

Place and Resource Scrutiny Committee

11 December 2025

Corporate Complaints Team Annual Report 2024-25

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr R Hope, Customer, Culture and Community Engagement

Local Councillor(s):

All

Senior Leadership Team:

J Mair, Director of Legal & Democratic

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Statutory Authority: Local Government Ombudsman

Report status: Public Choose an item.

Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

This annual report provides an update on the numbers, types and outcomes of complaints made against services at Dorset Council. A separate report will be presented to the People and Health Committee in January 2026 to meet statutory reporting requirements of Children's and Adult's Services.

Recommendation(s)

That the Committee scrutinises and notes the Annual Complaints Report for 2024/25

Reason for the recommendation(s)

To have an awareness of the numbers and types of complaints and the organisational learning.

1. The report

Key messages for 2024-25 are:

- Dorset Council received 1919 Complaint Contacts.

This is an 17% increase from the 1659 the previous year and the highest number of complaints in Dorset Council's 6 year history. However, we are still reassured that the Complaints function is easy to find, and people are feeling empowered to use the function. The complaints function is a learning mechanism for Dorset Council as well as an early warning system. This report highlights the areas of possible concern as well as the valuable organisational learning.

- Out of the 1919 contacts, 1117 of these were managed and responded to as formal complaints. The focus on early resolution continues to pay dividends for both council staff and those complaining but we need to ensure that we don't obstruct statutory processes due to the significantly increased demand. The Ombudsman's Handling Code gives clear guidance to what is and is not a complaint, and lays out the expectations for Local Authorities to follow

Of the 1919 complaints received, 802 were considered as cases where resolution could be met without the undue process of the formal complaints route, or where other processes were more appropriate. Again the Ombudsman's Handling Code has limited informal resolution and we have experienced the rise in complaint volumes as predicted in last years report, as there is no 'Informal/Stage 0' option. We welcome the clarity and will still apply common sense, but through the complaints process

- The Ombudsmans report that 85% of complaints they investigated were upheld (33 cases). This is similar to other organisations, and does show a slight increase on the 79% upheld the previous year both locally and (again) as an average across comparable authorities. However, this only tells a small part of the story. The Complaints Team received and managed 1919 complaints in 2024-25. Members may be heartened that of these complaints only 151 (7%) reached the Ombudsman at all. This demonstrates that the majority of the time Dorset Council get it right first time, and have a positive culture around complaints, learnings and actions

Of the 151 approaches the Ombudsman concluded that only 39 warranted investigation and of these 33 were upheld. The key observation from the Ombudsman's figures are that we are missing an opportunity to resolve upheld complaints in line with their financial remedies guidance. The Corporate Complaints Team provide remedies guidance to managers as part of the process, and the expectation is that we follow the remedies guidance if we are upholding complaints. Essentially Dorset Council want to do the Ombudsman's job for them in terms of upheld complaint investigations and as a Council we are only achieving this in a small number of cases. This is a point to improve on as an authority.

Dorset Council met the recommendations in 100% of these 33 upheld cases.

Directorates	2024/25	2023/24
Childrens Services SEN	15	21
Childrens SC	1	0
Adult SC	8	7
Adult non SC (Housing)	2	0
Place - Planning	2	3
Place SEN Transport	2	0
Place Highways	0	2
Place Env Health	1	0
Corp - Revs n Bens	2	0
TOTAL	33	33

- Timescales are a possible concern to highlight as 15% complaint responses were recorded as overdue compared to 17% the previous year. Although the cases are being assigned promptly, this demonstrates that the increased volumes into the Complaints function, coupled with the conflicting priorities of service managers, is starting to have a more serious impact on our ability to meet the deadlines.
- The complaints procedures operated by the Council vary in timescales for responses. The Whole Authority procedure, which is applied to those services within the remit of the Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee, is 20 working days. The timescales for statutory policies associated with Childrens and Adults social care differ from this - the Children's Services Social Care procedure is 10 working days, up to 20 by exception (with automatic escalation to an independent investigation if not met. This can be costly). The Adult Social Care procedure does not specify exact timescales, and we are now looking to establish these on a case by case basis depending on the gravity and risk of the complaint and the time needed to investigate it.
- Of the 1919 complaints received, 11% were fully justified and 12% partially. This shows a small increase on the 9% upheld the as the previous year. It may still seem surprising that so few complaints are considered to be justified by responding managers, but the real challenge is to ensure the justified complaints contribute to the lessons learned and continual improvement
- With the increase in complaints comes an opportunity, and we are happy to report a 61% increase in learnings generated from complaints. 317 cases presented organisational learning and reflection compared to 196 the previous year. It does evidence that Dorset Council are getting value from the complaints presented to us.
- We are pleased to report 556 compliments across the directorates compared to 520 the previous year. This is something for Dorset Council to celebrate

and hopefully presents a more balanced report on service perceptions. It is still clear that people were more likely to voice complaints, than compliment a job well done. These split into directorates as follows: Place 310, Childrens 111, Adults 103, Corporate 32 . It is however unlikely that all compliments reach the team, and many will go directly to services and therefore not be captured within this report.

- In addition, we received 72 code of conduct complaints regarding Dorset Council and Town and Parish Councillors in Dorset (some 160 councils and 1,400 councillors). This is a 27% Increase on the previous year and follows the general trend of increased complaints to Dorset Council . Of the 72, 22 related to Dorset Council Councillors and 50 Town and Parish Councillors. Of these, just 4 were investigated and none upheld at the time of this report. In line with our approach to other complaints, we will look in the future to how we can learn from complaints about councillors as part of promoting high standards of conduct.

The Complaints Team, as an Assurance function, continue to make a difference in promoting a culture of learning from complaints despite continuous challenges across the directorates. We are also pleased to report that we are able to support managers across the directorates in resolving complaints without undue process, where possible.

- 1.1 Whilst this report is focused on 2024/25 activity, we are someway through 2025/26, and it is worth highlighting that complaint numbers continue to increase (50% up Q2 YOY). This is in part attributable to the use of AI tools, which is positive in so far as it helps provide a voice to those members of the public that may otherwise have found it difficult to pursue a complaint, but does provide a further pressure on both the corporate complaints team and services.

2. Alternative options considered

N/A

3. Legal considerations

N/A

4. Financial implications

As in previous years, SEND related complaints still dominate the Ombudsman's involvement. This again is largely due to children out of education in Dorset and a lack of available, suitable placements. This is a national issue, but we have taken steps to improve communication and be more available before matters escalate to complaints. This will be covered in more detail in the paper presented to People and Health Scrutiny Committee in January.

The Ombudsman required a financial remedy in the following cases

Place

23019627 - Mr F £250 as a remedy for the uncertainty and the distress this caused, along with a formal apology. (Anti Social Behaviour)

5. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

None

6. Well-being and health implications

The consistently high volume of complaints, coupled with associated vexatious behaviour continues to have an impact on the wellbeing for colleagues involved with complaint handling and response. The team and associated colleagues are regularly encouraged, through line management and other Dorset Council support, to be mindful of themselves and their colleagues in-keeping with our behaviours

7. Other implications

None

8. Risk implications

HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: LOW

Residual Risk: LOW

9. Equalities

None

10. Appendices

Infographic and

13. Background papers

None

7 Report sign-off

This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)