Agenda Item 5

Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

27 November 2024

**Customer Feedback Annual Report
1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**

Recommendation

That the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments on the contents of this Report.

1.   Executive Summary

1.1   This is the annual customer feedback report for services within the Communities Directorate covering the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

1.2   The report summarises compliments, complaints, and comments received by services within the directorate including learning and service improvement. Data, trends, and themes have been compared over the last three years. (See Appendix 1)

1.3   A new customer feedback system was implemented on 15 January 2024, part way through the reporting period and consequently information has been taken from both systems for the purposes of this report.

1.4   Following a review in 2023/24, Warwickshire County Council's Customer Complaints Policy, including the updated corporate policy approach, was approved by Cabinet on 15 February 2024. The revised policy is available on the Council's website here.

1.5   At an organisational level, overall feedback received has returned to pre-Covid restrictions levels and in 2023/24 it is at the lowest over the last six years. The number of complaints decreased by 16% from 1809 in 2022/23 to 1520 in 2023/24. (See Appendix 1)

1.6   In Communities' Directorate, the overall number of complaints has decreased from 634 in 2021/22 to 565 in 2023/24 a reduction of 11%. (See Appendix 1)

2.   Corporate Complaints Process

2.1   Warwickshire County Council takes all feedback seriously. The Council gives particular attention to complaints with the intention of ensuring that complainants are dealt with fairly, consistently and within timescales set out in the relevant complaints process. All feedback should be dealt with efficiently and with an emphasis on learning and improvements.

2.2   Procedures relating to how the Council deals with and responds to complaints are explained in more detail in Warwickshire County Council's Complaints Policy.

2.3   The policy has been developed in line with best practice recommendations and legislation. In the policy, a complaint is defined as:

"… any expression of dissatisfaction with a service that the Council (or one of its partners or contractors) has provided, and that requires a response."
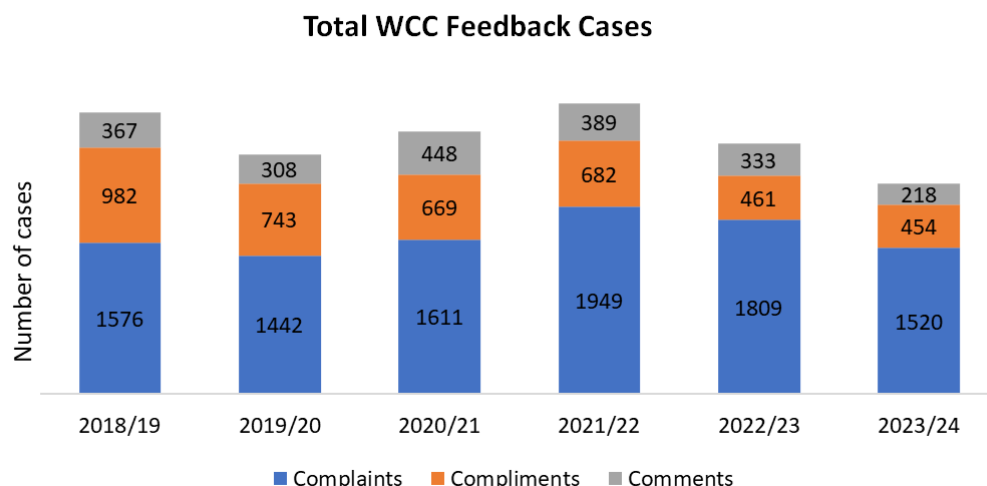
2.4   If a complainant remains unhappy after exhausting all stages of a complaints. process, the complainant can take their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). A complainant can access the LGSCO at any point during the complaint process; however, the LGSCO normally gives the Local Authority the opportunity to process a complaint through every stage of the appropriate complaint's procedure, before investigating it themselves. Complaints that are referred back to a Local Authority by the LGSCO to progress under the relevant complaints process are classed as 'premature' complaints. Warwickshire County Council has a very low upheld complaint rate on the Oflog metric compared to other councils.
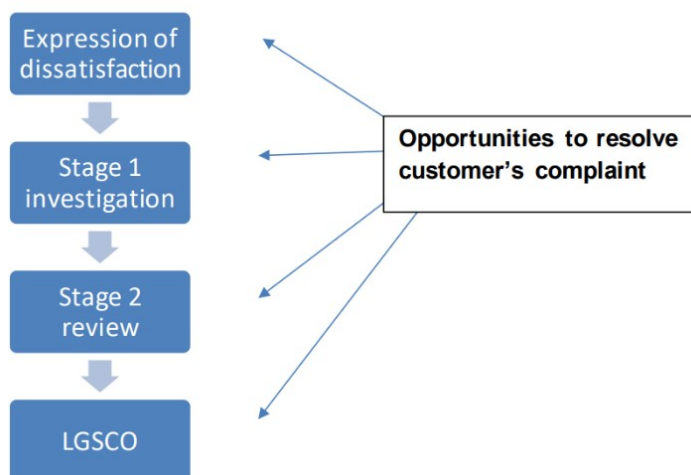
3.   Analysis of customer feedback received during 2023/24.

3.1   During 2023/24 feedback from members of the public was recorded on both the previous 'Contact Us' system and from 15 January 2024 on the new customer feedback system.

3.2   Feedback can be shared by customers through an online portal, by telephone, by post or via email and it is categorised into complaints, compliments, and comments. Questions from the public are not recorded on the system but are referred to be dealt with directly by the appropriate service.

3.3   The following analysis covers data, trends and themes compared over the last three years and, where relevant, also examines the position before and after the pandemic (2019 to 2022). This offers a clearer understanding of changes in customer feedback during these periods.

__Feedback cases over time – All Council Services__

Total WCC Feedback Cases

Year	Complaints	Compliments	Comments
2018/19	1576	982	367
2019/20	1442	743	308
2020/21	1611	669	448
2021/22	1949	682	389
2022/23	1809	461	333
2023/24	1520	454	218

Number of cases

■ Complaints ■ Compliments ■ Comments

Figure 1: Number of complaints, compliments and comments received from 2018/19 to 2023/24 across all WCC services.

Overall cases:
3.4   The total number of cases raised over the last three years decreased by 27% from 3020 in 2021/22 to 2192 in 2023/24. The total number of cases in 2023/24 is the lowest in the five years, with the second lowest number of complaints. As figure 1 indicates, overall feedback received has returned to pre-pandemic levels and in 2023/24 it is at the lowest over the last six years. (See Appendix 1)

Complaints:
3.5   Complaint numbers peaked in 2021/22 which is considered likely to reflect increased customer interaction following the end of the lockdown period. The number of complaints decreased by 16% from 1809 in 2022/23 to 1520 in 2023/24. (See Appendix 1)

3

Compliments:

3.6   The reduction in compliments has continued with a 33% decrease from 682 in 2021/22 to 454 in 2023/24. As figure 1 indicates, the number of compliments received across all services has reduced by 54% since 2018/19. (See Appendix 1)

Complaints per population analysis:
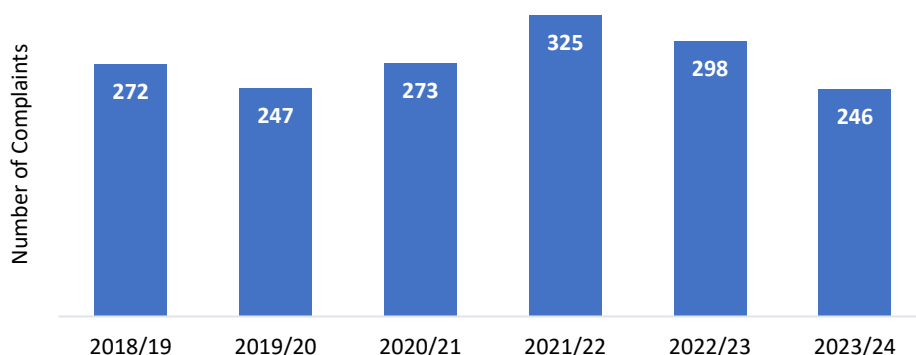
WCC Complaints per 100,000 population

Figure 2: WCC complaints per 100,000 population of Warwickshire (as per Office of National Statistics) from 2018/19 to 2023/24.

3.7   When cases are analysed against per 100,000 population it indicates a 0.25% complaint rate.

Feedback cases over time – Communities Directorate
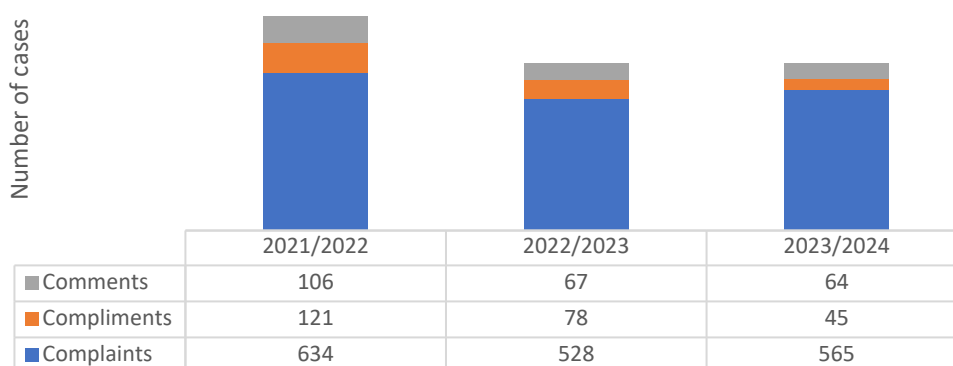
Total feedback cases for Communities

	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024
Comments	106	67	64
Compliments	121	78	45
Complaints	634	528	565

**Figure 3: Number of cases assigned to Communities by type from 2021/22 to 2023/24.**

4

Complaints:

3.8   The overall number of complaints in relation to the Communities Directorate has decreased from 634 in 2021/22 to 565 in 2023/24 a decrease of 11%. Examples of service improvements made as a result of complaints made in this area, include evaluation of complaints to ensure learning and improvements in communication, a focus on the customer and ensuring apologies are made where appropriate. (See Appendix 1)

Compliments:

3.9   There has been a drop in the number of compliments from 121 in 2021/22 to 45 in 2023/24. This may in part be attributed to this type of feedback not being encouraged or recorded centrally. (See Appendix 1)

Initial feedback contact method for Communities Directorate
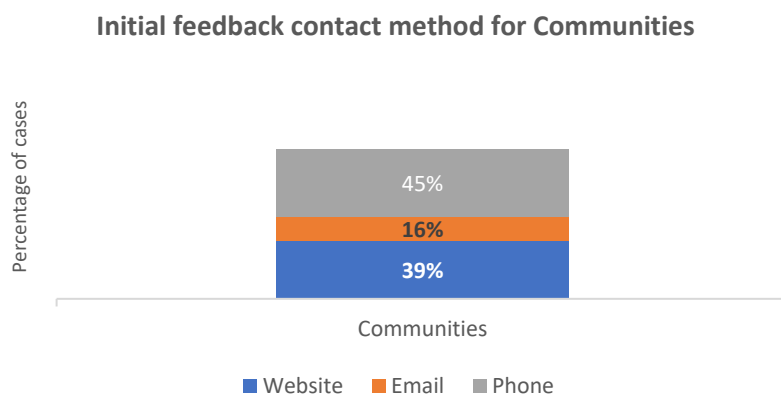
Figure 4: Percentage breakdown of original contact method for complaints, comments and compliments received since 15th January 2024.

3.10   The 'type of initial feedback contact method' (figure 4) is new data collected since 15 January 2024 due to improvements made when developing the new customer feedback system. There is, therefore, no comparative data and the figures below do not include all cases raised in these services in 2023/24. However, by using percentages of data held for January to March 2024, trends can still be identified. (See Appendix 1)

3.11   For services in the Communities Directorate, most cases are raised either by phone at 45% or via by the website 39%.

3.12   In 2023/24, the Customer Relations Team continued to invest time speaking directly to prospective complainants, regardless of how the initial contact was made or the service that their feedback relates to. This proactive approach provides an important opportunity to build a trusting relationship with the complainant/service user, which is particularly critical when handling more complex complaints. This allows for a more thorough understanding of the concerns raised and desired outcomes, and in turn supports investigating managers to provide more precise and detailed responses.

5

3.13   Talking directly to customers in this way also ensures that where it is appropriate and possible, concerns are resolved without the need to progress to the complaints process. This can prove to be a quicker and more beneficial means of resolution for all concerned and is in accordance with the LGSCO Complaint Handling Code published in February 2024.
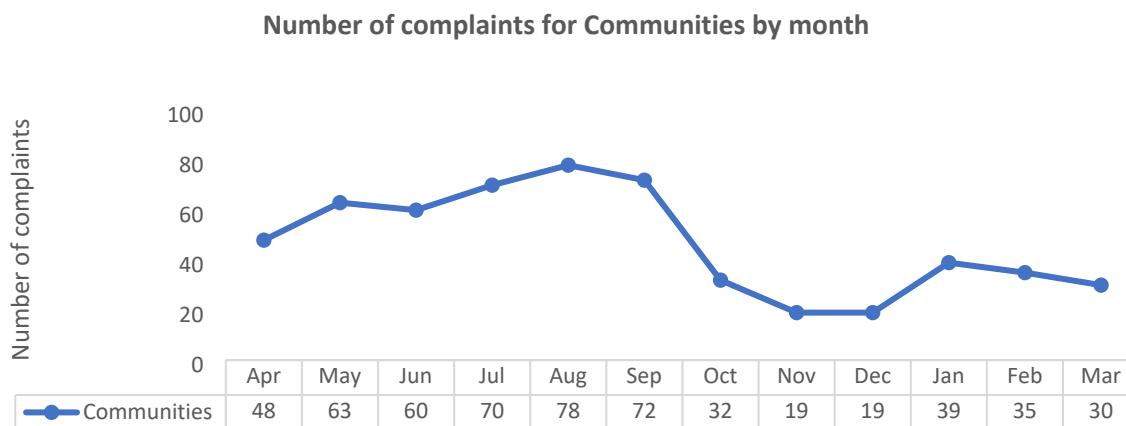
Complaints data trends by month:

Number of complaints for Communities by month

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Communities	48	63	60	70	78	72	32	19	19	39	35	30

Figure 5: Number of complaints assigned to Communities by month for 2023/24.

Trend increases:

3.14   Data shows the most significant increase in complaints occurred in the Communities Directorate in August 2023. This has been found to correlate with the introduction of digital parking permits as noted previously.

Trend decreases:

3.15   A decrease in complaint numbers is shown in October, November and December. This would correlate with the winter months.

Complaints data by stage for all Council services:

Complaint Stage	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024
Stage 2	97	45	48

Figure 6: Breakdown complaints by stage 2 for 2021/22, 2022/23 & 2023/24 across all Council services.

3.16   All initial complaints once triaged (and confirmed as being the correct feedback type and complying with the complaints policy definitions) are then allocated to the appropriate service area at Stage 1 for local resolution.

3.17   As per the policy, if a customer remains dissatisfied, they can then request a Stage 2 review of the complaint, which is undertaken by the Customer Relations Team if granted. Figure 6 shows a reduction of over 50% of Stage 2's across all Council services from 2021/22 (97) to 2023/24 (48). The

6   Page 48

reduction is as a consequence of the increased number of customer interactions we had with at the end of Covid winding down.

3.18   The Customer Relations Team has worked to reduce the number of reviews by consulting with services to seek de-escalations, where it is felt that the issue could be resolved before a complaint is accepted as a Stage 2.

3.19   Customers can at any time in the process, approach the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) for them to consider their complaint. In this reporting period the rate of Local Government Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) upheld decisions per 100,000 residents was 2.3 for Warwickshire, which again is low compared to the average for county councils which was 4.5 per 100,000 residents in the period. The annual review and summary of upheld complaints issued by LGSCO in the financial year 2023/24 was recently taken to Cabinet on 5 September 2024. The report can be found: Here

Complaint categories by subject

3.20   The data in the table below indicates differing trends for service areas in terms of categories of concern, and facilitates more targeted, specific training in each of the services areas.

	Communities	
	Number of complaints	%
Outside Complaints process	238	42%
Communication	127	23%
Physical environment issues	99	18%
WCC Service Standards	37	7%
Staff conduct	23	4%
Financial Issues	22	4%
Policy	7	1%
Commissioned Service Provision	7	1%
Discrimination	4	0%
Protection of user	1	0%
Total	565	100%

Figure 7: Breakdown of subject categories in Communities for 2023/24.

3.21   The top categories within the Communities Directorate are:

- Outside complaints process (42%). This is chosen if the complaint is sent to the services, and they advise that the issue should be taken forward under another process. This would include services with a statutory complaint/appeal process such as parking fines or school appeals, complaints about issues that are not within the control or operation of Warwickshire County Council such as issues with land not owned by the Council, issues with buses or matters within the remit of

district or borough councils These matters are still captured as feedback for insight purposes.

- Communication (23%). This category is used when customers feel they have not had the expected level of contact with a member of staff. This category has increased over the last 3 years from 5% in 2021/22 to 22% in 2023/24. (See Appendix 1)
- Physical Environment Issues (18%). This category is used for issues such as abandoned road signs, blocked drains, and road re-surfacing. (See Appendix 1)

Complaints per team

3.22   With the introduction of the new customer feedback system, the opportunity was taken to refine and update. This is in its early days which means the analysis does not provide a direct comparison with previous years e.g. County Highways has been split into eight teams to allow more in-depth analysis. In the medium-term this will improve our ability to provide Councillors and senior officers with more robust information about complaints to drive improved performance and scrutiny.

Communities– Contact Us (1 Apr 2023 – 14 Jan 2024)	Complaints	%	Communities – Customer Feedback System (15 Jan 2024 – 31 Mar 2024)	Complaints	%
Civil Enforcement	105	22%	County Highways	33	37%
Parking Permits	45	9%	County Highways - Network Management	13	15%
Waste Management	42	9%	Waste management	10	12%
County Highways North	33	7%	Civil Enforcement	5	6%
Streetworks	30	6%	Transport Delivery - Public Transport (Publicity and Contracts)	5	5%
County Highways South	27	6%	Parking Permits	3	4%
Trading Standards	26	5%	Transport Delivery - Home to School, Social Care transport	4	4%
CH Minor Works Team	24	5%	County Highways - Delivery	4	4%
Public Transport	19	4%	County Highways - Streetlighting	3	4%
Rights of Way	19	4%	Road Safety Engineering Team	2	3%
Design Services	17	4%	Road Safety Education	1	1%
Transport Operations	17	4%	Concessionary Travel	1	1%
Forestry	14	3%	County Highways - Policy	2	1%
Street Lighting	12	3%	County Highways - Rights of Way	1	1%
Concessionary Travel	8	2%	Highways Development Management	1	1%
Country Parks	8	2%			
Traffic Control and Information Systems	7	1%			
Traffic Engineering	5	1%			

Development Management Highways	4	1%				
Flood Risk Management	3	1%				
County Fleet Maintenance	2	0%				
Gypsy and Traveller	2	0%				
HS2 Enquiries	2	0%				
Planning	2	0%				
County Highways Policy	1	0%				
Driver Education	1	0%				
Not Assigned	1	0%				
Transport Planning	1	0%				

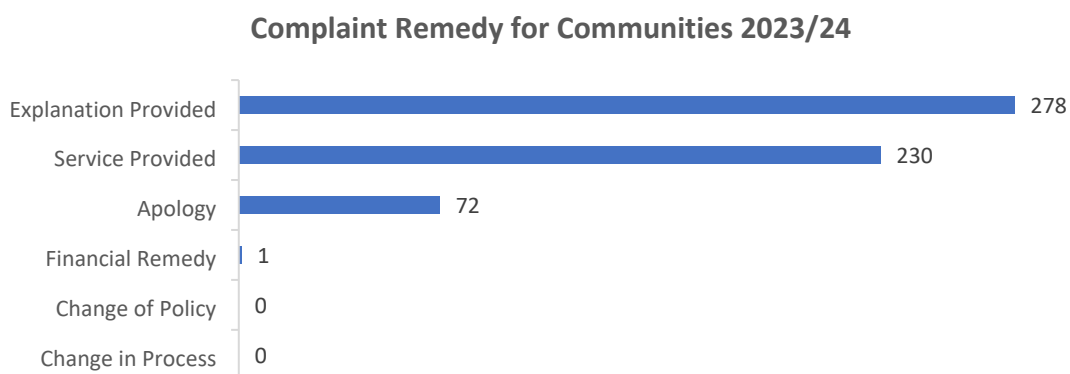Figure 8: Breakdown of complaints per team for Communities for 2023/24

3.23   For the period April 23 to Jan 24, the team with the highest number of cases was the Civil Enforcement team at 22%. This follows the trend in 2022/23. (See Appendix 1)

3.24   In the same period, the team with the second highest number of recorded complaints was the Parking Permits team. This does not follow the trend in 2021/22 or 2022/23 but as explained above (paragraph 3.13) this does align with the introduction of the new digital parking permit process. (See Appendix 1)

3.25   Since the introduction of the new system and revised team groupings, between 15th of January 2024 and 31st March 2024 the teams with the highest number of recorded complaints were County Highways at 37% and County Highways Network at 15%. (See Appendix 1)

Remedies:

3.26   When things have gone wrong, the Council has the power to offer remedies to put things right. The Local Government Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)'s Complaint Handling Code, which the Council is required to have regard to, says that organisations should have systems in place to ensure that a complaint can be remedied at any stage of its complaints process and should ensure that appropriate remedies can be provided at any stage of the complaints process without the need for escalation to stage 2 or the LGSCO. The Code states that any remedies offered should reflect the impact on the individual as a result of any fault identified and organisations should take account of the good practice guides issued by the LGSCO when deciding on appropriate remedies. The LGSCO also has the power to make recommendations to the Council in cases where the LGSCO has investigated and found fault causing injustice. Whilst the LGSCO cannot force the Council to carry out its recommendations, they publish public reports that draw public attention to non-compliance and use reports to draw attention to particularly significant issues of concern. Where such formal reports are issued by the LGSCO, formal action has to be taken by the council in question, including discussing the report at a meeting of members. It is therefore extremely rare for a council not to comply with the LGSCO's

recommendations. The LGSCO's recommendations will usually aim to put the complainant back in the position they would have been in, but for the faults they have identified. The LGSCO's guidance on remedies can be found here: LGSCO Guidance on remedies

3.27   Remedies can take many forms, including apologising, taking corrective action to put things right such as the service provided, a change in process or policy, or a quantifiable financial remedy.

Complaint Remedy for Communities 2023/24

Remedy	Count
Explanation Provided	278
Service Provided	230
Apology	72
Financial Remedy	1
Change of Policy	0
Change in Process	0

Figure 9: Closed complaint remedies for Communities in 2023/24.

3.28   The most frequent remedy provided by the Council was an "explanation provided". This would usually take the form of a fuller, more person-centred explanation, which may include clarifying of the process or language being used. This has remained the top remedy for all previous years (See Appendix 1)

3.29   "Service provided" is the second ranked remedy selected by services and is again consistent with previous years. This would be entered when the original service requested has been delivered or agreed following the complaint being received: e.g. A service that was complained about as being delivered late is then provided (See Appendix 1)

3.30   An apology ranked third as the most used remedy. Recently, the Customer Relations team provided training to services emphasising the importance of timely apologies wherever appropriate.

3.31   To note, the new Customer Feedback system allows multiple remedies for different stages of the complaint, so there may be different remedies. applied at different points e.g. Stage 1 ends an apology, Stage 2 may end. up with financial remedy.

10

Outcomes:

3.32   Categories of outcomes have changed in the new feedback system to improve data accuracy. The new feedback system allows for a reallocation if the wrong feedback type was initially selected, and outcomes are only recorded against complaints, which will improve the quality of data and insight provided.

3.33   The categories have been analysed in respect of the three standard reportable categories "upheld, not upheld and partially upheld" and **excludes** complaints in the old system that were closed as "questions answered" and any withdrawn complaints, this does mean the percentage calculates to less than 100%. This data has been analysed from both systems.

Outcomes	Complaints	% of Stage 1 Complaints
Upheld	34	7%
Partially Upheld	27	6%
Not Upheld	46	10%

Figure 10: Complaints closed by outcome (excluding withdrawn complaints and questions).

3.34   During 2023/24 the highest category was "not upheld", and this indicates that 10% of complaints (46) had no failings identified following an investigation. The second highest outcome was "Upheld", and accounts for 7% of complaints (34), which indicates after investigation some failings have been identified and a recommendation in the form of remedy and/or service improvement is likely to have been implemented.

Timescale compliance:
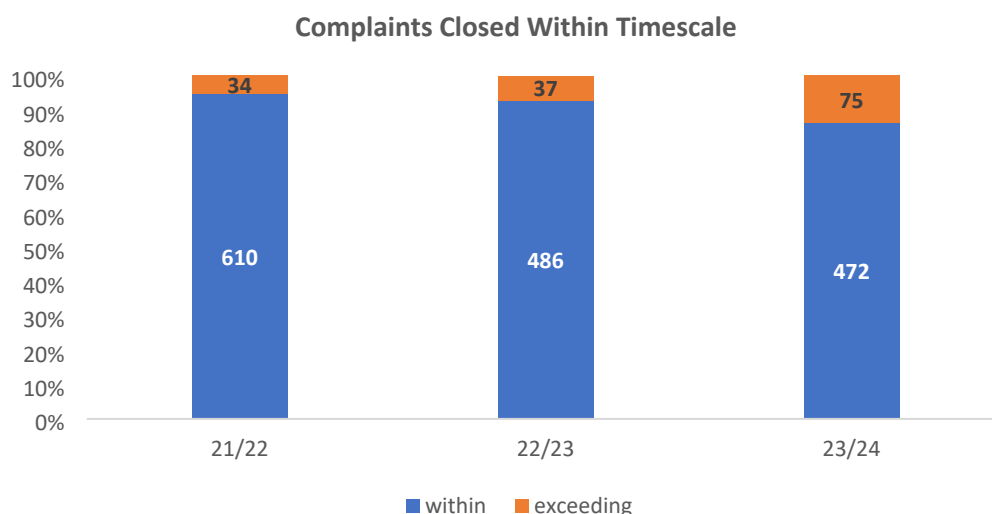
Complaints Closed Within Timescale

Figure 11: Timescales for closed complaints for Communities from 2021 to 2024. The graph does not include the 9 closed migrated cases as they span two systems and timescale reporting date is incorrect.

11   Page 53

3.35   Timescales for dealing with complaints are different dependent on the type of complaint and process followed. The relevant timescales for each type of complaint are covered in the Council's Complaints Policy and associated procedures.

3.36   The above data shows that over 80% of complaints within the last 12 months were closed within timescale. This is consistent with previous years. Further analysis of these complaints over timescale indicates an average delay of 40 days over the timescale.

Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services.

3.37   Identifying, actioning, recording, and sharing of 'lessons learned' is critical in improving customer experience with the Council's services. It is an opportunity for staff to reflect on how that case could have been prevented/gone better and how the Council can improve in future cases. These lessons are used for learning and training purposes for not only the team who have managed the case but also for the wider Council.

3.38   Examples of lessons learned, and actions taken from past cases within the Communities Directorate include:
- Training for the Customer Relations Team on helping neurodivergent customers.
- Including relevant policies and letter templates for each case loaded to make complaint handling easier.
- Training on complaints is being undertaken by the Customer Relations Team in 2024/25.
- Updated policies and procedures to make it easier for both services and complainants to understand the complaints process.
- Updated letter templates for services to use to ensure consistency.
- Day to day guidance for services on process and system-based issues.

Specifically:
- Customers who complain are called in a timely manner.
- Better communications on who is on shift and when.
- Managers conducted staff customer service training,
- Contractors to read work instructions.
- Customer to be met on site and apology given.

Customer Platform:

3.39   The introduction of the new system has significantly improved our approach to handling complaints by streamlining processes and making data more accessible to managers. This system provides richer, more detailed data that allows managers to track patterns, identify root causes, and resolve issues more efficiently. With real-time analytics and enhanced reporting

capabilities, managers can make informed decisions, prioritise cases, and provide quicker resolutions. In the long term, the system fosters transparency, improves accountability, and enhances customer satisfaction, ultimately reducing the number of recurring complaints and building trust with the public.

3.40   In addition, Business Intelligence have now provided a dashboard that allows oversight of trends of the data and allows real time implementation of support or resources if needed e.g. Complaints rise in a particular team, CRT can contact and ensure processes are being followed.

3.41   Executive Directors have access to their own Directorate's dashboard to ensure local oversight is given in real time. Discussions are to take place in 2024/25 to provide a dashboard for Members.

4. Financial Implications

4.1   There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

5 Environmental Implications

5.1   There are no direct environmental implications arising from this report.

Appendices
1.   Appendix One Communities OSC Feedback Data

Background Papers
1.   None

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s): not applicable county wide report
Other members:
Cllr Heather Timms - Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate and Culture
Cllr Andy Crump - Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety
Cllr Martin Watson - Portfolio Holder for Economy
Cllr Jan Matecki - Portfolio Holder for Transport and Planning.

14