

Introduction

The Corporate Complaints Team sit in Legal & Democratic as an Assurance function, with the emphasis more on learning from complaints, rather than merely processing increasing numbers. As the report will show the greater level of scrutiny on services remains year on year with an increase in most directorates

The Complaints Team have also been heavily involved in helping Dorset Council manage vexatious and unreasonable behaviours.

The council operates 4 complaints procedures. The Council's own – which is a one stage process with a review process as necessary and Children's Services and Adult Services Social Care have their own legal procedures. Full details of these procedures are found in Appendix 1 and 3 as full reports which are required to satisfy legislation. We have also been delegated the Councillor Code of Conduct complaints to triage and manage. Although not contributing greatly to the overall numbers, it has been an interesting experience trying to apply the same culture of learning to a new and unfamiliar policy to the team.

The team's focus for this coming year is:

Recognising and following the best practices of the Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code, and pre-empting the likely outcomes should they need to be involved

Reporting/Learning – 2024-25 saw an improvement in the quality of learnings presented by team managers. There is a genuine mutual awareness for delivering extra value. However some complaints are resolvable without grass-roots learnings presenting themselves.

2024-25 Numbers

Total Complaint Contacts –1919

This is an 17% increase from the 1659 received in 2023-24 and the highest number of complaints in Dorset Council's 6 year history. We are encouraged that the Complaints function is still easy to find and must remember that 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.

The Ombudsman's Complaints Code give best practice advice and what we receive more often than not are genuine service failure complaints, having stripped out any duplication or service requests, so it is however worth noting that genuine formal complaints to Dorset Council have increased 344% since the first year as a unitary council

Directorate	2024-25	2023-24	%
Adult Social Care	201	126	+60%

Adult Non Social care (Housing)	133	126	+6%
Childrens Social Care	197	147	+34%
Children s Non Social Care	321	265	+21%
Place	744	820	-9%
Corporate	239	175	+37%
Police & Crime panel	2	5	-150%
Code of Conduct*	82	51	+61%
TOTALS	1919	1659	+16%

Formal Complaints 1117

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.

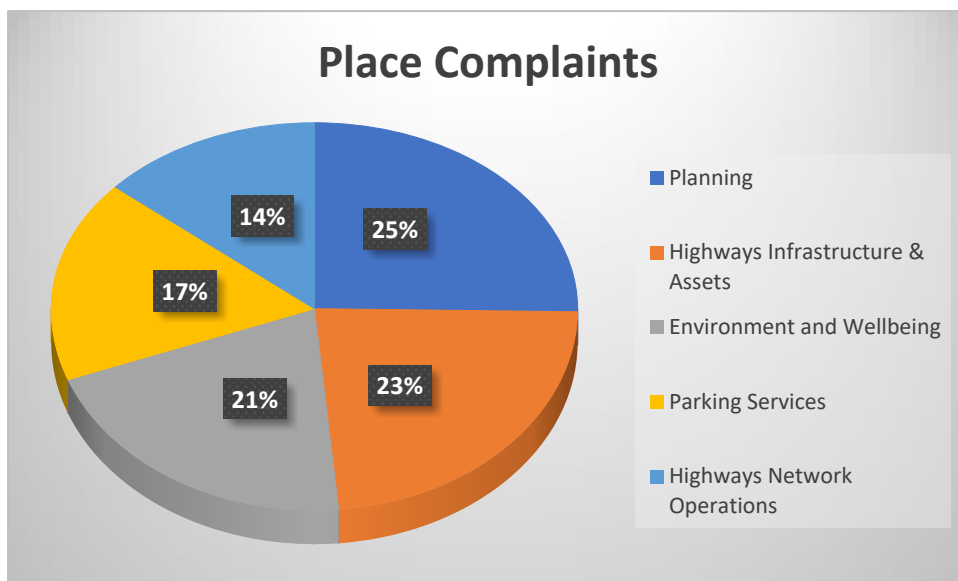
Informal Complaints 802

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.

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 clarify and will still apply common sense, but through the complaints process

The Statutory reporting requirements for Childrens and Adults Services are presented as appendices in the **People and Health Committee report**. This summary focusing first on PLACE which enjoyed a decrease in complaints. Here is an overview of the main areas and themes

Place



Service Area	Complaints
Planning	258
Highways Infrastructure & Assets	238
Environment and Wellbeing	212
Parking Services	168
Highways Network Operations	146

Top Complaint Themes by Service Area

1. Planning

- Disagreement with Decision – 116
- Quality of Service – 58
- Service Provision – 32

2. Highways Infrastructure & Assets

- Quality of Service – 98
- Service Provision – 62
- Disagreement with Decision – 26

3. Environment and Wellbeing

- Service Provision – 128
- Quality of Service – 36
- Customer Service – 24

4. Parking Services

- Quality of Service – 64
- Service Provision – 48
- Disagreement with Decision – 20

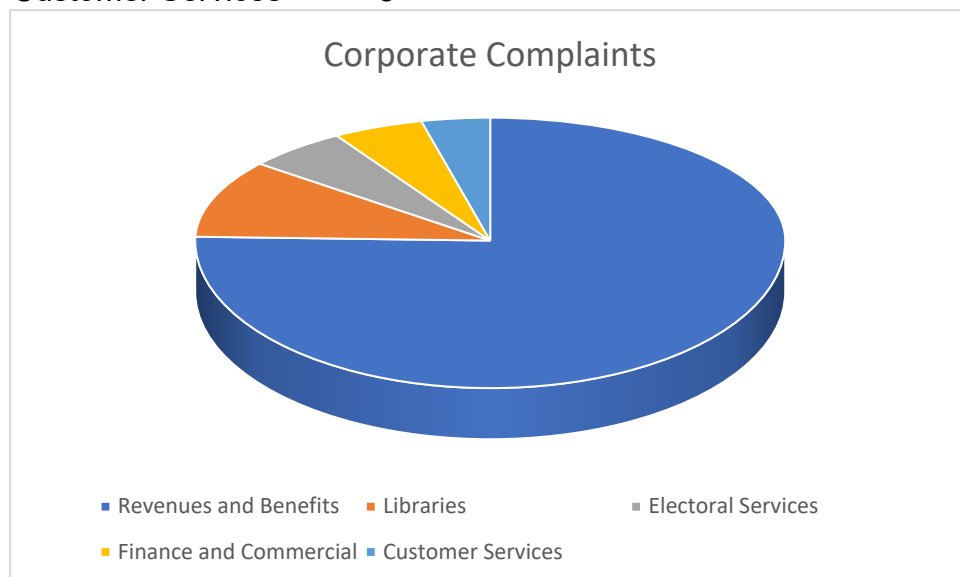
5. Highways Network Operations

- Quality of Service – 50
- Other – 28
- Service Provision – 26

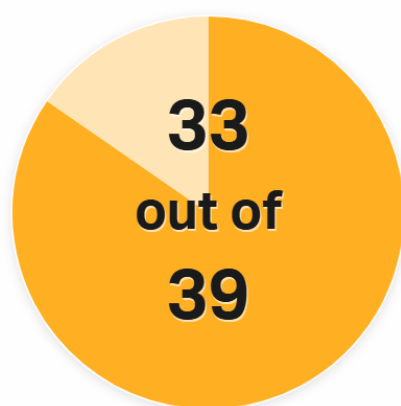
Corporate Complaints breakdown as follows:

Service Area	Complaints
Revenues and Benefits	135

Service Area	Complaints
Libraries	16
Electoral Services	10
Finance and Commercial	10
Customer Services	8



Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Complaints



We investigated **39** complaints and upheld **33**.

85% of complaints we investigated were upheld.

 This compares to an average of **80%** in similar authorities.

The Ombudsman report that 85% of complaints they investigated were upheld. 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 which is the highest number since Dorset Council was formed. Councillors and Members should 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 only 39 were investigated and 33 of these 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 we recognise this 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 only achieving this on a small number of cases. This is a point to improve on as an authority.

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

Overall the Ombudsman's involvement breaks down as follows:

	2024/25	2023/24
Childrens Services SEN	15	21
*Childrens SC	1 <i>(but no injustice)</i>	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
	33	33

So 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.

Dorset Council financial remedies in 2024-25 resulting in a total cost of £40,630 which is consistent with previous years, although there was a single payment that

was not claimed from the previous year of £63,150. The total sum paid from Ombudsman cases was therefore £103,510 .

In addition to this, we have worked hard to pre-empt Ombudsman outcomes as part of the complaint handling process and have also paid £42,621 for SEND related complaints, outside of any involvement from the Ombudsman.

In the other directorates, 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)

Adult Non Social Care (Housing) – total £500

23 018 994 - Pay Mr X £300 for the distress caused by the uncertainty of his housing
23 021 413 - apologise in writing to Mrs C, and pay her £200 to acknowledge the distress

and uncertainty the Council's faults caused her, including her loss of review rights.

Adult Social Care – total £1550 in remedies and an agreement to refund £7,914.14

The Childrens and Adults payments feature in the Appendices

Councillor Code of Conduct

The Corporate Team have been delegated the management of the Code of Conduct Complaints and report an 41% increase year on year. This table offers a breakdown of Dorset Council, and Parish & Town Council complaints and captures how few have real substance. Some cases have not reached a conclusion at the time of this report

	2020/ 21	2021/ 22	2022/ 23	2023/ 24	2024/ 25
Code of Conduct Complaints	54	60	47	51	72
Dorset Councillor Conduct Complaints	9	10	10	17	22
Number of Councillors	82	82	82	82	82
% of Councillors subject to Complaint	11%	12%	12%	21%	27%
Number Investigated	N/A	0	1	1	1
Number Upheld*	N/A	0	0	1	TBC
Parish & Town Councillor Conduct Complaints	45	50	37	34	50
Number of Councillors	1400	1400	1400	1400	1400

% of Councillors subject to Complaint
Number Investigated
Number Upheld*

3%	4%	3%	2%	4%
N/A	3	6	1	7
N/A	0	0	0	TBC

Timescales – 18% Overdue

This is a possible concern to highlights as 18% 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 is 20 working days, 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. Corporate Services come out of this very well, but pressures in Children's, Adults and Place seem to be contributing to these delays

Justifications – 11% fully 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

Compliments – 556

We are pleased to report 556 compliments across the directorates compared to 568 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 277, Childrens 94, Adults 118, Corporate 67

Learnings – 317

We are pleased to report 61% increase in cases which generated valuable learnings and actions. In 2024-25 317 cases included organisational learnings across the directorates, compared to 196 in 2023-24 which is an excellent return. Especially as the learnings are now so measurable and present genuine action plans that close loops in the service areas. Councillors and members should be assured of the positive culture around complaints at Dorset Council, and our commitment to providing genuine value from peoples concerns