

OVERVIEW OF COMPLAINTS – 2021/2022

REPORT OF: DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES
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Wards Affected: (All)
Key Decision: No
Report to: Scrutiny for Leader, Deputy Leader and Housing and Customer Service
8th March 2023

Purpose of Report

1. To provide Members with annual information about formal complaints received by the council from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022. It also summarises the complaints referred to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) during the same period.

Recommendations

2. **The Committee is recommended to receive the report.**

Background

3. In 2021/22 the council received 161 complaints. 99% of these were investigated and responded to within the target times set out within the Council's complaints procedure. During the same period the council also received 320 compliments. This compares to 181 complaints and 575 compliments received in 2020/21.
4. Transparently reviewing and learning from our complaints and compliments data is a crucial step in ensuring we respond to feedback, identify opportunities for improvement, and celebrate our success. The staff newsletter provides the number of complaints and compliments received and highlights some examples of excellent customer service to share best practice. The total number of complaints and compliments received are also reported quarterly to Scrutiny Committee and reported through the monthly Member Information Service (MIS).
5. The compliments highlight our residents' appreciation of the services we provide and the efforts of our staff. In addition to those recorded below, verbal compliments are often received but not always recorded. The following is a breakdown of comments by service area:

Team	Compliments 21/22	Team	Compliments 2122
Customer Services	121	Environmental Health	5
Waste & Outdoor Svcs	85	Parking	3
Planning	61	Planning Support	3
Revenues & Benefits	17	Estates & Facilities	2
Wellbeing & Community Services	7	Communications	2
Housing	6	Digital	1
Democratic Services	6	Legal	1

6. Examples of the compliments we have received are shown below:

Communications – Praise from residents for the excellent and informative Mid Sussex Matters magazine.

Community Services – Thanks for organising of the play days across the district and other initiatives you assist with.

Corporate Estates – Thanks to both facilities and estates teams for all their work both in the offices and the district in making improvements and helping to make things run as smoothly as possible.

Customer Services – Thanks to the team from residents for the pro-active and caring help they provide across various services and for going the extra mile to assist those in a vulnerable situation. Thanks, received from residents to say that they are able to contact Mid Sussex District Council through multiple channels i.e. self-service, face to face and on the phone. Existing and new residents who have recently moved into Mid Sussex find this very refreshing.

Democratic Services and Elections - Thanks for the excellent minutes produced by the team and the way council meetings were conducted, particularly during Covid. Thanks for the way in which elections and canvass are run and for the assistance with events that are organised on behalf of Members including the Mid Sussex Applauds awards.

Digital – Thanks received for responding to queries raised by residents about customer facing technology so promptly.

Environmental Health – Thanks received for staff for dealing with sensitive neighbour enquiries, ranging from licensing, drainage, and noise. Grateful thanks received from residents who have received assistance through the Disabled Facilities Grant programme (DFG). Taxi drivers complimenting the service that they receive from the team and how we try to make it as accessible as possible, compared to their experience with some other authorities.

Housing – Thank you to staff for their help and support for both providing temporary accommodation and supporting vulnerable residents to stay in their homes. It has a huge impact on their lives. A quote which sums this up was: - *“For once in my life I am really happy, the accommodation was amazing, so peaceful and I’ve had the best night’s sleep in a long time.”*

Parking - Thank given to the **Civil Enforcement Officers** for taking action when made aware of parking problems and for the help that they give to vulnerable people during their visits throughout the district.

Planning – Compliments received about the way planning officers conduct themselves and manage the planning process and how efficient this feels compared to their experience with some other authorities. The positive impact of paths as part of the place and connectivity works.

Planning & Building Control Support Team – thanks for the service received - amazing service during the Covid pandemic – *“I have really struggled to contact other Local Authorities and their timescales have slipped massively but Mid Sussex have continued to provide an excellent service with no delays for which I am very grateful.”*

Revenues and Benefits – Vulnerable and concerned residents appreciate the help given both in reception and on the phone from staff on a range of matters.

Waste & Outdoor Services - Compliments to Serco for prompt response to fly-tipping, their cheerfulness and friendly disposition during collections and their assistance to our vulnerable residents. Thanks for their work during both extremes of inclement weather.

Thanks were given for assisting in arranging for parks and open spaces to be cleared before and after community events. Improvements to parks and open spaces, and the handling sensitive enquiries such as organising memorial benches on land that we are responsible for.

Wellbeing - Thanks received for the various initiatives and workshops, including the weight-off workshop, smoking cessation, alcohol, falls initiative and well-being checks – to quote feedback received - *“I doubt there’s anywhere in the country that offers the brilliant service that Mid Sussex offers!”*

Local Government Ombudsman Referrals

7. The LGO nationally reviewed 15,826 complaints from the public in 2021-22 which was an increase compared to 11,830 in 2020-21, however the LGO stopped accepting new complaints for three months due to Covid-19. Comparing 21/22 instead to pre-pandemic levels, 2019-20 shows 17,019 complaints received, and therefore reflects a reduction.
8. Of the 15,826 complaints received, 66% (two thirds) of their investigations were upheld, which decreased slightly from 67% in the previous year. The LGO’s latest data specifically relating to MSDC’s performance can be viewed via the following link: [Your Councils Statistics](#)
9. The LGO received 14 complaints in total for MSDC in 2021/2022 compared to 15 in 2020/2021. The breakdown of LGO Complaints and how they were handled for MSDC in 2021/22 are as follows;

Total received for Investigation	-	14
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Of these:

Closed without further action	-	7
Referred for local resolution	-	3

Of the remaining 4:

Not upheld	-	1
Upheld	-	3

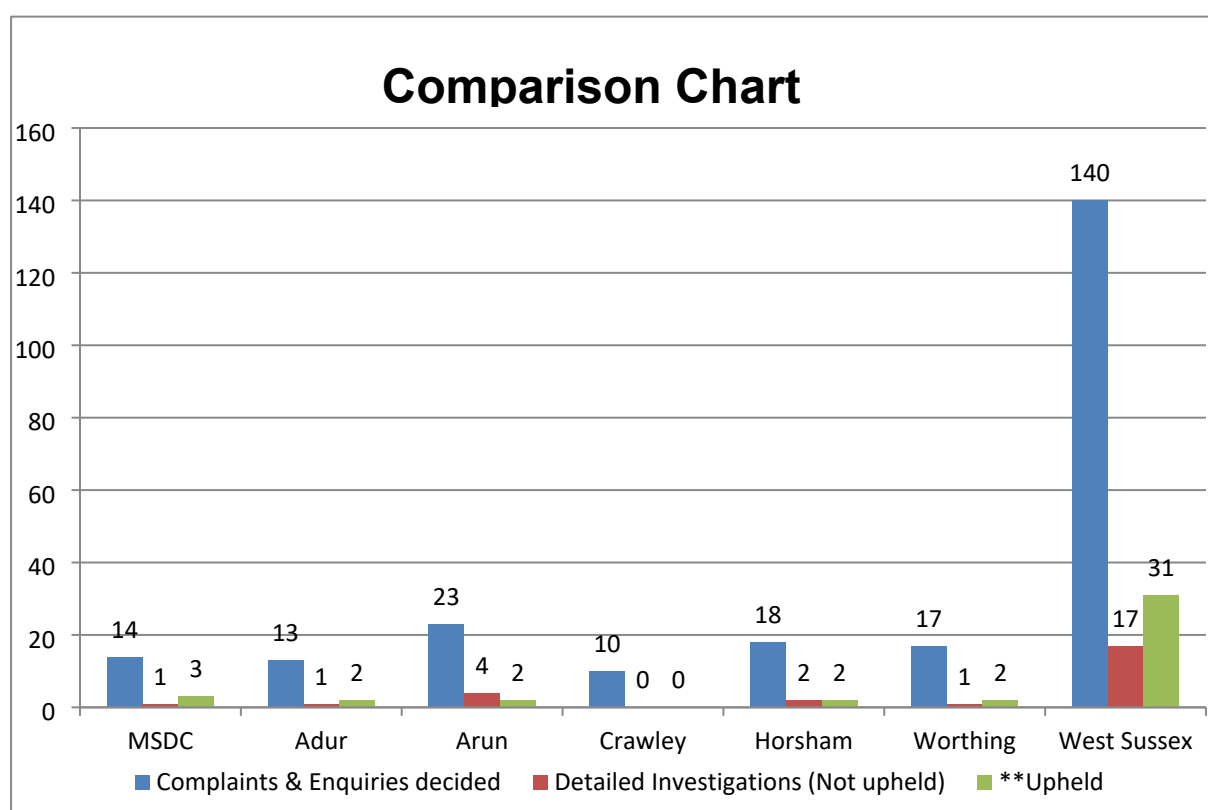
10. Therefore 75% of complaints that received detailed investigations were upheld compared to an average of 51% in similar authorities. Although it should be noted that while technically upheld, one complaint was not investigated as it did not meet the tests in the LGO assessment Code on how they decide which complaints to investigate, and the council had already provided a suitable resolution to the resident.
11. The council maintained its 100% compliance rate with any recommendations from the LGO and had already provided a satisfactory remedy in 33% of upheld cases, meaning that the council had already provided a satisfactory remedy to the resident before the complaint had reached the LGO or been investigated by them, compared to 20% in similar authorities.
12. The LGO states that they are reassured to see that compliance with their recommendations remains high which suggests that the system we have in place is in good health. They are also often impressed by authorities’ commitment to significant service changes and reviews following detailed complaint investigations.

13. The council follows the LGO good practice guidance in dealing with complaints:
- Ensuring reports are concise and written in plain English where possible to ensure they can be understood by a range of people.
 - Ensuring there is a record of how all key material planning considerations were considered.
 - Ensuring comments from local people and other bodies are summarised so people can see what was considered.
 - Clearly explaining what is being considered and the impact on any existing permissions and planning controls.
 - Using a system for recording reasons for decisions, even if the decision is that no action should be taken.

14. A local comparison for the number of complaints received by the LGO is as follows:

Adur	Arun	Crawley	Horsham	Mid Sussex	Worthing	West Sussex County Council
12	15	9	16	14	23	128

15. A local comparison of decisions made by the LGO for the period 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022 in West Sussex is shown in the table below:



** Upheld complaints are those where the LGO finds some fault in the way a council acted, even if it has agreed to put things right during the investigation or has accepted it needs to remedy the situation before the complainant made the complaint.

Complaints process and detail of LGO investigations

16. The Council has a formal complaints procedure (a link is available in the Background Papers section). A summary of all complaints and compliments received are reported to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Customer Services monthly and included in our Monthly Members Information Service. Heads of Service are advised of complaints which are being investigated by the LGO.
17. There can be discrepancies between the number of complaints received for investigation and the number completed by the LGO as sometimes they are completed in following fiscal year.
18. There were four detailed investigations undertaken by the LGO in 2021/22 into complaints by Mid Sussex residents. These four investigations were for Anti-Social Behaviour, Environmental Health (two), and Waste & Outdoor Services with three being upheld. Details of the upheld cases, their resolutions and improvement actions are shown below:

Service	Details of Complaint	LGO Summary	Service Improvement
1. Anti-Social Behaviour	A Community Protection Warning (CPW) was issued for filming of neighbours.	Complaint upheld. Although no fault was found for issuing the CPW, the LGO asked the Council to apologise for any confusion caused. An apology was given.	Processes reviewed and updated where required to avoid future issues.
2. Environmental Health	Complaint about the lack of interim support received following the breakdown of a stairlift under the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) adaptations.	Complaint upheld. Apology made for inconvenience and costs reimbursed.	Internal processes updated to include the LGO's recommendations.
3. Waste and Outdoor Services	Complaint about change in collection point of clinical waste for a vulnerable resident.	Complaint upheld. Although the complaint was upheld, the LGO did not investigate as the Council had already resolved the issue with the resident.	Although upheld, the LGO closed the complaint as the Council had already worked with the resident to reach a resolution. As per standard complaints handling, our processes were also reviewed internally to identify any opportunities for improvement.

19. Further details on the complaints closed before a detailed investigation took place are shown below:

Service	LGO Summary
Planning and development.	Closed after initial enquiries. (Complaint about granting planning permission for a detached single garage and workshop)

Planning and development.	Closed after initial enquiries. (Complaint about a planning application)
Planning and development	Closed after initial enquiries. (Complaint about lack of consideration given to trees when granting planning permission for a dwelling.)
Planning and development	Closed after initial enquiries. (Complaint about how allegations regarding works to protected trees had been dealt with. Had already appealed to the Planning Inspector).
Planning and development	Closed after initial enquiries. (Complaint about handling of neighbour's planning application)
Other	Closed after initial enquiries. (Alleged failure to consult properly on closure of a public building as consultation ongoing.)

Financial Implications

20. Reimbursements were required for one environmental health case as described above.

Risk Management Implications

21. There are no specific risk management implications arising from this report.

Equality and Customer Service Implications

22. Complaints are an opportunity to learn and improve our services. Emphasis is placed on reviewing processes as much as the actual complaint, to ensure we don't miss any opportunities to improve, learn, and avoid similar outcomes in future.

Other Material Implications

23. There are no other material implications arising from this report.

Sustainability Implications

24. There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

Appendices:

- [LGO Annual Review letters](#)

Background Papers

- [Review of Local Government Complaints 21-22](#)
- [MSDC Feedback page](#)
- [MSDC Complaints Procedure](#)