

SMART CITIES AND ENABLING SERVICES DIRECTORATE

Annual Report

Compliments, Complaints & Feedback

For the period:

April 2024 - March 2025

Introduction

This report from the Complaints and Feedback Team includes information for Quarter 4 and covers the financial year, April 2023 - March 2024.

Together for Children (TfC) provide a six-monthly report on complaints regarding Children's Services, which is presented to the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee for detailed analysis.

Sunderland Care and Support provide a separate annual overview for Scrutiny Committee.

The first part of this report includes statistical data, which is presented in an updated, easy to view format.

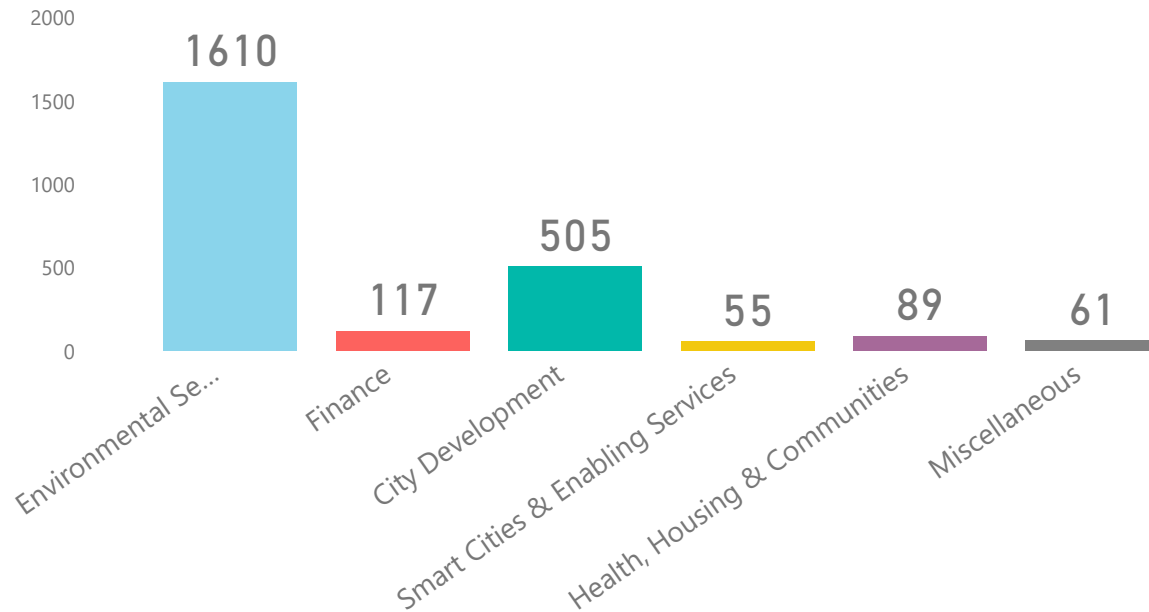
The report goes on to provide information on the different Compliments and Complaints Procedures that are used by the Council to handle customer feedback and so includes further information on each service area.

Complaints Overview

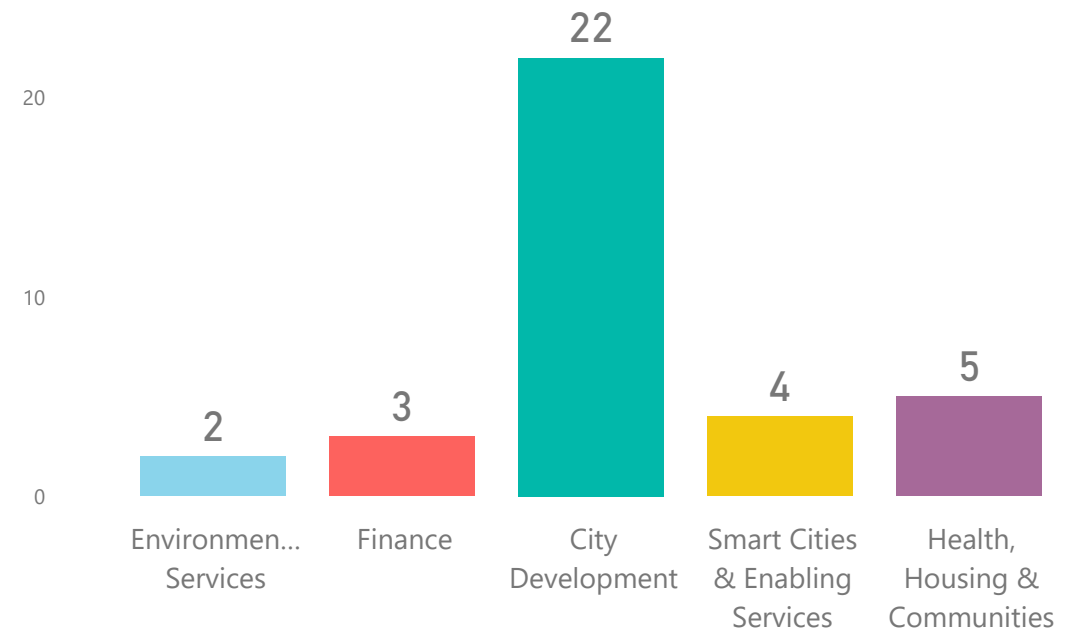
Ombudsman - 34



Corporate Stage One - 2437

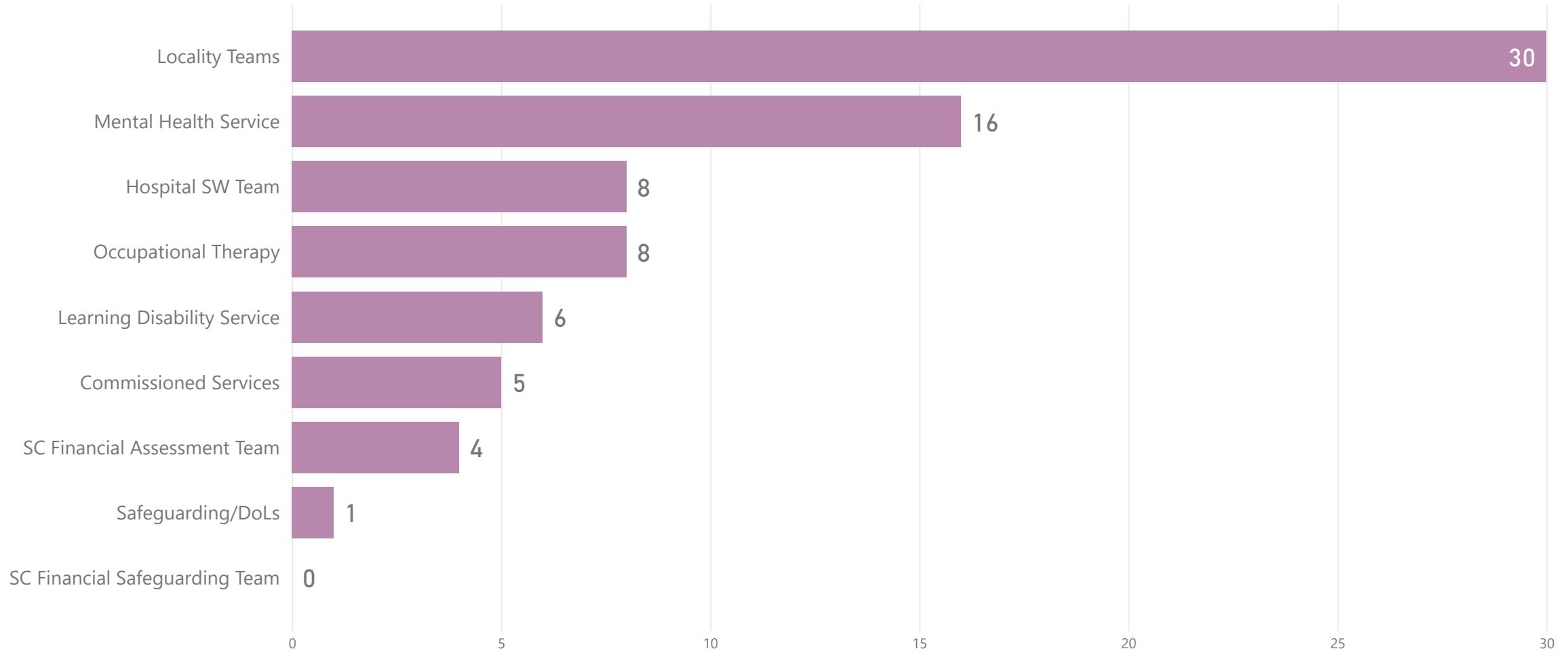


Corporate Stage Two - 36



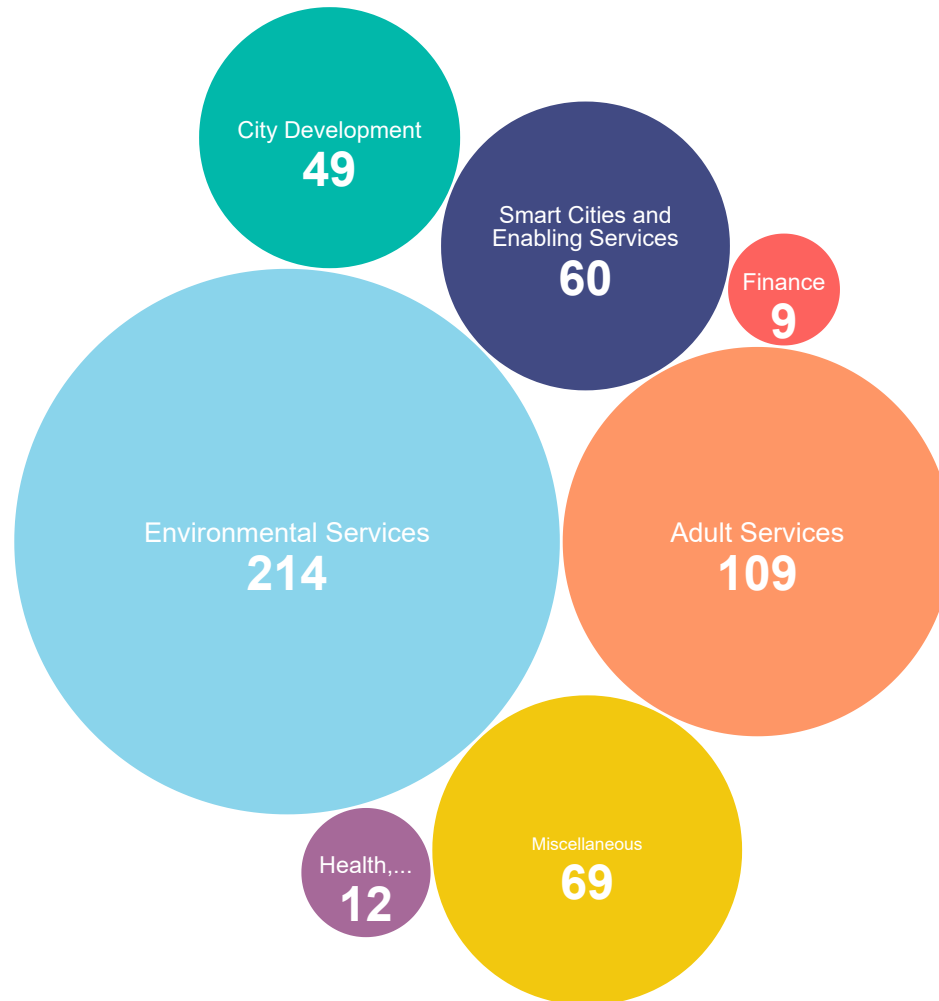
Complaints Overview

Adult Statutory Social Care - 78



Compliments

Compliments - 522



The worker has provided great knowledge and information to myself and the family regarding my husband who has advanced vascular dementia. I appreciate him listening to our concerns and offering solutions.

Easy instructions enabling easy to complete entry for inclusion in Memorial book.

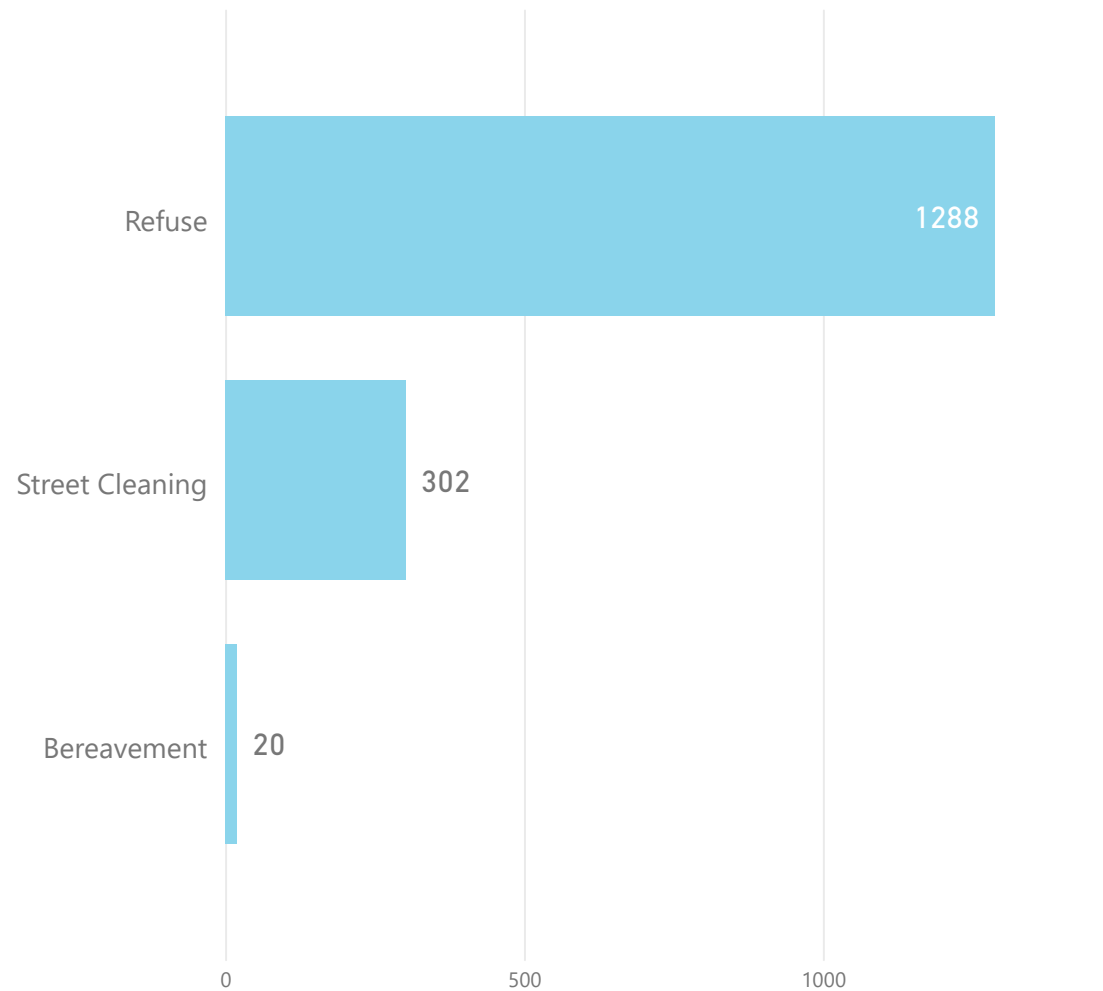
I contacted City Hall regarding a blocked drain outside of the property. The highway maintenance team attended approx. 2 hours after my call. This was excellent service, and they explained about the drain and advised what to do if it happened again. They were both very professional and helpful. Thank you again for this excellent service.

Customer wanted to thank the very helpful worker from the Customer Enablement Service team for being patient when talking her through the blue badge application.

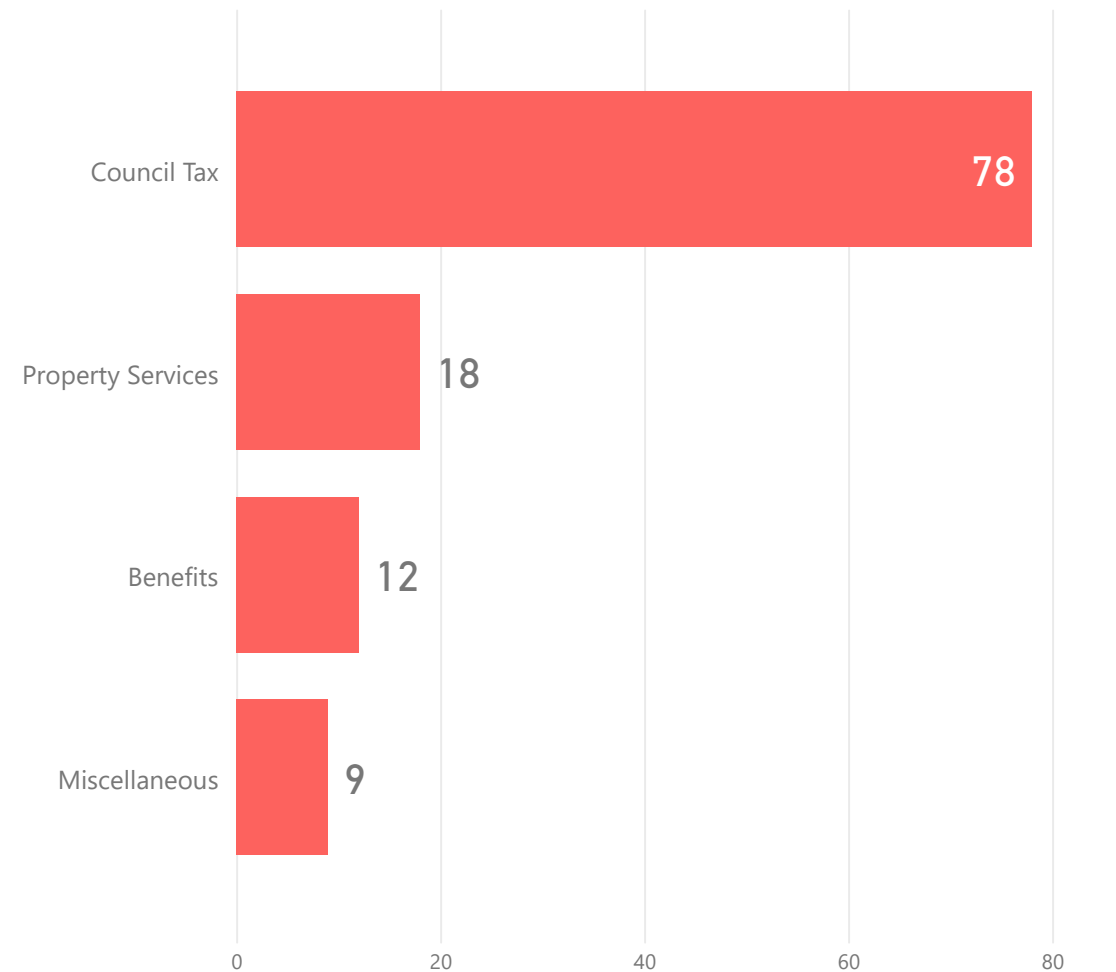
A compliment to the wonderful recycling depot at Pallion, what a great facility, the people who work there are wonderful, and the facility itself is fantastic, super easy to book, turn up and drop off scrap and rubbish that does not or cannot go into the usual household bins.

Corporate Complaints Breakdown for Stage 1

Environmental Services - 1610

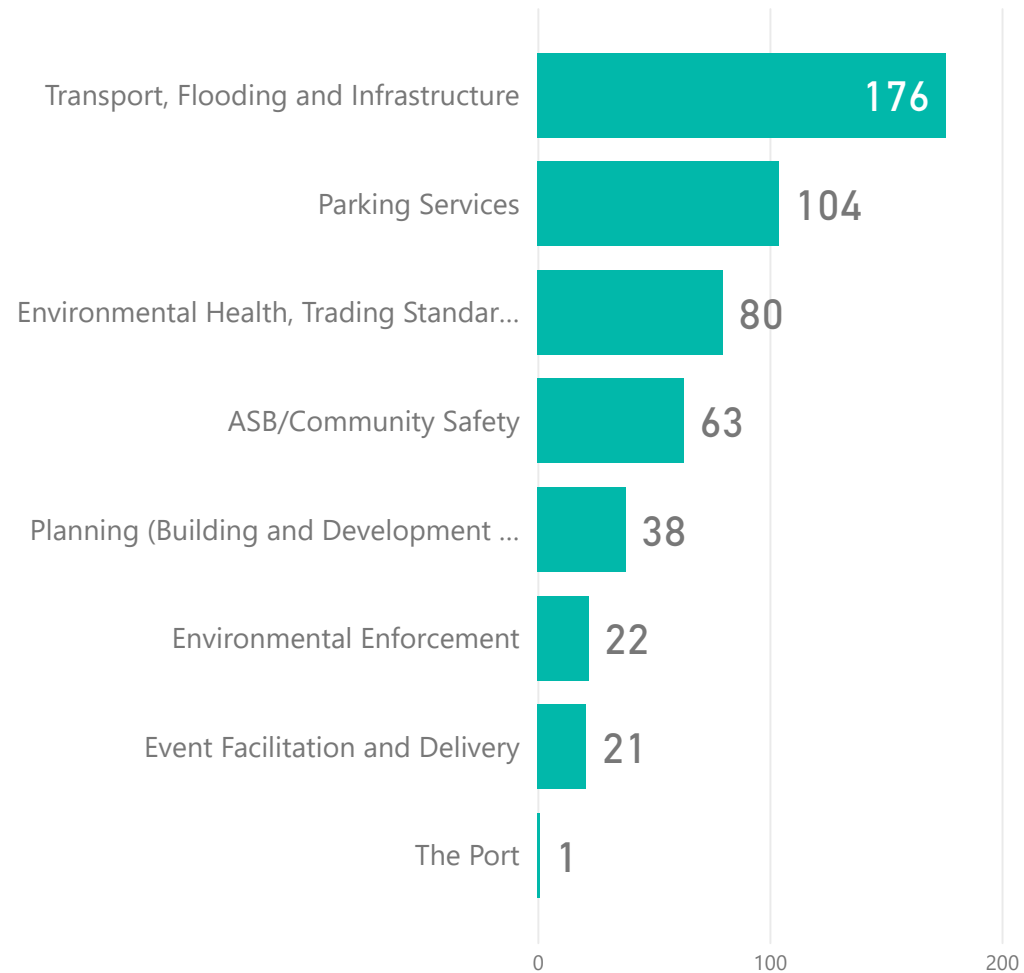


Finance - 117

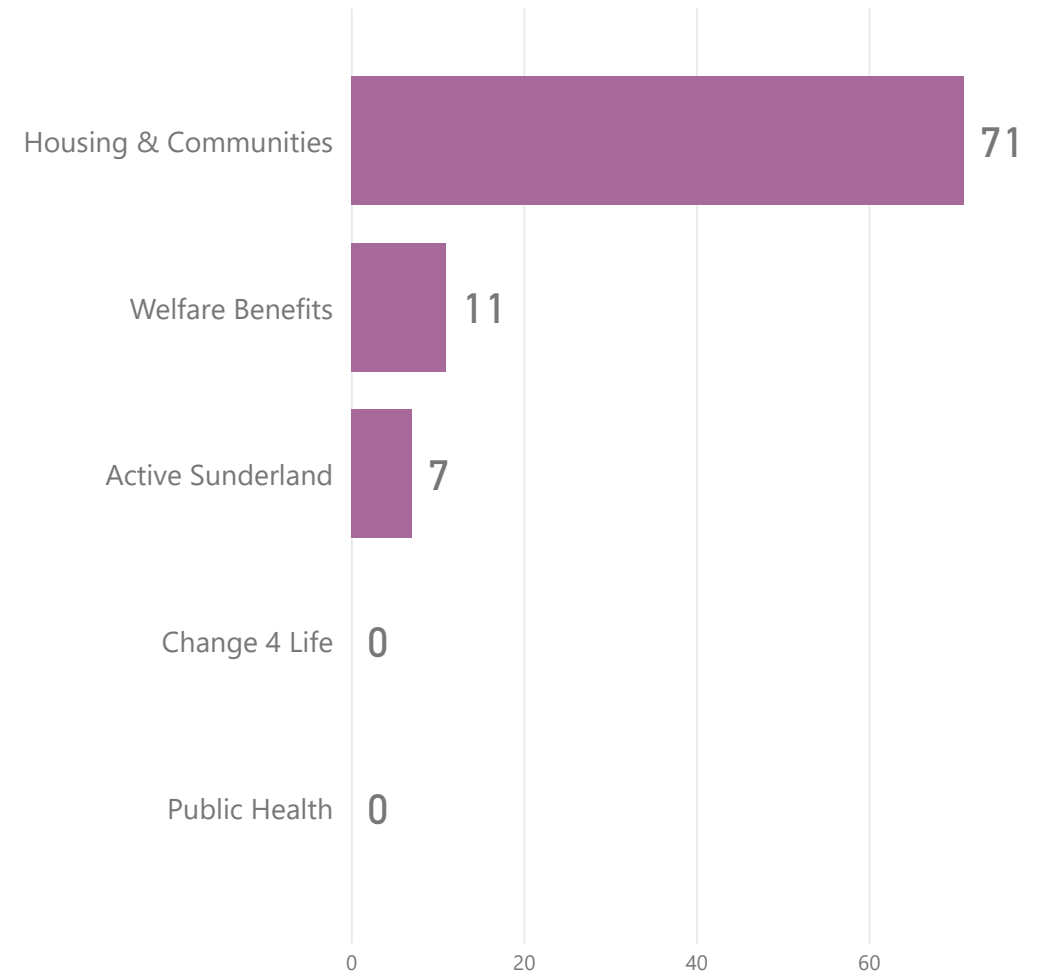


Corporate Complaints Breakdown for Stage 1

City Development - 505

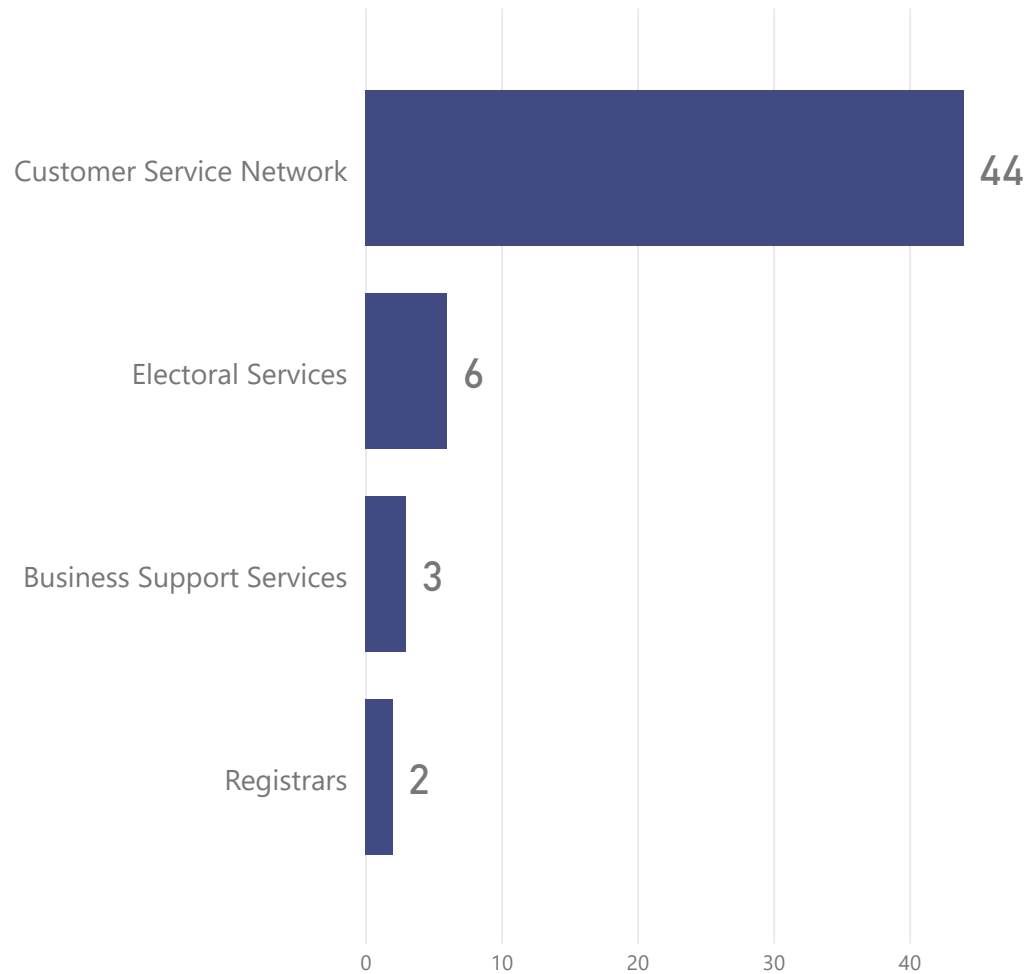


Health, Housing & Communities - 89



Corporate Complaints Breakdown for Stage 1

Smart Cities & Enabling Services - 55



Compliments

Compliments tell us what people like best about the services they receive. They also allow us to use this information to build those features into our services where possible and this helps us to continually improve levels of customer satisfaction.

The table below shows the number of compliments received by the Council together with comparative data for the previous three years.

	2024-25	<i>2023-24</i>	<i>2022-23</i>	<i>2021-22</i>
Q1 - Apr-Jun	137	126	316	206
Q2 - Jul-Sep	124	139	190	235
Q3 - Oct-Dec	143	145	119	258
Q4 - Jan-Mar	118	232	110	360
	522	642	735	1059

The table below shows the service areas where compliments were received.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Adult Services	29	26	23	31	109
Council Tax	2	2	4	1	9
Customer Enabling Services	11	0	22	4	37
Environmental Health	1	3	3	2	9
Environmental Services	29	28	30	31	118
Environmental Services - Refuse	24	31	19	22	96
Highways / Network Management	9	8	12	8	37
Housing	4	0	6	2	12
Misc.	16	20	16	17	69
Parking Services	0	0	3	0	3
Registrars	12	6	5	0	23
	137	124	143	118	522

A sample of compliments received in Q4

Adult Services

Customer wanted to thank the Therapy Team for the support he received to move property.

The worker did everything he said he would, when he said he would and all with a very pleasant and positive manner, I couldn't have asked more from him, he turned what could have been an unpleasant experience into something bordering a pleasure. The whole service that has been provided is very, very much appreciated, thank you.

Customer couldn't sing your praises enough and wanted to thank you for the work you have done for him and said you did an excellent job.

Thank you for your help with my family and supporting us with getting my mam placed. It's very much appreciated, and good to know yourself and wider social services team have been able to help our family.

The worker has provided great knowledge and information to myself and the family regarding my husband who has advanced vascular dementia. I appreciate him listening to our concerns and offering solutions.

Customer complimented the worker on her approach and empathy throughout the assessment and following the passing of her mother.

Customer said the worker had been brilliant on the visit and that she was 1st class.

I have recently had the very difficult task of moving my mother into a residential care home following her stroke. Throughout the financial side of this I have been supported by the relevant teams at Sunderland Council. Their expertise has been delivered in a professional manner, in a thoughtful and helpful way. I am very grateful to the people I have spoken to during this procedure. Their kindness was very much appreciated.

Bereavement Services

Easy instructions enabling easy to complete entry for inclusion in Memorial book.

I emailed a question and received a call to answer my question plus an alternative option. I received confirmation that my application had been processed. A speedy, personal service and that's much appreciated. It makes a difference. Thank you.

Council Tax

Customer very thankful for the £200 that was given to people for the fuel fund, she said she was able to put her heating on and stay warm.

Customer Enabling Services

Customer said that the worker from Customer Enabling Services was a credit to the Council.

Customer wanted to thank the very helpful worker from the Customer Enablement Service team for being patient when talking her through the blue badge application.

Environmental Health

Drainage gullies cleaned out and customer states workers have done a good job.

I was extremely impressed with the results of how quick your team acted, very happy with the outcome.

Environmental Services

Reported fly tipping of butane gas canisters on grass verge outside my estate. Staff member on initial call was fantastic, very helpful. Within 30 minutes these items were collected. Well done to everyone involved. Thank you so much.

I am just giving feedback on the absolute superb service I have just received. I put in a dog fouling complaint at 9am this morning and by 11am today not only was it cleared by one of your guys who was really polite and professional, but he has put up a few no fouling signs as well. Thank you and great work.

Big thank you for removing a large amount of leaves outside my property, very fast service and even followed up with a road sweeper to clean pavement, thanks again great service.

Many thanks for your prompt attention to my report of a tree outside my home which was damaged during the high winds last Friday. From the helpful lady on the telephone to the quick inspection and removal of the branch which was broken and lying on the pavement I couldn't fault you. Well done to all concerned.

Crew have been cutting the bushes outside the back of her property, and she wants to say what a good job they have done.

Reported two lots of fly tipping and received excellent service on the web site and from the team who removed the rubbish. Please ensure the guys receive well deserved appreciation from myself and my neighbours. Many thanks.

Reported a tree down in Houghton old cemetery, this was dealt with promptly thanks to the department who dealt with it.

There are 2 lads cleaning up the street from a build-up of leaves and other rubbish from traffic on the street. They have been working on it for hours and it is the cleanest that it has been in years, the lads are doing a terrific job. Wanted to make sure that this was passed on.

Visited Rectory Park for the first time in a couple of weeks, the change is incredible with new bins and seats and the grounds tidied.

I reported a problem with a tree, the inspector came out to examine it, he understood our concerns, it has now been removed. Great service, excellent job done and cleaned up afterwards.

I reported that debris from a burnt-out vehicle was all over the road. The next morning everything apart from some melted items were removed, the morning after that the melted items were also removed. Great service and responded extremely fast. Thank you to all involved.

Environmental Services Refuse

Reported a fly tipping incident near me, 2 hours later it was removed. Really fast, great service many thanks.

Customer would like to thank the team who clear up fly tipping. After reporting several fly tipping instances over the years, we wish to say a huge thank you to all for being so stoic in clearing up other people's mess. It really helps make a difference to us as householders and to others who do care about their surrounds.

A compliment to the wonderful recycling depot at Pallion, what a great facility, the people who work there are wonderful, and the facility itself is fantastic, super easy to book, turn up and drop off scrap and rubbish that does not or cannot go into the usual household bins.

Reported dumped rubbish bags on highway mid-morning and issue dealt with swiftly, within a few hours. Many thanks to the team for your attention.

A huge thank you to the staff involved in the speedy response to clearing the leaves and debris from the footpaths in Harraton. The work was outstanding. It was very much appreciated. Thank you.

Highways

I contacted City Hall regarding a blocked drain outside of the property. The highway maintenance team attended approx. 2 hours after my call. This was excellent service, and they explained about the drain and advised what to do if it happened again. They were both very professional and helpful. Thank you again for this excellent service.

Thank you to the team who cleaned the roundabout and paths at Doxford International. Report raised yesterday and went to work today, and it's been cleared already with a sweeper and team. Very quick and efficient was not expecting it to be such a quick turnaround.

Welfare and Benefits

Customer called to express his thanks as he received the funeral payment, quickly and straight into his bank account with no hassle.

Corporate Complaints Procedure

There are two stages to the Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure.

Stage One complaints are handled by the relevant service area, with a response being provided to the customer within 25 working days. Should the complainant remain dissatisfied, they can escalate their complaint to Stage Two of the procedure.

Stage Two is a Review undertaken by the Complaints and Feedback Team on behalf of the Chief Executive.

Stage One

The table below shows the number of Stage One corporate complaints together with comparative data for the previous three years.

	Number of complaints 2024-25	% change from same period last year	% responded to within timescale	<i>Number of complaints 2023-24</i>	<i>Number of complaints 2022-23</i>	<i>Number of complaints 2021-22</i>
Q1	661	+1%	85%	653	752	807
Q2	693	+10%	87%	629	730	790
Q3	465	-12%	84%	529	519	702
Q4	618	+15%	91%	535	551	540
	2437	+4%	87%	2346	2552	2839

The **618** complaints received this quarter are broken down into Directorates in the table below.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	<i>Complaints 2023-24</i>
City Development	129	132	100	144	505	518
Finance	32	36	23	26	117	151
Environmental Services	424	472	310	404	1610	1524
Health, Housing & Communities	29	29	10	21	89	89
Smart Cities & Enabling Services	19	9	13	14	55	64
Miscellaneous	28	15	9	9	61	0
	661	693	465	618	2437	2346

City Development

Service Area	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	<i>Complaints 2023-24</i>
Planning (Building & Development Control)	11	4	10	13	38	24
Environmental Health/Trading Standards/Licensing	21	20	12	27	80	87
ASB/Community Safety	11	18	16	18	63	38
Parking Services	28	21	19	36	104	113
Environmental Enforcement	3	8	4	7	22	33
Culture, Event Facilitation and Delivery	5	5	9	2	21	26
Transport, Flooding, and Infrastructure	50	56	29	41	176	197
The Port	0	0	1	0	1	0
	129	132	100	144	505	518

Planning

Complaints about this service area were regarding concerns to do with general planning issues, failure to follow processes and enforcement action.

Infrastructure & Transport

Complaints about this service area were regarding road resurfacing, footway repairs, traffic calming/restrictions and potholes.

Parking

Complaints about this service area were regarding car parks, the actions of the Civil Enforcement Officers (CEO), lack of communication and parking permits.

Finance

Service Area	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	Complaints 2023-24
Council Tax	19	27	16	16	78	99
Benefits	6	1	3	2	12	18
Property Services	5	4	4	5	18	24
Misc	2	4	0	3	9	10
	32	36	23	26	117	151

Council Tax

Complaints about this service area were regarding general issues about Council Tax, incorrect information, Business Rates, payment issues and wrong action taken.

Environmental Services

Complaints in respect of Environmental Services make up 65% of the complaints made against the Council. The table below provides a breakdown of the service areas within Environmental Services.

Environmental Services	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	Complaints 2023-24
Refuse: <i>non/late delivery of bins & caddies/missed bins</i>	323	368	251	346	1288	1171
Bereavement: <i>maintenance of cemeteries/ crematorium</i>	7	9	3	1	20	27
Street Cleaning: <i>fly tipping/dog bins</i>	94	95	56	57	302	326
	424	472	310	404	1610	1524

Refuse Complaints

Of the 404 complaints received for Environmental Services, **346** (86%) were about issues to do with refuse collection. This should be viewed in context; in any quarter the Council will service approximately 1.6 million containers.

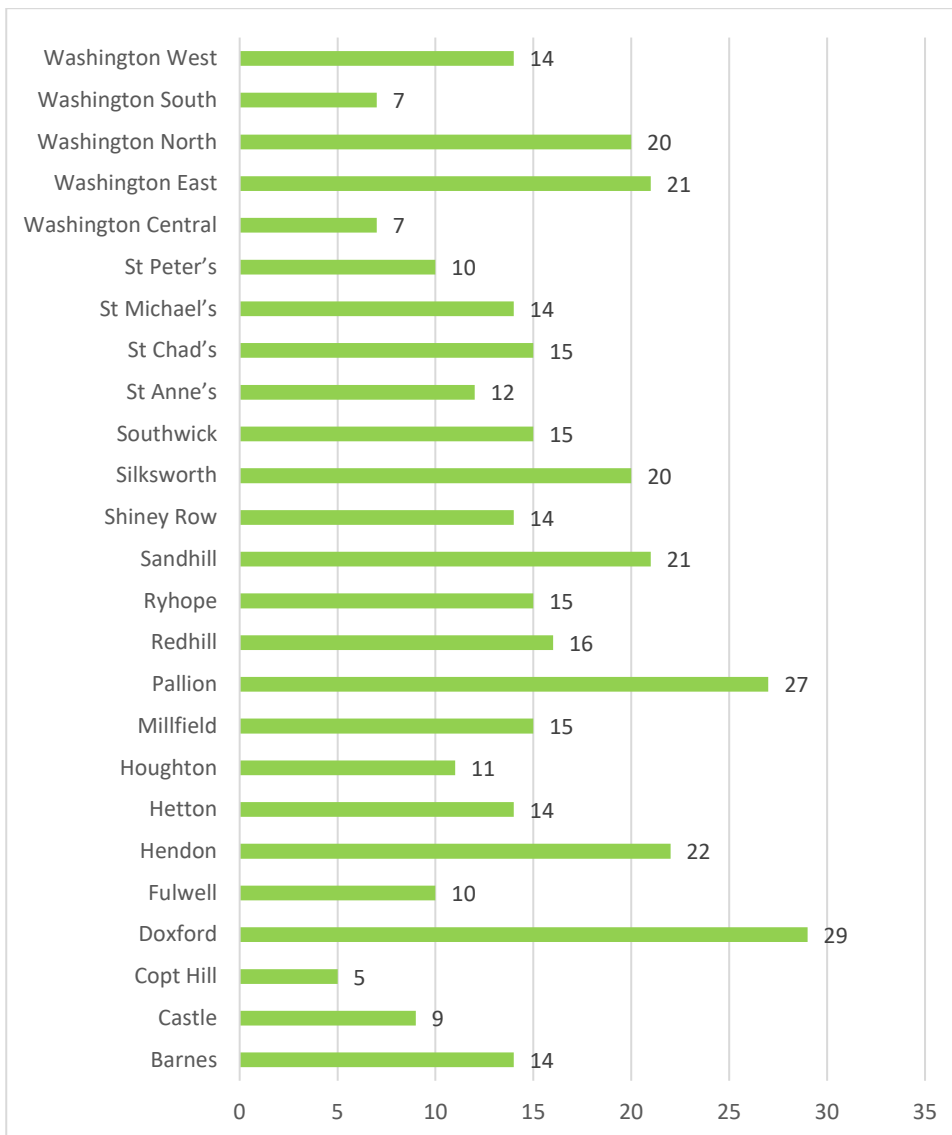
The table below contains data on complaints about refuse in relation to previous years.

Refuse Complaints

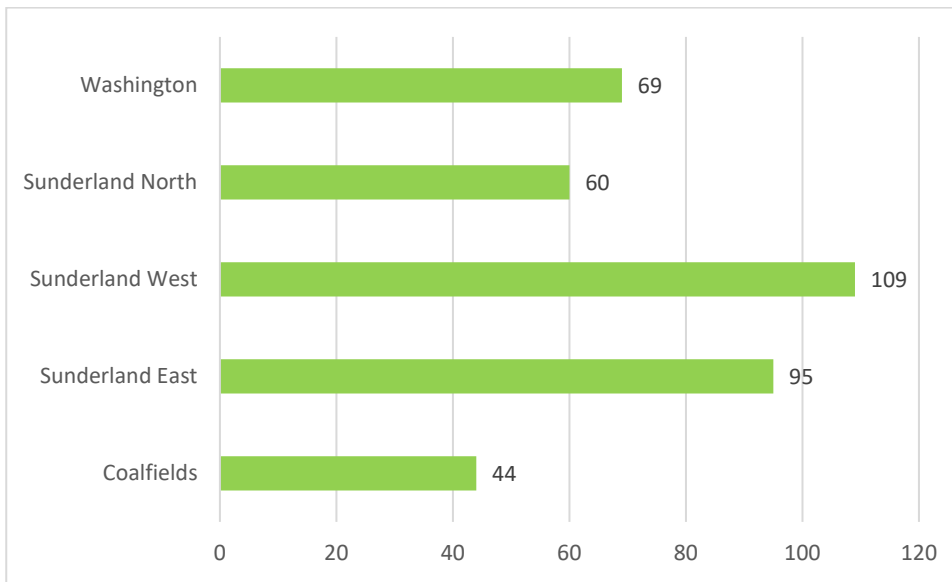
	Number of Complaints for 2024-25	% change from previous year	<i>Number of Complaints for 2023-24</i>	<i>Number of Complaints for 2022-23</i>	<i>Number of Complaints for 2021-22</i>
Q1	323	-2%	<i>330</i>	<i>413</i>	<i>477</i>
Q2	368	+20%	<i>305</i>	<i>348</i>	<i>468</i>
Q3	251	-2%	<i>257</i>	<i>233</i>	<i>428</i>
Q4	346	+24%	<i>279</i>	<i>256</i>	<i>297</i>
	1288	+10%	<i>1171</i>	<i>1250</i>	<i>1670</i>

At a previous Scrutiny Coordinating Committee, a request was made by Members for information to be provided about Environmental Services complaints by Ward area and by Area Committee. Tables including this information are set out below.

Complaints about Environmental Services by Ward



Complaints about Environmental Services by Area Committee



Health, Housing & Communities

Service Area	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	Complaints 2023-24
Active Sunderland	4	2	0	1	7	10
Housing & Communities	23	23	9	16	71	67
Welfare Benefits	2	4	1	4	11	12
	29	29	10	21	89	89

Smart Cities & Enabling Services

Service Area	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	Complaints 2023-24
Customer Enabling Services	17	6	8	13	44	44
Registrars	0	1	1	0	2	7
Electoral Services	2	1	3	0	6	8
Business Support Services	0	1	1	1	3	5
	19	9	13	14	55	64

Customer Enabling Services

Complaints about this service area were regarding staff attitude, lack of communication and general issues around contact.

Sample of complaints received at Stage 1

This section enables members to gain a sense of the content of the complaints, similar to what is provided regarding compliments.

Allotments

The allotments are unkept and untidy. The customer has advised that allotment officers have walked past these unkept allotments and have said that it has been like that for a while although there is a policy that states that the allotments must be kept clean and tidy. Customer has advised that out of the 11 allotments that are there, 2 of them at most are kept. NOT UPHELD

Anti-Social Behaviour

The customer was issued a Public Protection Warning. The customer said that the officer dealing with the case never spoke to him to get his side. The officer turned up at the customer's property with no warning along with the police and his landlord and issued him the warning. NOT UPHELD

Council Tax

I received a letter saying I had to pay £300 in 7 days to avoid a court summons. I rang the Council and from the get-go the agent on the phone was rude. I asked him if I could please pay this over the rest of the tax year and his response was basically no. The agent didn't consider Christmas or other things I might have to pay for. PARTLY UPHELD

Customer advised that they were not told that Council Tax needed a forwarding address before Single Person Discount could be applied. NOT UPHELD

Customer Enabling Services

Customer advised she had provided all the information for her blue badge and was told that the badge will be with her within 15 working days which did not happen. UPHELD

I was recently affected by a huge outage and due to this I am still awaiting payments into my account, this is a banking issue and no fault of my own. I called to let the Council know that I do not know if my direct debit will bounce or not as I am unaware when my bank balance will update, and my pay will be available. I spoke to a lady who was extremely rude, showed no empathy and didn't care to listen to a word I had to say. NOT UPHELD

Environmental Health

Customer booked appointment for pest control and waited at home all day, but no one attended. No courtesy call, email, text, nothing. In this day and age with so many levels of communication this is an appalling way to treat a customer. UPHELD

I was really disappointed to learn that I had to wait in all day for a visit from pest control. I appreciate that being given a time is unreasonable but I would have thought a morning or afternoon slot might be a reasonable compromise. NOT UPHELD

Environmental Services

There is a bin attached to a bus stop outside my home and this bin is constantly overflowing and the waste is all over my garden. I have a small child and its unacceptable that I should have to constantly clean my garden of rubbish from that bin. NOT UPHELD

The carpark in Barnes Park hasn't been gritted which has led to the customer slipping on black ice. NOT UPHELD

Bushes in front of premises have been cut back; however all the debris has been left which looks an absolute mess. The cut twigs are being blown in front of my house. PARTLY UPHELD

Customer has reported that the trees at the side of her house have been cut right back and she thinks that some have been removed. She feels that no thoughts have gone into privacy or security. NOT UPHELD

The Council sent a sweeper to try and collect the moss from paths. The sweeper has done a circle and left, but it's made the rest of the path look worse as its not finished and now there is mud all over. NOT UPHELD

Environmental Services – Refuse

The euro bins were emptied this morning but were not put back where they were taken from. They are kept on a small incline. The brakes were not applied by crew and have rolled down the incline and has caused a near miss accident. UPHELD

Customer's bin was not emptied today - she has advised someone put flooring in the bin and this wasn't her. PARTLY UPHELD

A few months ago, when collecting the blue waste bin your workers broke the lid of our blue bin, now after our collection today we now have a crack down the side of our green bin. Now both of our bins have been broken by your workmen when collecting our waste. PARTLY UPHELD

They were late arriving this morning and when they have emptied the bins there are loads of boxes etc blown into her garden. She thinks they should have come into her garden and picked the rubbish up. NOT UPHELD

Missed assisted collection. Crew are missing the bins and not collecting them. Every few months this will happen so will have to call up to report the missed bin. UPHELD

Customer advised that the bin crew are emptying the bins and keep putting them in front of the customer's garage door. PARTLY UPHELD

Customer advised that the bin crew are reversing down the private drive to empty the bins. The wagon is going onto the grass, the wagon has got stuck in the grass and there is mud all over the driveways. UPHELD

Events

We booked tickets for the festival of lights for 2 adults and our 2 children. When we arrived, most of the lights seemed to be off and when we were about to leave, we asked staff who advised there was a power cut and that it was likely to be at least 20 more minutes until it was resolved. We couldn't wait that long as my son was getting upset so we had to leave. UPHELD

Highways

Customer applied for a disabled parking bay. He rang to chase it up and he spoke to someone who said that they would ring back but no one has been in touch. He has phoned several times and requested that he receive a call back, but this has not happened. NOT UPHELD

Council have left a pedestrian road sign and sandbag (collapsed and not now needed) in the middle of the path. UPHELD

Nothing has been done about cars parking on the double yellow lines all the way up Kier Hardie Way after the Sunderland matches. This forces people onto the main road where there is live traffic. UPHELD

Fence built on Tay Road to stop the cars entering the fields, the fence is too short so cars can get around it. UPHELD

Housing

Customer reports that he was removed from the housing register due to a review that he never received. He was unhappy that he was removed from the list as he has been waiting since 2018 as he has not received the review. UPHELD

Customer is currently homeless and feels as though he is being let down when he is in a vulnerable position and has expressed concerns but feels that no one is listening to him. NOT UPHELD

Parking Services

On Millenium Way there are about 8 parking spaces where you can park for 30 minutes. Unfortunately, those parking spots are occupied by cars all day long by people who leave their cars for several hours. I haven't seen any Council enforcement checking cars parked for years over there. NOT UPHELD

Customer is unhappy regarding the permit scheme within his area as he feels that he is being fleeced by the Council regarding what he has been paying for his permit. NOT UPHELD

Planning and Developmental Control

Customer submitted a planning application regarding an air source heat pump installed in their property. Customer filled in all the relevant sections, answered the questions and supplied plans, elevations, photos etc. Customer has been told it is invalid and been given a long list of complicated and time-consuming requirements, some of which he already supplied, and the rest weren't even mentioned in the application form. NOT UPHELD

My application is over 15 weeks over the completion date. I've reached out many times via phone call and email and the lack of communication is beginning to feel like a joke now. All I would like is someone to please get in contact with me and help me through my application. PARTLY UPHELD

Customer wished to complain about the delay in completing or even starting the link road from Market Crescent in New Herrington to Penshaw. 10 years ago, the buildings at the end of Market Crescent were demolished. Since then, the land has been left as a dump. It is used as a dumping ground by all and sundry, there have been fires lit on it and the fences are falling down or missing. NOT UPHELD

Property Services

Public male toilets below Zen on Seaburn seafront locked 9:12am whilst female toilets unaffected. I have a Radar key so attempted to use changing places facility, but the lock showed engaged - the same as it has been for over a week but no notice on the door to explain the disabled facility is out of order. There have been several occasions where the male facility has had the door locked shut for no obvious reason, but the lack of the alternative disabled facility isn't acceptable. PARTLY UPHELD

Registrars

I am complaining about the fact that there is no reception in the Registrars part of the building. As a result, I was not able to book my citizenship ceremony in person. Very unwelcoming, disappointing way of dealing with people who come to book a ceremony. Also, the current set up is unsuitable for people with learning difficulties who find it difficult to talk on the phone. NOT UPHELD

Welfare Benefits

I was informed I'd been awarded the Household Support Grant. Food vouchers quickly followed via email but there was no information about energy support which was listed. I emailed to let the team know about this and was told the vouchers had been redeemed, which isn't possible as they have not been issued. UPHELD

Stage Two - Review

Where customers remain dissatisfied with the response to their Stage One complaint, they can request a review be undertaken by the Complaints and Feedback Team.

The internal timescale for completing Reviews is 25 working days. More complex cases may require further time to complete with the aim of completing those within 65 working days.

Year	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22
Number of complaints	36	30	36	35
% Responded to within timescale	70%	90%	86%	74%

9 Stage 2 complaints have been concluded in this quarter.

The number of Stage 2 complaints together with comparative data for the previous three years is shown in the table below.

	Number of Stage 2 Complaints 2024-25	Number of Reviews 2023-24	Number of Reviews 2022-23	Number of Reviews 2021-22
Q1	4	8	11	5
Q2	5	8	12	11
Q3	18	10	9	13
Q4	9	4	4	6
	36	30	36	35

The reviews were in respect of services within the following Directorates.

Directorate	Total	Outcome		
		Upheld	Partly Upheld	Not Upheld
City Development	22	2	6	14
Environmental Services	2	0	1	1
Finance	3	0	2	1
Health, Housing & Communities	5	1	1	3
Smart Cities & Enabling Services	4	0	2	2
	36	3	12	21
		8%	22%	59%

Summary of Stage 2 Reviews in Q4

City Development (6)

Anti-Social Behaviour – the complainant was unhappy with the process regarding taking legal action against landlord and tenant (not upheld).

Anti-Social Behaviour – the complainant was unhappy with the investigation that had been undertaken in relation to a dog barking at a neighbouring property (not upheld).

Highways – a complaint about the delay in installing a dropped kerb (upheld).

The Port – a complaint about the Council's decision to deny the complainant access to the Port for fishing (not upheld).

Planning – a complaint alleging a lack of due diligence regarding a planning application for the erection of a single-story office building at a local primary school (not upheld).

Planning – a complaint that a decision to grant planning permission had been made without sufficient transparency or a clear assessment of the evidence (not upheld).

Finance (1)

Insurance Services – a complaint that the Council had not taken seriously a claim for damages to a car (not upheld).

Health, Housing and Communities (2)

Environmental Health – a complaint about a lack of action on the part of the Council regarding a new development (not upheld).

Environmental Health – a complaint regarding the Council's response to the removal of rubbish from the property following fly tipping (not upheld).

Health and Social Care Complaints Procedure

The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009 provide for a single complaints process for all health and local authority adult social care services in England. There is one stage to this procedure. An appropriate manager within Adult Social Care considers the issues and provides a response to the complainant within 25 working days.

The table below shows the number of complaints received regarding adult social care services, together with comparative data for previous years. The number of complaints received has remained steady with 78 complaints received in 2024/05 compared to 79 complaints received in the previous year.

	Number of complaints 2024-25	% responded to within timescale	<i>Number of complaints 2023-24</i>	<i>Number of complaints 2022-23</i>	<i>Number of complaints 2021-22</i>
Apr-Jun	19	63%	20	22	19
Jul-Sep	17	65%	19	16	27
Oct-Dec	18	39%	24	23	24
Jan-Mar	24	67%	16	24	19
Total	78	59%	79	85	89

The complaints were about the following issues:

Nature of Complaints	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	<i>Comparison for 2023-24</i>	<i>Comparison for 2022-23</i>
Actions of worker	6	5	3	1	15	14	11
Assessment Disagreement	1	2	2	3	8	6	7
Care Practice Issues	0	1	1	5	7	9	5
Communication	2	3	3	7	15	9	21
Delay	2	2	2	0	6	6	12
Finance	2	4	1	4	11	17	8
Quality Issues	1	0	4	1	6	10	11
Lack of help/support	5	0	2	3	10	8	10
	19	17	18	24	78	79	85

The complaints were made regarding the following service areas:

Service Area Involved	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	<i>Figures for 2023-24</i>	<i>Figures for 2022-23</i>
Mental Health Service	6	3	4	3	16	5	7
Hospital SW Team	1	1	1	5	8	11	10
Learning Disabilities Service	0	3	3	0	6	10	5
SW Locality Teams	8	6	5	11	30	35	39
Occupational Therapy Service	2	2	3	1	8	12	16
Financial Assessment Team	1	2	0	1	4	4	4
Commissioned Services	1	0	1	3	5	2	1
Financial Safeguarding Team	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Safeguarding Adults/DoLs	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
	19	17	18	24	78	79	85

Outcome of complaints

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	Figures for 2023-24	Figures for 2022-23
Upheld in full	2	2	3	5	12	25	14
Upheld in part	6	4	2	3	15	23	27
Not Upheld	9	10	10	10	39	23	33
NE/WD/OTH**	2	1	3	6	12	8	11
Ongoing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	19	17	18	24	78	79	85

**not eligible/withdrawn/other

Summary information about the 5 upheld complaints received in Q4 is included below.

- A complaint regarding issues with care home fees*
The investigation found that the private rate had been applied which had been an oversight. Action was taken to ensure the final balance of the account was corrected for the period in question to reflect the Local Authority rates.
- A complaint about a lack of communication during a review period*
Unfortunately, the worker was unavailable for a period of time and was unable to respond or provide updates to the customer and there was no alternative point of contact offered. Apologies were offered for this circumstance and assurance provided that there would be better communication in the future.
- A complaint that incorrect equipment had been provided and that there had been a delay in progressing an assessment/referral in respect of adaptations to the property*
Both elements of the complaint were upheld, and sincere apologies were offered to the customer. Improvements have been made to the quality checking process and there is also now a more robust process in place to monitor performance and timescales.
- A complaint about a lack of communication and support from the social worker*
The customer had been advised that they could contact the worker directly should they have any further enquiries but then experienced difficulties when trying to do so. Unfortunately the worker was not at work and unable to return voicemail messages. Sincere apologies were offered to the customer, and a different worker was allocated to the case and regular communication has since been maintained.
- A complaint about finance for care home fees and a level of confusion regarding the end of the self-funding period*
The investigation found that there had been an error made on the Council's database regarding payments to the care home. The error was rectified immediately, and apologies were offered to the customer for the error and for any confusion this had caused.

Complaints dealt with by the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (Ombudsman) has a statutory responsibility for investigating complaints of maladministration about local Councils. When a complaint has completed the Council's complaint process the complainant is advised of their right to escalate their complaint to the Ombudsman.

There were 8 Ombudsman complaints in Q4 bringing the total for the year to 34.

The table below shows the number of complaints together with comparative data for previous years.

Year	Number of Ombudsman Complaints Received	Number Investigated by Ombudsman	Number upheld	% Upheld rate
2024/25	34	8	5	62%
2023/24	29	12	11	92%
2022/23	34	8	4	50%
2021/22	32	12	9	74%

The table below shows the total number of complaints received in 2024/25 for each Directorate, how many of those complaints the Ombudsman chose to investigate; and from those investigations how many were upheld.

	Total Ombudsman complaints received	Number closed after initial enquiries	Number Investigated by Ombudsman	Outcome of Investigations			
				Not Upheld	Upheld with fault but no injustice	Upheld with injustice and fault	% upheld rate
Adult Services	5	2	3	1		2	
Together for Children	10	7	3	1	1	1	
City Development	11	10	1	1			
Environmental Services	3	2	1			1	
Finance	2	2	0				
Smart Cities & Enabling Services	3	3	0				
Total	34	26	8	3	1	4	62%

Detailed Investigations

Of the total 34 complaints received from the Ombudsman, 26 (76%) were closed after initial enquiries.

8 complaints were investigated by the Ombudsman (24%) of which 5 were upheld, providing the outcome rate of 62%.

Ombudsman Complaints made in Q4

Summary information about the 8 Ombudsman complaints made in Q4 is included below. The Ombudsman's reference is included in brackets and the full report can be found on their website; www.lgo.org.uk

Customer Enabling Services (24 015 520) - a complaint about the Council adding the complainant to its Employee Protection Register.

Outcome: *Closed after initial enquiries – no further action*

The Ombudsman will not investigate because there is not enough evidence of fault, and the Information Commissioner is better placed to consider data protection matters.

Highways (24 017 121) – a complaint about highway noise and vibrations.

Outcome: *Closed after initial enquiries – no further action*

The Ombudsman will not investigate because there is not enough evidence of fault.

Highways (24 019 129) – a complaint about being injured following a fall on a slated pavement edge.

Outcome: *Closed after initial enquiries – no further action*

The Ombudsman will not investigate because this is a complaint about negligence which is a legal matter for the courts to consider and decide. Also, there is no sign of fault in the way the Council considered the request to make changes to the pavement.

Parking (24 020 536) – a complaint that the Council wrongly issued a Penalty Charge Notice for an alleged parking contravention.

Outcome: *Closed after initial enquiries – out of jurisdiction*

The Ombudsman will not investigate because it is reasonable for the complainant to put in an appeal to the Traffic Penalty Tribunal.

Refuse (24 019 633) – a complaint about the Council's refusal to accept liability for damage to a car.

Outcome: *Closed after initial enquiries – out of jurisdiction*

The Ombudsman will not investigate because it is reasonable to expect the complainant to take the matter to court.

Together for Children (24 012 992) – a complaint about child protection.

Outcome: *Closed after initial enquiries – no further action*

The Ombudsman will not investigate as there is not enough evidence of fault, and it could not achieve the outcome the complainant is seeking.

Together for Children (24 018 398) - a complaint about the Council's involvement with his child and issues of data accuracy.

Outcome: *Closed after initial enquiries – out of jurisdiction*

The Ombudsman cannot investigate because it is reasonable for the complainant to take the matter to court and the Information Commissioner is best suited to consider matters re data accuracy.

Together for Children (24 002 134) – a complaint about the Council's involvement in a child protection investigation and how it handled the statutory complaints process.

Outcome: *Upheld – fault, no injustice*

The Ombudsman came to a finding of no fault on the substantial part of the complaint but found there was some limited fault due to a short delay in the statutory complaints process, but this did not cause a significant injustice.

Together for Children Customer Feedback Annual Report 2024-2025



HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY 2024/25

What are our key achievements?

- We have received 273 compliments this year from children, young people, families, and professionals. This is a substantial increase from 190 compliments received in 2023-24.
- We successfully helped 174 customers to receive satisfactory resolutions to their issues or concerns informally, without having to initiate a complaint.
- The second phase of development of the Apteon Respond complaints management system was completed in relation to MP and Councillor Enquiries now all appearing on the system and managed in this way to improve efficiency and provide greater analysis and insight through reporting.

What are our areas of focus for 2025/26?

- To work with services that have seen an increase in complaint numbers and escalations to provide satisfactory resolutions at an early stage and to take forward learning and recommendations from current and closed complaints.
- Continue to focus on the timeliness and quality of complaints.

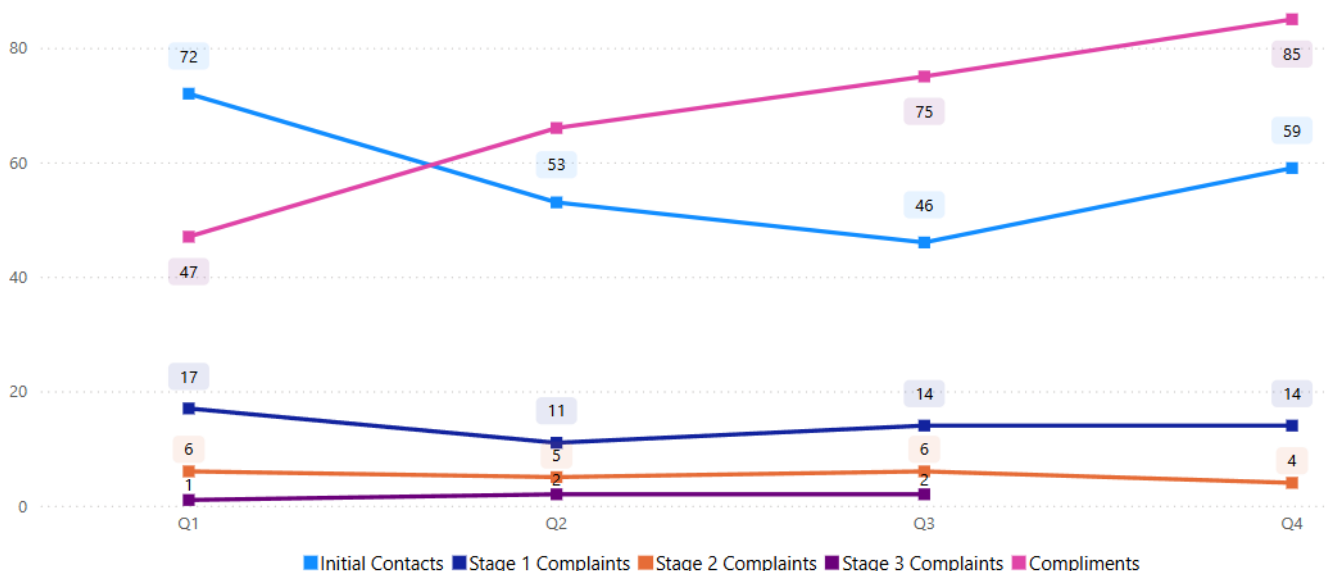
1. PURPOSE OF THE ANNUAL REPORT

1.1. This report covers the period 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025. Together for Children (TfC) welcomes all forms of feedback as a way of improving service delivery to children, young people, and families. The report provides an overview of customer feedback received throughout the year, identifying topics and trends in relation to complaints information and areas of organisational learning that have taken place in response to feedback received.

2. SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

2.1. The Customer Feedback Team are responsible for receiving, recording, and responding to feedback received from children, young people and families regarding services delivered by Together for Children. The following graph shows the different types of feedback received in each quarter in 2024/25.

Feedback Summary



2.2. In addition to the above types of feedback, the Chief Executive and Director of Children’s Services receives Member Enquiries. In 2024/25, we received 80 enquiries (68 MP Enquiries and 12 Councillor Enquiries) of which 62 were responded to within timescale. Most enquiries were in relation to education queries (57).

3. COMPLIMENTS

3.1. In 2024/25, we received 273 compliments from children and young people, parents and other family members, foster carers, external professionals, and staff within TfC, compared with 190 last year. Compliments are communicated to workers and management structures of the relevant teams and is used to congratulate workers and teams and to inform service developments and best practice. Compliments are also shared more widely with the Senior Management Team and Communications Partner, so all staff can be recognised for their dedication and hard work. Below are some examples of the compliments we have received in 2024/25:

Adoption

X is our social worker and we couldn't have asked for more! She has gone above and beyond every step of the way. The whole team have been welcoming and supportive through the process.

Assessment Teams

Dr Sarah Mills, Consultant paediatrician at Sunderland Hospital was really positive about X's practice and how she was excellent in a visit to a family in a very difficult situation.

Business Support

I wanted to pass on our huge thanks and appreciation for X. She has gone above and beyond this week helping sort out a passport issue for a Cared for child to be able to go on holiday with his foster carers and brother; X has provided so much support to the social work team and we wouldn't have been able to make this holiday happen for the boys without X's support and we just wanted to say a huge thank you to her – she has been amazing!

Cared for Teams

I've had social work involved with my family for a little over a year now. All I can say is if this is the level of social workers these days, I'm hopeful for the future. I have kids with complex needs and both have been fantastic support for my children. I am so grateful that I've finally met agencies who help and care about wellbeing of families.

Child Protection Teams

I just wanted to highlight the fantastic praise given from a very senior London High Court Judge who has been trial judge for a highly unusual case describing Together for Children's approach to this case as 'outstanding' which counsel attributes to a reflection of the work undertaken by colleagues in social care Child Protection Teams.

Children's Homes

The support they provide to young people, their dedication to them and their desire to ensure best outcomes is evident in our interactions with them, they always ensure that relevant information is communicated to us via the phone or email.

Children with Disabilities Team

Thank you for supporting us, giving us guidance, reassurance and help when we have needed it. The vast amount of assessments, evidence and more that you've had to read and questions and answers has not been a little or an easy task, so well done and thank you. We are really grateful for your hard work and dedication to the teams involved and most importantly, the children.

Children's Independent Reviewing Team

I really appreciated X's support in the ratifying cared for review today. It was really tough for me in the meeting, with me recommending a plan of adoption and it being my first adoption, and he was brilliant. He was incredibly supportive and I felt that he ran the meeting really well, allowing mum to speak and share her views. He showed lots of empathy which was really nice to see, but at the same time fully supported my assessment and views, and I'm just grateful to have that kind of support in such a difficult meeting.

Clinical Psychologist

The feedback we received around our multiagency working was phenomenal! They also used the word 'cracking' a number of times to describe the work we are doing. Children have fed back that they felt safer as they knew the work was going on.

Customer Feedback Team

Thank you X for walking me through the process and putting me at ease. It made the whole experience easy.

Early Help Team

I'm so grateful for all the support I have received from coming to the Family Hubs. I honestly would have struggled massively as I had just moved into the area and had my baby a month later.

Education

I wanted to write and commend X to you, as without her, Y would not have achieved the four GCSEs. As you will know from her record, Y only attended school for half a term in two years, and simply would not have passed Maths, English and Science, had it not been for X's support, patience, expertise and encouragement. Although four GCSEs may not be considered a great amount, for my daughter this was a phenomenal achievement having received little education in years due to severe anxiety and depression. Although X left us in June, we still miss her greatly. I cannot stress that enough. However, Y will always remember her and how she gave her the confidence to go to college. I have copied X into this email in order to let her know that Y is now flying. She is doing so well and one can barely recognise the sad and withdrawn girl she used to be. She made her first pitch to tutors and classmates in college last week (voluntarily!), has made new friends and is disappointed on the days she's not in college! She is loving her course at Sunderland College. In fact, she's doing so well, private therapy is now reduced to once every four weeks and CYPs envisage her coming off medication in the next year. Without X, none of the above would have been possible. A huge thank you from me and Y for giving us a helping hand when we had slipped off the edge of an inadequate education system for mental health needs. I cannot thank you enough.

Finance Team

At the Daycare Network meeting last week, X shared how 'fantastic' and 'very supportive' you had been around all the changes with the funding and wanted me to feed this back to you.

Fostering

I think Together for Children is outstanding. The managers are so approachable and available. Fostering social workers go above and beyond and the children's social workers really listen and care.

ICRT

That meeting was absolutely brilliant! It felt child-centred and allowed professionals to share balanced views. X, I thought you really allowed that to happen so thank you so much for allowing my challenge. I really hope the ongoing support can get a positive outcome for the child with clear direction and guidance.

Kinship Team

When the Kinship team become involved in our lives it was daunting. However, I have built a good relationship with X and feel whatever questions I have she will always do her best to answer in a way in which I can understand. I feel comfortable expressing my worries and concerns and always feel reassured at the end of our meetings. If I have any issues I always know I will be able to contact X and she will be happy to help in any way she can which makes this whole process a little easier.

Next Steps

X is the girlfriend of Y. X wanted to say that she did not know what Next Steps did before she met Y. X wanted to say that Z is very helpful and supportive to Y and to her, even though she is not open to Next Steps. She thinks he is very helpful and supportive and is a genuinely nice person.

Pre-Birth Team

Just to let you know I have held the Review Child Protection Conference today for the twins. Parents and grandparents praised X for all her hard work with the family and thanked her for this. Mam in particular was very complementary of the support X has given them. Well done X.

SEND Team

We received a phone call into the team yesterday from Mam saying what an excellent job X had done, she appreciated the amount of work that goes into this. She said she was kept informed, listened to and provided sound advice and guidance to her and made the process much easier for her and the family and the plan reflects her son accurately. Overall, she is very pleased with the outcome.

Systems Development

Yesterday I contacted Liquid Logic support via email and I received a quick response from X. I did not fully understand the instructions X had sent me and I requested a video call on teams and X obliged almost instantly. This is the first time I have had an issue with Liquid logic that I personally did not understand. X took me through the steps that I had to follow, and once I had been shown, it seemed so simple. I am extremely happy with the kind and professional way X was with me throughout. A huge thank you to X for being so knowledgeable and kind.

Targeted Youth Services

I just wanted to say that X has been fantastic, extremely supportive to both my son, myself and my husband. She is always approachable and professional and to be frank, she has supported us through a very difficult time. I cannot thank her enough and she is an asset to your team. Please once again, pass on my sincere thanks to X.

4. INITIAL CONTACTS

4.1. Initial contacts presented by customers can be queries, concerns, information requests or issues that require a resolution. Whilst customers are provided with information about the complaints process and their rights to complain, we aim to achieve informal resolution at the earliest opportunity, in the best interests of customers for an improved customer experience. The table below shows the initial contact data for each quarter:

Initial Contacts	Q1 (Apr – Jun)	Q2 (Jul – Sep)	Q3 (Oct – Dec)	Q4 (Jan – Mar)	Total 2024/25	
Number Received	72	53	46	59	230	
Number Escalated to Stage 1	17	11	14	14	56	24%

4.2. In 2024/25 we received 230 initial contacts, an increase of nine when compared to the previous year. Through responding to issues or concerns at the outset, we have helped 174 of our customers to receive satisfactory resolutions informally with 56 (24%) initial contacts escalating to a formal stage one complaint. Of the 230 initial contacts, 151 were children’s social care contacts and 79 were corporate contacts.

4.3. Many initial contacts have been resolved without escalation and there has been a decrease in those escalating to stage one when compared to 59 in 2023/24.

An example of an initial contact:

A Dad expressed concern about his son's welfare while in the care of his mother and stated he had not been included in any support plans. The Team Manager followed up with the Early Help worker to link in with Dad and school. Arrangements were made for him to meet the Early Help worker and Assistant Team Manager at the Family Hub and having given consent, arrangements were made for him to be part of the support plan going forward, including meetings with schools. Dad was happy with the response and the initial contact was resolved.

5. COMPLAINTS PROCESS

5.1. **Children's Social Care Complaints** - follows statutory guidance and is a 3-stage process as follows:

- **Stage One** – the initial stage of the process is investigated by an Officer in the Customer Feedback Team. It is hoped a local resolution can be achieved within ten working days, however an extension of up to 20 working days can be requested for more complex cases.
- **Stage Two** – on receipt of the response to their stage one complaint, customers have twenty working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage two if they are unhappy with the initial outcome. At this stage, an Investigating Officer will be appointed to investigate the complaint and an Independent Person who will be involved in all aspects of consideration of the complaint. The investigation can take between 25-65 working days to complete.
- **Stage Three** – if the customer remains unhappy with the outcome of the stage two complaint, they have twenty working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage three. The review should take place within 30 days of the request. At stage three, a review panel will be appointed to review the complaint. This will consist of three independent people who will make recommendations to the Director of Children's Services.

5.2. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

5.3. **Corporate Complaints** - any complaints that do not relate to Statutory Children's Services, are handled under the corporate complaints procedure which consists of the following two formal stages.

- **Stage One** – the initial stage of the process is investigated by an Officer in the Customer Feedback Team. It is hoped a local resolution can be achieved within ten working days; however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases for a further ten working days.
- **Stage Two** – on receipt of the response to their stage one complaint, customers have twenty working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage two if they are unhappy with the initial outcome. At this stage, an Investigating Officer will be appointed to investigate the complaint within twenty working days; however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases for a further 20 working days.

- 5.4. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

6. COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

- 6.1. The table below shows the number of complaints we received under the Children’s Social Care and Corporate Complaints Policies, at each stage of the process.

	Q1 (Apr-Jun)		Q2 (Jul-Sep)		Q3 (Oct-Dec)		Q4 (Jan-Mar)		Totals 2023/24	
	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate		
Stage 1	7	10	6	5	3	11	9	5	56	-3
Stage 2	4	2	2	3	2	4	1	3	21	-7
Stage 3	1	N/A	2	N/A	2	N/A	0	N/A	5	+3
Totals	12 (+4)	12 (+1)	10 (-4)	8 (+1)	7 (-7)	15 (-)	10 (-4)	8 (+1)	82	-7

- 6.2. **Stage one complaints** - TfC received three less stage one complaints this year compared with 2023/24. Of those, there was a decrease of 10 complaints relating to children’s social care and an increase of 7 corporate complaints.
- 6.3. **Stage two complaints** - TfC received seven less stage two complaints this year. Of those there were nine relating to children’s social care compared with 12 in the previous year and 12 relating to corporate complaints compared with 16 the year before.
- 6.4. **Stage three complaints** – Five complaints progressed to stage three, compared to two in 2023/24. One complainant withdrew their request for a Stage 3 Review Panel and it did not go ahead in Quarter 2, therefore four Stage three Review Panels concluded.
- 6.5. **Overall total** - in 2024/25 we received 82 complaints overall compared with 89 in 2023/24 which shows a decrease of 7.8%.
- 6.6. **Number of Complaints by Young People** – 3 complaints were received from young people. One was resolved at staged one, the further two complaints were withdrawn at stage 1 and stage 2 by the young people.

7. STAGE ONE COMPLAINTS

7.1. The table below shows the percentage of stage one complaints received by service area.

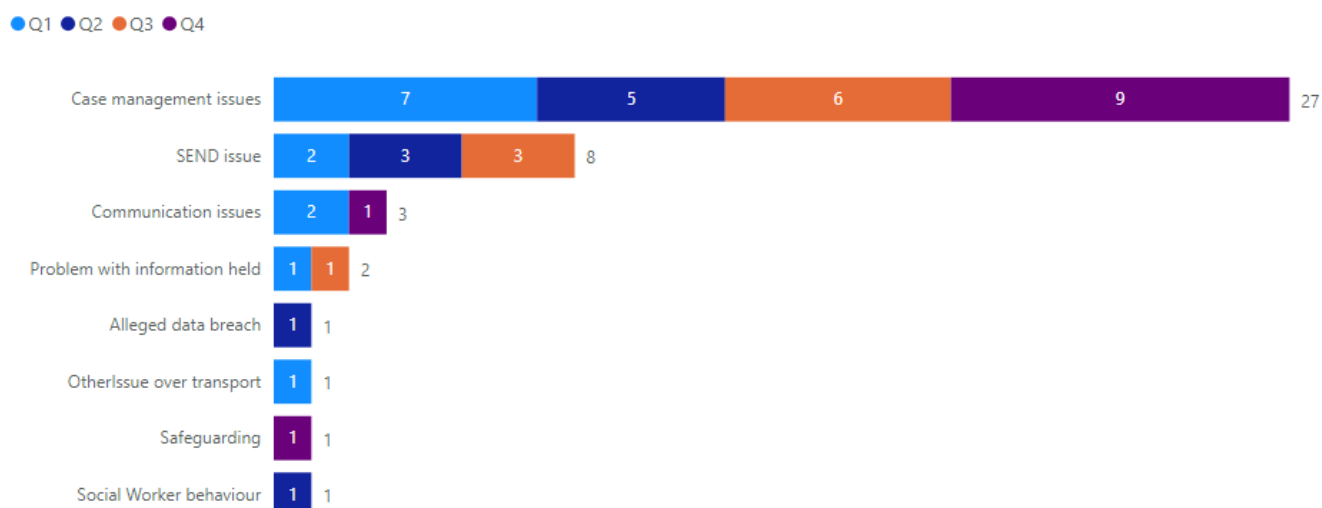
Team	Total 24/25	Percent 24/25
Adoption	1	1.8%
Assessment Teams	10	17.9%
Child Protection Teams	7	12.5%
Finance Team	1	1.8%
Kinship Team	3	5.4%
Early Help Team	5	8.8%
Education	1	1.8%
ICRT Service	1	1.8%
Next Steps	4	7.1%
Cared for Teams	3	5.4%
SEND Team	19	33.9%
Transport	1	1.8%
TOTAL	56	100%

7.2. 33.9% of stage one complaints received in 2024/25 relate to the SEND Team and 10% relate to the Assessment Teams. There has been a decrease in the number of complaints relating to the Child Protection Teams from 11 to 7 when compared with the previous year, and there has been no change in numbers of complaints for the SEND Team with 19 in 2024/25 compared with 19 in 2023/24. Three complaints were withdrawn by the complainants.

Themes:

7.3. The main themes of the complaints completed at Stage One in 2024/25 are shown in the chart below:

Stage 1 Closure by Primary Theme



7.4. Complaints relating to case management (sufficiency of support and decision making) together with complaints linked to EHCP/SEND issues make up the top two themes in 2024/25.

Timeliness of Response to Stage One Complaints:

7.5. The timeliness of stage one complaints has fluctuated over the year but overall there has been a decrease from 72% in the previous year to 56.82% in 2024/25.

% Of all stage 1 complaints responded to in timescale	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
	69.23%	40%	20%	90.91%	56.82%

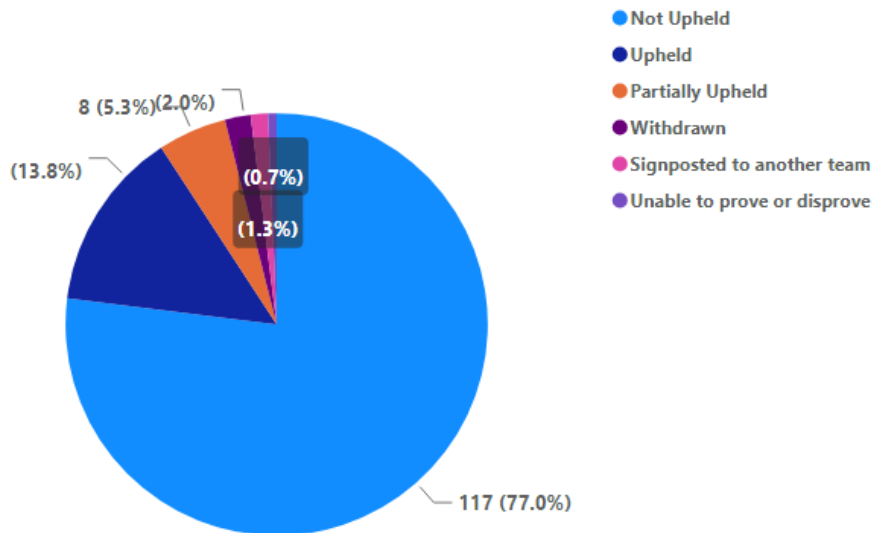
7.6. 12 children’s social care complaints and 13 corporate complaints were responded to within timescale. 6 children’s social care complaints and 12 corporate complaints were responded to out of timescale. Out of the 20 working days timescale, 13 complaints were responded to within 29 working days and 5 were responded to over 30 working days.

7.7. The Customer Feedback Team aim to resolve concerns at the earliest stage for customers by providing a greater focus on customer conciliation and mediation, e.g., offering opportunities for customers to meet with workers and managers so they can listen, discuss, and resolve their issues rather than moving to the lengthier stage two process (where this is possible). Whilst this increases customer satisfaction, consequently it can take some complaints at stage one out of timescale. We continue to focus on how to achieve the same result but within the 10 or 20 working day timescales.

Stage One Complaint Outcomes:

7.8. There were 152 elements of complaint identified within stage one complaints that concluded in 2024/25, compared with 136 elements of complaint in the previous year. The outcomes of all stage one complaint elements for the year are shown below.

Stage 1 Complaint Element Outcomes



7.9. Most complaint elements (equating to 77.0%) were not upheld.

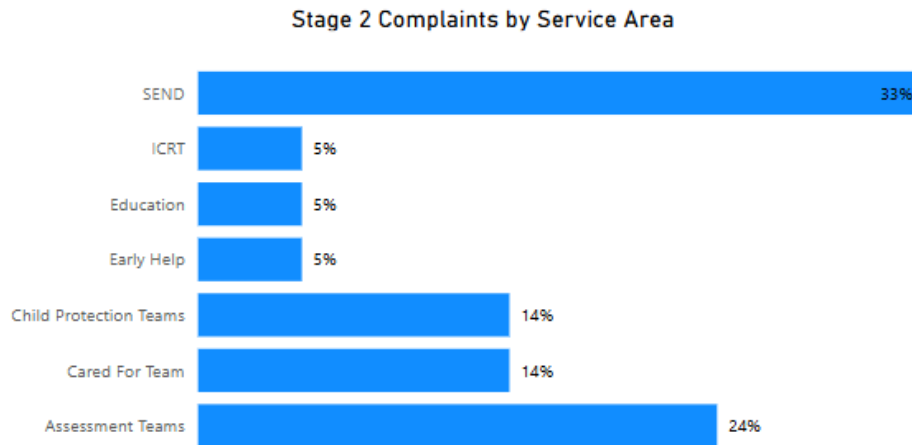
7.10. Of the 152 elements of complaint, 13.8% were upheld. A further 5.3% of elements were partially upheld. The upheld complaints related to case management issues, communication and SEND issues.

An example of a stage one corporate complaint:
 A mother alleged that she had not been provided with an updated version of her daughter’s EHCP and that she had been informed that information from CYPS (Children and Young People’s Service) had been necessary but this had been repeatedly sent back further delaying the plan. The matter was discussed with the Caseworker who explained that we had needed further clarity from CYPS about the support required as we needed specifically to know the length and frequency of sessions to finalise the plan and cover the cost. As the delays were outside of TfC this complaint was not upheld.

8. STAGE TWO COMPLAINTS

Overall, the number of stage two complaints has decreased by seven when compared to last year. One complaint was also withdrawn by the complainant.

8.1. The chart below shows the stage two complaints received by service area.



8.2. Of the 21 stage two complaints received, 33% related to the SEND Team, 14% to Child Protection Teams, 14% to Cared for Teams and 24% to the Assessment Teams. Compared with the previous year, there has been a notable shift in stage two complaints concerning the SEND team, reducing from 42.9% to 33%.

8.3. The top theme for stage two complaints related to case management and decision making.

For example:

- how information has been shared
- timeliness of EHCP plans
- accuracy of information
- provision of education provision identified in EHCP
- disagreement with alleged accusations
- timeliness of assessments
- decisions not to return child to parents
- not agreeing with social worker involvement

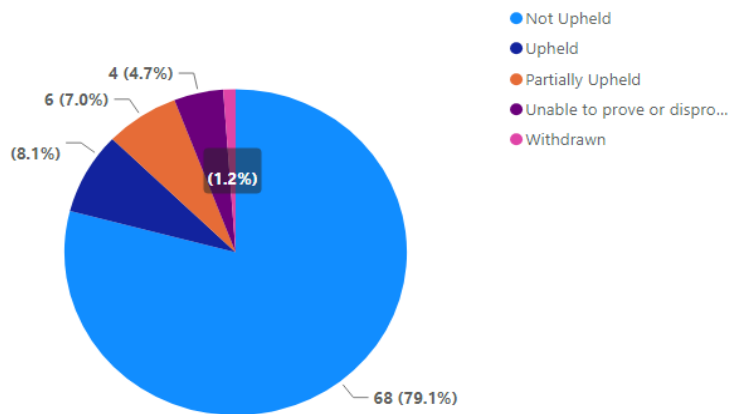
Timeliness of Response to Stage Two Complaints:

8.4. In 2024/25, 25 complaints concluded (figures differ to numbers received, as there were complaints open at the start of the year from 2023/24 and complaints that remain open moving into 2024-25). Seven of the 13 stage two Children's Social Care complaints were completed within the 65 working-day timescale (53.8%). Nine of the 12 stage two corporate complaints were completed within the 40 working-day timescale (75%).

8.5. The average days taken for investigation and adjudication of the complaints was 47 working days: a slight increase from an average of 40 working days in 2023/24. This will continue to be an area of focus for the Customer Feedback Team in 2025/26.

Stage Two Complaint Outcomes

8.6. There were 86 elements of complaint identified within all stage two complaints that concluded in 2024/25. The outcomes of stage two complaint elements for the year are shown below:



8.7. At stage two, most complaint elements equating to 79.1% were not upheld compared with 56.52% in 2023-24. 7% percent of elements were partially upheld compared to 13% in 2023-24 and 8.1% were upheld compared with 30.43% in 2023-24.

An example of a stage two social care (statutory) complaint:

A parent made a complaint about an Initial Child Protection Conference regarding their son and his siblings. The parent complained that during the Initial Child Protection Conference inappropriate terminology was used by a manager and the parent was not provided with the opportunity to comment following information provided by professionals. Management listened to the parent and acknowledged concerns about the terminology used during the Conference and apologised to the parent they did not feel able to share their views. As a result of the investigation, it was agreed that Together for Children would reinforce their practice around inviting parents to share their views throughout an Initial Child Protection Conference.

An example of a stage two complaint (corporate):

A parent contacted TFC to complain that a Child and Family assessment written by Together for Children included bias towards his ex-wife. He explained that the Child and Family assessment included incorrect information, and it had been sent to a solicitor which could be used to create a negative opinion of him, during ongoing private law proceedings. TFC considered his complaint and advised that while some of the information included in the Child and Family assessment was provided by Police and therefore deemed to be accurate, it was agreed that wording within the assessment could have been given more consideration to provide clarity of meaning. TFC provided an apology to the parent for this and for any distress the content of the Child and Family assessment may have caused and any impact it may have had on him.

9. STAGE THREE COMPLAINTS

9.1. There were five requests for Stage Three Review Panels. One complainant withdrew their request for a Stage Three Review Panel, and therefore four were concluded:

- The first complaint had 21 elements, and the Panel changed the outcome of three of those elements of complaint. One from partially upheld to upheld, one from not upheld to upheld and one from not upheld to unable to prove or disprove.
- The second complaint had one element, and the Panel agreed with the outcome.
- The third complaint had six elements, and the Panel changed the outcome of one of those elements from not upheld to unable to prove or disprove.
- The fourth complaint had one element, and the Panel agreed with the outcome.

10. OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

- 10.1. There have been ten complaints highlighted to the Customer Feedback Team by the Local Government Ombudsman this year. Seven were closed after initial enquiries.
- 10.2. Of the three investigated, one was not upheld; one was upheld with no fault due to the Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaint responses being out of timescale; one was upheld with fault relating to SEND delays with the EHCP, poor communication and a lack of support resulting in a remedy payment of £350.

11. COST OF COMPLAINTS

- 11.1. The total cost of investigating claims this year was £10,633 compared to £21,445 in the previous year. All stage two investigations are undertaken by TfC Investigating Officers rather than using external allocations, resulting in a significant saving. The costs therefore relate to the external recruitment of Independent Persons who work alongside the Investigating Officers in line with statutory guidance.
- 11.2. The compensation costs paid in relation to upheld complaints this year is £11,611 compared with £43,920 last year. This relates to five corporate SEND complaints relating to delays in the EHCP process, poor communication, distress, time and trouble for raising the complaints and lack of support. The 1 children's social care complaint compensation costs related to up to 8 weeks that would have been given to Panel-approved kinship carers if Together for Children's process and communication had been better.

12. PERSISTENT & UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT BEHAVIOUR

- 12.1. The Customer Feedback Manager wrote to one customer this year regarding the content and frequency of their communications to our services. The matters did not escalate further.

13. LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT

- 13.1. TfC continue to drive improvement from learning from the complaints and compliments raised. An action plan is maintained by the Customer Feedback Team which includes actions and recommendations from stage two investigations and stage three panels. The action plan is closely monitored by the team. Reminders are sent to managers with responsibility for the recommendations each month and reported into Senior Management Team meetings to ensure that the learning is shared across the whole service.

Below are some areas where learning has been taken from complaints and messages or processes have been reinforced following the resolution of complaints:

- Ensuring no drift and delay in the completion of tasks including risk assessments. Work is ongoing to improve the quality of supervision and monitored through audit and quality assurance processes.
- Specific training for Social Workers regarding neurodiversity has been held and will be repeated on a rolling program to allow all staff to access this. This covers the completion of written documents.
- A prompt given within care arrangement meetings for Social Care staff and parents around parents/carers giving gifts and letters to children and communications in the child's care plan.
- Keeping parents up to date if there are any delays in making referrals and explaining why a referral cannot be made at the time it is discussed.

- 13.2. Although there is still work to do to continue to improve timeliness, we have received positive feedback from customers confirming that concerns are being resolved at an earlier stage and therefore customers are not having to proceed through the lengthier stages unnecessarily.
- 13.3. The Customer Feedback Team will continue to proactively work with services to analyse arising themes to identify learning and improvement opportunities.

- 13.4. Through our complaints handling management system, Apteon Respond, complaints data is now more accessible, can be reported more easily and assists with workflow management within the team. In May 2024, the Customer Feedback Team completed the second phase of development of the Apteon Respond system in relation to a new workflow of our MP and Councillor Enquiries that has improved efficiency and effectiveness with these responses.
- 13.5. Work will continue to be carried out to look at the reasons for escalation from initial contacts to Stage 1, and from Stage 1 to 2 to see if any work can be done to resolve issues at an earlier stage. These reviews will consider the complexity of concerns raised by parents.
- 13.6. We are now working to the principles of the LGO Complaint Handling Code that was introduced in February 2024 for our corporate complaints. The Complaint Handling Code sets out a process for organisations that allows them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The purpose of the Code is to enable organisations to resolve complaints raised by individuals promptly, and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It also helps to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals. The Code acts as a guide for individuals setting out what they may expect from an organisation when they make a complaint.