



Cheshire West and Chester Council

Corporate Complaints and Compliments

Annual Report
2022 – 2023

1. Introduction

This report provides information about the Council's handling of corporate complaints and compliments received during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. In particular:

- Corporate Complaints (stage 1 and stage 2) and Compliments received by Cheshire West and Chester Council.
- Complaints received and decided by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

The report highlights performance against our timescales for complaint handling and provides assurance that improvements or revisions to services have been identified because of listening and responding to customer feedback through the complaints and compliments processes.

The Council's Compliance team, part of the Companies, Compliance and Assurance service within the Governance Directorate, was responsible for the coordination of complaints and compliments during this period. All Council services are responsible for responding to complaints and compliments, satisfying themselves that providers have also dealt with them appropriately and in line with any contractual or statutory requirements.

The Council has a 2-stage complaints process. Customers may escalate their complaint for consideration at stage 2 within 20 working days of receipt of their stage 1 response. Very occasionally a complaint may be accepted at stage 2 immediately, for example where there has already been extensive dialogue with the Council about the issue. All requests for stage 2 are considered by the Customer team, who will decide whether there are grounds to escalate the complaint and keep the customer informed. The Compliance team review all draft stage 2 complaint responses answered by the Council and provide advice and support at all stages to services on reasonable outcomes or remedies to complaints, from a layperson's perspective.

All customers have a right of appeal to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, although the Ombudsman will usually expect the customer's complaint to have completed the Council's complaints process before reviewing it.

All compliments are acknowledged at the point of submission and referred to the relevant service, where the Director or senior manager will decide whether a further response is necessary.

Officers are encouraged to resolve all matters locally and at the first point of customer contact to avoid escalation. Where complaints are received, services are required to carry out a 'triage' call or contact with the customer within 5 working days to resolve the issue. There are exemptions within the policy for some types of complaints. See the Council's published [Corporate Complaints Policy](#) for full details.

1.1. The objectives of this report are to:

- be open and transparent about our complaints and compliments handling.

- produce an annual corporate complaints and compliments report to align with our separate statutory annual reporting requirements for Adults and Children’s social care complaints.
- provide clear and concise comparative data on complaints and compliments, broken down by service area and/or workspace.
- Use this customer feedback to take remedial actions, identify service improvements and demonstrate learning and improved practices and processes from these.

1.2. Context

The Council is keen to be open and transparent about its handling of customer contact and strives to improve the customer experience across all its services. This report is the Council’s first Corporate Complaints and Compliments report. It is intended to be developed into a wider report on all the Council’s Compliance functions (including information governance), subject to feedback.

Data for 2022-23 can only be compared to the previous year, 2021-22. Data prior to that date is considered unreliable as we were setting up a new complaints system and procedure from October 2018, improvements to which were delayed due to the Covid pandemic and whilst we scoped out our reporting requirements. This report is intended to be the Council’s benchmark for its handling of corporate complaints going forward.

The Council has an ambitious target for compliance with complaints and has 2 indicators in the Council’s Performance Management Framework:

- 6.12 Stage 1 Complaints – Percentage of stage 1 complaints answered within 20 working days:

This measure is important as it will show which services are compliant with the formal complaint deadlines and ensure effective Customer Service. Ensuring compliance will also reduce demands on services with escalated cases.

What targets are we trying to achieve?

In year targets		Annual Targets	
Period	Target	Period	Target
2023/24 Target P1	98.0%	2020/21 Target	95.0%
2023/24 Target P2	99.0%	2021/22 Target	97.0%
2023/24 Target P3	99.0%	2022/23 Target	98.0%
2023/24 Target P4	99.0%	2023/24 Target	99.0%

What does good performance look like?

High is good

- 6.23 Percentage of corporate complaints that have been accepted as a formal Stage 2 that are answered within 40 working days.

This was a new measure introduced in 2022-23.

What targets are we trying to achieve?

In year targets		Annual Targets	
Period	Target	Period	Target
2023/24 Target P1	98.0%	2022/23 Target	98.0%
2023/24 Target P2	98.0%	2023/24 Target	98.0%
2023/24 Target P3	98.0%		
2023/24 Target P4	98.0%		

What does good performance look like?

High is good

2. PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY 2022/23

2.1. Summary of Complaint Activity

Customers may raise a complaint using the Council’s online complaint form or via email, post or telephone. Other options are available for customers requiring additional support. All complaints are entered onto the Council’s complaints system, Firmstep, and are labelled as ‘contact’ at this stage. Customers have the option to pick the service they wish to complain about from a list of high-volume ‘workspaces’, which are managed by services. They are named to be more easily identifiable to customers e.g. ‘Roads’ rather than highways. If the customer is unsure, or the service area does not have a workspace because usually it does not receive a high-volume of contact then they select ‘Any Other Service’. The Customer team coordinates responses to these with its network of ‘GO TO’ contacts who do not have their own workspace.

The service is expected to contact the customer to resolve the issue reported at stage 1 within 5 working days, usually by way of a ‘triage’ telephone call or visit. Where the customer is not contacted, the service must record a reason why.

After the ‘triage’ contact the service must record the outcome as one of the following:

- Formal complaint (provide a written answer within 20 working days)
- Urgent complaint (provide a written answer within 5 working days)
- Logged on Confirm – Service Request (our system for logging and managing most environmental reports)
- Routine business – request for service (for logging non-environmental reports)
- Routine business – early intervention (where the service can resolve the complaint at an early stage)
- Alternative path (where an exemption applies, or where there is a more appropriate right of appeal)

- Withdrawn by customer (the customer has indicated they do not wish to progress their complaint or, rarely, where this is a duplicate submission from the customer, or they are requesting escalation (so the original complaint record will be updated instead)

3. Stage 1 Corporate Complaints

A total of **2812** contacts were received this year. Of these **205** formal complaints were progressed. There was **1** complaint marked as urgent.

Of the remaining representations:

- **273** were Logged on Confirm – Service Request.
- **1304** were Routine business – request for service (for logging non-environmental reports).
- **834** were Routine business – early intervention.
- **126** were Alternative path (where an exemption applies, where there is a more appropriate right of appeal etc).
- **33** were Withdrawn by customer.
- **2** were escalated straight to stage 2.
- **34** did not have an outcome recorded by the service (but were not complaints).

3.1. Comparison with Previous Years

The table below shows the number of contacts and progressed complaints for 2022/23 compared with the previous year. It is obvious that there is a disparity between what the customer and the Council considers are a ‘complaint’, with 56% of contact received through the complaints route being re-classified as requests for service following triage.

Table 1: Total number of contacts received and complaints progressed

Year	Total Contact	Contact progressed as a formal or urgent complaint	% of contact becoming a complaint
2022-23	2812	205	7%
2021-22	2210	175	8%

3.2. Number of Complaints - Observations

The Compliance team continues to focus its efforts on promoting the initial triage of complaints with services to identify opportunities for early resolution of issues raised, or signposting to better, more appropriate, routes.

Despite the volume of contact received in 2022-23 being more than the previous year, the % progressing as a formal/urgent complaint has decreased slightly. This demonstrates the Council’s approach to the early resolution of all complaints.

3.3. Complaint Outcomes

Table 2 below shows the outcomes of the 205 complaints investigated.

Table 2 - Outcomes and comparisons with previous years

Year	Upheld	Partially upheld	Not upheld	Not known/Blank	Total
2022-2023	74	41	76	14	205
2021-2022	69	20	79	7	175

The percentage of cases with some or all of the complaint upheld was 36% in 2022/23, a slight decrease on the previous year of 39% which shows an improving picture.

3.4. Breakdown of contact received by Service Area

Table 3 shows a breakdown of contact received by each workspace area.

Table 3 – Breakdown of complaint by workspace

Service Area	2021-22	% of contact	2022-23	% of contact
Adult social care	17	0.8	3	0.11
Any other service	80	3.6	169	6.01
Arts, museums and events	6	0.3	1	0.04
Benefits	46	2.1	55	1.96
Blue badge scheme	4	0.2	8	0.28
Building control and regulations	9	0.4	11	0.39
Bus passes and concessionary travel	5	0.2	5	0.18
Cemetery services	11	0.5	18	0.64
Children social care	13	0.6	31	1.10
Client Finance	0	-	2	0.07
Commissioning people	2	0.1	16	0.57
Commissioned school transport	0	-	5	0.18
Council property	11	0.5	9	0.32
Council tax	104	4.7	240	8.53

Service Area	2021-22	% of contact	2022-23	% of contact
Countryside and green spaces	13	0.6	9	0.32
Dog fouling and strays	3	0.1	7	0.25
Elections and voting	5	0.2	8	0.28
Environmental health	45	2.0	54	1.92
Footpaths and rights of way	20	0.9	0	2.17
Grass cutting	71	3.2	61	3.38
Housing Services	70	3.2	95	0.11
Libraries	6	0.3	3	0.64
Licensing	20	0.9	18	3.91
Parking including Park and Ride	130	5.9	110	0.21
Parks and gardens	8	0.4	6	2.42
Planning	62	2.8	68	0.25
Plans and policies	3	0.1	7	0.43
Public rights of way	6	0.3	12	0.07
Registration services (births, death, marriage and civil partnerships)	7	0.3	2	9.85
Roads	255	11.5	277	3.41
Schools (admissions, transport, SEN)	50	2.3	96	0.32
Staff conduct			5	0.18
Street cleaning	45	2.0	60	2.13
Street lighting	15	0.7	18	0.64
Trading standards	4	0.2	7	0.25
Transport (Strategy, Buses & Bus Passes (except schools), Bus Stops, Active Travel, Rail)	0	-	2	0.07
Transport and travel including Park and Ride	12	0.5	53	1.89
Trees, woods and hedges	39	1.8	43	1.53
Waste and recycling (waste collection, recycling, household waste and recycling centres)	1013	45.8	1217	43.28
Total	2210	100	2812	100

Table 4 provides details of the top 10 services receiving contact.

TABLE 4 Top 10 services contacted.

	Top 10 services receiving contact 2021-22	Top 10 services receiving contact 2022-23	Position
1.	Waste and recycling (waste collection, recycling, household waste and recycling centres)	Waste and recycling (waste collection, recycling, household waste and recycling centres)	No change
2.	Roads	Roads and footways	No change
3.	Parking including Park and Ride	Council tax	CTAX up 1
4.	Council tax	Any other service	AOS up 1
5.	Any other service	Parking	Parking down 2
6.	Grass cutting	Schools (admissions, transport, SEN)	Schools up 3
7.	Housing Services	Housing Services	No change
8.	Planning	Planning	No change
9.	Schools (admissions, transport, SEN)	Grass cutting	Grass cutting down 3
10.	Benefits	Street cleaning	Street cleaning up 2

The above table shows that there has been little change to the ranking of services most contacted between 2021-2023. As expected, the majority of services most contacted provide environmental services and this is most likely due to customers regarding what the Council would consider a service request as a complaint e.g. a first report of a missed bin, littering etc.

3.5 Complaint Response Times

Table 5 shows the percentage of complaints that were answered within the stage 1 deadline of 20 working days. Compliance has dropped by around 5% on the previous year and fell far short of our ambitious target of 98%.

Table 5

Year	Stage 1 Complaints	Stage 1 Complaints responded to within 0-20 Working Days	
	Number	Number	Percentage
2021/22	176	122	69.32%
2022/23	205	131	63.90%

4. Stage 2 Corporate Complaints

Table 6 shows that in 2022/23 the Council processed 41 stage 2 complaints, with 24 of those being answered within 40 working days (59%), a decrease on the 2021/22 compliance rate of 69% for a similar volume (39).

Table 6

Yearly Stage 2 Complaint (S2 C) Volumes and Compliance 2021/22-2022/23				
Year	Stage 2 Complaints	Stage 2 Complaints responded to within 0-40 Working Days		Annual Volumes Change
	Number	Number	Percentage	Percentage
2022/23	41	24	58.54%	64.00%
2021/22	39	27	69.23%	-

5. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)

The Ombudsman reports on local authority figures based on the number of cases it receives in the reporting year; the number of decisions it makes in the reporting year (which may include cases ongoing from the previous year) and the Council's compliance with any recommendations.

In 2022-2023 the Ombudsman:

- Received 70 complaints
- Made decisions on 68 complaints
- Upheld 8 complaints

Of the 8 Upheld complaints:

- 1 related to Corporate and other services
- 3 related to Adults Social Care
- 2 related to Planning & Development
- 1 related to Benefits and Taxation
- 1 related to Education and Children's Services

Table 8 shows the breakdown of upheld complaints by service and the remedy/financial remedy.

Table 8

Reference	Category	Decision	Decision Reason	Remedy	Financial Remedy
21006753	Corporate & Other Services	Upheld	fault & injustice	Apology	
21010265	Adult Care Services	Upheld	fault & injustice	Apology, Financial Redress: Quantifiable Loss, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble	£700 + waiver of charges
21010430	Planning & Development	Upheld	fault & inj - no further action organisation already remedied		
21012694	Planning & Development	Upheld	fault & injustice	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Provide training and/or guidance	£200
22006171	Benefits & Tax	Upheld	Injustice remedied during		

Reference	Category	Decision	Decision Reason	Remedy	Financial Remedy
			organisations complaint processes		
22007336	Education & Childrens Services	Upheld	fault & injustice	Apology,Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble,Financial redress: Loss of service,Provide training and/or guidance,Procedure or policy change/review	£7,500
22008710	Adult Care Services	Upheld	fault & injustice	Apology,Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble,Procedure or policy change/review	£500

Reference	Category	Decision	Decision Reason	Remedy	Financial Remedy
22009905	Adult Care Services	Upheld	fault & injustice	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Procedure or policy change/review	£150

6. COMPLIMENTS RECEIVED

Table 9 shows a comparison of volumes of comments and compliments received between 2021/22 and 2022/23. There has been a significant drop in the numbers of each recorded in 2022/23, most significantly with Compliments with an 88% reduction. We believe that this is not a true reflection of the volume of comments and compliments received by the Council, rather these are the only ones that have been formally recorded on our system. Services may not realise the value of formally recording compliments and may maintain a local record to raise with staff without logging it, or their business as usual takes priority over logging compliments. The Customer Team will be promoting the recording of compliments and reviewing its guidance/process for doing so to make it simpler.

Table 9 Comments and Compliments

Row Labels	2021-2022	2022-2023	Trend
Comment	557	309	↓

Compliment	413	52	↓
Grand Total	970	361	↓

Table 10 shows the breakdown of compliments received by workspace each year.

Table 10 Compliments by Workspace

Workspace	Compliment 2021/22	Compliment 2022/23	Trend
Adult social care	175	1	↓
Waste and recycling (waste collection, recycling, household waste and recycling centres)	70	11	↓
Children social care	32	1	↓
Parking	16	7	↓
Street cleaning	14	0	↓
Any other service	13	2	↓
Blank e.g. no service recorded against the compliment	12	10	↓
Grass cutting	12	0	↓
Roads and footways	12	4	↓
Housing Services	7	0	↓
Council tax	5	1	↓
Libraries	5	7	↑
Schools (admissions, transport, SEN)	5	0	↓
Blue badge scheme	4	0	↓
Environmental health	4	2	↓
Planning	4	0	↓
Trees, Woods and Hedges	4	0	↓
Licensing	3	0	↓
Trading Standards	3	0	
Dog Fouling and Strays	2	0	↓
Footpaths and Rights of Way	2	0	↓
Registration services (births, death, marriage and civil partnerships)	2	0	↓
Transport and travel including Park and Ride	2	1	↓
Benefits	1	0	↓
Building Control	1	0	↓
Bus passes and concessionary travel	1	1	-
Commissioning People	1	0	↓
Countryside and green spaces	1	2	↑
Arts, museums and events	0	0	-
Cemetery services	0	0	-

Workspace	Compliment 2021/22	Compliment 2022/23	Trend
Council property	0	0	-
Elections and voting	0	0	-
Parks and gardens	0	2	↑
Public rights of way	0	0	-
Street lighting and Traffic signals	0	0	-
TOTAL	413	52	↓

7. LEARNING AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENT

The Council has identified areas and opportunities from which learning can be taken from the complaints and the compliments process and used to improve future service delivery.

Whilst compliance looks poor, particularly as there are low volumes of complaints dealt with by the services, it is important to note that the bulk of their focus will be on clearing the other contact received to prevent it progressing as a formal complaint. This is by way of triage calls or visits and often follow-up emails outside of the complaints process. Although 7% of contacts progressed to a formal complaint, 93% were dealt with by other means.

The complaints process requires at least a service manager to respond at stage 1, and a senior manager to respond at stage 2. This usually means that the manager responsible for the service complained about responds to the customer. However, some areas are more complained about than others which puts a burden on individual managers. There is nothing in the policy that prevents any manager within (or outside) the service from responding if that helps to share the burden. Concerns about professional knowledge may be raised but can easily be discussed with the lead officer as part of the complaint investigation. The Customer Team will seek to pilot some cross-service complaint investigations in 2023/24.

A lot of the time responses are with managers dealing with conflicting priorities, where culturally complaints (about something that has already happened) are considered less urgent than the day job, dealing with 'live' issues.

Demands on the network of customer contact coordinators has increased since it was originally set up in 2018. Most coordinators do not just deal with complaints but MP and executive correspondence, FOIs etc alongside their day job.

We are confident that cases can be managed well on the system we use. However, we are aware that officers tend to keep their own local records of cases. We will continue to promote the use of the system (Firmstep) as the primary way for managing caseloads.

Steps to improve compliance

1. Lead Customer Experience Coordinators

Following concerns about complaints compliance, particularly at stage 1, the Customer Relations Team improved its compliance chasing, regularly reminding services of due dates. This did not lead to any significant improvement.

In Sep/Oct 2023 3 Lead Customer Experience Coordinators were recruited, one per Executive Directorate, to work with services to improve customer experience throughout the whole customer journey. Their role is to:

- Support Senior Council Officers through the preparation of high-quality responses to complex and statutory enquiries from the public, Members, MPs, and other key stakeholders and regulators, including finding innovative solutions to challenges.
- interpret data and information to identify opportunities for improvements to services based around the needs of customers and present these to senior management.
- contribute to the Council's customer experience objectives to make sure that excellent customer service is delivered across all services and contact channels. Analysing and interpreting management information to identify root cause and recommend improvements to shape the customer journey.

These roles have the scope to really shape the way that the council provides its services to customers, including complaints handling. The impact of these roles will be shared in the 2023/24 report.

2. Escalation

A report was taken to Compliance, Assurance and Risk Board in December 2023 to outline plans for improved communications to, and engagement with, services to promote compliance with complaints. It was agreed to increase our reporting of caseload breaching complaint deadlines to senior managers and engage them in ensuring that their service improves its compliance.

3. Improved communications, training and utilisation of firmstep

We provide ad hoc training for new coordinators on Firmstep and there are user guides for all stages of the complaint process on their network Sharepoint site. However, we are revisiting our training offer for complaints and developing an ilearn module and other resources suitable for all learner styles.

This will include training on negotiating and/or empowering staff to offer suitable remedies at the earliest stage. Guidance will also be provided on answering a complaint and making a good remedy.

We will also be working with services to ensure that the customer receives appropriate signposting to raising reports and/or complaints, and understands our procedures for dealing with both.

8. FUTURE PLANS FOR COMPLAINT HANDLING

In September 2023, responsibility for the customer experience programme transferred from the Public Sector Reform Directorate to the Governance Directorate. This brings together the complaints and correspondence team with the wider customer experience leads. The teams will work together to improve the compliance with complaints through:

- Improved service engagement
- Improved reporting on non-compliant caseload
- The development of a Customer Experience Dashboard where all customer data, including complaints, can be presented
- Root cause analysis of complaints, reviewing what remedial actions and service improvements have been put in place following complaints, and sharing this best practice
- Updating training, guidance and resources for officers (on the Hub) and Customers (on the website) to ensure that customers understand our processes
- Improving systems for managing service requests and complaints and working with services to ensure that the customer is signposted to the most appropriate route to raise their enquiry

9. OMBUDSMAN JOINT CODE ON COMPLAINT HANDLING – CONSULTATION

This year the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman consulted public authorities and the public on its plans for a Joint Complaint Handling Code from the Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. They have explained that this sets out requirements 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 quickly, and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals.

As part of the plans, organisations will be asked to self-assess against the Code annually on a 'comply or explain' basis, and publish this on their website or appropriate public forum if an organisation does not host a website. The self-assessment provides a snapshot of not just compliance with the Code, but the culture of an organisation. The Code is planned to be published in early 2024, with Councils using it from April 2024.

The Council has fed back its views on the Code as part of the consultation.

End report