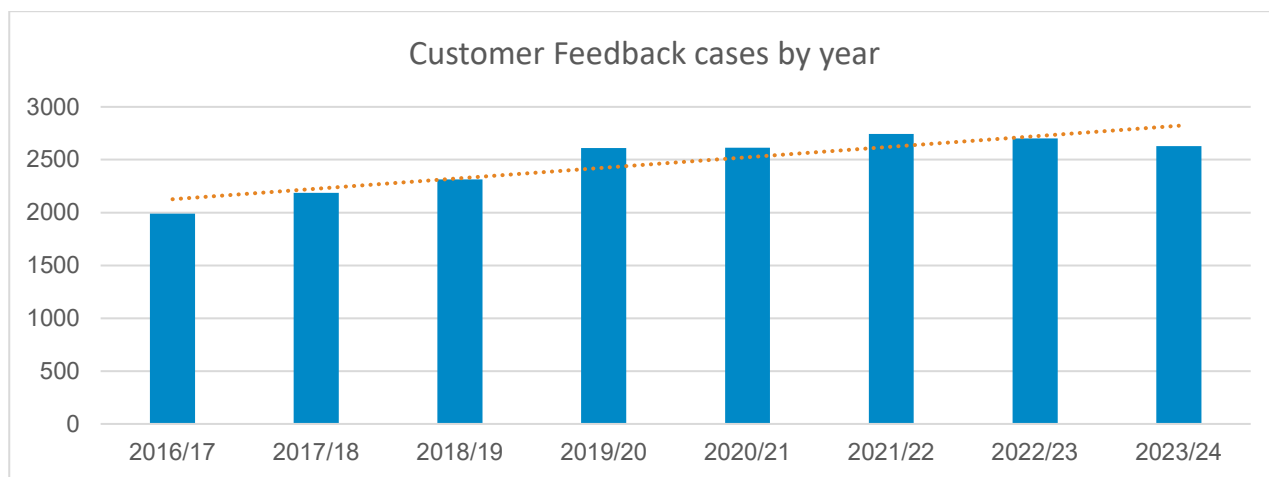
Feedback levels can vary over the year with slight fluctuations influenced by changes in weather conditions (e.g. heavy rain or snow and ice can lead to place-based complaints) or other factors. Overall, 2023/24 didn’t see any dramatic increases or fluctuations due to weather conditions.



Over the year, the monthly average was 219 customer feedback cases (similar to the previous year at 225). Customer feedback cases were relatively steady across the year with slight decreases in July and December. October (252), June (241) and August (235) saw the greatest number of feedback cases, marking very different patterns to the previous year. Looking across the years, September is often a busy month but in 2023/24 it did not result in the same high levels of feedback and near average numbers were received (217). There were 171 customer feedback cases in December, and this is commonly the month with the fewest cases.

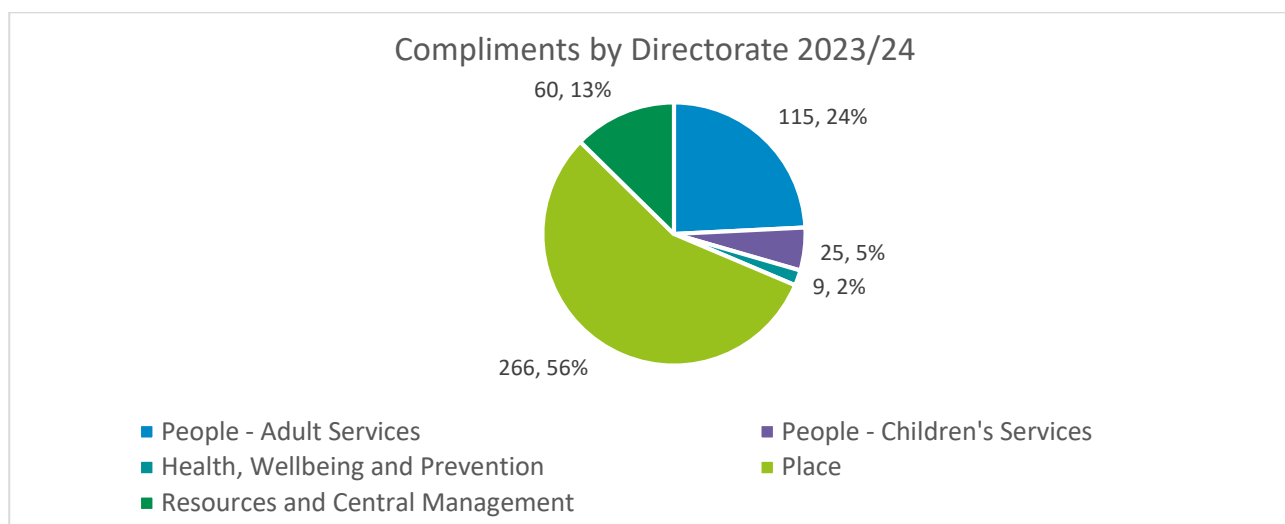
Performance data is considered by quarter. In 2023/24 quarter 1 (April to the end of June) saw higher case numbers (684 in total) compared to 654 in quarter 4. The pattern is very different to the previous year making forecasting difficult.

Overall customer feedback case volumes have increased over recent years, but this latest year shows a plateauing with numbers now relatively stable for the last 3 years. There was a 36% increase in customer feedback from 2016/17 and the chart below shows the upward trend line for customer feedback. The current levelling off may change with significant transformation of customer systems described later in this report.



Work takes place to monitor the proportion of complaints within annual customer feedback totals. Over recent years there has not been any dramatic change and the proportion has fluctuated slightly between 40% and 44% (40% this year).

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%).

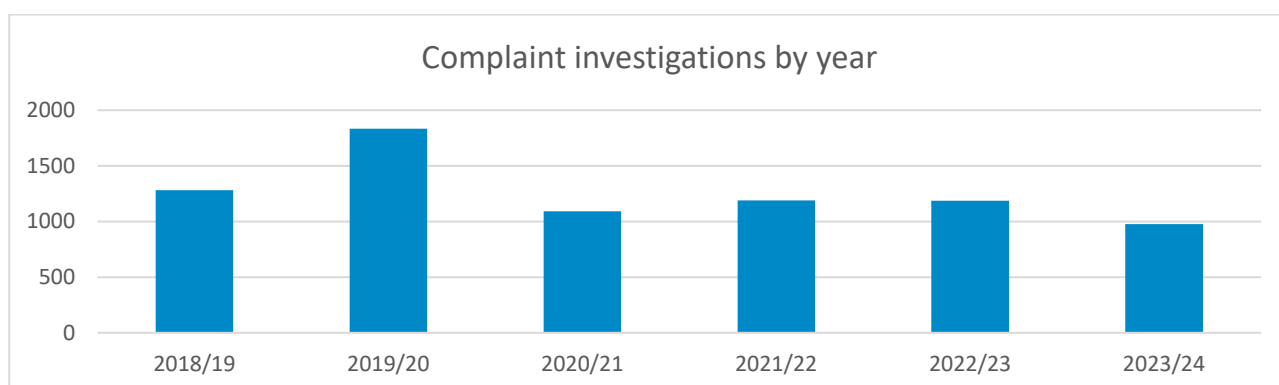


Adult Services and Children's Services data is presented separately due to the different complaint procedures for statutory cases and the need to provide some comparison year on year. There are ongoing changes that need to be made to accurately reflect changing Council structures and a more comprehensive review will be required following recent structural changes and transformation programmes (see recommendations).

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 2023/24 there were 1,934 complaints cases and 978 complaint 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 1,934 complaints cases, many 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 a commissioned service, or a more appropriate process may have been available (such as an appeal). Of the early closures, 273 cases (47%) had to be early closed because the complainant chose not to provide contact details (anonymous complaints cannot be investigated). 16% were outside of the council's jurisdiction and 9% were insurance claims. Complaint outcomes are explored in more detail later in the report and this is picked up within the report recommendations.

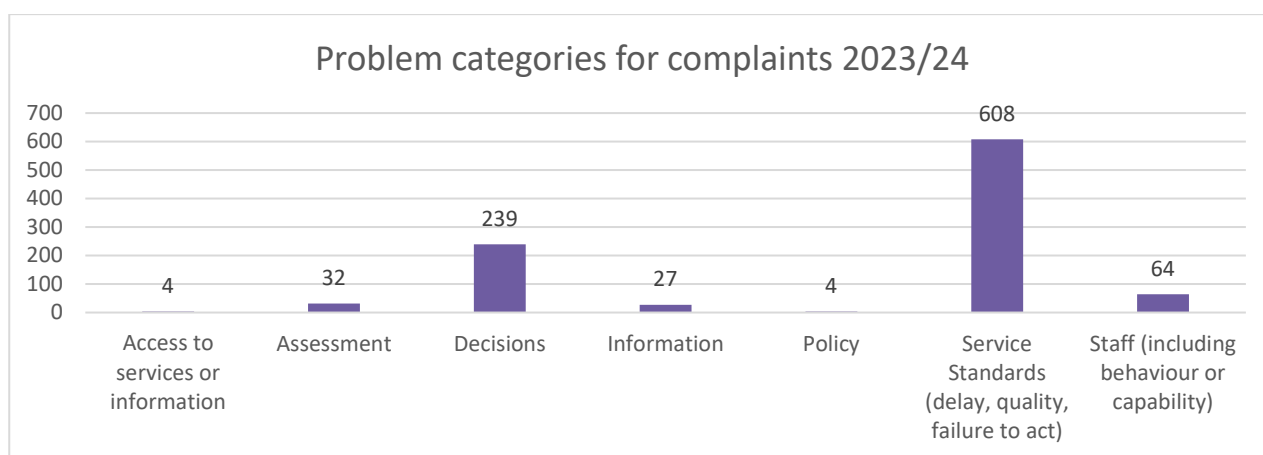
The following paragraphs are based on complaints investigations against which more detailed information is captured. The performance measures Shropshire Council uses to monitor complaints are largely based on complaints investigations.



The chart above illustrates that in 2019/20 there were a large number of complaint investigations, out of line with other annual totals. This year marked the introduction of a new customer feedback IT system and a reduction in telephone correspondence with customers and greater use of email and online forms initially increased complaint numbers. 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 streetlight. 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 2023/24. 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 (only 3 complaints related to a decision not taken). Complaints related to decisions seem to have been growing over the last two years, across multiple departments and this could be linked to public sector budget challenges.

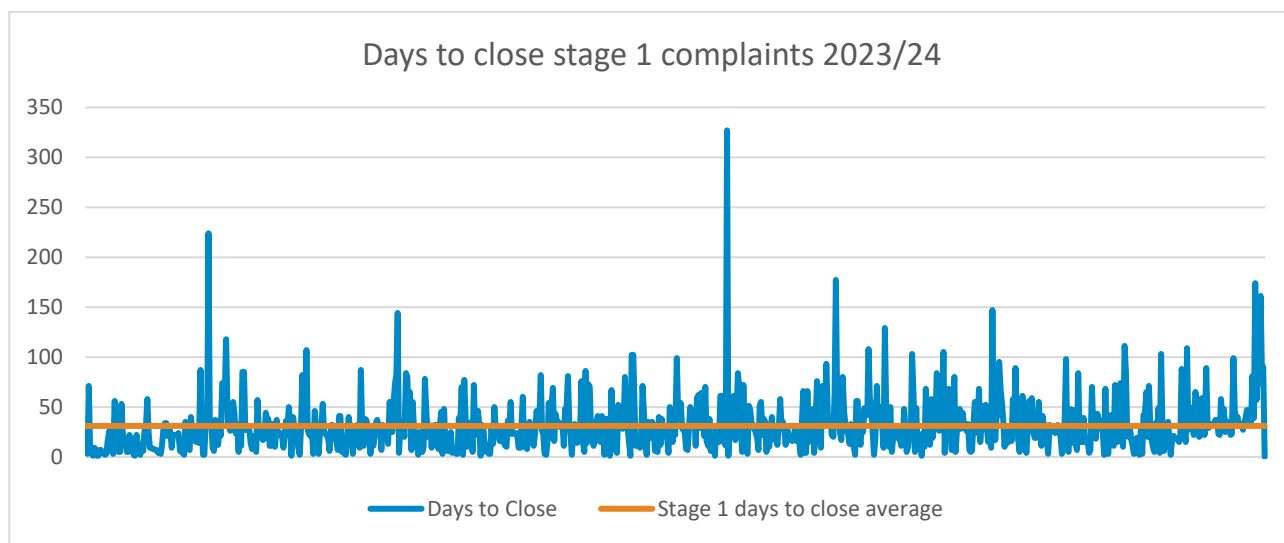


During 2023/24 Shropshire Council took an average of 31 working days to respond to stage 1 complaints (against the 30 working day timescale). This has been the dominant performance issue over the last 2 years. Quarterly performance reporting has been focusing on the average time taken to respond to stage 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 but continued focus has shown a stabilising of average performance. The Council currently has 60 working days in total to respond to corporate complaints, 30 working days for each stage (stage 1 and stage 2).

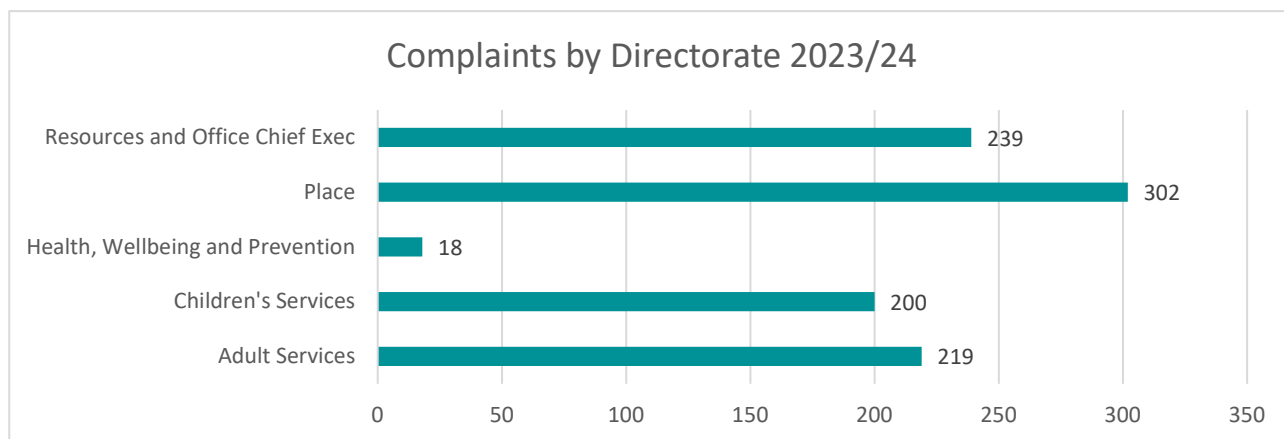
Additional analysis shows that of the 643 stage 1 corporate closed complaints, 263 were late and 380 (59%) were on time. Days to close will remain a key measure within ongoing performance monitoring.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has implemented a new complaint handling code for corporate complaints (excluding adult and children’s social care statutory complaints). The Ombudsman has issued the Code as “advice and guidance” for all local councils in England under section 23(12A) of the Local Government Act 1974. The Code is currently being piloted and there is an expectation that local authorities will adopt the Code by March 2026. More detail on the impact of the Code on the Council will be provided in the 2025 Annual Customer Feedback report. The Ombudsman intends to start considering the Code as part of processes (including case findings and reporting) from April 2026. Under the Code, stage 1 complaint investigations must be completed and a response provided within 10 working days. An additional 10 working days may be applied as an extension if there are robust and recorded reasons why more time is required and this is communicated to the complainant. Feedback and Insight Team officers report increasing complexity within complaints cases. Unfortunately, complexity is not something that can be easily measured or reported on with currently available data.

One indicator of complexity that can be reported is the number of investigations raised for each complainant during the year (complaints may be added to over time or additional new complaints made as a complaint is responded to). The data shows that, in 24% of cases (222 cases) more 2 or 3 investigations take place. 17 cases had 4 or more investigations (2%).



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 (31% of all complaints) followed by Resources and the Office of the Chief Executive (24%) and Adult Services (22%). The proportions differ from the previous year. In 2022/23 Place directorate complaints formed a larger proportion at 45% and Adult Services a smaller proportion at 16% (Children’s Services complaints last year were also smaller at 15% increasing to 20% in 2023/24). Data for Adult Services and Children’s services is explored in more detail throughout the year and within the annual reports for these services.



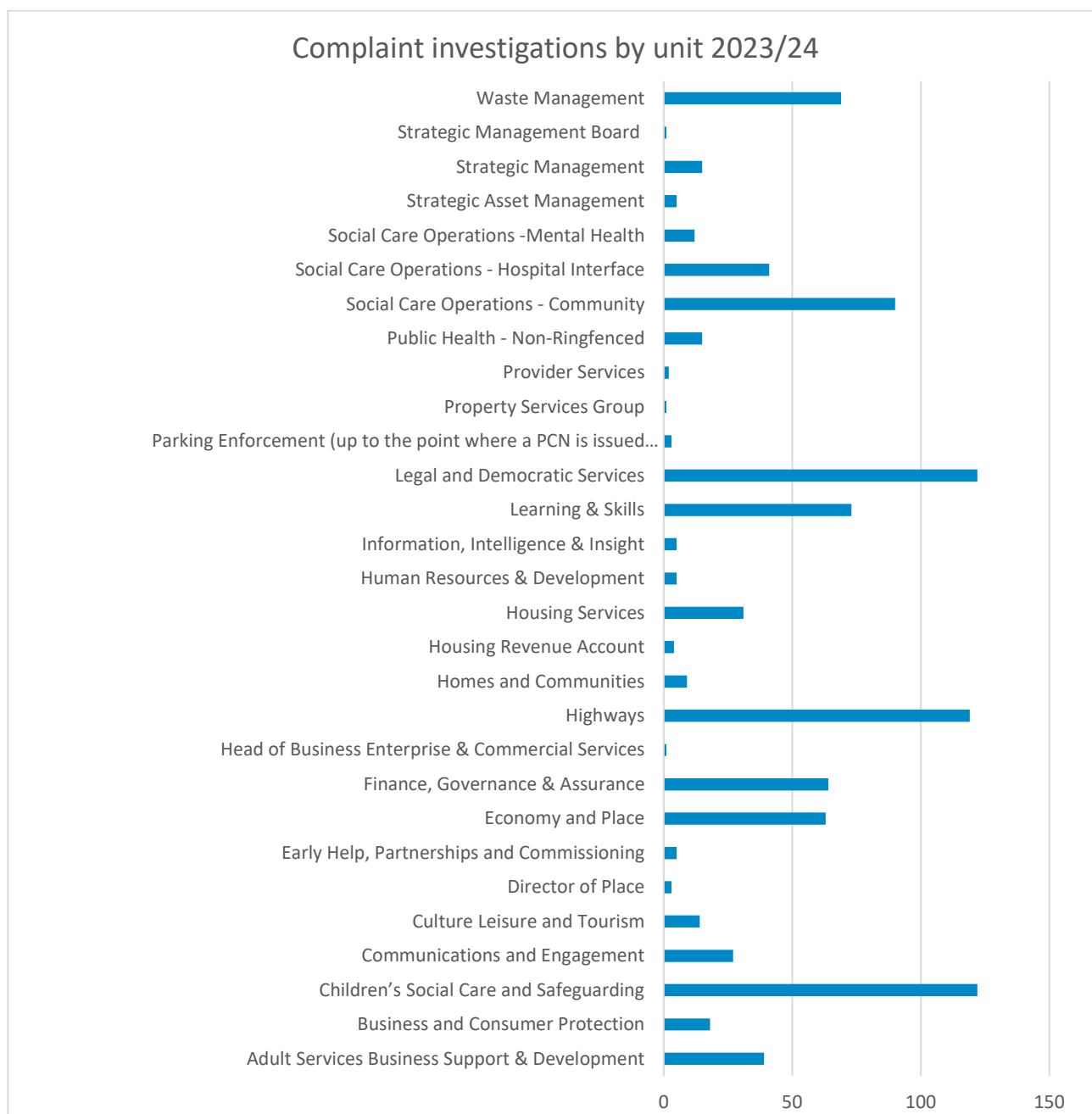
Taking a closer look at the breakdown of complaints by service highlights a shift from the last few years. Highways and Transport complaints have formed a large proportion of all complaints over recent years but these have now reduced to 12% of all Shropshire Council’s complaints in 2023/24 (from 19% in 2022/23 and 27% in 2021/22). Waste services complaints have also reduced from 14% in 2022/23 to 6% in 2023/24. These are services used by all residents.

Revenues and Benefits received a significant proportion of complaints at 6% but this has reduced slightly since last year. Planning Services complaints formed 5%.

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. Legal and governance services was allocated 13% of all complaints but this is due to the fact that stage 2 corporate complaints have increased in volume (the complaints are not complaints about the services delivered by Legal Services).

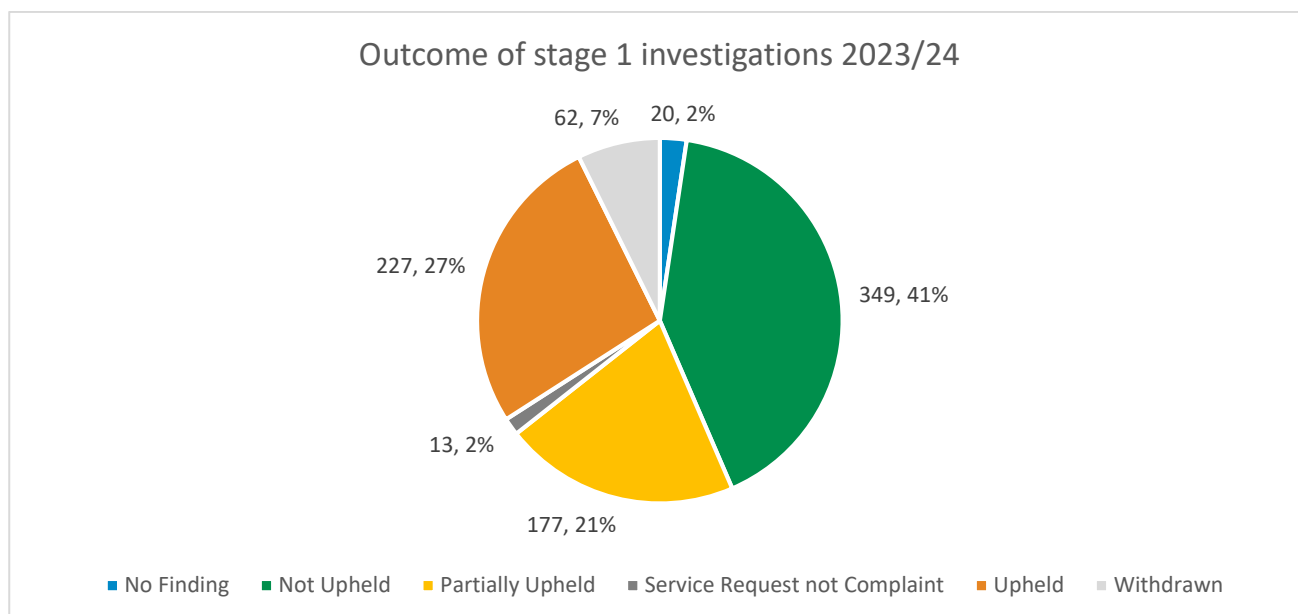
Considering detailed data by service it is worth noting that some service areas with slightly higher volumes of complaints reflect the national picture across other local authorities. Children’s social work case management, Housing and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) complaints are among 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. In Shropshire SEND complaints have increased and although complaint response quality is very good, this places more pressure on the service area.

The chart below displays numbers of complaints by unit (services are grouped into these areas for ease of reporting).



When considering complaints performance, the outcome is very important. The data for 2023/24 shows that:

- At the end of the 12-month period 2023/24, there were 848 closed stage 1 complaints.
- Of the closed stage 1 complaints 27% were upheld (227 complaints compared to 173 the year before), 21% were partially upheld and 41% were not upheld.
- Considering the complaints that were upheld (all stages), 17% were with Highways and Transport (a significant improvement compared to 2021/22 at 32% but more than 2022/23 at 14%). 16% were for the Special Educational Needs and Disability and 8% were with Waste Management and 8% for Adult Social Care - Social Work Teams South.
- Although only relatively low numbers, there were also a higher proportion of cases upheld within Adult Services' Hospital Interface Social Work Teams (7%) and Children's Case Management (7%).
- The two dominant problem categories within upheld complaints are 'Service standards – communication (failure/poor)' and 'Service standards – failure to provide a service/take action'. 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.
- 2% 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 again in 2023/24 following a focus within performance monitoring

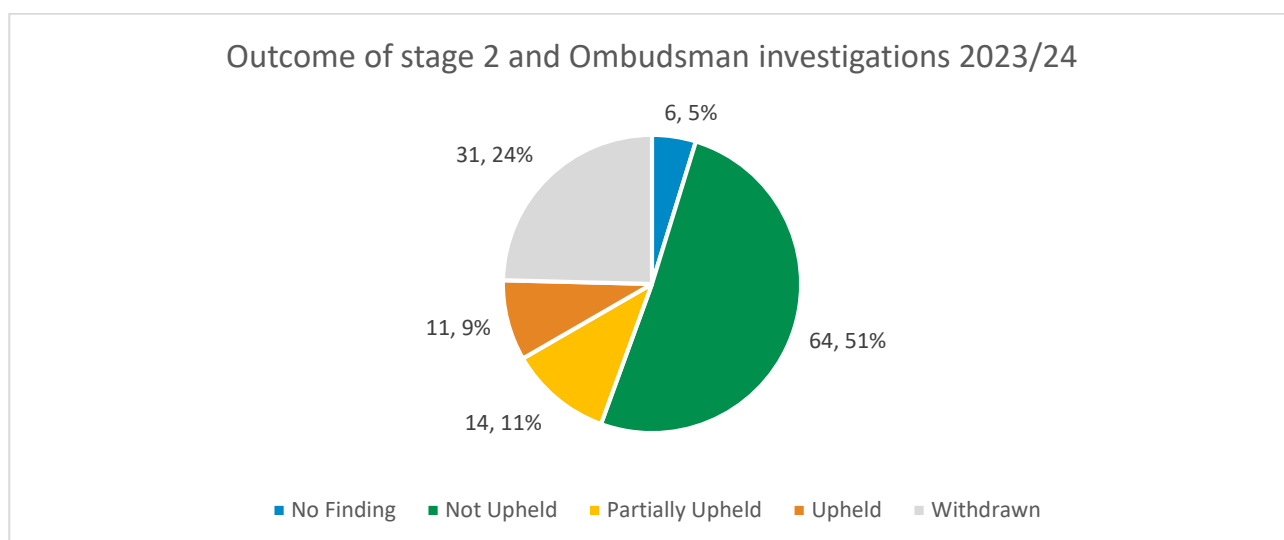


4. Progression of Complaints

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 has increased. In 2021/22 99 cases progressed beyond stage 1; in 2022/23 the number was similar at 95 but in 2023/24 129 cases progressed. Looking at longer term data there has been a significant overall increase.

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 (3 of the cases remain open so do not yet have a finding). Numbers will differ from the Ombudsman data later in the report due to the difference in the dates reported to each organisation.

Stage 2	Ombudsman	Total investigations beyond stage 1
74	55	129



The Shropshire annual report from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman highlighted that 81 complaints were received by the Ombudsman for Shropshire Council in 2023/24 and 79 cases were considered/decided (24 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 79 cases decided, 5 were not upheld, 19 were upheld and the remainder resulted in other actions such as referring back for local resolution, offering advice, or closure after initial enquiries. The Ombudsman reports Shropshire Council's upheld rate at 79%. The LGO upheld rate for similar local authorities is also reported as 79%. 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 – Received and Upheld

Category	Number received	Number upheld
Adult Care Services	17	7
Benefits & Tax	4	0
Corporate & Other Services	5	0
Education & Children's Services	18	9
Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation	4	1
Highways & Transport	11	0
Housing	8	1
Planning & Development	14	1
Grand Total	81	19

Outcome of Decisions Made

Advice given	Closed after initial enquiries	Incomplete/ Invalid	Referred back for local resolution	Detailed Investigations			Grand Total
				Not Upheld	Upheld	Upheld rate (%)	
1	27	6	21	5	19	79	79

Within the Ombudsman's annual complaints letter and report for Shropshire Council 2023/24 the Ombudsman wrote "*I am aware of the difficult financial circumstances and service demands that make continuous improvement a challenging focus for the sector. However, we will continue to hold organisations to account through our investigations and recommend proportionate actions to remedy injustice. Despite the challenges, I have great confidence that you recognise the valuable contribution and insight complaints, and their swift resolution, offer to improve services for the public.*" The Ombudsman suggested a need to focus on providing more timely responses to its requests for information and mentioned a desire for action to comply with the new code and new timescales for response.

For the first time this year the Ombudsman introduced a new measure for performance reporting; the rate of complaints per 100,000 population. Shropshire Council's rate for 2023/24 is 4.6 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.

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 many cases overseen by the service area's Executive Director.

5. Annual Comparisons 2021/22 to 2023/24

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<p>Number of compliments – return to average</p> <p>The number of compliments in 2023/24 is slightly more than the previous year but in line with average figures per annum.</p>	454	436	475
	Performance is in line with expected numbers with a slight improvement on last year.		
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<p>Complaints investigations – lower than expected</p> <p>The number of complaint investigations recorded by Shropshire Council totalled 978 in 2023/24, 1,187 in 2022/23 and 1,190 in 2021/22. Overall, the reduction is against the upward trend shown in the last 5 years of data. Work has been taking place to triage cases and ensure service requests are not taken forward as complaints prematurely. The Ombudsman warns that a fall in complaint numbers can be a sign of poor performance and should be considered alongside other measures such as upheld rates.</p>	1,190	1,187	978
	Complaint investigations have reduced in number, but this is not necessarily a sign of improved performance and should be considered alongside other data.		
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<p>Days to close – Average days to close increased</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. The data for 2023/24 is similar to 2021/22 performance. Performance is better than it has been overall in recent quarters, 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>	32 working days	26 working days	31 working days
	Average performance has returned to 2021/22 levels. There are still too many complaints investigations exceeding timescales.		
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<p>Outcome at stage 1 – Increase in upheld cases</p> <p>When considering the proportion of complaints upheld, performance overall was relatively steady until this last year which saw a trend towards more upheld complaints in 2023/24. This was reported in quarterly reports. 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). As highlighted earlier in the report, there are some services experiencing pressure and seeing increased findings of fault.</p>	14%	16%	27%
	Performance is a concern with more complaints upheld.		
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<p>Complaints progressing beyond Stage 1 – Increased</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%), in 2022/23 95 (8.7%) and in 2023/24 129 (15% of all closed cases). The Ombudsman upheld rate was 80% in 2022/23 and remained stable in 2023/24 at 79% (the same as the similar local authority average upheld rate).</p>	8.3%	8.7%	15%
	Complaints cases have become increasingly complex and time consuming and the data for escalated cases help illustrate this increase.		

6. Example Compliments

Shropshire Council received 475 compliments during 2023/24. 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 for Adult Services Short Term Support: *"...I just wanted to ring up and tell you how impressed I am with the service. The last couple of months have been great and everyone has been professional, caring, and efficient... Thank you very much..."*

Compliment for Highways: *"Thank you very much to your team for clearing the fly tipped mattress near Grinshill Quarry this morning. I am truly appreciative for such a swift response to this problem."*

Compliment for Enable: *"Thank you for supporting me through an exciting and daunting time in my life. It's been over 5 years since I was last in employment and thanks to your support, I've secured a part time job! Your advice has been priceless to me and your genuine understanding of mental health problems is so reassuring to me. I've had a couple of hiccups in the job hunt along the way but your support has got me through. Enable is a life changing project and long may it continue."*

Compliment for the Welfare Support Team: *"Thank you so much for considering and agreeing to a payment from funds for our emergency repair. This is really useful to us as on basic pension and finding money for unexpected items and events can be impossible."*

Compliment for the Registrars: *"My wife and I just want to thank you for making our day so special. [Name removed] and yourself made us feel less nervous. We had the best day, just want to relive it over and over."*

Compliment for Interim SEND Team Manager and SEND Case Officer from an Executive Headteacher: *"I just wanted to say thank you for a very positive meeting. Knowing that you are there to support us and work alongside us with the new model has filled us with confidence. Your passion for the children was very clear and this eases our concerns considerably."*

Compliment for Rights of Way Officer: *"We are all quick to criticise, specially local authorities, but when someone stands out, they too should be noted. I have been communicating with [name removed] over the last few months on a community issue. She has been very proactive and responsive. She has listened and responded in quick time and to a high degree of skill. And as such I feel it is important to praise her work ethics - Well Done!"*

Compliment for a Social Worker, Disabled Children's Team: *"I just wanted to send a note to say how much I appreciate everything you have done for X. I thought of all times with current headlines this would be appreciated. I have a deeper insight than most I'm sure, of the pressures and constraints you all work under and I personally wanted to give my thanks, you replying at 9pm the other night says it all regarding the dedication you have."*

Compliment for Shropshire Archives: *"Thank you so much for your quick response! Thank you for pointing me in the direction of the Country Life Articles, we have a few bound copies in the office and we managed to find it!"*



7. Example Complaints

Shropshire Council received 1,934 complaints during the year 2023/24 and carried out 978 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.

Complaint relating to SEND support services: [Name removed] wishes to complain of the following: Failure to provide an education; failure to finalise an EHCP; and failure to provide provision specified in the EHCP to meet SEN needs. *"Bearing in mind the injustice to named child, that your failure to provide her basic human rights, to receive an education suitable for her age, aptitude and any special needs that she may have...you have denied her social, emotional learning opportunity potentially breaching the Equality Act 2010, Article 23 28 of the United Nations Convention for the rights of the child."*

Complaint relating to Waste Management: *"Refuge collectors left plastic recycling bins all over the lawn, with rubbish tipped out. This was the general waste collection which comes before the recycling. I am disabled and had to tidy up after them."*

[Name removed] has called in respect of his outstanding complaint which was due for response 14th March 2022. He is complaining that the complaint procedure is not being followed and that the investigating officer is not taking accountability for the complaint and response. He has made it clear that the lack of response is holding up his legal team.

Complaint has been raised in respect of a rent refund: Back in June she was advised she did not have to pay rent from the date of her husband's death and that any rent paid from that time would be refunded. However, although several enquires have been made to chase this, she has still not received anything.

Complaint relating to Revenues Team: *"Hopefully this gets to a senior manager. I am owed money on my council tax from last year. I have been chasing this for 4 weeks already and your representatives on the phone don't want to help. Just tell me to send emails with copy receipts (I am a 60 year old widow who doesn't do technology) I did manage to send one after managing to get some help and have had no reply so followed this up with a call and a rude lady said we have got it but will respond with 4 weeks. Another 4 weeks!!! To get my money, if this was a private business it would never continue with this level of poor service."*

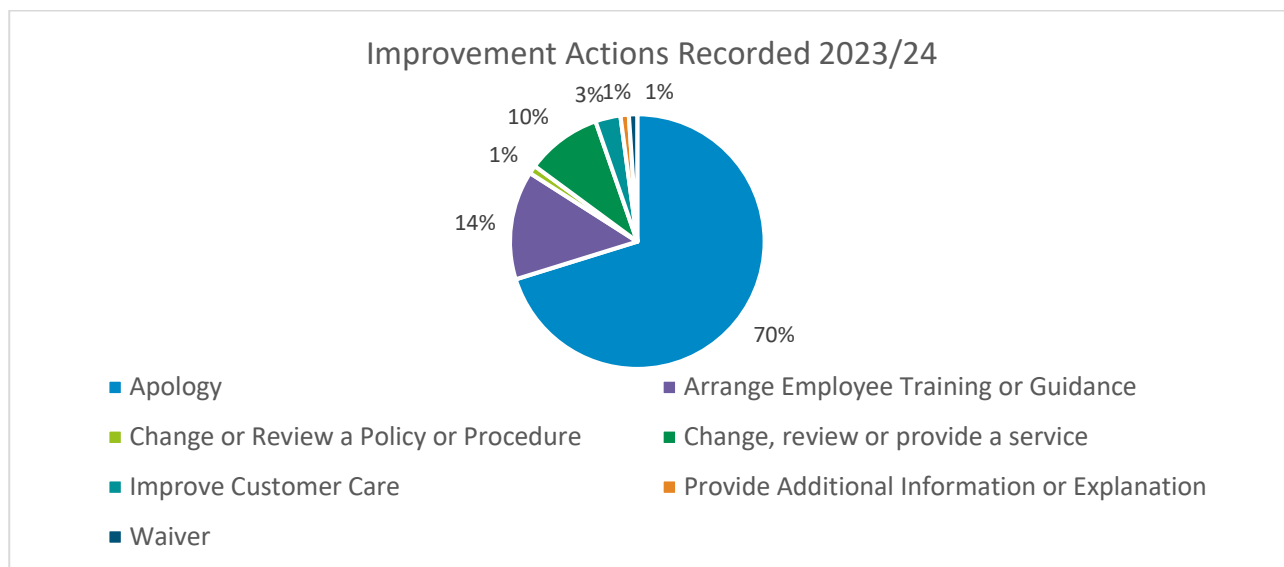
Complaint relating to Community Social Work Team - Central. Mother is unhappy that her son who has been placed out of county is not being supported to return to his hometown of Shrewsbury where all his family live.

Complaint relating to Highways North: "Customer has reported water pouring out of a manhole cover a while ago but has had no response, feels it's being ignored and it's getting worse the more that is left. It has been assigned to [staff name removed] but he has left the council and it doesn't look like the reports are being passed on to anyone else, so no one is looking into these and nothing is getting done. He feels this issue is particularly dangerous as even in summer months there is water pouring out of manhole. He is not happy that no one has been out to sort it and he's had no correspondence about it.

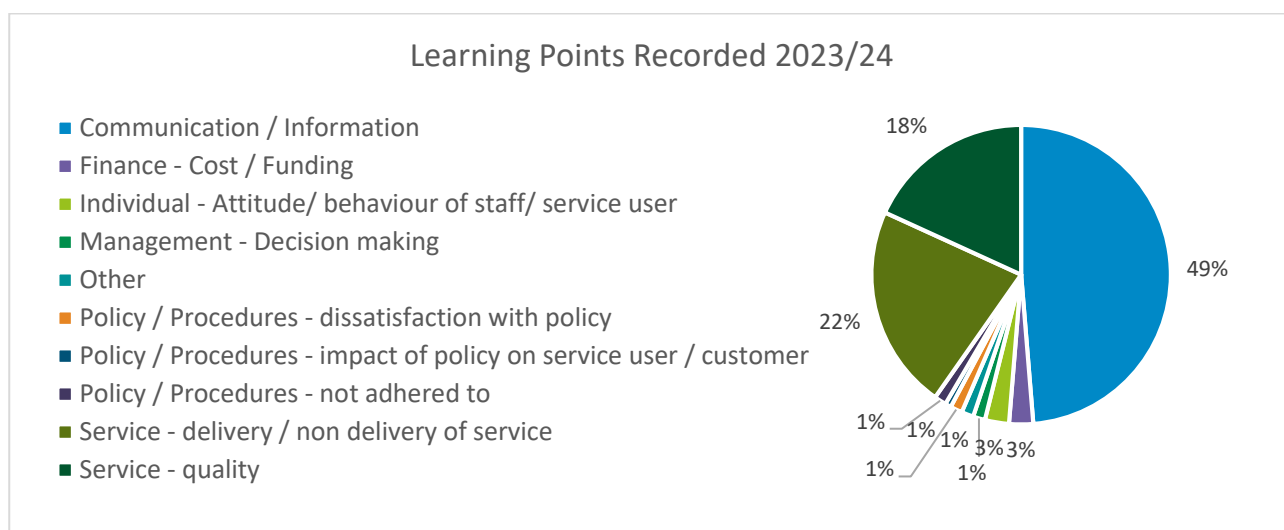


8. Learning and Actions

Shropshire Council recorded learning, action or outcome notes against 790 complaints in 2023/24 (and 135 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 36% of all partly upheld or upheld closed cases have a learning point recorded). 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 2023/24 70% were to provide an apology. 14% of actions included arranging employee training or guidance and a further 10% were actions related to providing a service or making changes or undertaking a review.



49% 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.

The Investigating Officer wrote *"Please let me first apologise for the way that your call was handled. After listening back to the call, I do feel disappointed with how the advisor dealt with the enquiry. I am very conscious that as a front line service the way our team is perceived is very important and I would like to reassure you that we are working hard to ensure that customers receive the best possible service with the resources available. I apologise that on this occasion you did not receive the service you should have done."*

Complaint regarding no green or domestic waste collection for a month due to new members of staff. The learning identified that communication is now passed onto new staff to ensure collections take place.

The complaint was in respect of the mismanagement of a submission of a planning permission application. The investigation concluded that there was fault in the handling of the case and it was confirmed that staff members need a reminder to ensure all of the information is correct before publishing.

The Investigating Officer concluded: *"I do not feel the approach and communication regarding your care and support and long-term planning was handled in a way we would expect within our service. I apologise for any concern and upset this has caused you."*

In relation to a complaint about breach of confidentiality the Investigator reported that the case had been raised through the Information Governance process and the issue has been formally addressed with the member of staff concerned.

After investigation the complaint was upheld due to the length of time taken to allocate a social worker to the case. An apology was issued acknowledging that mistakes had been made and that this issue of timescales would form an area of focus.

The investigator wrote: *"I would like to apologise that you have found the need to raise concerns of this nature with us. Having reviewed your children's records and spoken with the chair person I share the concerns that you raise and uphold your complaint. There are concerns regarding the social work practice provided in your case. The planning in respect of your children has not been effective and there have been times when actions have not been followed through."*

The Investigator found that there had been an overcharge on the complainant's late mother's account. They wrote *"A letter was sent to you ...to confirm that a reconciliation had been completed and a credit note will be raised for £XX within the next four weeks. I am sorry that you have had this negative experience with the Council and would again like to apologise for any distress the delays in resolving this matter have caused you. In light of your complaint we will look to improve our internal communications and processes to ensure learning from errors is embedded into our team training programme."*

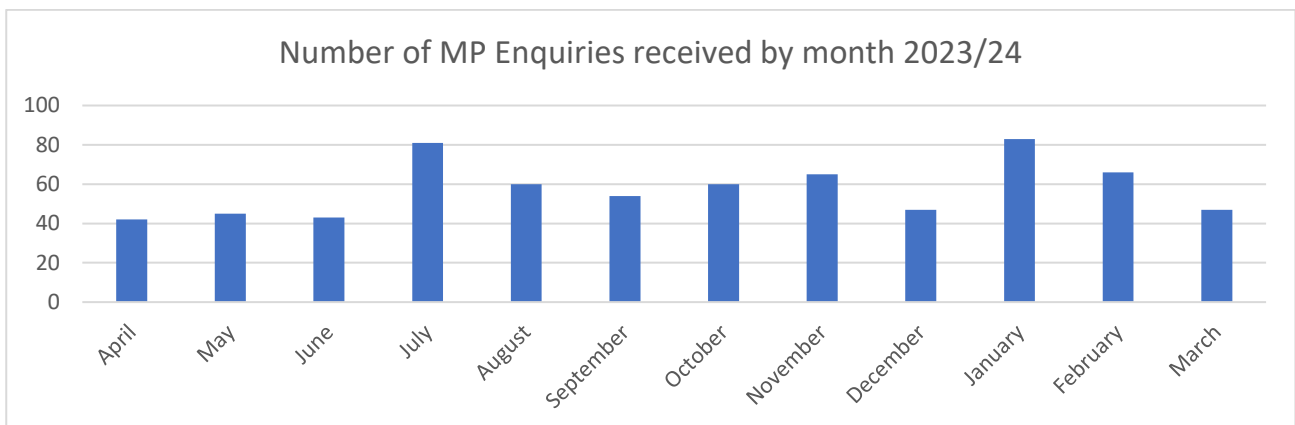
The investigation concluded that the customer should have been referred to the ICS community team to complete a review, ensure the direct payment was set up and to provide any additional support needed. The commented *"I am sorry this was not your experience of the service and on this basis, your complaint has been upheld."*

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 2023/24 693 MP Enquiries were received and reported compared to 647 in 2022/23, 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 and a 7% increase again this year. The pattern suggests an ongoing increase in MP enquiries and any changes in MP following elections can lead to further changes in ways of working.

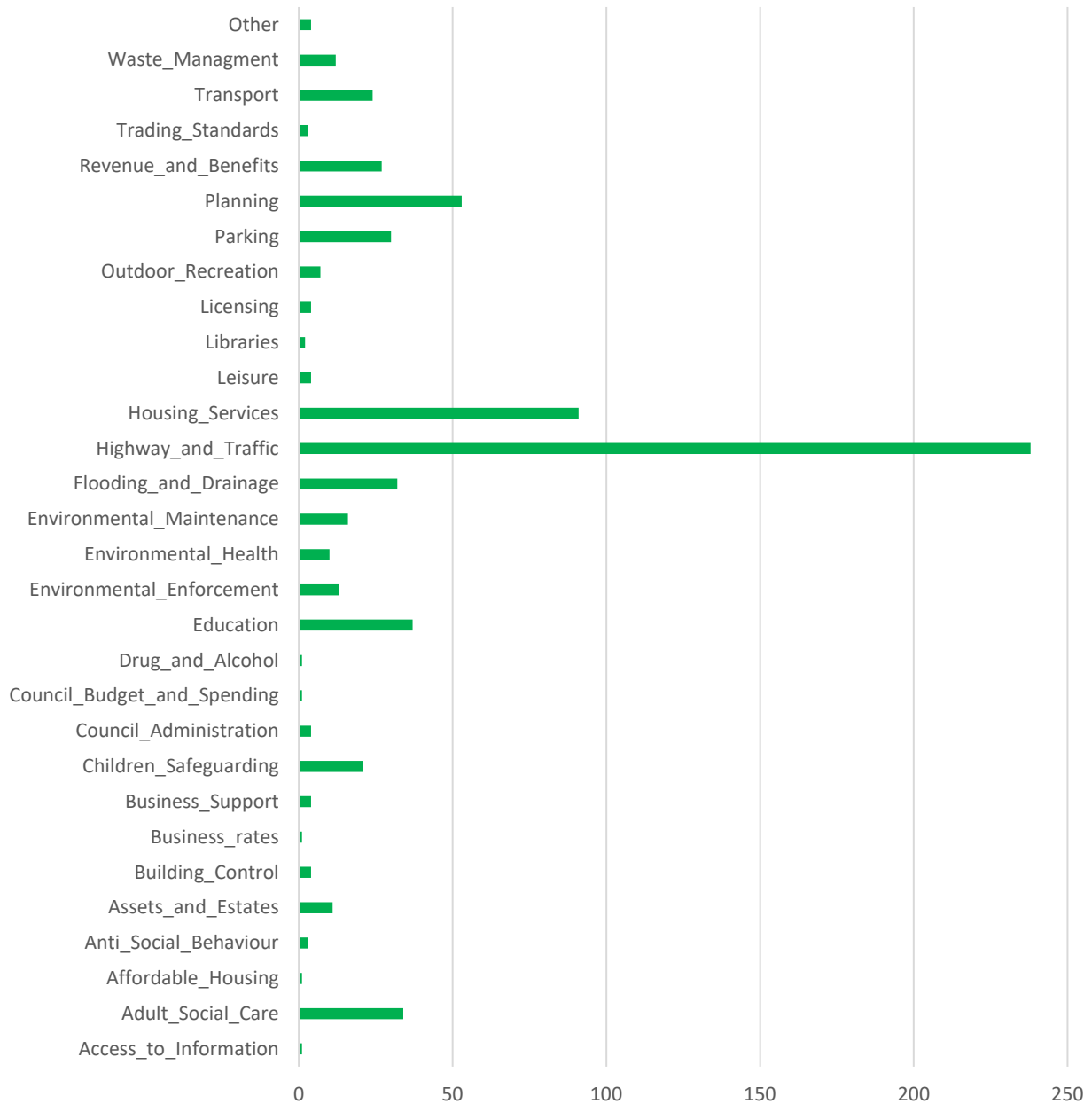
In 2022/23 an average of 54 MP enquiries were received a month and this has increased to 58 in 2023/24. In the same way as complaints, there can be seasonal fluctuations caused by seasonal issues such as the impact of winter conditions on the roads or waste collections. In 2023/24 January 2024 saw the greatest number of enquiries.



MP enquiries in 2023/24 were received from Shropshire's three MPs who were sitting as MPs for the period of this report. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham), Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) and Philip Dunne (Ludlow constituency, South Shropshire).

A consideration of MP enquiries by service category suggests that there are 2 big clusters of topics. 34% of all MP enquiries cover highway and traffic issues, 13% relate to housing issues, 8% relate to planning issues. Adult Social Care, Education and Flooding and Drainage form 5% each. These proportions are similar to complaints at stage 1 although slightly different categories are used within reporting.

Number of MP Enquiries received by service 2023/24



11. Conclusions

The 2023/24 customer feedback data demonstrates some changing patterns in the customer feedback received by Shropshire Council compared to the last few years. The complexity of complaints has increased (although difficult to demonstrate through the performance measures) and more complaints are progressing beyond stage 1 to stage 2 (for corporate and children's statutory complaints) and to the Ombudsman. More complaints are being upheld and the service pressures being reported are leading to some service areas finding fault or failure to meet service standards such as lack of inappropriate action/ lack of action, poor communication and delays.

Complaints for Adult Services and Children's Services have grown as an overall proportion of all complaints, whilst Place Directorate complaints have decreased (from 45% in 2022/23 to 31% in 2023/24). Adult Services complaints now form 22% of complaint investigations (from 16% in 2022/23) and Children's Services complaints have increased from 15% to 20% this year. There are clear areas of more pressure (many reflected nationally) in increases for some services resulted in complaints including Special Educational Needs and Disability, Housing, Revenues and Benefits and finance related complaints. Considering areas of pressure in more detail the analysis highlights that there are more upheld complaints for Highways and Transport (despite a reduction in the number of complaints), Special Educational Needs and Disability, Waste Management and Adult Social Care - Social Work Teams, South.

Complaints investigation numbers have reduced compared to the previous year, but this should not necessarily be considered a sign of improvement and may reflect the Council's ability to adequately resource the complaints processes and/or work to direct misreported complaints into service request processes. MP Enquiries increased again for the second year in a row and may change again to reflect different working practices by MPs changing following elections.

In a similar way to 2022/23, the pattern for more complaints relating to decisions has been maintained in 2023/24. Generally, complainants are more likely to challenge the decisions taken by Shropshire Council. This is not restricted to some services but can be seen across the local authority. The Council's need to make £51m of savings in 2023/24 and the continuing rising demand seen for many services, particularly social care, will have influenced the increase. Council decisions now form the second largest complaint category after service standards. Decisions form the second largest 'problem category' now at 24% following service standards (for example delays, quality, failure to act) at 62%.

The average number of working days taken to respond to stage 1 complaints remains a concern within regular performance reporting. There has been an increase in the average number of working days to respond to stage 1 complaints from 26 working days in 2022/23 to 31 working days in 2023/24. Late responses will be linked to the increase in the proportion of complaints progressing beyond stage 1. Additional analysis shows that of the 643 stage 1 corporate closed complaints in year, 263 were late (41%) and 380 (59%) were on time. This is a concern due to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's new complaints handling code for corporate complaints which includes a 10 working day stage 1 timescale. The Ombudsman hopes local authorities will have implemented the new code by April 2026.

Overall, the Ombudsman investigated 24 complaints relating to Shropshire Council in 2023/24. 19 complaints were upheld with an uphold rate of 79%. Due to the relatively small numbers of cases the upheld rate can fluctuate significantly each year and comparison is difficult, however, performance is in line with the average upheld rate for similar local authorities (79%). The concern raised by the Ombudsman was Shropshire Council's speed at responding to and delivering remedies following Ombudsman recommendations (see recommendations).

A positive within 2023/24 performance is the increase in compliments (an 8.9% increase from the total in 2022/23).

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. An update of more recent progress linked to the transformation programme Shropshire Council is delivering is also summarised below.

	Action Last Year	Progress Made
1	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.	Work to improve internal staff communications related to the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure has been effective and it has led to increased but appropriate application of this approach. Numbers of cases have increased. This has placed growing demand on the Feedback and Insight Team but, despite the impact, it is recognised that there is an organisational benefit and appropriate application allows officers to share their time more fairly to address other customer requests and work requirements and reduces negative impact on staff wellbeing.
2	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 etc.	Shropshire Council has launched a programme under transformation titled the Digital Delivery Unit (DDU). This is designed to generate improvements within the council's digital offer so that more customers will choose to interact digitally, accepting that some transactions and people will be best served in the traditional way. The objectives include improving processes by simplifying and refining workflows and creating more efficient and customer friendly interactions. Customer feedback and complaints is part of a much larger programme and it is hoped that the result will not only lead to IT improvements but influence how the organisation works to reduce complaint volumes and improve responses.
3	46% of the complaint cases that were early closed in 2022/23 were anonymous complaints which could not be investigated. It was easier and faster to raise an anonymous complaint online, but they result in little benefit to either the complainant or Shropshire Council.	The Feedback and Insight Team worked closely with Digital Services and other colleagues within IT to implement changes to the Shropshire Portal site. This instantly reduced some of the anonymous reporting that was taking place as a result of process problems rather than customer choice. Further longer-term work is being planned as part of the Digital Delivery Unit work described above. Learning from the problems experienced in 2022/23 should lead to improved online forms going forwards and a permanent method of avoiding any further increases in anonymous reporting (where the Council is unable to respond to the customer and address concerns).
4	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.	Despite ongoing work through the year within regular performance reporting and staff communications, growing demand and pressures within the organisation mean that complaint response times have not improved. Too many responses are being issued outside of agreed complaint process timescales. The new requirements within the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code will reduce timescales significantly for corporate complaints. As a result, this will need to remain an area of focus for 2024/25.

	Action Last Year	Progress Made
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.	Over the year new learning forms have been trialled within the People Directorate for Adult and Children's Services complaints. This has worked well within some teams but there is ongoing work to do to generate consistent responses across all teams. This work will be built into the IT system replacement work that has been mentioned above (the Digital Delivery Unit transformation programme).
6	Quality of complaints responses is a growing concern as teams and services across the organisation report conflicting demands and increasing work pressures.	The Feedback and Insight Team has worked throughout the year to assist within the People Directorate where there were quality concerns (and statutory complaints responses are often more complex). Some complaint investigators consistently produce good quality responses but there were other areas that required attention. The roll out of this work across the wider organisation is not possible at this stage due to the small size of the Feedback and Insight Team but other opportunities will be considered through the Digital Delivery Unit programme (increased use of Co-Pilot AI software among complaint investigators could be a possibility).
7	The Ombudsman 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 participate in the consultation once it is announced.	The Executive Director of People, Complaints Monitoring Officer and Feedback and Insight Team Leader met with representatives of the Ombudsman following the meeting suggestion last year. Following that meeting the consultation on the new Complaint Handling Code was announced in the Autumn and Shropshire Council participated in the consultation. The Complaints Manager took a report to Cabinet and the council prepared and submitted a response to the consultation. The Code is currently being trialled by a number of local authorities and the Ombudsman is calling for all local authorities to have implemented their recommendations by the end of March 2026. The Self-Assessment in section 14 presents a baseline prior to any implementation.

13. New requirements: Ombudsman Code

In August 2023, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman published proposals for a standardisation of complaints processes for public bodies that are within its remit, including council complaints processes. It should be noted that the proposals do not cover statutory complaints processes for social care (children’s statutory complaints process and adult statutory complaints process). The aim of the planned changes will be to create a consistent approach to complaints across councils and housing providers to give the public greater clarity of what to expect when making a complaint. Shropshire Council responded to the consultation along with other bodies, including the Local Government Association.

This has resulted in some revisions to the Code published by the Ombudsman in February 2024. The Ombudsman has asked councils to start applying the Code as soon as possible but will not use the Code within its assessment of complaints and recommendations until April 2026.

The table below sets out the Code timescales compared with the current council procedure.

Process	Shropshire Council’s current corporate complaints timescales	Ombudsman’s Complaint Handling Code timescales
Stage 1 investigation acknowledgement	5 working days	5 working days
Stage 1 investigation response	30 working days	10 working days
Stage 1 investigation extension	Not applicable – as soon as possible	10 working days
Stage 2 review acknowledgement	5 working days	5 working days
Stage 2 review response	30 working days	20 working days
Stage 2 review extension	Not applicable – as soon as possible	20 working days

Main requirements:

- An annual report (to include a list of content including the annual letter from the Ombudsman).
- Completion of an annual self-assessment against the Code. This should set out how well the organisation is performing against the Code (e.g. timescales), information of improvements implemented, records of quality checks, exclusions and feedback from staff. If the failure to meet an expectation only relates to one service area or department this should be made clear.
- Changes to corporate complaints procedure to use the definitions of complaints and service requests set out within the Code. Clear exclusions must also be explained (where other processes should be used rather than a corporate complaint).
- Communication about the complaints process and choice of channels to make a complaint (e.g. online form, telephone, letter).
- Demonstration of reasonable adjustments and complaint remedies action.
- An appropriately resourced complaints process with central responsibility and senior officer leadership and governance. All relevant staff should be suitable trained in the importance of complaint handling.
- A culture of learning from complaints with access to all levels to allow resolution of disputes promptly and fairly.
- An Elected Member with responsibility for complaints with reporting to Scrutiny.
- Robust performance reporting.

The Ombudsman has announced that it expects to use its work to trial implementation of the Code to produce more detailed guidance for councils in 2024/25.

14. Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment

Although Shropshire Council has not yet implemented the new Complaints Handling Code outlined in section 13, a step towards implementation includes the publication of an annual self-assessment to demonstrate compliance. This self-assessment acts as a baseline, pre-implementation with progress expected to be reported in 12 months' time.

Code section	Compliance?	Comments
1. Definition of a service request and complaint		
1.1 Adopt a shared understanding of what constitutes a service request and what constitutes a complaint. This should be set out within the complaints policy.	Not yet	The complaints procedure will need to be updated.
1.5 A complaint that is submitted via a third party or representative should still be handled in line with the organisation's complaints policy.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
1.7 Organisations should have the opportunity to deal with a service request before a complaint is made. A complaint may be raised when the individual expresses dissatisfaction with the response to their service request, even if the handling of the service request remains ongoing.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
2. Exclusions		
2.1 and 2.4 If the organisation decides not to accept a complaint, it should be able to evidence its reasoning and communicate to the complainant. Each complaint should be considered on its own merits.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
2.2 Organisations should accept complaints referred to them within 12 months of the issue occurring, or the individual becoming aware of the issue. Discretion may be applied in some circumstances.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
2.3 Exclusions should be set out within the complaints policy/procedure.	Partly	Some changes are required as the procedure is updated.
3. Accessibility and awareness		
3.1 Organisations should make it easy for individuals to complain by providing different channels through which they can make a complaint.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
3.1 and 5.6 Organisations must consider their duties under the Equality Act 2010 and anticipate the needs and reasonable adjustments of individuals who may need to access the complaints process.	Partly	This appears to be in line with current practice although clarification of the Ombudsman's expectation would be helpful.
3.2 Individuals should be able to raise their complaints in any way and with any member of staff. All staff should be aware of the complaints process and be able to pass details of the complaint to the appropriate person within the organisation.	Partly	This is in line with current practice but staff members may need reminders.
3.3 High volumes of complaints should not be seen as a negative, as they can be indicative of a well-publicised and accessible complaints process. Low complaint volumes are potentially a sign that individuals are unable to complain.	Yes	This is communicated in current performance reporting.

Code section	Compliance?	Comments
3.4 Organisations should make their complaint policy available in a clear and accessible format.	Yes	This appears to be in line with current practice although clarification of the Ombudsman's expectation would be helpful.
3.5 The policy should include details about the Ombudsman and the Code.	Yes	This is in the current procedure and when updated will remain.
3.6 Organisations should give individuals the opportunity to have a suitable representative deal with their complaint on their behalf, and to be represented or accompanied at any meeting with the organisation.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
3.7 Organisations should provide individuals with information on their right to access the Ombudsman service.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
3.8 Where an organisation asks for feedback about its services through a survey, it should provide details of how individuals can complain.	No	This is a significant additional requirement and may generate complaints.
4. Complaint handling resources		
4.1 Organisations should have designated, sufficient resource assigned to take responsibility for complaint handling, including liaison with the relevant Ombudsman and ensuring complaints are reported to the governing body (or equivalent).	Unclear	Clarification of the Ombudsman's expectation of 'sufficient' would be helpful.
4.2 Anyone responding to a complaint should have access to staff at all levels to facilitate the prompt resolution of complaints. They should also have the authority and autonomy to act to resolve disputes promptly and fairly.	Yes	Staff at all levels are engaged in the complaint process.
4.3 Organisations are expected to prioritise complaint handling and a culture of learning from complaints. All relevant staff should be suitably trained in the importance of complaint handling. It is important that complaints are seen as a core service and resourced accordingly	No	A training programme will need to be implemented.
5. The complaint handling process		
5.1 Organisations should have a single policy for dealing with complaints covered by the Code.	Yes	This is current practice although the existing policy will need updating.
5.2 Organisations should not have extra named stages (such as 'stage 0' or 'informal complaint') as this causes unnecessary confusion.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
5.3 When an individual expresses dissatisfaction that could meet the criteria for a complaint as set out in section 1 of the Code, they should be given the opportunity to make a complaint.	Yes	This is in line with current practice, but a review is recommended in line with IT system changes.
5.4 (See list of response expectations).	Yes	This is in line with current good practice but will need to be included in staff training.
5.5 Where a response to a complaint will fall outside the timescales set out in this Code the organisation should inform the individual of when the response will be provided and the reason(s) for the delay.	Yes	This is in line with current practice, but a review is recommended in line with IT system changes.
5.6 Organisations should keep a record of any reasonable adjustments agreed. Any agreed reasonable adjustments should be kept under active review.	No	The current IT system does not allow this recording. This is a new requirement.

Code section	Compliance?	Comments
5.7 Organisations should not refuse to escalate a complaint through all stages of the complaints procedure unless there are valid reasons to do so (recording reasons).	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
5.8 A full record should be kept of the complaint, and the outcomes at each stage...This should be retained in line with the organisation's data retention policies.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
5.9 and 6.10 Organisations should have systems in place to ensure that a complaint can be remedied at any stage of its complaints process. Individuals should not have to escalate a complaint in order to get an appropriate remedy.	Partly	Recommended for review.
5.10 and 5.11 Organisations should have policies and procedures in place for managing unacceptable behaviour from individuals and/or their representatives. Restrictions should be proportionate and have regard for the Equalities Act 2010.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
6. Complaints stages		
6.2 Complaints should be acknowledged and logged at stage 1 of the complaints procedure within five working days of the complaint being received.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
6.3 Organisations should provide a full response to stage 1 complaints within 10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.	No	This is a new requirement and significant timescale change.
6.4 Any extension should be no more than 10 working days without good reason, and the reason(s) should be clearly explained to the individual. 6.5 When an organisation informs an individual about an extension to these timescales, they should be provided with the details of the relevant Ombudsman.	No	This is a new requirement.
6.6 A complaint response should be provided to the individual when the answer to the complaint is known, not when the outstanding actions required to address the issue are completed. Outstanding actions should still be tracked and actioned promptly, with appropriate updates provided to the individual.	Partly	Responses are provided when the answer is known but the central team do not track and report all actions.
6.7 Organisations should address all points raised in the complaint and provide clear reasons for any decisions, referencing the relevant policy, law and good practice where appropriate.	Partly	Complaint investigators do not always reference relevant policies within responses.
6.8 At the conclusion of stage 1 organisations should provide details of how to escalate the matter to stage 2 if the individual is not satisfied with the response.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
6.9 Where individuals raise additional complaints during stage 1, these should be incorporated into the stage 1 response if they are related, and the stage 1 response has not been provided. Where the stage 1 response has been provided, the new issues are unrelated to the issues already being considered, or it would unreasonably delay the response, the new issues should be logged as a new complaint.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.

Code section	Compliance?	Comments
6.12 Requests for stage 2 should be acknowledged and logged at stage 2 of the complaints procedure within five working days of the escalation request being received.	Yes	This is in line with current practice although demand can mean some logging may be delayed.
6.13 Individuals should not be required to explain their reasons for requesting a stage 2 consideration. Organisations should make reasonable efforts to understand why an individual remains unhappy as part of its stage 2 response.	No	This is a new requirement.
6.14 The person considering the complaint at stage 2 should not be the same person that considered the complaint at stage 1.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
6.15 Organisations should issue a final response to the stage 2 within 20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.	No	This is a new requirement.
6.16 Any extension should be no more than 20 working days without good reason, and the reason(s) should be clearly explained to the individual.	No	This is a new requirement although stage 2 responses would not usually exceed 40 days.
8.18 and 6.18 (See list of stage 2 content). Stage 2 should be the organisation's final response and should involve all suitable staff members needed to issue such a response.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
6.22 Organisations are responsible for ensuring that any third parties handle complaints in line with the Code.	No	Activity will be required to communicate new expectations and monitor compliance.
7. Putting things right		
7.1 Where something has gone wrong an organisation should acknowledge this and set out the actions it has already taken, or intends to take, to put things right.	Yes	This is in line with current practice.
7.2 and 7.3 Any remedy offered should reflect the impact on the individual as a result of any fault identified. The remedy offer should clearly set out what will happen and by when and be followed through to completion.	No	This is a new requirement and require significant change including IT system changes.
8. Performance reporting and self-assessment		
8.1 Organisations should produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny. Refer to list of contents on page 11 of the Code.	Yes	Changes to the annual report have been incorporated.
8.2 The annual complaints performance and service improvement report should be reported through the organisation's governance arrangements and published on the section of its website relating to complaints. The response to the report from the relevant governance arrangement should be published alongside this.	Yes	This is in line with current practice other than publishing the response to the report within the report on the complaints webpages.
9. Scrutiny & oversight: continuous learning and improvement		
9.2 Organisations should use complaints as a source of intelligence to identify issues and introduce positive changes in service delivery.	Yes	Some improvement may be achieved.
9.3 Organisations should report back on wider learning and improvements from complaints to stakeholders, such as citizens' panels, staff and relevant committees.	Partly	There isn't a citizens' panel but reporting is in place for the Making it Real Board.

Code section	Compliance?	Comments
9.4 The organisation should appoint a suitably senior person to oversee its complaint handling performance. This person should assess any themes or trends to identify potential systemic issues, serious risks, or policies and procedures that require revision.	Yes	The Complaints Monitoring Officer is a senior role. The Complaints Manager role may need review following organisational changes.
9.5, 9.6 and 9.7 The 'Member responsible for complaints' should receive regular information on complaints performance (including the annual report) and have access to staff.	Yes	Reporting to the lead member is in place.
9.8 9.8 Organisations should have a standard objective in relation to complaint handling for all relevant employees or third parties (includes taking responsibility, collaboration across departments and acting within professional standards).	Unclear	Clarification of the Ombudsman's expectation would be helpful.

15. 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. For the first time this also covers work towards implementation of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's complaint handling code.

1. **Improve customer experience:** Use the Digital Delivery Unit transformation programme as a means of improving the ease of raising customer feedback reporting and the updates provided to reassure customers that the appropriate action is underway.
2. **Focus on service request responses:** Adopt a focus on resolving requests for services promptly as a way of reducing the number of complaints received by the organisation.
3. **Feedback Culture:** Foster a positive complaint handling culture among staff and individuals, as envisioned by the Ombudsman's Code, to encourage constructive feedback and learning from complaints. Implement staff training and remind staff to also report compliments centrally so that Shropshire Council has a view of both positive feedback and complaints.
4. **Review the potential impact of the LGSCO Complaint Handling Code:** Undertake further analysis of the impact of the new Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code and present a report to Cabinet during 2025/26 with a detailed action plan as appropriate.
5. **Clarify exclusions:** Ensure customers and members of staff understand the most appropriate way of responding to enquiries and complaint process exclusions. Using the correct processes and clarifying when a complaint cannot be taken will avoid case handling where cases are outside of the council's jurisdiction or better handled through an appeal or other process.
6. **Improve Response Times:** Continue efforts to reduce the average response time for stage 1 complaints, aiming to meet the 30-working day timescale.
7. **Service Area Focus:** Pay special attention to service areas where complaints appear to be generated as a result of service pressures and where there are higher upheld rates (see pages 8 to 10).
8. **Upheld Rates:** A greater proportion of complaints are being upheld. This suggests service failure and growing pressures. It may be a difficult issue to address with local authority budgets under pressure but it should remain a focus within quarterly performance reporting.
9. **Complaint Progression:** A focus should be on trying to reverse the annual increases in the proportion of complaints escalating beyond stage 1. Stage 2 complaints have increased significantly in the last year. This focus will link to quality and remedies below.
10. **Focus on Response Quality:** Without significant change the Feedback and Insight Team is not large enough to quality check all complaints. Work is recommended to find ways of improving quality, perhaps through training, IT system record keeping etc.
11. **Remedies:** Shropshire Council will need to respond to the Ombudsman's Code with a new approach to remedies. This may need policy consideration and could also include increased reporting and reporting of actions and integration into performance reporting. This will be addressed in a more detailed report to Cabinet during the next year.
12. **Equalities and Reasonable Adjustments:** The Complaint Handling Code sets out new requirements for the way local authorities should consider and record customer needs within

the complaints process. Although regard is already made for customer communication needs and the Equality Act 2010, this issue is likely to require significant consideration and action to meet new Ombudsman requirements and will be considered in a future report around the new Code.

13. **Changing Customer Behaviours:** The work completed over the last 12 months will need to continue to ensure staff members are more aware of how to address scatter-gunning (use of multiple process in an attempt to seek a different outcome) and unreasonable and vexatious customer behaviour. Unfortunately, a small proportion of customers, not always complainants, can seek to demand a disproportionately large amount of officer time. Abuse towards staff is becoming more common and must be addressed. Work will continue to assist officers in applying the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure and other support to assist where possible.
14. **Third Party Complaints:** Consideration will need to be given to any implications of the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code on the complaint handling arrangements with third party providers
15. **Engagement and Surveys:** The Ombudsman has included a request within the Code for local authorities to report back on wider learning and improvements from complaints to stakeholders, such as citizens' panels, staff and relevant committees. It also asks that service feedback surveys provide details of how individuals can complain. Shropshire Council will need to consider how these new requirements may be implemented and resourced.

Appendix 1 Ombudsman Letter 2023/24



17 July 2024

By email

Mr Begley
Chief Executive
Shropshire Council

Dear Mr Begley

Annual Review letter 2023-24

I write to you with your annual summary of complaint statistics from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for the year ending 31 March 2024. The information offers valuable insight about your organisation's approach to complaints, and I know you will consider it as part of your corporate governance processes. As such, I have sought to share this letter with the Leader of your Council and Chair of the appropriate Scrutiny Committee, to ensure effective ownership and oversight of complaint outcomes, which offer valuable opportunities to learn and improve. In addition, this year, we have encouraged Monitoring Officers to register to receive the letter directly, supporting their role to report the decisions we uphold to their council.

For most of the reporting year, Paul Najsarek steered the organisation during his tenure as interim Ombudsman, and I was delighted to take up the role of Ombudsman in February 2024. I look forward to working with you and colleagues across the local government sector to ensure we continue to harness the value of individual complaints and drive and promote systemic change and improvement across the local government landscape.

While I know this ambition will align with your own, I am aware of the difficult financial circumstances and service demands that make continuous improvement a challenging focus for the sector. However, we will continue to hold organisations to account through our investigations and recommend proportionate actions to remedy injustice. Despite the challenges, I have great confidence that you recognise the valuable contribution and insight complaints, and their swift resolution, offer to improve services for the public.

Complaint statistics

Our statistics focus on three key areas that help to assess your organisation's commitment to putting things right when they go wrong:

Complaints upheld - We uphold complaints when we find fault in an organisation's actions, including where the organisation accepted fault before we investigated. We include the total number of investigations completed to provide important context for the statistic. This year, we also provide the number of upheld complaints per 100,000 population.

Compliance with recommendations - We recommend ways for organisations to put things right when faults have caused injustice and monitor their compliance with our recommendations. Failure to comply is rare and a compliance rate below 100% is a cause for concern.

Satisfactory remedy provided by the authority - In these cases, the organisation upheld the complaint and we agreed with how it offered to put things right. We encourage the early resolution of complaints and give credit to organisations that accept fault and find appropriate ways to put things right.

Finally, we compare the three key annual statistics for your organisation with similar authorities to provide an average marker of performance. We do this for County Councils, District Councils, Metropolitan Boroughs, Unitary Councils, and London Boroughs.

Your annual data, and a copy of this letter, will be uploaded to our interactive map, [Your council's performance](#), on 24 July 2024. This useful tool places all our data and information about councils in one place. You can find the detail of the decisions we have made about your Council, read the public reports we have issued, and view the service improvements your Council has agreed to make as a result of our investigations, as well as previous annual review letters.

Your organisation's performance

During the year, there were several occasions when our investigations were delayed by your Council's failure to respond in a timely way to our requests for information; 44% of its responses were late.

I ask that you take action to improve the timeliness of your responses to our enquiries. It is important we are provided with the information we have asked for promptly, and that, where you encounter delays, you keep us informed. If there is any support my office can provide to help improve the situation, please do let me know.

Supporting complaint and service improvement

In February, following a period of consultation, we launched the [Complaint Handling Code](#) for councils, setting out a clear process for responding to complaints effectively and fairly. It is aligned with the Code issued to housing authorities and landlords by the Housing Ombudsman Service and we encourage you to adopt the Code without undue delay. Twenty councils have volunteered to take part in an implementation pilot over the next two years that will develop further guidance and best practice.

The Code is issued to councils under our powers to provide guidance about good administrative practice. We expect councils to carefully consider the Code when developing policies and procedures and will begin considering it as part of our processes from April 2026 at the earliest.

The Code is considered good practice for all organisations we investigate (except where there are statutory complaint handling processes in place), and we may decide to issue it as guidance to other organisations in future.

Our successful complaint handling training programme continues to develop with new modules in Adult Social Care and Children's Services complaint handling available soon. All our courses include practical interactive workshops that help participants develop their complaint handling skills. We delivered 126 online workshops during the year, reaching more than 1,700 people. To find out more visit www.lgo.org.uk/training or get in touch at training@lgo.org.uk.

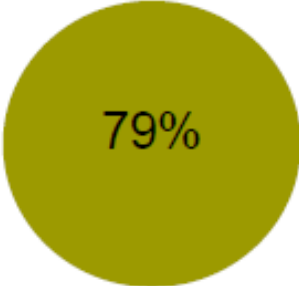
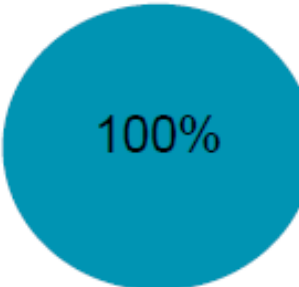
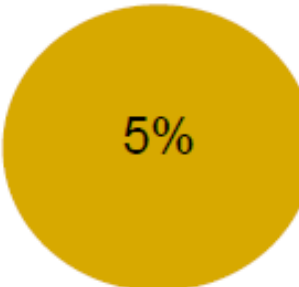
According to our records we have not delivered complaint handling training to your Council in the last three years. Our courses are highly rated by delegates who consistently report increased confidence in handling complaints. As a result, we often see improved performance in a council's complaint handling, and I encourage you to explore our training offer further.

Returning to the theme of continuous improvement, we recognise the importance of reflecting on our own performance. With that in mind I encourage you to share your view of our organisation via this survey: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ombudsman/>. Your responses will help us to assess our impact and improve our offer to you. We want to gather a range of views and welcome multiple responses from organisations, so please do share the link with relevant colleagues.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amerdeep Somal', followed by a horizontal line.

Amerdeep Somal
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
Chair, Commission for Local Administration in England

Complaints upheld		
	<p>79% of complaints we investigated were upheld.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 79% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>19 upheld decisions</p> <p>This is 5.8 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.</p> <p>The average for authorities of this type is 4.6 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents.</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 24 investigations for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024</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 100% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>Statistics are based on a total of 19 compliance outcomes for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024</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 5% 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>1 satisfactory remedy decision</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 19 upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024</p>

Appendix 2 Ombudsman Recommendations 2023/24

This table covers complaints that were **upheld** by the Ombudsman during 2023/24.

Category	Decided date	Ombudsman recommendation	Agreed action	Completed date
Adult Care Services	26/03/2023	Financial Redress: Quantifiable Loss Improved BinJ remedy. Provide training and/or guidance. Reassessment. Provide information/advice to person affected. Provide services to person affected.	Shropshire Council reimbursed the complainant for equipment that had been purchased and undertook a financial assessment. Officers trained in meeting specialist communication needs and sensory and visual impairment needs were called on for support.	18/07/2023
Planning & Development	04/06/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Procedure or policy change/review.	Shropshire Council made a payment for time and trouble to the complainant and took action in line with Ombudsman recommendations to review its policy for leasing properties.	10/08/2023
Adult Care Services	13/06/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble.	Shropshire Council made a payment for time and trouble and apologised for delays in undertaking a reassessment of needs.	11/05/2023
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 Ombudsman found fault with the way the council considered an application for home to school transport. Action was taken to reassess the application and provide a payment for time and trouble. Suggestions were made for the amendment of the appeals process.	25/04/2023
Education & Children's Services	26/03/2023	Apology	No fault was found in the services provided but the Ombudsman did find some fault in communication and recommended an apology was undertaken.	18/07/2023
Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation	04/06/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Procedure or policy change/review.	The Ombudsman recommended a time and trouble payment as a result of delays and asked the council to issue staff guidance to environmental health officers to remind them to tell complainants they can apply direct to court for an abatement notice.	31/01/2024
Adult Care Services	31/10/2023	Apology. Financial redress: Loss of service. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide training and/or guidance.	Fault was found within the support provided to implement a Personal Support Plan. Shropshire Council undertook steps to assist with the appointment of a personal assistant, reassessed needs and provided a payment for financial redress.	25/01/2024
Adult Care Services	13/12/2023	Apology. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide training and/or guidance.	Delays and a lack of communication were found as a result of social worker absence. Shropshire Council provided an apology and a time and trouble payment.	14/05/2023
Education & Children's Services	02/04/2023	Apology. Financial redress: Loss of service. Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble.	Shropshire Council accepted that there had been delays in implementing speech and language therapy. An apology and payment for time and trouble were provided.	22/05/2023

Category	Decided date	Ombudsman recommendation	Agreed action	Completed date
Education & Children's Services	22/03/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide services to person affected.	Delays were found in the completion of the stage 2 statutory complaints process for children's services following the commissioning of independents. An apology was provided, and action taken to complete the process. A time and trouble payment was provided.	11/06/2023
Education & Children's Services	11/04/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. New appeal/review or reconsidered decision.	Delays were found in the completion of the stage 2 statutory complaints process for children's services following reports by independents. An apology was provided, and action taken to complete the process. A time and trouble payment was provided.	20/12/2023
Housing	11/12/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Provide information/advice to person affected.	The Ombudsman found that Shropshire Council had failed to make enough reasonable adjustments within the housing process for the customer. The Ombudsman suggested other adjustments that could be made and recommended financial redress.	03/11/2023
Adult Care Services	05/10/2023	Apology. Financial Redress: Quantifiable Loss.	Shropshire Council used an incorrect date within an assessment for residential charges and as a result carried out a reassessment and apology. In correcting the date, financial remedy was applied.	17/09/2023
Education & Children's Services	24/08/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble. Procedure or policy change/review.	Delays were found in the completion of the stage 2 statutory complaints process for children's services. An apology was provided, and action taken to complete the process. A time and trouble payment was also provided.	15/03/2024
Adult Care Services	22/01/2024	Apology. Provide training and/or guidance.	The Ombudsman found that the complainant had not been adequately involved in decision making around the care of a relative. An apology letter was issued and learning from the complaint implemented in relation to the Mental Capacity Act.	28/09/2023
Education & Children's Services	31/08/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble.	This case was linked to a previous Ombudsman investigation. Shropshire Council had failed to issue a stage 2 adjudication letter as part of the children's statutory complaints process. Payment for time and trouble was made and the process completed.	28/09/2023
Education & Children's Services	31/08/2023	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble.	This case was linked to a previous Ombudsman investigation. Shropshire Council had failed to issue a stage 2 adjudication letter under the children's statutory complaints process. Payment for time and trouble was made and the process completed.	20/02/2024
Adult Care Services	24/01/2024	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble.	Shropshire Council was not at fault for its actions in service delivery but failed to communicate appropriately, which caused confusion. An apology and time and trouble payment was made.	22/11/2023
Education & Children's Services	10/10/2023	New appeal/review or reconsidered decision.	This was linked to a previous Ombudsman investigation. The action required was a stage 3 children's statutory complaint panel.	18/07/2023