

Annual corporate complaints report – 2024-25

Report of the Director of Strategy and Innovation

Recommended:

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

SUMMARY:

- The Committee is requested to consider the analysis and learning points drawn from the complaints received by Test Valley Borough Council during the period 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Each year, the Council is required to prepare an annual summary of complaints dealt with under the formalised complaints procedure. The reporting year runs from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

2 Background

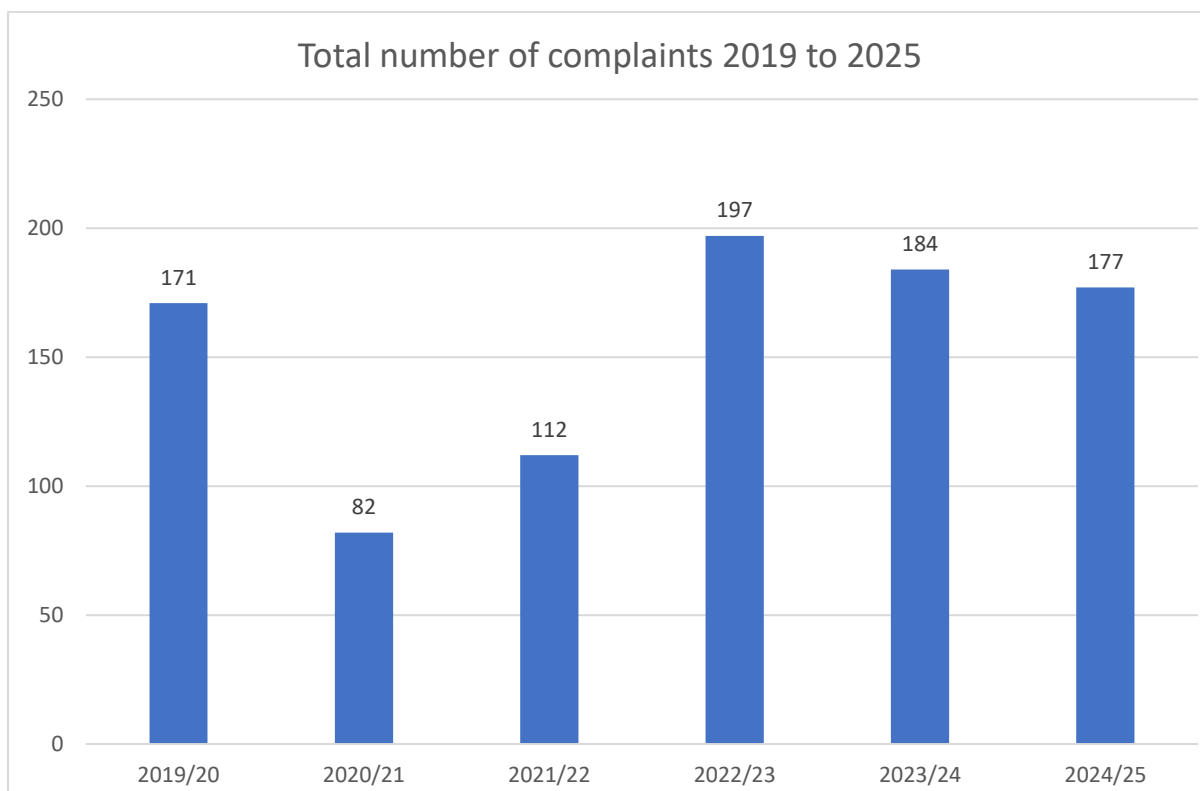
- 2.1 A complaint is defined within the Council as: “an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, action or lack of action by the Council, or its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers.”
- 2.2 Service level complaints are dealt with under Stage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

3 Complaints overview

- 3.1 In the year 2024/25 there were 177 service level complaints (those dealt with by more than one service at the same time are counted as one complaint). From these 177 complaints, 20 were escalated to the Chief Executive.
- 3.2 There were also two additional Stage 2 complaints that were raised as Stage 1 complaints in the previous year. (These have not been included in the figures to ensure percentages accurately reflect the overall picture of complaints.)
- 3.3 The LGSCO received 7 new complaints relating to Test Valley Borough Council and decided on 6 (one carried into the next reporting year). Of these 6, the LGSCO investigated two complaints, one of which was upheld.

Stage of complaints process	Number of complaints
Service level (Stage One)	177
Escalated to Chief Executive (Stage Two)	20 (of the 177 above)
Received by the LGSCO	7
Decided by the LGSCO (this includes two received during the previous reporting period)	6
Investigated by the LGSCO	2
Upheld by the LGSCO	1

- 3.4 This year we received slightly fewer complaints than last year: 177 against 184, around a 4% decrease. This is a marginal change and suggests that, following recent years, the number of complaints received has stabilised. When placed in context with a population of around 137,000, the 177 complaints represent a very small proportion of the population who have raised a complaint.



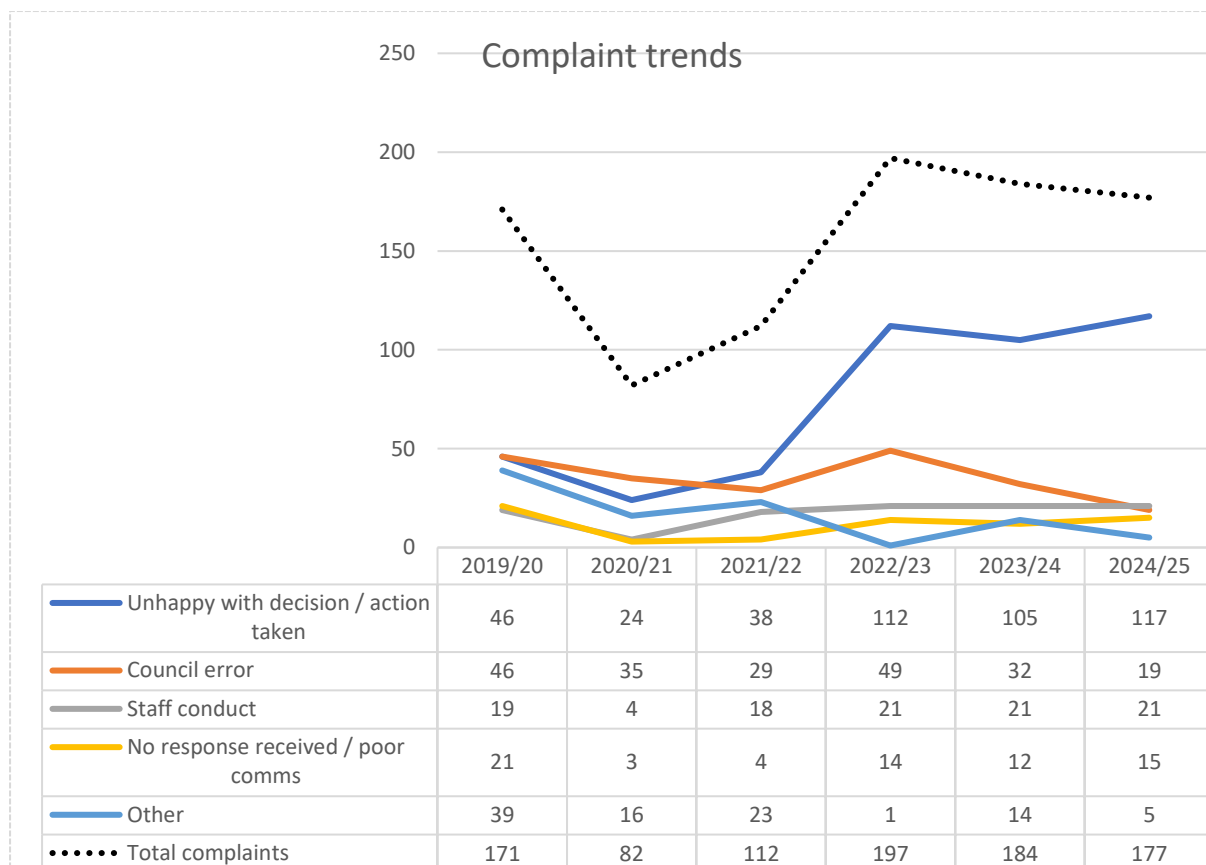
- 3.5 To provide wider context about the total number of contacts received by the council, the Customer Service Unit received 59,968 telephone calls, 7153 face-to-face contacts (in Andover and Romsey), and 7678 emails. The council website received 400,463 unique visitors this year. The total number of contacts with the Council was 460,431. There has been a large decrease in the number of interactions compared to last year (527,646), this is likely due to a refinement in the way we collect data for unique website visitors, counting visitors as a unique user if they return to the website within 3 months. This means that the 177 complaints received were approximately 0.04% of overall recorded contacts (which do not include the many other in-person interactions council officers have daily with residents). This is significantly less than the 0.1% industry standard advised by the Institute of Customer Service.
- 3.6 The annual complaints logs contain personal information that should not be published, in line with the Ombudsman's view that it is neither necessary nor desirable to make such details public. As a result, the information provided in this report is largely statistical in nature. Councillors should refer to the Head of Policy and Insight if they require more details about a specific case. However, this information is strictly confidential.

- 3.7 Of the 177 complaints received at service level, 22 (11.3%) were escalated to the Chief Executive (Stage Two). This is broken down by service below:

Lead Service	Number of Stage One complaints	Number of Stage Two complaints
Environmental Services	67 (37.9%)	1 (5%)
Planning and Building	34 (19.2%)	10 (50%)
Finance & Revenues	18 (10.2%)	3 (15%)
Community and Leisure	16 (9%)	2 (10%)
Housing and Environmental Health	19 (10.7%)	2 (10%)
Property and Asset Management	15 (8.5%)	1 (5%)
Legal and Democratic	6 (3.4%)	1 (5%)
Strategy and Innovation	0 (0%)	0
Planning Policy & Economic Development	2 (1.1%)	0
Total number of complaints at each stage	177	20

- 3.8 The number of complaints for each service does not, of course, necessarily provide a direct correlation with the standard of customer service provided, and these overall results cannot be treated in isolation. Each of these service results are heavily influenced by the type of business transacted by that service, for example, the number of transactions with residents carried out, the public profile of the actions carried out by that service, and whether the resident has alternative formal routes for redress or appeal.
- 3.9 Environmental Services received the highest number of complaints, but these were very low when considered against the total number of interactions with the public. For example, in 2024/25, Environmental Services provided waste and recycling collections to around 59,000 properties within Test Valley each week. This totals just over 3 million collections a year. Using this example, the number of complaints received equates to just 0.002% of collections.

- 3.10 In 2024/25, the Planning and Building Service dealt with 3,561 planning related matters, comprising of 1262 planning applications, 380 pre-application enquiries, 686 condition discharge applications, 706 tree applications, and 527 planning enforcement cases. The number of complaints received against the volume of work undertaken by the Planning and Building Service equates only to approximately 1% of the work carried out.
- 3.11 Analysis of the root cause of complaints received continues to show that most complaints can be categorised into one of four categories:
- Unhappy with decision / action taken
 - Council error
 - Staff conduct
 - No response received / poor comms
- 3.12 The total number of complaints in each category are shown on the chart below. The chart shows a small increase in complaints categorised as 'unhappy with decision / action taken' which is in line with the overall steadying of complaints received. There is a notable drop in complaints categorised as 'council error' with this figure being the lowest reported in the last 6 years. We feel this is a positive reflection of the quality of work services are delivering.
- 3.13 In addition, the council also receives positive feedback from residents. The mechanism for capturing and reporting on these has been improved over the reporting period and now the majority of services capture positive feedback from residents and other stakeholders. Planning and Building and Environmental Services, two of the services with most daily interactions with residents, received 73 and 83 positive comments respectively during the reporting period. Positive feedback is a valuable means to identify good performance and improve delivery for residents. However, the volume of compliments or positive feedback received is often linked to the visibility of the service being provided. Some services are less visible to the public and therefore less likely to receive positive feedback, but this has no reflection on the standard of service being provided.



4 Time taken to respond

- 4.1 The council's current service standard is to respond in full to a complaint within 10 working days of receipt, or if this is not possible (for example, because of the complexity of the complaint, the number of third parties involved or awaiting additional information), a holding response is sent to the complainants. This standard was met in 85% of service complaints at Stage One (151 complaint responses), processed in the year 2024/25.
- 4.2 When a complaint is escalated to Stage Two, the Chief Executive has 15 working days to respond. This standard was met in 45% of escalated complaints (20 complaint responses). Where it is not possible to respond within this time frame, the complainants are made aware that there will be a delay. Increased complexity in complaints is a contributing factor to the response rates in this reporting period. The Policy Team will be exploring this further to understand how we can continue to deliver high quality responses to complex complaints, in realistic and appropriate timelines.
- 4.3 A recent programme of work has been in place focussing on guidance and training for those handling and responding to complaints. This has covered response times, drafting and complex complaints.
- 4.4 The complaints process continues to be reviewed for opportunities to refine and improve. Understanding that this is a key engagement point for our

service-users and therefore a source of learning for the organisation as it continues to transform and move towards becoming part of a future new unitary council.

5 Learning points

- 5.1 The council treats every complaint as an opportunity to identify learning outcomes and improve service provision. Complaints are valuable not only in identifying service improvements but in improving public perception and satisfaction with the council as a whole. Each complaint can be an opportunity to make changes or service improvements on a small or greater scale.
- 5.2 Examples of the key learning points and improvements made as a result of complaints during 2024/25 are outlined below. These can be summarised into three headings: timeliness, communication and implementing policies / processes.
- 5.3 Timeliness - The time taken to respond to residents has been raised as a contributing factor in a small number of complaints. This has presented as both the reason for making a complaint, and in the handling of complaints. When identified as a cause for residents to raise complaints, services have identified opportunities to improve by ensuring consistent monitoring of shared inboxes, stronger cross service communication and contingency planning for staff absences.
- 5.4 In terms of handling complaints, this presented as a particular area for learning when the LGSCO upheld a complaint due to the time taken to resolve it, how we communicated with interested parties over this extended period, and the extent of record keeping as well as issues caused by having a number of different officers handling a case. In response to the LGSCO's review an action plan was put in place which has since been implemented.
- 5.5 Communication – regular, clear and empathetic communication is fundamental to ensuring residents are heard and understood. On rare occasions, this has not aligned with our values and behaviours as an organisation, understanding the perspective of the individual. Specific learning points include teams providing regular updates through application processes and ensuring cases are handed over in staff absence / changeover.
- 5.6 Implementing policies / processes – there are occasions where complaints have highlighted the need to review or update our policies and or processes. This has led to reviews of the complaints process and updates to better support residents in communicating with us. One example highlighted the need to improve interpretation and application of our policies to ensure that residents are treated fairly and inclusively.
- 5.7 There are currently no complainants determined as vexatious.

6 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

- 6.1 Once a complainant has completed the council's complaints process, by escalating their complaint to the Chief Executive, they have the option of taking their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. The ombudsman investigates complaints about maladministration and service failure, which they call 'fault'. They also consider whether any fault has had an adverse impact on the complainant, which they call 'injustice'. Most of the complaints that reach the ombudsman from the council are closed after initial inquiries, for example because there is not enough evidence of fault by the council. A much smaller set of complaints – one this year – then undergo a more comprehensive investigation.
- 6.2 The LGSCO publishes the statistics for all local authorities each year. This enables a comparison to be made between comparable authorities based on the CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) 'Nearest Neighbours Model'. The model provides a "family group" of local authorities that are comparable for bench-marking purposes. The statistics for Test Valley Borough Council and similar authorities are reproduced below. However, it is important to note that this is not an exact comparison due to the unique nature of each authority and the services they provide, as well as the geographical area and related issues. It can therefore only be used for ascertaining an approximate and informal benchmark. Additionally, it should be noted that having a complaint investigated and upheld can serve as a useful source of learning and a driver for improvement.

Authority name	Total complaints decided	Not for LGSCO or not ready for assessment	Closed after initial inquiries	Investigated and complaint not upheld	Investigated and complaint upheld	Upheld decisions per 100,000 residents
Test Valley Borough Council	6	0	4	1	1	0.7
Ashford Borough Council	18	6	12	0	0	0
East Hampshire District Council	16	5	9	1	1	0.8
South Oxfordshire District Council	5	1	3	1	0	0
Vale of White Horse District Council	8	3	4	0	1	0.7

- 6.3 The number of complaints or enquiries received by the LGSCO does not necessarily match with the number of complaints progressed to the council by the LGSCO. This is because in some cases, complainants approaching the LGSCO directly may be given advice or be referred to another organisation and the council may not be aware of this. The LGSCO will also refer a complainant back to the council if the complaint has not properly progressed through the local authority's complaints procedure and in some cases, the complainant may choose not to come back to the council. During the year 2024/25 the LGSCO decided to investigate two cases, one of which was upheld. Further details are provided in the table below:

Investigated			
Date decided	Details of Complaint	Action Taken	LGSCO Outcome
24/10/24	The complainant complained that the council failed to enforce breaches of planning control that affected their amenity.	The LGSCO decided that there was no breach of planning control, but that the council took too long to make its decision causing avoidable distress. An apology was given and financial remedy paid.	Upheld
03/01/25	The complainant complained that the council would not take enforcement action against a landowner who had felled trees in breach of a Tree Preservation Order (TPO).	The LGSCO decided that there no fault in the way the council made its decision not to take formal enforcement action.	No fault

Not investigated			
Date decided	Details of Complaint	Action Taken	LGSCO Outcome
19/07/24	The complainant complained about the council's decision to approve a planning application.	LGSCO decided that further investigation was not warranted because the complaint was submitted too late.	Closed after initial inquiries
09/09/24	The complainant complained about the council's handling of	LGSCO decided that further investigation was not warranted because there was	Closed after initial inquiries

	their concerns about the accuracy of plans submitted for their neighbours development.	insufficient evidence of fault by the council.	
29/08/24	The complainant complained about the council's handling of a planning application for a housing development.	LGSCO decided that further investigation was not warranted because they cannot investigate complaints made by public bodies,	Closed after initial inquiries
26/03/25	The complainant complained about liability for business rates for a business plot they do not occupy.	LGSCO decided that further investigation was not warranted because there was insufficient evidence of fault by the council. Additionally, that the complainant should pursue court action if they believe the demands are wrong.	Closed after initial inquiries

7 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 7.1 A robust and effective complaints process supports the delivery of our vision of working collaboratively to deliver high quality services that support all communities in Test Valley to thrive. Reviewing and learning from complaints also helps us to live our values, maintain high standards in everything we do, and understand the needs and expectations of the residents of Test Valley.

8 Communications

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

9 Resource implications

- 9.1 None

10 Conclusion

- 10.1 Complaints at service level remain low relative to the overall volume of interactions with the public. The similar volume this year indicates that complaints have stabilised and start to demonstrate a consistent pattern.
- 10.2 The consistency of complaints reporting suggests that the complaints process continues to work effectively, and that the public are able to make a complaint with ease. Where necessary, trends are identified and managed by individual services. The Head of Policy and Insight will continue to work closely with services to identify ways to improve our complaints process and more effectively manage and resolve complaints.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
N/A			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	0		
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Report to:	Audit Committee	Date:	15 December 2025