

Agenda

Audit and Governance Committee

Date: Thursday 25 September 2025

Time: 10.00 am

**Place: Conference Room 1, Herefordshire Council Offices,
Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE**

Notes: Please note the time, date and venue of the meeting.

For any further information please contact:

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Agenda for the meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee

Membership

Chairperson **Councillor David Hitchiner**

Vice-chairperson **Councillor Mark Woodall**

Councillor Chris Bartrum

Councillor Frank Cornthwaite

Councillor Peter Hamblin

Councillor Robert Highfield

Councillor Aubrey Oliver

Kerry Diamond Independent Expert

Agenda

	Pages
1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE To receive apologies for absence.	
2. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY) To receive details of any councillor nominated to attend the meeting in place of a member of the committee.	
3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST To receive declarations of interest in respect of items on the agenda.	
4. MINUTES To approve and sign the minutes of the meeting held on 15 July 2025.	11 - 16
HOW TO SUBMIT QUESTIONS Deadline for receipt of questions is 5pm on Friday 19 September 2025. Questions must be submitted to councillorservices@herefordshire.gov.uk . Questions sent to any other address may not be accepted. Accepted questions and the response to them will be published as a supplement to the agenda papers prior to the meeting. Further information and guidance is available at www.herefordshire.gov.uk/getinvolved	
5. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC To receive any questions from members of the public.	
6. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS To receive any questions from councillors.	
7. ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S INFORMATION REQUESTS & COMPLAINTS 2024/25 To inform the committee of performance in the areas of complaints, data incidents and requests for information made to the council over the municipal year 2024/25.	17 - 74
8. 2024/25 EXTERNAL AUDIT FINDINGS REPORT To consider the external audit findings report for the year ended 31 March 2025. <i>NB: Papers to follow.</i>	To Follow
9. ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2024/25 To seek the view of the committee as to whether the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for 2024/25 properly reflects the internal control environment the council is operating in and the appropriateness of actions identified to improve.	To Follow

<i>N.B: Papers to follow.</i>	
10. 2024/25 STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS	To Follow
To approve the 2024/25 Statement of Accounts and associated letter of representation from Grant Thornton, the external auditors.	
<i>N.B: Papers to follow.</i>	
11. EXTERNAL AUDITOR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2024/25	To Follow
To present to the Audit and Governance Committee the External Auditor's Annual Report 2024/25 for information and discussion.	
<i>N.B: Papers to follow.</i>	
12. INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN 2025/26	To Follow
To review and agree the Internal auditor's plan for 2025/26.	
<i>N.B: Papers to follow.</i>	
13. WORK PROGRAMME	75 - 78
To consider the work programme for the committee.	
14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING	
Tuesday 28 October 2025, 2pm.	

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- Attend all council, cabinet, committee and sub-committee meetings unless the business to be transacted would disclose 'confidential' or 'exempt' information.
- Inspect agenda and public reports at least five clear days before the date of the meeting. Agenda and reports (relating to items to be considered in public) are available at www.herefordshire.gov.uk/meetings
- Inspect minutes of the council and all committees and sub-committees and written statements of decisions taken by the cabinet or individual cabinet members for up to six years following a meeting.
- Inspect background papers used in the preparation of public reports for a period of up to four years from the date of the meeting (a list of the background papers to a report is given at the end of each report). A background paper is a document on which the officer has relied in writing the report and which otherwise is not available to the public.
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- Have access to a list specifying those powers on which the council have delegated decision making to their officers identifying the officers concerned by title. The council's constitution is available at www.herefordshire.gov.uk/constitution
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The location of the office and details of city bus services can be viewed at:

www.herefordshire.gov.uk/downloads/file/1597/hereford-city-bus-map-local-services-

The Seven Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles)

1. Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

2. Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

3. Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

4. Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

5. Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

6. Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

7. Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour and treat others with respect. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Guide to the Audit and Governance Committee

The Audit and Governance Committee comprises seven members of the council and may also include an independent person who is not a councillor but is appointed by council.

Councillor David Hitchiner (Chairperson)	Independents for Herefordshire
Councillor Mark Woodall (Vice Chairperson)	The Green Party
Councillor Chris Bartrum	Liberal Democrats
Councillor Frank Cornthwaite	Conservative Party
Councillor Peter Hamblin	Conservative Party
Councillor Robert Highfield	Conservative Party
Councillor Aubrey Oliver	Liberal Democrats
K Diamond	Independent Person

The Audit and Governance Committee oversees the audit and corporate governance arrangements of the Council including the annual audit plans and reports of the internal and external auditors, the Council's system of internal control, risk management framework and prevention and detection of fraud and corruption. In particular, the Committee has responsibility for considering and approving the annual statement of accounts. Further details about the committees function can be found [here](#).

Minutes of the meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee held in Conference Room 1, Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 15 July 2025 at 2.00 pm

Committee members present in person and voting: Councillors: David Hitchiner (Chairperson), Mark Woodall (Vice-Chairperson), Chris Bartrum, Peter Hamblin, Robert Highfield, Aubrey Oliver and Richard Thomas

Non-Voting Committee Person: K Diamond

[Note: Committee members participating via remote attendance, i.e. through video conferencing facilities, may not vote on any decisions taken.]

Others in attendance:

G Hawkins	Senior Manager, Grant Thornton
J Nelson	Counter Fraud Manager
S O'Connor	Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer
P Stoddart	Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services
J Tranmer	Chief Accountant
J Preece	Democratic Services Officer
C Smith	Public Sector Audit Manager. Grant Thornton
L Cater	Head of Internal Audit, South West Audit Partnership

70. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Frank Cornthwaite.

71. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Cllr Richard Thomas attended the meeting as a substitute member for Cllr Frank Cornthwaite.

72. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

73. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2025 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the chairperson.

74. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

No questions had been received from members of the public.

75. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

No questions had been received from councillors.

76. CODE OF CONDUCT FOR COUNCILLORS - SIX MONTHLY REVIEW

The Head of Legal Services (HLS) introduced the report, which he split into two parts. The following principal points were noted.

Code of Conduct

- 4 complaints had been received about Herefordshire Council councillors which was a marked decrease from previous years.
- No complaints had been received from Herefordshire members about another member.
- 29 complaints had been received for Parish and Town Councils which was a reduction of 25%,
- [Appendix 1](#) was highlighted. Over the past 6 years, 85 Parish and Town Councils had received no complaints and only 9 had generated more than 5 complaints. Although it may seem numbers were high, it should be taken into account the number of Parish and Town Councils there were. Acknowledgement was given to Bartestree with Lugwardine Parish Council who had received no complaints in the last administrative year, having historically received high numbers.
- In relation to Key Performance Indicators, from the receipt of a complaint to the issuing of the initial assessment had reduced from 31 days to 26 since Q4.
- Response times from Independent Persons (IP) remained exceptional at 1 day.
- There had been two cases of a complaint that had reached a standards panel one had taken 39 calendar days, and the other 53 from Initial Assessment to Outcome, the variation showed that it was very much dependent upon the circumstances, availability of witnesses etc. The councillors in both hearings were found by the standards panel to be in breach of the code of conduct making recommendations to the Parish council and to the councillor to remedy the breach, unfortunately, neither councillor had complied, and both had indicated that they would not comply with the recommendations calling in to question again the adequacy of sanctions.
- A standards panel having not convened for 7 years had to adopt a new process and train new panel members. It was thought that the process went as well as expected and following lessons learnt, a meeting had been set up with the current panel members to see where the process could be improved.
- 40% of all complainants during the 2024/25 period were generated by Parish/Town Councillors against other councillors. This was disappointing because the majority could and should have been dealt with between the members themselves and caused unnecessary work and time of the service.
- 60% of all complaints had respect or a lack of respect featuring as part of the complaint.
- Although an extremely low number of Parish/Town councils had signed up to the NALC/SLCC civility and respect pledge (7) previously, it was reported that 5 additional councils had signed up since January.
- The IP expressed their satisfaction with how the process was working and offered her compliments to the HLS and his team.

Following committee discussion it was noted.

1. Feedback is received, noted and acknowledged from dissatisfied complainants and dissatisfied subject members about complaints, however there is no right of appeal unless they feel the Council has failed to follow process and can appeal to the Local Government Ombudsman.

2. The IP explained in her personal experience with cases she had not differed significantly in opinion from officers and that if feedback was being received it would be interesting for that to be shared with the IP's.
3. With regards to Councillors Bradford and Sinclair not complying with the recommendations of the standards panel it was confirmed that there was no further action that could be taken. Change in legislation on sanctions was expected from Government over the next 12 months.
4. The cases of Councillor Bradford and Sinclair were not the norm; the HLS never having experienced a member not accepting the findings of a standard panel before and highlighted that most similar cases were dealt with at the initial investigation stage with most Councillors offering to or already having apologised meaning the complaint ended there and then.

Informal Resolution Process

- It was proposed that a threshold be considered that must happen before a complaint is received by Herefordshire Council and dealt with under the Code of Conduct Process.
- A proposed draft could be found at [Appendix 2a](#) and [Appendix 2b](#)
- The proposal had come after two years' worth of data highlighting a trend of majority of complaints being around a lack of respect and categorised as minor, meaning that most complaints are resolved at the initial assessment and not the types of complaints that should be coming to the monitoring officer to deal with under the Code of Conduct. Most of these are generated by parish/town councillors.
- The Standards Panel had also voiced a similar view from a recent case they had seen and felt it could have been dealt with better at an early stage informally.
- This was just a concept and pending agreement from the Committee to continue, the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Chair would bring a proposal back to this committee as soon as possible.

Following committee discussion it was noted.

1. There would be no data collected on the number of complaints received using this informal process as it was envisaged that there would be resolution by the Parish and Town Council and no need for the Councils' involvement.
2. It was clarified that an informal resolution did not result in anybody being found in breach of the code or not in breach of the code. The infraction would be resolved informally and hopefully with the outcome being a better relationship going on in future, which was thought could work for both members of the public and councillors.
3. It was noted that it should be an informal resolution procedure, which could be optional for the complainant.
4. It was queried whether the protocol would be effective and the amount of officer time spent pulling the process together be worth it.

RESOLVED

The committee proposes further development to the Informal Resolution Protocol (IRP) and delegates to the Monitoring Officer (in consultation with the Chair of Committee) to bring a preferred option proposal back to the committee.

77. ANTI-FRAUD, BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION POLICY AND FRAUD RESPONSE PLAN

The Counter Fraud Manager (CFM) presented the report, the purpose of which was for the Audit and Governance Committee to review and approve the updated Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy, the new Fraud Response Plan and Flowchart. The following principal points were noted.

- The policy undergoes a review every three years, and it had been updated in line with the Council's corporate branding and the content itself had been streamlined to ensure that it was clear and concise.
- The updated legislation within section 12 of the policy was highlighted, which included the new failure to prevent fraud offence which is being introduced on the 1st of September 2025.
- The policy now incorporated the recently updated 6 strategic pillars to include deterrence and protect.
- The fraud response plan had been separated from the policy to be a standalone document.

Following committee questions, it was noted.

1. Concern was raised on paragraph [12.2](#) of the Anti-fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy (appendix 1). The CFM explained that it is not feasible or expected that all organisations prevent every single case of fraud, but the expectation is to increase the onus on larger organisations specifically to ensure that they have got robust controls and considerations around how they manage the risk of fraud. Section 13 (taken from the Home Office guidance) outlined six bullet points that providing the council are comfortable assurances around those six criteria are in place, then the council are protecting themselves as an organisation against the new legislation.
2. The Annual Fraud report presented to the committee normally in January provides the committee with detailed breakdowns and an overview on all counter fraud activity across the Council's services throughout the previous calendar year and represents an up-to-date account of the work undertaken, including progress and outcomes aligned with the strategy and core objectives.
3. The CFM was the only dedicated resource in the team and reported directly into the Section 151 officer who would take on his duties in his absence.
4. The Head of Internal Audit explained that when an audit is undertaken, they always look for any potential fraud and if they did find something that would be reported straight to the CFM.
5. Second home premiums were being monitored closely with the council tax and revenues department. A risk assessment was in place to ensure adequate controls are in place to try to detect and react to issues.
6. Herefordshire Council had successfully completed the Cyber Assessment Framework ('Get CAF Ready') scheme and received a recognition grant award of £15,000 from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for the good progress made and were now in a strong position ahead of the expected mandatory introduction in Summer 2026.
7. The Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services felt the Council was in a good position and that Cabinet would be reviewing the corporate risks which included Cyber Security and providing an update on those in September.

RESOLVED

The committee approved the updated Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy and recommends for adoption by the cabinet member for finance.

78. INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE REPORT QUARTER 1 2025/26

The Head of Internal Audit (HIA) South West Partnership (SWAP) introduced the report the purpose of which was to update the committee on the progress of internal audit work and to bring to their attention any key internal control issues arising from work recently completed. The following principal were noted.

- Two reports had been finalised since the last committee, the CQC Inspection Readiness and VfM Assessment Public Realm & Minor Works Framework.

- Five reports were at draft stage, with two having been completed since publication of Q1. These would be included in the committee's next update and two reports were in progress.
- Attention was drawn to the action tracking, showing the open agreed actions and the number that have been closed since the Q4 report.

Following committee discussion, it was noted.

1. The HIA would confirm who was responsible for the delays in obtaining information and clarification during the CQC Inspection Readiness audit.
2. It was queried if it was normal for the Council's first self-assessment to be seen halfway through the year and if the piece of work was worth doing given the audit had to stop midway through as the inspection was happening. Confirmation would be given that this was already included on the Audit Plan.
3. Work carried out by SWAP in connection with the embedding of VfM in the Public Realm Contract indicated that further work was required to identify how this could be assessed.

The committee noted the report.

Action(s)

2025/26-01 The HIA would confirm who was responsible for the delays in obtaining information and clarification during the CQC Inspection Readiness audit.

2025/26-02 The HIA would confirm if the CQC Inspection Readiness audit was included on the audit plan.

79. 2024/25 FINANCIAL STATEMENT AUDIT PROGRESS

The Audit Manager (AM) Grant Thornton (GT) presented the report, the purpose of which was to report progress on the external audit of the council's 2024/25 draft financial statements. The following principal points were noted.

- Work had started earlier than planned.
- Significant testing had started earlier in the year at planning stage.
- Most samples had been issued; GT were awaiting officers to pull together evidence.
- The audit was ahead of where they would expect it to be, and very much on track at that point to complete the audit by the end of September.
- Significant risk areas that were identified during audit planning included management override of controls which is a standard significant risk across all audits, valuation of the Council's property, plant and equipment and the Council's investment properties, valuation of the pensions.

Councillor Stoddart, Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services issued his thanks to the Director of Finance and her team for publishing the draft statement of accounts a month in advance of the deadline and one of the first in the country, which has enabled GT to make an earlier start and in a good place to complete the audit by the end of September.

The Chief Accountant felt the audit was progressing well, the finance team, were working hard to reply with evidence, samples and responses to queries. They were pleased to have received a site visit from GT which was felt to be beneficial on both sides and that they were looking to repeat another visit in August.

In response to committee questions, it was noted.

1. The Senior Manager GT confirmed that they were not experiencing any resource squeezes due to the impact of devolution of district councils and that they were not seeing any movement for mergers in the regional area at the moment.
2. The AM worked remotely from Glasgow with the auditor in charge based in India. It was hoped that pending visas the auditor in charge would travel to the UK for the month in August and join the rest of the team in another site visit to Herefordshire. It was noted that the audit was completed fully remotely last year, and it did not cause any major problems.

The committee noted the report.

80. WORK PROGRAMME

The committee's work programme was noted.

81. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday, 25 September 2025 10am

The meeting ended at 3.51 pm

Chairperson



Title of report: Annual review of the council's Information Requests & Complaints 2024/25

Meeting: Audit & Governance Committee

Meeting date: 25 September 2025

Report by: Information Governance Manager / Complaints and Children's Rights Manager

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

All wards

Purpose

To inform the committee of performance in the areas of complaints, data incidents and requests for information made to the council over the municipal year 2024/25.

Recommendation(s)

That the information set out in the report is noted.

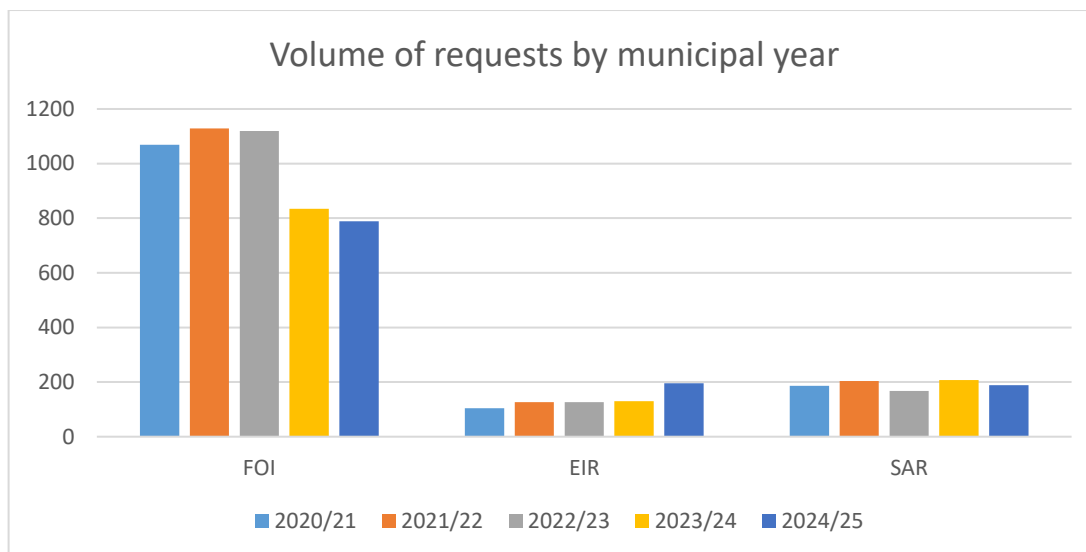
Key considerations

Requests for information

1. The council is subject to legislation that requires openness and transparency, providing members of the public with qualified rights of access to information. At the same time, the council is also required by legislation to protect certain information from unauthorised disclosure, and to exempt information from being released. The council therefore makes decisions on disclosure of information based on the law and regulatory guidance, occasionally having to balance the public interest in releasing data with the confidentiality of the information and the harm that release would cause. When the council undertakes this balancing exercise,

it does so taking into account relevant case law and decision notices.

2. From 1 May 2024 to 30 April 2025 the council dealt with 789 requests under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000, and 196 requests under the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) 2004.
3. A total of 35 such requests were answered outside of the statutory deadlines for responses to be made (20 working days), meaning that the overall response rate was 96.4%. This exceeded the council's target of 95% compliance and was within the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) threshold of 90% for responses within deadline. Where information was not provided in full this was because some of the information was exempt (for reasons such as the information consisting of personal data). In a small number of cases the information was not held or refused in full due to the information being exempt from disclosure and no information was released. If information is withheld the reasons for this are explained to the requester.
4. There were 21 more requests received in comparison to the previous municipal year. In the last couple of years volumes of requests received have fallen or increased only slightly each year, compared to the steady year-on-year increase which was experienced a few years ago. We believe that this is due to the introduction of a disclosure log where we publish requests / responses to all FOI and EIR requests except for those which have had an exemption applied for personal data. To date over 2,500 requests / responses have been published to the log. We have also dealt with more requests as Business as Usual. These are requests for which the information is already publicly available either on the council's website or disclosure log or are otherwise easily answerable. During the municipal year we dealt with an additional 322 requests as business as usual. Handling them that way ensures a faster response for requesters and reduces the amount of time that service areas have to spend on FOI / EIR requests.
5. Two cases were referred to the ICO. In one case the ICO upheld the council's decision and in the other confirmed previously withheld information should be disclosed.
6. During the last municipal year there were also 189 requests where individuals asked for personal data about themselves under their right of subject access in data protection legislation. The response rate for this period was 64% of requests responded to within the statutory deadlines. This was below the target for the calendar year, which we set at 95% response rate. The processing of these requests is very complex. For each request the Information Governance team have to review every single document to consider whether an exemption applies and redact accordingly. If the request is from a care leaver this can involve reviewing 1000+ documents. The graph below compares volumes of requests received in the municipal year 2024/25 with volumes received in previous years.



7. [Statistical data](#) on requests processed under FOI and EIR are published on the council's website and updated quarterly.
8. Where other council's publish their FOI / EIR request volume statistics, some informal benchmarking can be made based on requests received in the financial or calendar year, and the council is performing well in comparison to other such councils. During 2024/25, Powys had a response rate of 80% and Staffordshire County Council 80%, while Shropshire Council's response rate for the start of 2025 was 76%.
9. Information request data is monitored monthly within the council with Corporate Directors provided with monthly Information Governance reports, at the information governance steering group and bi-annually at Corporate Leadership Team. There is a section on processes for staff to follow regarding information requests within the mandatory training completed by all council staff upon joining the council and then annually.
10. The information governance team deals with requests made by the police in relation to criminal investigations to view council information, and requests from other public sector organisations in relation to such matters of investigation of fraud and child protection matters concerning closed social care cases. The volumes of the latter requests increased during the municipal year having been stable over previous years. Police requests also increased over the past year, and a total of 80 requests were processed, including the locating, proportionate sharing and redaction of records.

Information Governance

11. The council's information governance team monitors low-level data security incidents, near misses, and allegations of breaches of data protection legislation, of which 288 such cases were reported and dealt with over the past municipal year. Out of these, 1 met the threshold for reporting to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), however no action was taken against the council. The figures reflect that the council has sound processes in place for reporting data incidents, and that there is a high level of awareness from the mandatory training given to all council staff regarding data protection. It also indicates a more open culture around reporting things that have gone wrong. Incidents are reviewed at the information governance steering group and learning from incidents is fed back through staff training, communications to officers and changes in processes and procedures.
12. The information governance team also assesses the mandatory data protection impact assessments that are completed for new programmes, projects or systems that involve

processing of personal data, advise on information sharing agreements, implement information security policies and procedures, and ensure that teams make information available on how the council processes personal data.

13. In addition to providing the council with a service, as of April 2025, 39 of the county's schools were signed up to a self-funding school's data protection officer service level agreement. A high-level service and support to schools is provided whether on the end of the telephone or via a face-to-face visit.

Corporate Complaints

14. This section of the report provides information on complaints and feedback received by Hereford Council for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 that relate to all services within the Council, excluding children's social care. More information can be found in Appendix 1 'Annual Corporate Complaints Report 2024/2025'

Complaints about that specific service area is managed by a different statutory process and are subject to separate scrutiny.

The aim of the Corporate Complaints Procedure is to make sure that:

- Complaints are dealt with to a fair and consistent standard
- The Council responds to complaints in a reasonable timescale
- Outcomes from complaints are documented and shared throughout the Council
- A 'do it once do it right' approach is taken to complaints

The Council has based its complaints procedure on guidance set out in the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's 'Guidance on Running a Complaints System 2009'. The guidance explains the principles underpinning a successful complaints procedure:

15. Performance Metrics, Corporate Complaints

Complaints and compliments have been categorised into each directorate.

There were **560** complaints processed through the Corporate Complaints Policy, an increase in comparison to 483 received the previous year

NB: complaints about Community Wellbeing and Children's Services are reported and analysed separately but will be captured in the data within this report

16. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

The Ombudsman investigates complaints about the actions taken by or on behalf of a council or authority. The service is independent, free and impartial. The Local Government Act gives the Ombudsman the powers of the High Court to require the production of evidence held or witnesses.

The main statutory functions for the Ombudsman are:

- To investigate complaints against councils and some other authorities
- To investigate complaints about adult social care providers from people who arrange or fund their adult social care (Health Act 2009)
- To provide advice and guidance on good administrative practice.

At time of writing this report, **8** open cases being investigated. The LGSCO have received 55 communications from Herefordshire members of the public. These communications relay to the following directorates;

- 62% complaints were closed after initial enquiries
- 11% were premature
- 9% of complaints that were investigated, fault was found with the Local Authority with only a third of those upheld being found to have caused fault and injustice (2 complaints).

Statutory Children's Complaints and Representations

17. This section of the report seeks to recognise the determination of children and young people to see that Social Care processes improve and develop and outline not just what complaints were made, but what difference they have made in the work of Herefordshire Children's Services. More information can be found in Appendix 2 'Children's Complaints Annual Report 2024/2025'

The Complaints team reviews the policies and procedures for administering Children's complaints, reporting on complaints to the children's services DCS and senior management team, and arranged training for complaint investigation officers which is delivered both internally and by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).

The procedure covers complaints about councils' actions under Part 3 and some of Parts 4 and 5 of the Children Act 1989, as well as some adoption and special guardianship services. When deciding if a complaint should be considered under the procedure councils should check which part of the Act the service being complained about falls under. Generally, assessments and services in the following areas should be considered under the procedure:

- Children in need
- Looked after children
- Special Guardianship support
- Post-adoption support

18. Performance Metrics, Statutory Complaints

There were 79 complaints made under the Children's Complaints and Representations Policy in 2024/2025, with 4 of those being withdrawn. This totals a 22.5% decrease from the previous year.

- 53 were resolved at stage 1
- 22 were progressed to stage 2 (see point 26 for reasons)
- 5 were progressed to a stage 3

The Children's Complaints and Representations policy has demonstrably fostered a more open and responsive environment since 2022/2023. While the initial years saw an increase in processed complaints, this can be interpreted positively as reflecting greater awareness and accessibility of the complaint procedure.

The changes implemented have empowered families, children, and young people to voice their concerns with confidence, knowing that Children's Services values their feedback and is committed to learning and improvement. Moreover, the encouraging decrease in complaints received this year suggests that the changes implemented are having a positive impact and result in improved service delivery and a higher degree of satisfaction among those utilising children's services.

19. Outcomes from Stage One Complaint Investigations

Reporting Period	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
2023/2024	19	41	34
2024/2025	24	31	20
% difference	27.27%	27.78%	51.85%

NB: At the time of writing this report, a number of complaints remained open/outstanding, therefore these figures are not definitive and may alter should data be requested in the future.

Of the 75 complaints received in 2024/2025, outcomes from Investigation Officers include:

- 24 were upheld;
- 31 were partially upheld;
- 20 were not upheld;

20. Stage 2 Statutory Independent Investigations

Following the stage 1 internal investigation if a complainant remains dissatisfied they have the right to progress their complaint to stage 2.

21. Stage 3 Statutory Complaints, Independent Review Panel Hearing

Where Stage 2 of the complaints procedure has been concluded and the complainant is still dissatisfied, he will be eligible to request further consideration of the complaint by a Review Panel (regulation 18). As it is not possible to review a complaint that has not yet been fully considered at Stage 2 (including providing the report(s) and adjudication to the complainant), it is essential that the local authority does not unnecessarily delay the conclusion of Stage 2.

22. Statutory Complaints taken to the LGSCO

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) looks at complaints about councils and some other authorities and organisations, including education admissions appeal panels and adult social care providers (such as care homes and home care providers). The service is free, independent and impartial.

23 complainants took their complaints to the LGSCO for review in 2024/2025:

- 5 were deemed as premature
- 1 Not upheld: no injustice
- 0 Upheld: Fault and Injustice
- 7 Upheld: Fault and Injustice, financial redress
- 1 Upheld: no further action, organisation already remedied
- 1 Not upheld, no further action
- 8 Closed after initial enquires

23. Financial Implication of Statutory Complaints

Financial year 22/23, concluded stage 2 and stage 3 complaints cost a total of; **£19,830.20**
 Financial year 23/24, concluded stage 2 and stage 3 complaints cost a total of; **£72,107.65**
 Financial year 24/25, concluded stage 2 and stage 3 complaints cost a total of; **£87,826.34**

Community impact

24. In accordance with the adopted code of corporate governance, the council must ensure that it has an effective performance management system that facilitates effective and efficient

delivery of planned services. The council is committed to promoting a positive working culture that accepts, and encourages constructive challenge, and recognises that a culture and structure for scrutiny are key elements for accountable decision making, policy development, and review.

This report provides information about the council's performance in handling complaints and requests for information from members of the public, in order to provide assurance that the council handles requests and complaints effectively and derives learning from them to improve experiences for those who receive services from the council. It also provides information about the measures taken to protect personal data under the data protection legislation.

Environmental Impact

25. The council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire's outstanding natural environment.

Whilst this is a decision on back office functions and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the council's Environmental Policy, including through encouraging complaints and requests for information to be submitted electronically to the council.

Equality duty

26. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:
- A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
 - a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

This report is for information only and therefore there are no equality duty implications arising directly from this report.

Resource implications

27. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report, which is for information. As outlined above however, there are risks of fines from the Information Commissioner's Office for breaches of data protection legislation, and compensation payments if the council has acted in a way that results in maladministration and injustice. The council has sufficiently protected the personal data it holds to not incur fines so far.

Legal implications

28. There are no direct legal implication of this report other than it is a function of this Committee to undertake an annual review for Complaints and Information Governance.

Risk management

29. The risks to the council are of non-compliance with legislation including the UK General Data Protection Regulations, the Data Protection Act 2018, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, and the Local Government Act 1974. Effective operational and governance processes mitigate these risks of non-compliance with information legislation and standards, and maintaining high standards of compliance mitigates risks to the reputation of the council.

Consultees

Not applicable.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Annual Corporate Complaints Report 2024/2025
Appendix 2 Children's Complaints Annual Report

Background papers

None identified.

Corporate Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 2024 / 2025

Author: Tilly Page, Complaints and Children's Rights Manager

Introduction

A complaint, for the purpose of this report, is defined as:

An expression of dissatisfaction about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by Herefordshire Council, our staff or contractors.

An enquiry, for the purpose of this report, is defined as:

An act of asking for information.

A service request, for the purpose of this report, can be defined as:

A formal request that a member of the public, client or service user makes, asking a service provider to provide them with something that would be useful in the business's day-to-day operations.

A compliment, for the purpose of this report, is defined as:

A polite expression of praise.

Purpose of the Report

This report provides information on complaints and feedback received by Hereford Council for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 that relate to all services within the Council, excluding children's social care. Complaints about that specific service area is managed by a different statutory processes and are subject to separate scrutiny.

What is the Corporate Complaints Procedure?

The aim of the Corporate Complaints Procedure is to make sure that:

- complaints are dealt with to a fair and consistent standard
- the Council responds to complaints in a reasonable timescale
- outcomes from complaints are documented and shared throughout the Council
- a 'do it once do it right' approach is taken to complaints

The Council has based its complaints procedure on guidance set out in the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's 'Guidance on Running a Complaints System 2009'. The guidance explains the principles underpinning a successful complaints procedure:

What is a Complaint?

An expression of dissatisfaction about a council service (whether that service is provided directly by the council or by a contractor or partner) that requires a response. It is important to note that there are exclusions within the Corporate Complaints Procedure and not all complaints will be addressed under this procedure, even if the resident has identified their concerns as a complaint. The following are examples of exclusions under this procedure:

- First time request for service
- Certain highways issues
- Suggestions for improvements to council services
- Council action or lack of action that affects more than one individual, such as local highways or community issues
- Claims for damages
- Matters where an alternative and more appropriate course of action exist

Complaints regarding work other organisations carry out on the council's behalf may be investigated by the organisation concerned or the council team commissioning that service in the first instance, however, final stages of the complaints process will be managed by the Complaints Team. This includes organisations such as Hoople Ltd, Balfour Beatty Living Places, FCC, ACE adoption, adult social care providers and bailiffs.

This policy also covers second stage appeals for financial assessment for adult care and support charges.

The Role of the Complaints Team

The Corporate Complaints Procedure covers a wide range of Council services and infrastructure that are accessed and used by Herefordshire residents on a daily basis. The Complaints Team are responsible for assessing complaints and feedback about these services and screen each one to identify the most suitable way to address the issues raised.

Classification of Complaints and Feedback:

Service requests:

Any new issues such as highways defects, parking problems or rights of way concerns are not considered under the Corporate Complaints Process and will be referred to the Council's relevant service.

Examples can include:

- Notification of a new highways problem that has not been reported before
- Update on an existing issue
- Requests to re-open a closed report
- Problem parking on a residential street
- Blocked footpath that is a right of way
- Notify the Council of a claim for damages

Enquiry/Comment/Not Eligible for Corporate Complaints Procedure):

A notable portion of matters received by the Complaints Team fall under these categories. The team will log and contact the service to obtain a response for the resident. Types of feedback for this category are:

- Roadworks causing delay or disruption/diversion route
- Follow up/query in respect of highways reports
- Standard of works completed
- A general comment or observation about a Council service
- Disagreement with a decision that has been made in line with council policy
- Suggestions for improvement
- Issues that affect a number of people, not an individual

Informal Resolution:

Complaints that are identified as Informal Resolution must be about issues that are eligible for the Corporate Complaints Procedure and can be resolved quickly and without the need for detailed investigation. There must be evidence of potential service failure but not to the extent that requires a formal investigation. The service must respond directly to the resident and endeavor to reach a suitable resolution. For example:

- Delay in receiving library book
- Problems with renewing Blue Badge or Bus Pass
- Difficulties in accessing online services

Formal Complaint:

An issue will be considered under the formal complaints procedure whereby there is evidence of potential service failure and that this has impacted directly on the person who is making the complaint. These can include:

- Blocked drain has not been inspected despite being reported to the Council. The situation has worsened, and water is encroaching on the resident's property
- Roadworks have prevented a resident accessing their property
- Changes to the lighting provision outside a property has resulted in the light shining directly into the resident's property and impacting on their day to day living
- Works not carried out despite being advised that they would take place
- Conduct of a member of staff towards a resident
- Affected resident not included in consultation of local project
- Evidence of an application for a service not considered properly

The Complaints Team will define the issues that require investigation from the information submitted by the complainant. This assists the process by:

- Identifying the key issues that require investigation
- Ensuring that each complaint is considered separately and provides the complainant with a clear decision as to whether their complaint has been upheld or not
- Captures themes and trends for reporting purposes

It is important that a complaint is dealt with via the correct process from the beginning to avoid any potential future maladministration. Issues that are not eligible for handling under the formal complaint's procedures will be directed as appropriate.

Complaints are directed to the relevant service area, and progress is monitored to ensure that a response is provided within corporate timescales. Complaints are responded to at the point of service delivery giving the service area subject of the complaint the opportunity to respond to any concerns raised about it. The manager of the service is also best placed to provide a knowledgeable and comprehensive response to the complaint. They can identify where things have gone wrong and propose a suitable remedy to the complainant.

The Complaints Team do not usually provide a response to complaints unless in exceptional circumstances. This is to provide the resident with confidence that the team offers an impartial service that can support them in making representation to the Council. The team provides advice to persons wishing to use these procedures and offers staff members support and guidance on how to appropriately handle and respond effectively to complaints about the Council.

Learning From Complaints

All officers investigating and responding to complaints are encouraged to document any identified learning that has arisen from the investigation in order that this information can be used to improve existing practices. Sharing details of the complaint and investigation are also done in team meetings to allow teams to contribute to future service improvements.

It is expected that in all circumstances, complaints are investigated properly and that complainants are treated fairly and with empathy. An apology will often be offered in recognition that the resident will have felt sufficiently aggrieved to contact the council to make a complaint, even in cases whereby the complaint has not been upheld.

Collation of Data

Complaints are collated on a bespoke database, e-case, that records details of the service subject of the complaint, the nature of the complaints raised, the outcome and remedies/learning.

Making a Complaint

In line with the Council's digital strategy, residents can contact the Complaints Team via a designated email address and online form. However, we do recognise that in certain circumstances, residents wish to have a conversation with the team and therefore we also have a direct telephone line which is available Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm.

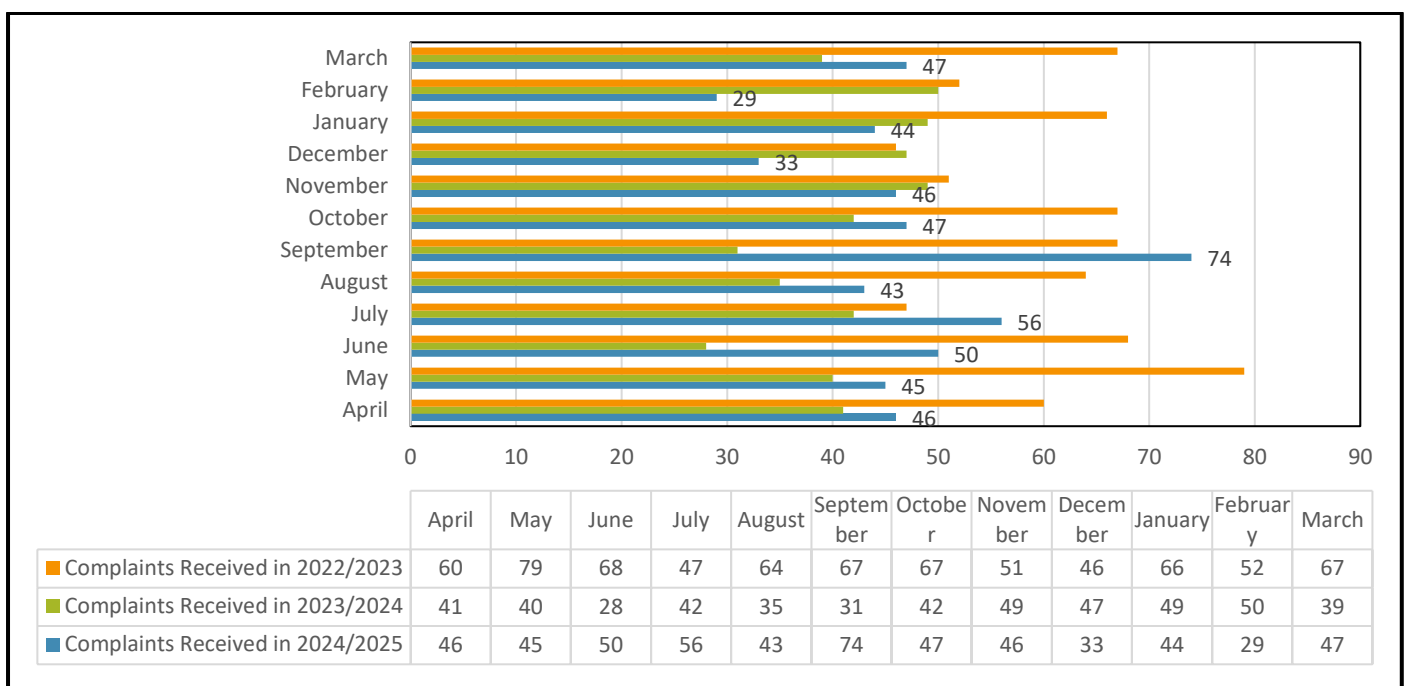
Performance Metrics

Complaints and compliments have been categorised into each directorate.

There were **560** complaints processed through the Corporate Complaints Policy, an increase in comparison to 483 received the previous year

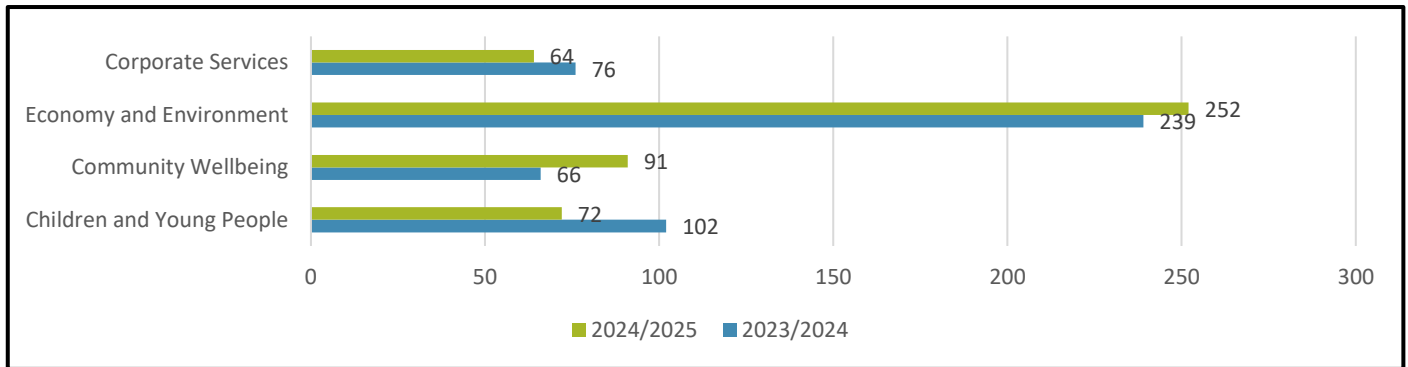
NB: complaints about Community Wellbeing and Children's Services are reported and analysed separately but will be captured in the data within this report

The chart below shows complaints received, by month, in reporting year 2024/2025, compared to reporting year 2023/2024. Analysing the complaint data over the past three years reveals some interesting trends. In 2024/2025, the number of complaints fluctuated throughout the year, with a noticeable peak in September with 74 complaints. Comparing this to the previous year, we see a generally lower complaint volume, though November, January, and February also saw higher numbers. The 2022/2023 period generally had the highest complaint volumes, particularly during the months of May and June. Overall, complaint numbers appear to have decreased from 2022/2023 to 2023/2024, with the current year showing a pattern somewhere in between these two prior years. Further investigation doesn't indicate that there is a particular area of concern or reason for complaints.



Children and Young People experienced a decrease in complaints, moving from 102 in the previous year to 72 in the current year, suggesting potential improvements in service delivery and/or communication. On the other hand, Community Wellbeing saw an increase in complaints, rising from 66 to 91, warranting further investigation into the underlying causes, the complaints team have worked closely with Community Wellbeing senior managers to understand the trends. Economy and Environment complaints remained relatively stable, fluctuating slightly from 239 to 252, this number is to be expected given the diverse range and number of services within this directorate. Finally, Corporate Services also demonstrated a decrease in complaints, decreasing from 76 to 64, perhaps indicating enhanced efficiency or customer service practices.

NB: Please note that the data shown under the Children and Young People's directorate fall under the corporate policy not the Children's Statutory Policy, this data is reported separately.

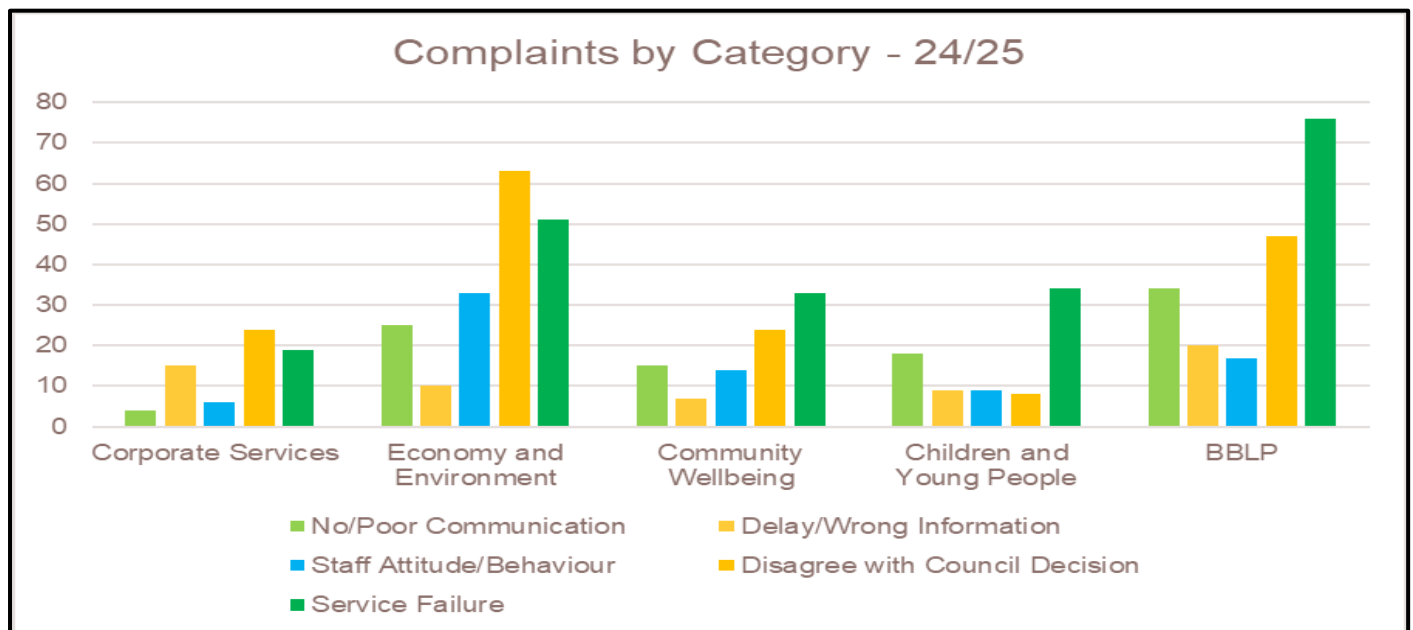


Complaints by category

Categories of complaint follow the most common categories for complaint identified by the Complaints Team when processing complaints.

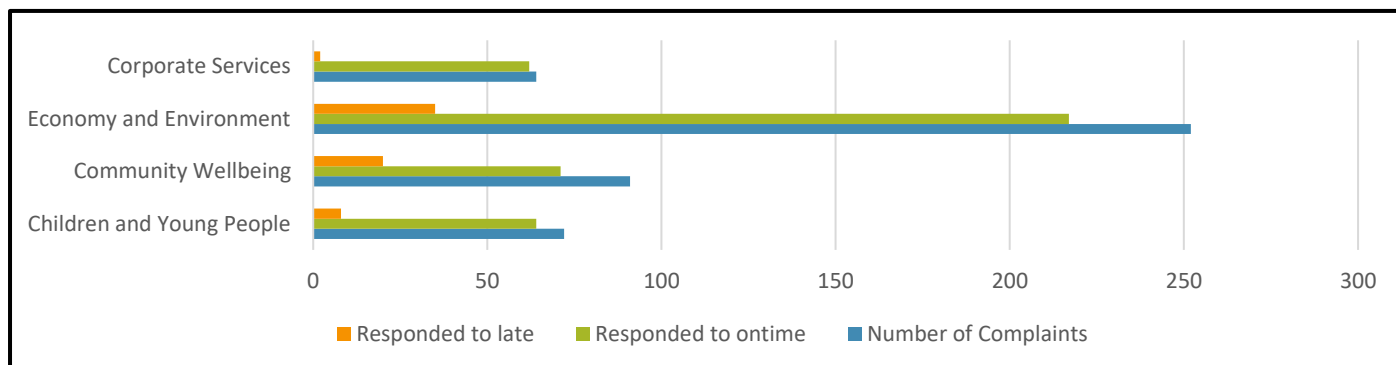
The graph below shows the volume of complaints received this year by category per directorate:

Service Failure can be seen to be the highest area of complaints throughout the year, with 29% of complaints being categorised as this, followed by Disagree with Council Decision with 26% of complaints. It's positive to see that the lowest number of complaints continues to be categorised as 'delay / wrong information' and 'no / poor communication', as these have previously been areas of concern.



Timeliness of Responses:

Reviewing complaint response timeliness across each directorates reveals interesting patterns. Corporate Services demonstrates the highest efficiency, with nearly all (62 out of 64) complaints addressed on time. Children and Young People follows closely, responding to 64 out of 72 complaints within the designated timeframe. While Economy and Environment handles the largest volume of complaints (252), their on time response rate is also substantial, with 217 resolved promptly, though they also account for the highest number of late responses at 35. Looking at this by percentage however, Community Wellbeing shows the lowest on time percentage, addressing 71 out of 91 complaints on time, suggesting potential challenges in meeting deadlines within this directorate (22% being late), although they handle a mid-range number of complaints. The data suggests a correlation between the volume of complaints and the number of late responses, but Corporate Services' efficiency highlights that high volume isn't the sole determinant of timeliness.



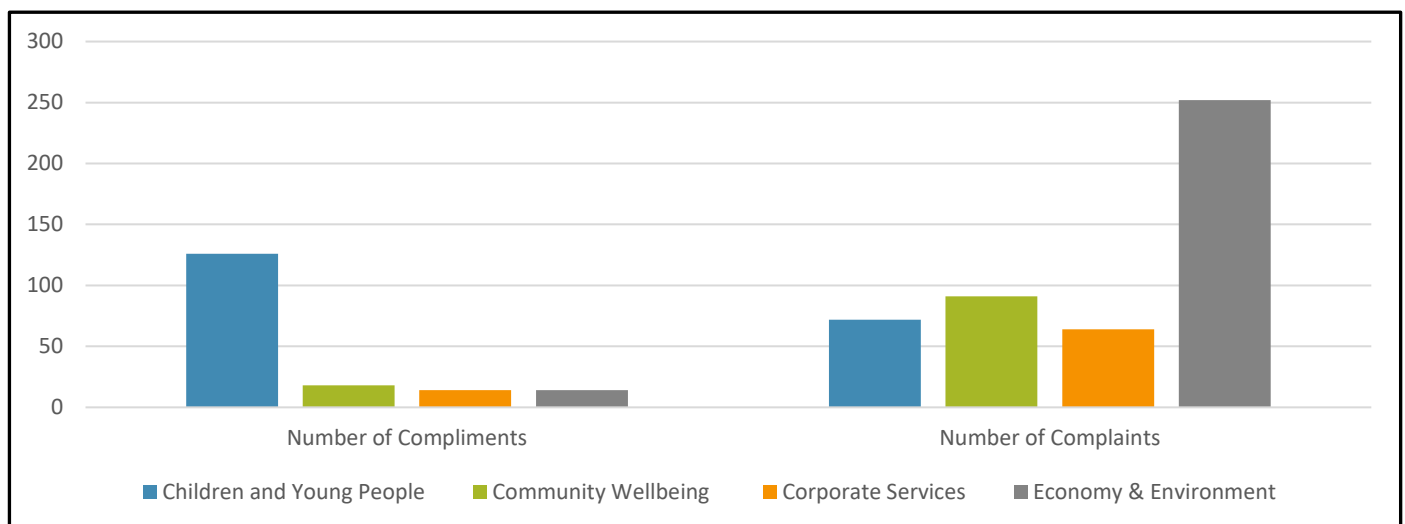
	Number of Complaints	Ontime	Late	% late
Children and Young People	72	64	8	11%
Community Wellbeing	91	71	20	22%
Economy and Environment	252	217	35	14%
Corporate Services	64	62	2	3%

Compliments

A compliment, for the purpose of this report, is defined as:
A polite expression of praise.

Since implementing the compliments@herefordshire.gov.uk email, we have received a high number of external compliments, particularly in the Children and Young People Directorate, this is widely promoted throughout the directorate. We've received a smaller number of compliments from Community Wellbeing directorate and Corporate Services but this remains limited along with Economy and Environment directorate.

Positive feedback about a service or member of staff can be made in a number of ways such as, by email, phone or directly to a member of staff. We record compliments that show a level of service or actions that go above what would normally be expected. Compliments are only logged if the positive feedback is made by a member of the public. 172 recordable compliments were received during 2024/2025. Unfortunately, in comparison to the number of complaints received the number of compliments does not reflect the positive, effective, work being done by Herefordshire Council services. There is opportunity here to promote and develop the compliments aspect of the service to ensure that positive feedback and praise is being recognised.



Lessons Learnt

When allocating a complaint to an internal investigating officer, along with the response template we sent the below learning template. Previously it was identified that completing two documents when responding to a complaint, given officers workloads, was unreasonable and it was shared as the reason for officers not completing this form. Following this feedback, the learning template was added into the response template, meaning investigating officers can complete all necessary information on one form and return this to the complaints team.

Unfortunately, although we have seen some improvement we are still seeing a significantly low number of forms being returned. Lessons learnt from complaints is a useful tool for continuing and allowing us as a Local Authority to be accountable and continue to improve, without this information we cannot take learning forwards to teams and we expose ourselves to the risk of reoccurring complaints by not acknowledging there may be some depth to the concerns being raised.

Learning Template

Case reference number CCMPT12023/01267	Has an advocate been involved Y/N	What category the complaint was about (Service failure/ Delay / Poor Communication/ Staff Attitude / Wrong Information Given)	Outcome of complaint (Up-held, Not up-held)
What were the underlying causes of the complaint? (e.g. poor record keeping)		What has changed? How will we ensure that this doesn't happen again?	
Was the complaint resolved within agreed timescales? If not, why not			

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

The Ombudsman investigates complaints about the actions taken by or on behalf of a council or authority. The service is independent, free and impartial. The Local Government Act gives the Ombudsman the powers of the High Court to require the production of evidence held or witnesses.

The main statutory functions for the Ombudsman are:

- to investigate complaints against councils and some other authorities
- to investigate complaints about adult social care providers from people who arrange or fund their adult social care (Health Act 2009)
- to provide advice and guidance on good administrative practice.

When investigating a complaint, the Ombudsman will look at whether there has been evidence of fault by the council and any injustice caused to the complainant. Following this the Ombudsman will recommend a proportionate appropriate and reasonable remedy to the complaint.

Enquiries – These instances are where the complainant has approached the Ombudsman with their complaint. The Ombudsman will then contact the Council to ask for further information to consider whether they will carry out a full investigation into the complaint. Should the Ombudsman decide that they will not carry out a detailed investigation, the complaint will be closed.

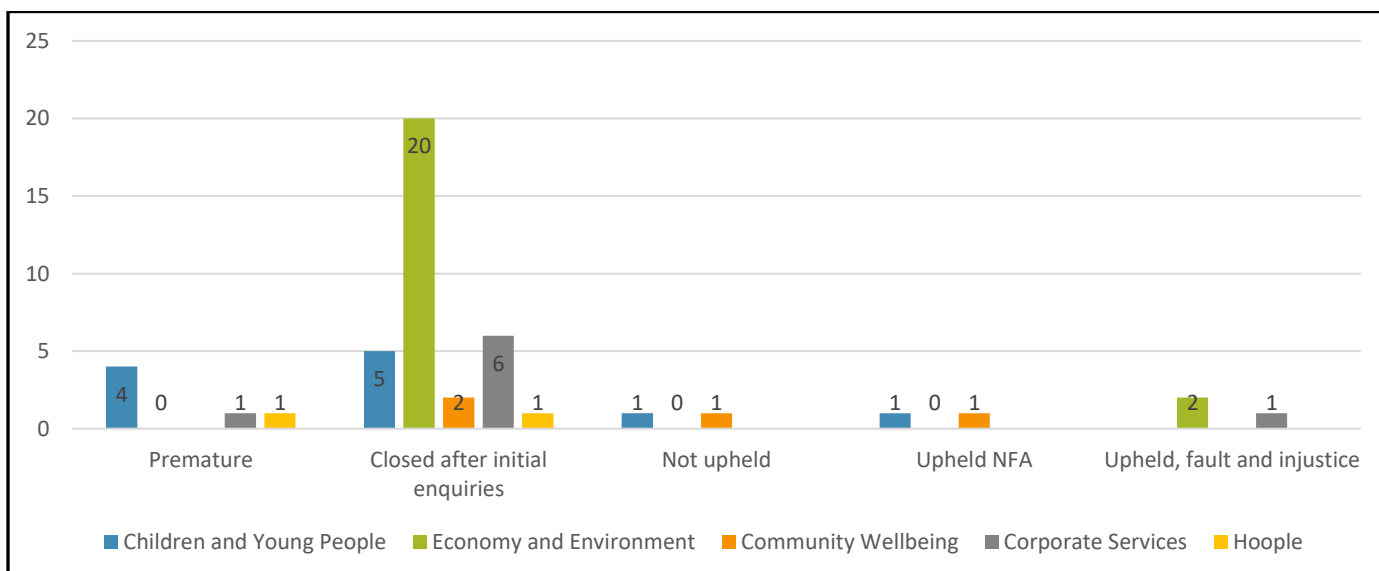
Not Investigating – On occasion, the Ombudsman may receive a complaint that it will not investigate. Reasons for this can be as follows:

- Alternative legal remedy
- Insufficient fault of justice
- Complaint referred to the Ombudsman over one year after the incident subject of the complaint occurred

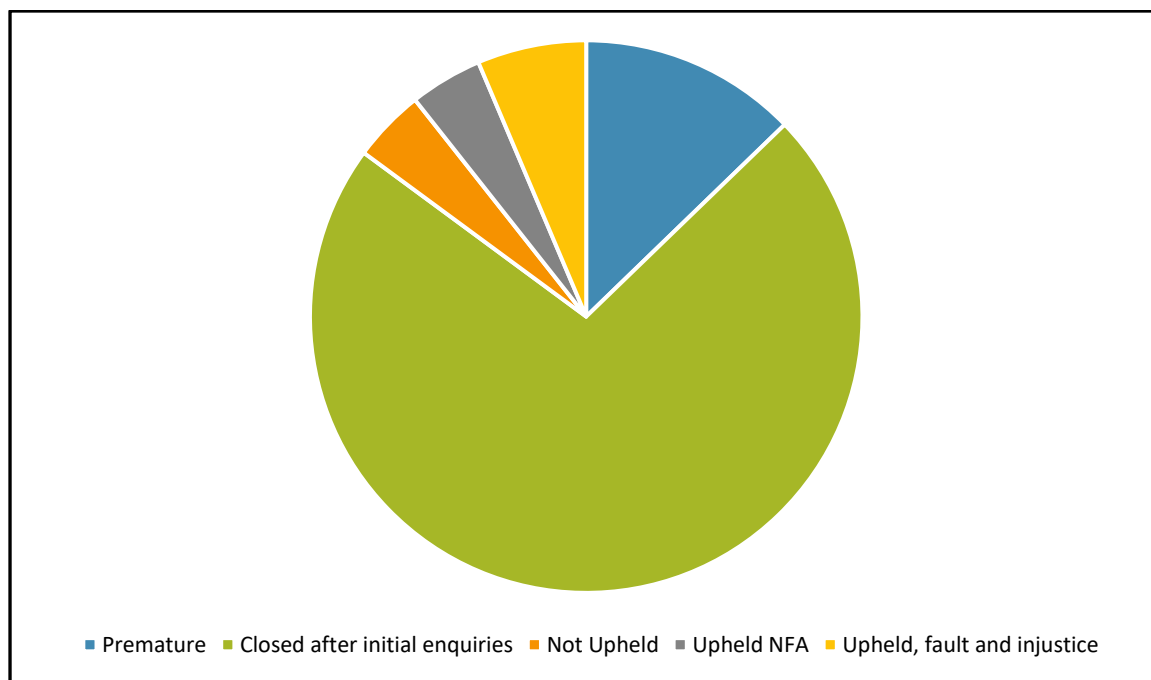
Investigation – An investigation will take place if the Ombudsman is of the view that the issues raised meet the tests set out in its Assessment Code. The Council will be advised of the investigation and the Ombudsman will specify what information it requires from the Council to investigate the complaint. Once the investigation has been completed, Draft Decision will be issued, and the Council and complainant will be invited to comment on this. The Ombudsman will then issue its Final Decision Statement on the complaint which details its findings and any recommendations that it expects the Council to implement. This can include changes to procedure or practice and financial payment to the complainant.

At time of writing this report, **8** open cases being investigated. The LGSCO have received 55 communications from Herefordshire member of the public. These communications relay to the following directorates;

Children and young people, **15**. Economy and Environment, **25**. Community wellbeing, **5**. Corporate services, **8**. Hoople, **2**



62% complaints were closed after initial enquiries and 11% were premature. A minimal 9% of complaints that were investigated, fault was found with the Local Authority with only a third of those upheld being found to have caused fault and injustice (2 complaints).



Nature of complaint	Directorate	LGSCO Decision
CAF Assessment.	Children and Young people	11.04.24 We have decided the complaint is premature. Please contact the complainant and ensure that the complaints procedure is completed
Planning	Economy and Environment	Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action.
Planning	Economy and Environment	Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action.
Care charges	Community well being	Adult Care Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction.
Council tax	Hoople	Benefits & Tax and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction.
Coroner complaint	Corporate Services	Corporate & Other Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
alcohol misuse impacting court	Children and Young people	Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Service failure 3 stage safeguarding procedures	Children and Young people	30.09.24 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Upheld: Fault and Injustice. Write to Ms X and apologise for the fault found. The Council should give regard to our guidance on how to make an effective apology. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay Ms X a further £250 in recognition of the distress and injustice caused. • Review how it will ensure that adjudication letters are sent in line with the statutory complaints procedure. • Review how it will ensure that it considers our guidance on remedies for upheld complaints

EHCP, Education	Children and Young people	Was premature then came back to investigate . Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Upheld: Fault and Injustice 01.25To remedy the injustice the Council caused to Ms F, the Council should, within one month of the final decision: a) pay Ms F £300 to acknowledge the distress and uncertainty the Council's faults caused her, including her delayed opportunity to exercise her appeal rights to the SEND Tribunal. The Council should provide us with evidence it has complied with the above
alleged wrongful pre-election political publicity by the Council	Corporate Services	Corporate & Other Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction.
Lack of communication repeated	Children and Young people	04.09.24 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Upheld: Fault and Injustice. Apologise to Miss X for the upset and uncertainty caused by its failure to ensure she has contact with Y and Z and respond to her repeated concerns about the lack of contact. We publish guidance on remedies which sets out our expectations for how organisations should apologise effectively to remedy injustice. The organisation should consider this guidance in making the apology. b) Carry out its proposed actions set out in paragraph 25 of this decision, including paying Miss X £500 to recognise the impact of the Council's failings. c) Agree a consistent communication plan with Miss X regarding her contact with Y and Z and with the Council. This should establish when Miss X will receive updates on their progress and when the Council will and will not respond to her communication. The Council should set this out in writing to Miss X once this is agreed.
telephone call with parking	Economy and Environment	We will not investigate Mr X's complaint about a telephone call with a Council officer. This is because it is unlikely an investigation by this office could add to the response already provided via the Council's previous investigation of the matter.
Letter re dog barking	Economy and Environment	Closed after initial enquiries - no further action. We will not investigate this complaint about the Council's actions in sending Ms X a letter advising her it had received a complaint about noise nuisance from dog barking. This is because we are unlikely to find evidence of fault by the Council sufficient to warrant an investigation.
Planning decision	Economy and Environment	Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action.
Delay stage 3 complaint panel	Children and Young people	26.06.24 recorded as premature to LGSCO. 02.12. 24 Final decision. Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Noise Complaint	Economy and Environment	Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation and the decision as: Upheld: Fault and InjusticeTo remedy the injustice caused to Ms D, detailed in paragraph 52, a) provide an apology to her, following the guidance on apologies we set out in section 3.2 of our guidance on remedies (see Guidance on remedies - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Guidance on remedies - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman); b) make a symbolic payment to Ms D of £250 in recognition of the distress caused to her (see section 3.6i of our guidance on remedies). 56. Also, to try and prevent a repeat of the fault identified in this case the Council has agreed within 20 working days of this decision to issue a

		reminder to all staff who investigate potential statutory nuisance of the importance of communication in closing investigations. They should always put a decision in writing with reasons for closing the case.
SAR and monitoring officer letters	Corporate Services	26.11.24 Corporate & Other Services and the decision as: Upheld: Fault and Injustice
Planning safety concerns	Economy and Environment	Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action.
Planning green space	Economy and Environment	08.08.24 Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Noise Complaint	Economy and Environment	08.08.24 We have decided the complaint is premature. Please contact the complainant and ensure that the complaints procedure is completed. Reopened 17.10.24. 31.03.25 Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation and the decision as: Upheld: Fault and Injustice
Direct Payments etc	Children and Young people	20.09.24 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Not happy with info included with the evidence to be considered by the Land Registration First-Tier Tribunal	Corporate Services	09.08.24 Corporate & Other Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction.
school admissions	Children and Young people	13.08.24 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction.

EHCP, Education	Children and Young people	<p>Upheld: Fault and Injustice 52. To remedy the injustice the Council caused to Ms C and X, the Council should, within one month of the final decision:</p> <p>a) pay Ms C £300 to acknowledge the distress and uncertainty the Council's faults caused her, including her delayed opportunity to exercise her appeal rights to the SEND tribunal;</p> <p>b) pay Ms C £1,200, to use as she sees fit for the benefit of X, to acknowledge the loss of education X experienced as a result of its delay in providing him with alternative educational provision;</p> <p>In total the Council should pay Ms C F £1,500.</p> <p>53. Within three months of the final decision the Council should also:</p> <p>c) remind its SEND staff of the Council's duty to ensure it issues decisions which always sets out appeal rights to parents and young people. This includes when requests for Education, Health, and Care needs assessment or reassessments are received, and a decision has been made.</p> <p>d) review the current staffing levels within its special educational needs team and how it allocates cases. This is to ensure it has sufficient staff available to respond to and action Education, Health, and Care plan assessments and annual reviews within the statutory timescales, including when existing staff leaves or are unexpectedly absent.</p>
New HMP	Economy and Environment	21.08.24 Highways & Transport and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Homelessness Forum	Community well being	30.08.24 Corporate & Other Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction.
kidnapped as a child 13 September 1977- Historic issues	Children and Young people	11.11.24 We will not investigate Mr X's complaint because it is unlikely we could reach a clear enough view now on events so long ago. Allegations of crimes are for the police. It would be disproportionate to investigate the Council's complaint handling in isolation and anyway there is not enough evidence of fault to justify investigating Council's conduct during the complaint process.
misquoted on various occasions and on other occasions children's services have outright lied and written down things he never said	Children and Young people Children in care	<p>15 October 2024</p> <p>Your ref:</p> <p>Our ref: 24 012 286</p> <p>Dear LGSCO Link Officer</p> <p>Thank you for providing information about this complaint.</p> <p>We have decided the complaint is premature. If you could please now consider this complaint further and contact the complainant and ensure that the complaints procedure is completed</p>
Overhanging hedge	Economy and Environment	Highways & Transport and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Lack of contact on home visit with police	Children and Young people	09.01.25 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action

Balfour Beatty to account, for failing to adequately maintain the King George V playing fields (known as Bishop's Meadow).	Economy and Environment	22.10.24 Corporate & Other Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction
Planning enforcement lack	Economy and Environment	05.11.24 Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Planning enforcement, loud music	Economy and Environment	29.10.24 Premature from LGO Reopen Jan25
EHCP plan delay and affects of this	Children and Young people	30.10.24 Premature from LGO
Council tax summons	Hoope	29.10.24 Premature from LGO
Planning Enforcement	Economy and Environment	22.11.24 Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
PROW macadams Lane	Economy and Environment	18.11.24 Highways & Transport and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Smoke fire building control	Economy and Environment	Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action.
complaint about a safeguarding matter.	Children and Young people	Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction
Residents parking permits	Economy and Environment	Highways & Transport and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Mash and data breach	Children and Young people	31.03.25 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Not upheld: No Fault.
Tree BBLP	BBLP	20.12.24 premature 22.01.25 reopened. 14.03.25 Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action,
PCN officer	Economy and Environment	13.01.25 Highways & Transport and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Homelessness	Community well being	Under investigation
Care home	Community well being	Adult Care Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction.
Safeguarding	Community well being	28.3.25 Adult Care Services and the decision as: Not upheld: No Fault
referral in March 2023 and report	Children and Young people	25.02.25 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction

Council's handling of a scheme to introduce tenants for her property	Community well being	Housing and the decision as: Upheld: no further action, organisation already remedied
Mash assessment	Children and Young people	Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction
New build waste bins	Economy and Environment	Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Question to cabinet	Corporate Services	03.02.25 We have decided the complaint is premature. If you could please now consider the complaint under your complaints procedure, please contact the complainant and ensure that the complaints procedure is completed.
Assessment	Children and Young people	10.02.25 Dear LGSCO Link Officer Thank you for providing information about this complaint. We have decided the complaint is premature. Could you please now consider this under stage two of your complaints procedure
Highway claim	BBLP	05.04.25 Highways & Transport and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - out of jurisdiction
EHCP	Children and Young people	Under investigation
EHCP	Children and Young people	Under investigation
EHCP	Children and Young people	Under investigation
PCN and officer	Economy and Environment	14.03.25 Highways & Transport and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries – no further action
Children in care	Children and Young people	24.02.25 Education & Children's Services and the decision as: Upheld: no further action, organisation already remedied.
Staff attitude	Corporate services	19.02.25 Corporate & Other Services and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
failing to effectively enforce against numerous unauthorised works and activities at The Majors Arms, Halmonds Frome, Herefordshire	Economy and Environment	Under investigation
decision to approve a planning application	Economy and Environment	12.02.25 Planning & Development and the decision as: Closed after initial enquiries - no further action
Noise Complaint	Economy and Environment	Under investigation
EHCP	Children and Young people	Under investigation

Analysis

Key Messages:

Complaint Volume: Overall complaints increased from 483 to 560 this year. While fluctuations occur monthly, the 2024/2025 figures fall between the higher volumes of 2022/2023 and the lower numbers of 2023/2024. No specific issue is driving the increase.

Directorate Performance:

- Children and Young People: Saw a reduction in complaints, suggesting service improvements.
- Community Wellbeing: Experienced an increase in complaints, requiring focused investigation and strategies.
- Economy and Environment: Complaint numbers remained stable, which is expected given service volume.
- Corporate Services: Achieved a reduction in complaints, potentially due to enhanced efficiency across services.

Complaint Categories: "Service Failure" and "Disagree with Council Decision" are the most common complaint categories. "Delay/wrong information" and "no/poor communication complaints" remain low.

Response Timeliness: Corporate Services demonstrates high efficiency in timely responses. Community Wellbeing has the lowest on-time response percentage, despite a mid-range complaint volume. Economy and Environment has the highest number of late responses which is to be expected based on volume of complaints.

Compliments: Compliments are primarily received through the dedicated email address, with Children and Young People receiving the most. Overall compliment numbers are low compared to complaints, underrepresenting the positive work of the council.

Recommendations:

Targeted Investigation (Community Wellbeing): Conduct a thorough analysis of the specific issues driving the increased complaints within Community Wellbeing. This should involve gathering detailed feedback, identifying root causes, and developing targeted solutions.

Best Practice Sharing: Analyse practices within Children and Young People and Corporate Services to identify strategies contributing to complaint reduction and improved response times. Share these best practices with other directorates, particularly Community Wellbeing.

Address Common Complaint Categories: Develop proactive strategies to mitigate "Service Failure" and "Disagree with Council Decision" complaints. This could involve service process reviews, clearer communication of decision-making processes, and enhanced customer service training.

Improve Timeliness (Community Wellbeing): Investigate the reasons behind the lower on-time response rate in Community Wellbeing. This may involve resource allocation, workflow optimization, or additional training for staff. Consider setting up regular reminder to ensure complaints are responded to within the designated timeframe.

Promote Compliments: Implement a more comprehensive strategy to encourage and capture compliments. This could include:

- Actively promoting the dedicated email address across all directorates and services.
- Training staff on how to proactively solicit positive feedback.
- Providing alternative channels for submitting compliments (e.g. online forms, feedback kiosks).
- Publicly acknowledging and celebrating positive feedback to recognize staff achievements and improve morale.

Data Monitoring and Reporting: Continue to monitor complaint trends and response times across all directorates. Use this data to identify areas for improvement and track the effectiveness of implemented strategies.

Resource Allocation: Ensure adequate resources are allocated to complaint handling, particularly in directorates with high complaint volumes or lower response times.

Further training: Provide further training to those dealing with complaints.

In conclusion, while the number of complaints has decreased since the 2022/2023 period, there is still room for improvement in addressing the root causes of complaints and increasing the number of compliments received. By focusing on best practices, resource allocation, and effective promotion, Herefordshire Council can continue to enhance its services and improve overall satisfaction.

Children's Complaints and Representations Statutory Annual Report 2024 / 2025

Author: Tilly Page, Complaints and Children's Rights Manager

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Introduction

This report has been written to analyse the complaints made against Children and Young People Directorate and provides information for the Statutory Children's Complaints and Representations Service and the Corporate Complaint Policy for Children and Young People directorate, for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. The report and service are provided in accordance with the Complaints and Representations Procedures established under the Children Act 1989 and the Local Authority Act 1970. Guidance for which policy is applied is outlined below.

The Procedures were amended from 1 September 2006 by The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006, and 'Getting the Best from Complaints', the accompanying guidance.

People who use Herefordshire's Children's Services are encouraged to give feedback on the quality and appropriateness of services they receive. This feedback can be in the form of compliments, comments, suggestions, queries or complaints.

A complaint, for the purpose of this report, and within our Policy, is defined as:

"An expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet in relation to an individual child or young person, which requires a response."

The Statutory Children's Representations and Complaints Policy covers complaints about:

- Council's services to children in need or in care (looked after children)
- How the council applies to take a child into care
- Complaints about fostering, special guardianship and adoption services
- Complaints about services to children leaving care.

The procedure exists to consider complaints not just by or on behalf of children, but from their parents, foster carers, special guardians, adopters and others who may have an interest in their wellbeing. The Statutory Procedure provides a Procedure for making representations about the discharge by a Local Authority of its functions under Part 3 and specified functions under Parts 4 and 5 of The Children Act 1989, certain functions under 2002 Act and functions regarding Special Guardianship support services.

Councils may decide not to accept a complaint that is made late but should not impose this restriction rigidly. It may suspend investigation of a complaint if there is ongoing court action or police investigations. The guidance allows councils to decide not to investigate a complaint if it would prejudice a concurrent investigation, including court proceedings. However, the guidance also allows a complainant to resubmit their complaint to the council once the concurrent investigation has ended (and for up to one year afterwards). Before deciding to end an investigation already in progress, councils should consider if it is possible to investigate some or all of the complaint without prejudicing any other investigation. Detailed records should be kept of any decision to end an investigation. Councils should tell complainants in writing the reason for the decision to end an investigation and the concurrent investigation at risk of being prejudiced. Councils should also tell complainants about their right to resubmit the complaint.

1.1 The Statutory Children's Representations and Complaints Procedure

There are three stages to the Statutory Complaints Procedure:

1.1.1 Stage 1 – Local Resolution

This stage is usually carried out by a Team Manager, however, following a review in November 2024 complaint investigations are now undertaken by the QA Assurance team to provide an independent element to the investigation. They are required to carry out an investigation by discussing the complaint with the relevant practitioners and the complainant(s) and considering any evidence which is held by the Local Authority, before making an informed finding on each specific complaint. There is a maximum timescale of 20 working days to complete this stage.

1.1.2 Stage 2 – Independent Investigation

This stage involves the commissioning of an Independent Investigating Officer (IO) and an Independent Person (IP) who will carry out an evidence-based investigation by firstly meeting with the complainant(s), relevant practitioners concerned and viewing evidence held on the Local Authority files. The IO and IP will each prepare a report, including recommendations for the Local Authority to consider. A relevant Senior Manager, responsible for the service area being complained about will then consider the reports and recommendations and prepare an adjudication response to the complainant detailing whether they accept the findings and recommendations, before all reports and responses are sent to the complainant. There is a maximum timescale of 65 working days to complete this stage.

The Complaints Team are required to accept all requests for a Stage 2 Investigation, however attempts are always made to try and resolve the issues locally, by the Complaints Team offering to meet the complainant along with the relevant operational manager.

1.1.3 Stage 3 – Review Panel

This stage involves the commissioning of three Independent Panel members including a Chair, who will attend a Panel meeting alongside the stage 2 IO and IP, the complainant, and a representative from the service who wrote the stage 2 adjudication, the Complaints Manager, a Clerk to the Panel and anyone else who is considered to be required.

The Panel will consider the adequacy of the Stage 2 Investigation in light of any additional information provided by the complainant. Panel will reach a view as to whether any findings need to be overturned and whether any additional recommendations need to be implemented.

The report provided by Panel will be shared with the Local Authority and the Director for Children's Services (DCS) will prepare a response to the complainant which will detail whether the recommendations are accepted. The Panel report and response from the DCS is then shared with the complainant.

1.2 The Corporate Complaints Procedure

The Corporate Complaints Procedure can be utilised when the representation does not fit the criteria to be investigated via the Statutory Complaints Procedure and is regarding a non-statutory service or if the representation is being made in the complainant's own right about a service which they have personally received, subject to the specific detail of the complaint. There are two stages to the Corporate Complaints Procedure:

1.2.1 Stage one

The Complaints Team will send a written acknowledgement to the complainant normally within 5 working days of receipt into the council. If the complaint has been received verbally, staff in the Complaints Team will make a written account of it which will be sent to the complainant with the acknowledgment to ensure the issues are all agreed and are correct. The Complaints Team may also offer to discuss the complaint over the telephone or in person, to identify and agree the points for investigation and the complainant's desired outcomes if they deem it to be necessary and appropriate.

The Complaints Team will then appoint an investigating officer. The investigating officer will, in most cases, be the principal officer or manager of the service being complained about because of their specialist knowledge. The Complaints Team will liaise with the Service Director, Service Manager or Head of Service responsible for the appropriate department if it is inappropriate to use an investigating officer in the service area concerned. If the complaint is too general, the investigating officer may need to contact the complainant to agree a statement of the complaint, so that points for investigation and the complainant's desired outcomes can be agreed.

The investigating officer will undertake an investigation in line with the timescale assigned by the Complaints Team – in accordance with the Complaints Handling Code, this is normally 10 working days but more complex complaints could take longer which will be explained to the complainant in writing by the Complaints Team. Where timescales exceed 20 working days, the complainant will be provided with the reason and this will be clearly explained and suitable intervals for updates will be agreed with the complainant. The complainant will also be provided with the details of the Ombudsman.

Where additional complaints are received after one has been recorded and the matters raised are related, it will be incorporated within the response that has been logged. However, where a response has already been sent or it is regarding new unrelated issues, or would unreasonably delay the response, the additional complaints will be logged as a new complaint.

The Complaints Team will review the response and outcome before providing a formal response to the complainant (this may involve the Complaints Team requesting further clarification or additional information from the investigating officer or the service involved).

The Complaints Team will send out the response to the complainant with a covering e-mail / letter stating that at this stage the complainant will have 20 working days to respond if they are dissatisfied with the outcome and request to escalate to stage 2.

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the response clear reasons should be given for the dissatisfaction and consideration of the complainant's desired outcomes.

If there is no further communication after the specified 20 working days, the Complaints Team will close the complaint.

1.2.2 Stage two

Request for stage 2 will be acknowledged and logged by the Complaints Team within 5 working days of the request for escalation being received. Within the acknowledgement, we will set out our understanding of any outstanding issues and the outcome the complainant is seeking. If any aspect of the complaint is unclear, the complainant will be asked for clarification.

The Complaints Team will assign the complaint to a different investigating officer to conduct a second investigation into the complaint and give consideration to the desired outcomes.

A final response will normally be sent to the complainant within 20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged. In complex cases the response timeframe may be extended to a maximum of 40 working days. In which case an explanation will be sent to the customer detailing progress and expected timescale for response.

Where timescales exceed 40 working days, the complainant will be provided with the reason and this will be clearly explained and suitable intervals for updates will be agreed with the customer. The complainant will also be provided with the details of the Ombudsman.

A stage 2 is the organisations final response. Where the council has investigated and taken all reasonable actions and the complaint remains unresolved, the complainant will be advised that the case will be closed and the Complaints Team will provide the complainant with details of the relevant Ombudsman should they wish to refer the issue.

1.3 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)

If a complainant remains dissatisfied following exhaustion of all stages of either complaints procedure they can take their complaint to the LGSCO. A complainant can access the LGSCO at any point, but the LGSCO normally provides the Local Authority with the opportunity to process through all stages of the complaints procedure unless they decide otherwise. Complaints referred back to the Local Authority to process are classed as 'premature referral' complaints. If the Local Authority take the decision to refuse to investigate a complaint or refuse to escalate the complaints to the next stage of the procedure, a complainant may then also approach the LGSCO.

1.4 Composition of Total Feedback Received

	<u>2023/2024</u>	<u>2024/2025</u>	<u>% Difference</u>
<u>Statutory Stage 1</u>	102	75	-26.5%
<u>Statutory Stage 2</u>	19	22	+15.8%
<u>Statutory Stage 3</u>	4	5	+25%
<u>Corporate Stage 1</u>	100	72	-28%
<u>LGSCO</u>	12	23	+91.6%
<u>Compliments</u>		126	

Appendix 1 – Complaints, regarding Childrens Services, processed through the Corporate Complaints Policy

Whilst the Children's Complaints and Representations Annual Report (2024/2025) focuses on the statutory reporting under the Childrens Complaints Policy this appendix will identify complaints made under the Corporate Complaints Policy - [Corporate Complaints Policy \(herefordshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/corporate-complaints-policy)

These include complaints from parents, careers and linked professionals regarding their interactions with Childrens Services in Herefordshire.

When handling complaints regarding Childrens Services we review these on an individual case by case basis to establish whether the complaint should be processed through the Childrens Complaints Policy or by the Corporate Complaints Policy. The distinction between the two policies is to determine who is making the complaint and what is the complaint regarding; we often receive complaints from parents careers and linked professionals and these complaints are often around concerns or issues pertaining to themselves and not the child, alternatively they may be regarding the child but they are not representing the voice of the child nor are they indicating any harm to the child. As you will see through the report often the individual is complaining about the lack of communication, a council decision, a services failure or staff attitude in respect of themselves therefore these complaints are handled under the Corporate Complaints Policy. The following tend to be managed through the Corporate Complaints Policy:

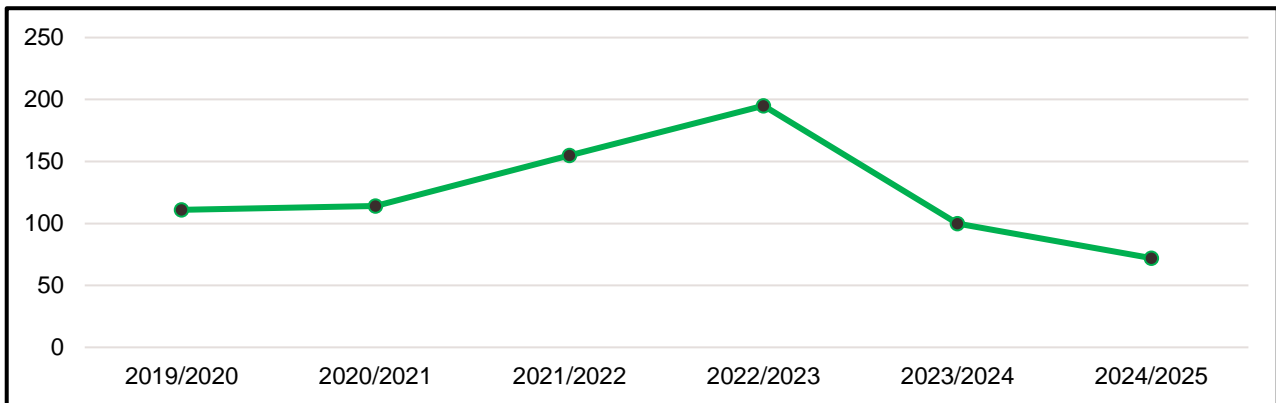
- Early Help
- Child protection including S47 enquiries and conferences
- Assessments of potential foster carers and adopters
- Foster carer registration
- Section 7 and Section 37 court reports

2 Complaints, regarding Childrens Services, processed through the Corporate Complaints Policy

- 2.1 Volume of complaints received
- 2.2 Category of complaints
- 2.3 Timeliness of complaint responses
- 2.4 Outcomes of complaint investigations

2.1 Volume of complaints received

The below information captures those complaints regarding Childrens Services, under the Corporate Complaints Policy, over the past four years to provide a reflective analysis.



The number of complaints, regarding Childrens Services, processed through the Corporate Complaints Policy have steadily increased over the past six years, saying this, this municipal year there is another notable decrease in corporate complaints received, that relate to children's services. This is a positive step, showing significant improvement from Children's Services.

2019 - 2020

111 Corporate Children's Complaints

2020 - 2021

114 Corporate Children's Complaints

2021 - 2022

155 Corporate Children's Complaints

2022 - 2023

195 Corporate Children's Complaints

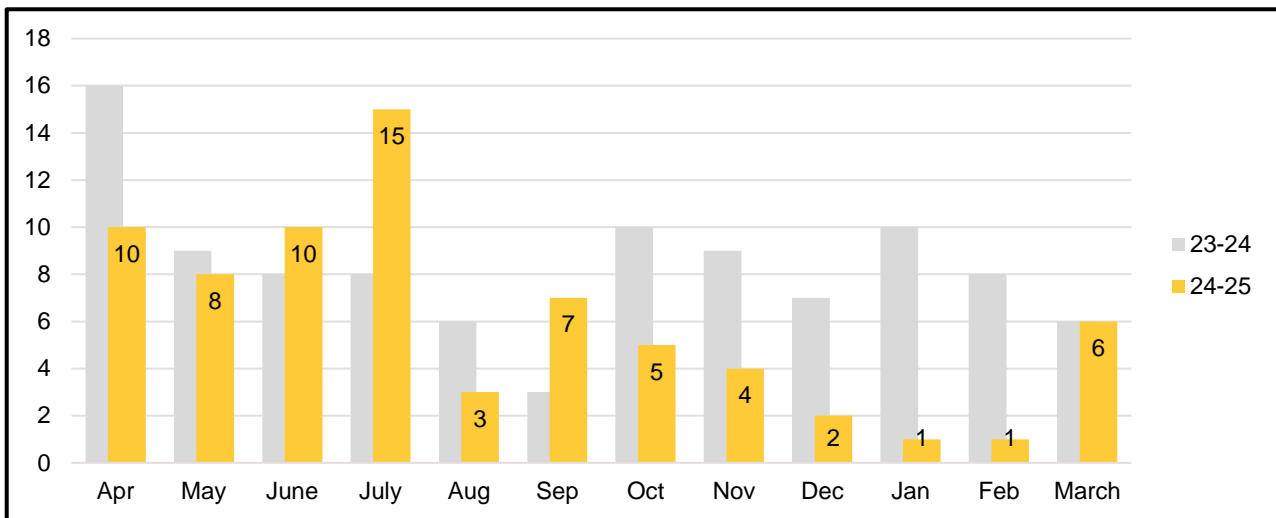
2023 - 2024

100 Corporate Children's Complaints

2024 - 2025

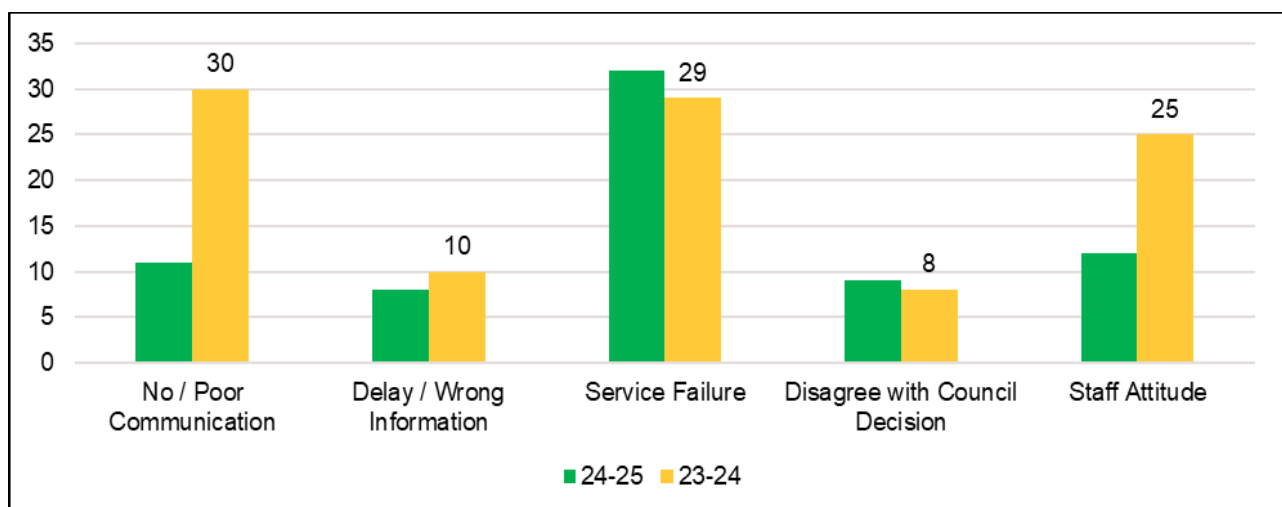
72 Corporate Children's Complaints

The below chart highlights the corporate complaints received by month, in comparison to the previous year;



The reason for the decrease in the number of corporate complaints could be suggested as; consistency in management within children's services and a general understanding of how Children's Complaints should be differentiated being implemented into standard practice.

2.2 Category of complaints



Analysis of complaints over the past five years reveals a consistent pattern of issues, primarily stemming from inadequate communication, service failures, and unsatisfactory staff attitudes. Several recurring themes contribute to these complaints. Staffing complexities, particularly over the last two to three years, with high turnover among frontline staff, have hindered consistent and effective communication. Complainants have reported a lack of introductions to new social workers, difficulties in contacting them, and significant delays in receiving responses. Furthermore, inconsistent case handovers have resulted in young people feeling unheard and unsupported as they are forced to repeatedly explain their history.

Service failures are often linked to a perceived lack of support or failure to deliver promised services. This issue is often intertwined with communication challenges, where misunderstandings

arise regarding the nature and expectations of available services, as well as individual responsibilities within agreed-upon plans.

It is important to acknowledge the significant improvement in staffing this year, reaching 100% permanent managers and 70% permanent social workers within children's services. While Herefordshire Children's Services has faced numerous challenges, it is crucial to leverage feedback and complaints to drive positive change and continuous improvement. Encouragingly, families have acknowledged that the complaints procedure provides a platform to be heard and have furthermore noticed the considerable progress made within children's services in recent years.

2.3 Timeliness of complaint responses

The timescale for response, under the Corporate Complaints Policy, is 15 working days.

2019-20

Out of 111 complaints 15 responses were extended to take longer than 15 working days

2020-21

Out of 114 complaints 16 responses were extended to take longer than 15 working days

2021-22

Out of 155 complaints 23 responses were extended to take longer than 15 working days

2022-23

Out of 195 complaints 87 responses were extended to take longer than 15 working days

2023-24

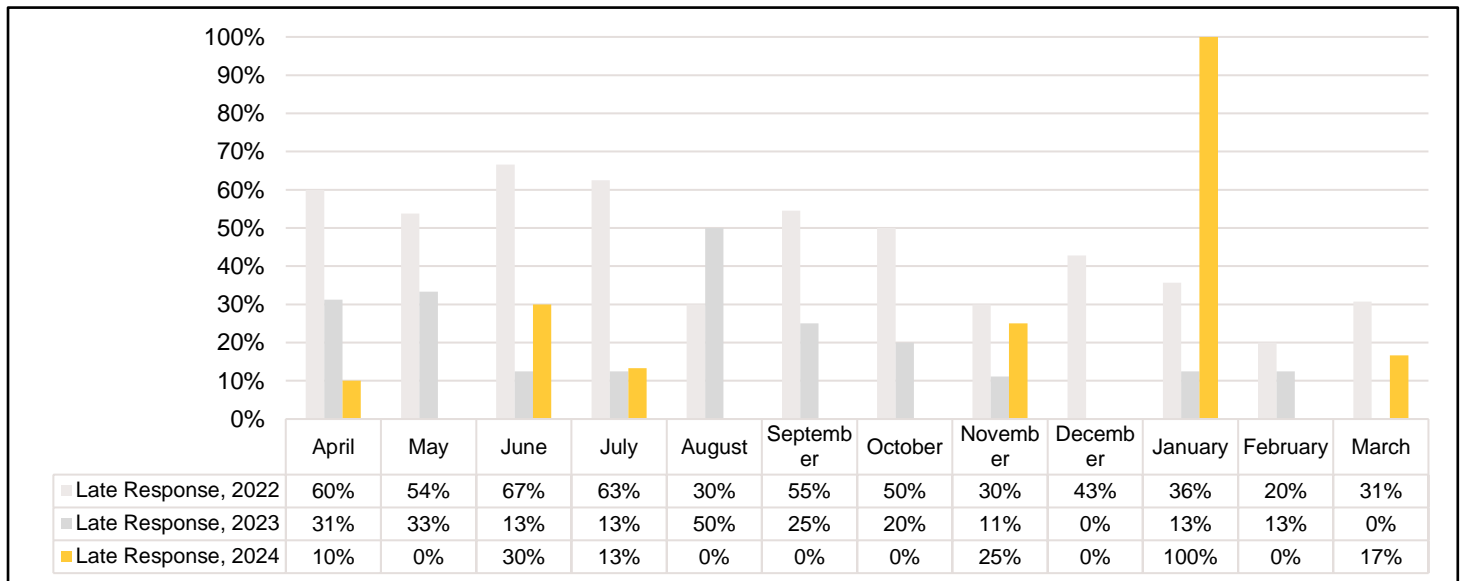
Out of 100 complaints 20 responses were extended to take longer than 15 working days

2024-25

Out of 72 complaints 9 responses were extended to take longer than 15 working days

This financial year, 12.5% of complaints received were responded too later than the allocated 15 working days which is a significant decrease from the 20% that were responded too late, in the previous financial year and 45% the year prior, this data alone shows the continued improvement within children's services.

The below chart compares, by month, the percentage of complaints that were responded too out of the 15 working day timescale in correlation to the data from 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. The below chart indicates, by percentage, the number of complaints that were responded too out of timescale, by month.



In the past year, leadership has strongly emphasised the importance of timely and effective complaint resolution at the local level. While there have been prior challenges with meeting the 15-day response target, recent improvements in complaint handling procedures are yielding positive results. Specifically, issues related to Investigating Officer transitions have been successfully addressed, resulting in better communication and continuity for complainants. Furthermore, the Complaints Team proactively collaborates with Investigating Officers within the QA service to manage workloads and provide realistic response timelines, enhancing complainant satisfaction. The requirement for operational manager oversight in the new process ensures both promptness and thoroughness in complaint responses. As a result of these combined efforts, the Quality Assurance service has consistently demonstrated a significant increase in on-time complaint responses over the past six months, marking a commendable achievement in improved service delivery.

2.4 Outcomes of complaint investigations

Reporting Period	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
2024/2025	25	13	34

NB: At the time of writing this report, a number of complaints remained open/outstanding, therefore these figures are not definitive and may alter should data be requested in the future.

Complaints, regarding Childrens Services, processed through the Children's Statutory Representations and Complaints Policy

This report seeks to recognise the determination of children and young people to see that Social Care processes improve and develop and outline not just what complaints were made, but what difference they have made in the work of Herefordshire Children's Services.

This is the fifth year that the children's complaints process was administered by the Council's Complaints Team, taking over its management from Childrens Services in 2019. The team continue to review the policies and procedures for administering Children's complaints, reporting on complaints to the children's services senior management team, and arranged training for complaint investigation officers which was delivered by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).

The procedure covers complaints about councils' actions under Part 3 and some of Parts 4 and 5 of the Children Act 1989, as well as some adoption and special guardianship services. When deciding if a complaint should be considered under the procedure councils should check which part of the Act the service being complained about falls under. Generally, assessments and services in the following areas should be considered under the procedure:

- Children in need
- Looked after children
- Special Guardianship support
- Post-adoption support

3 Complaints, regarding Childrens Services, processed through the Children's Statutory Representations and Complaints Policy

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 3.1 | Volume of complaints received |
| 3.2 | Who has complained |
| 3.3 | Category of complaints |
| 3.4 | Timeliness of complaint responses |
| 3.5 | Outcome of complaint investigations |
| 3.6 | Stage 2 complaints |
| 3.7 | Recommendations and learning from stage 2 |
| 3.8 | Stage 3 complaints |

3.1 Volumes of complaints received

There were 79 complaints made under the Children's Complaints and Representations Policy in 2024/2025, with 4 being withdrawn. This totals a 22.5% decrease from the previous year.

2018 – 2019

36 Children's Complaints and Representations

2019 - 2020

30 Children's Complaints and Representations

2020 - 2021

14 Children's Complaints and Representations

2021 - 2022

26 Children's Complaints and Representations

2022 - 2023

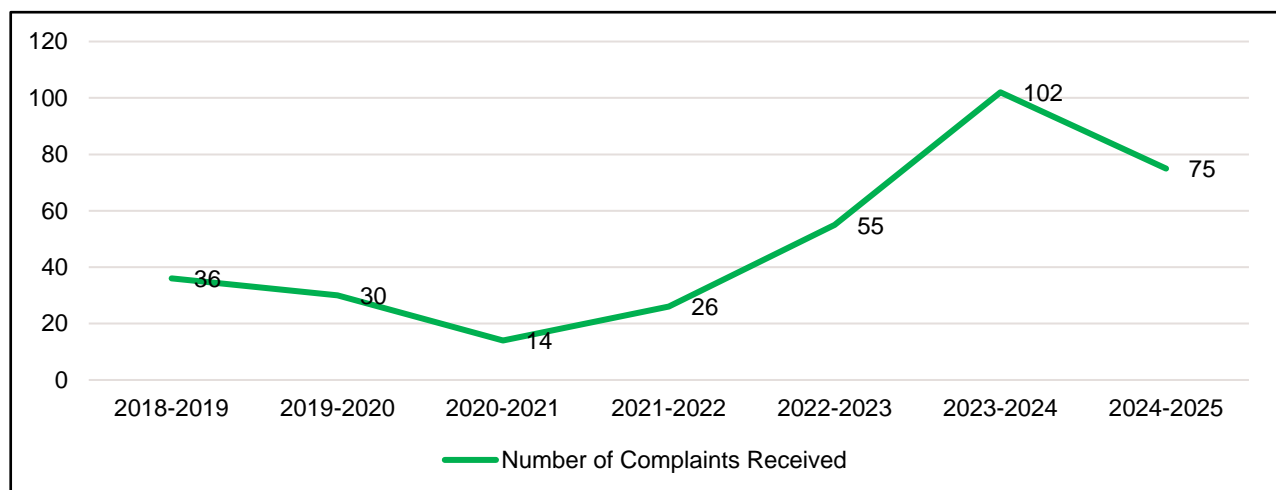
55 Children's Complaints and Representations

2023 – 2024

102 Children's Complaints and Representations

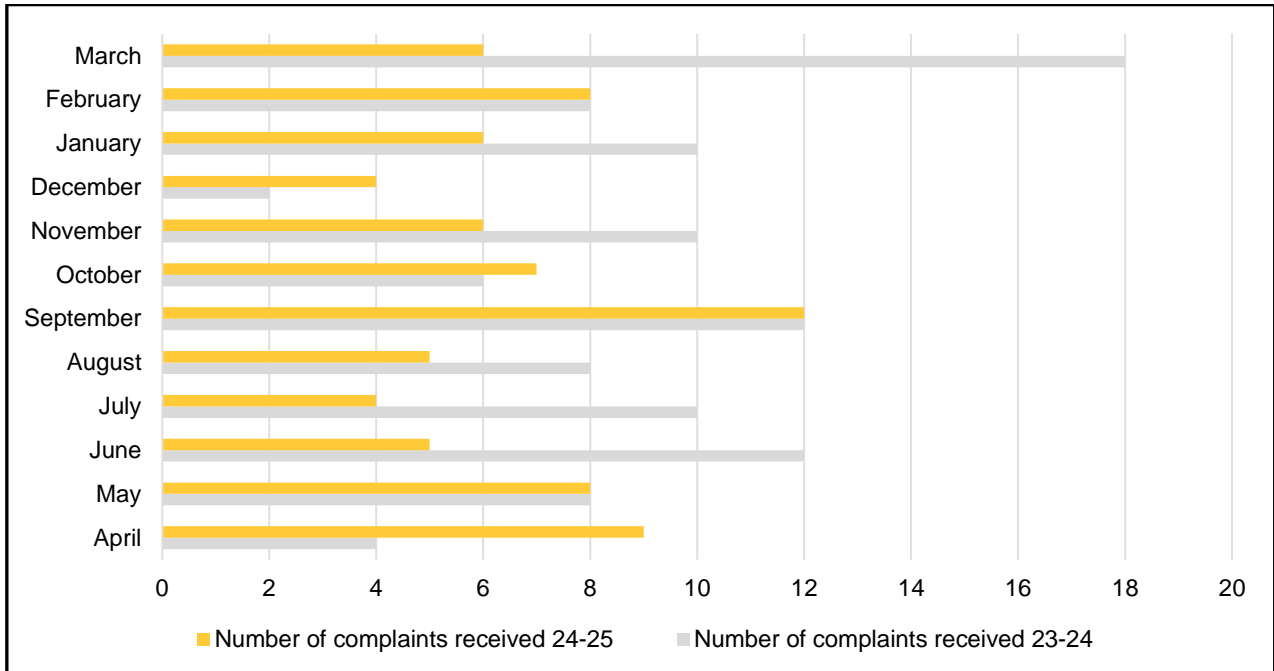
2024 – 2025

75 Children's Complaints and Representations

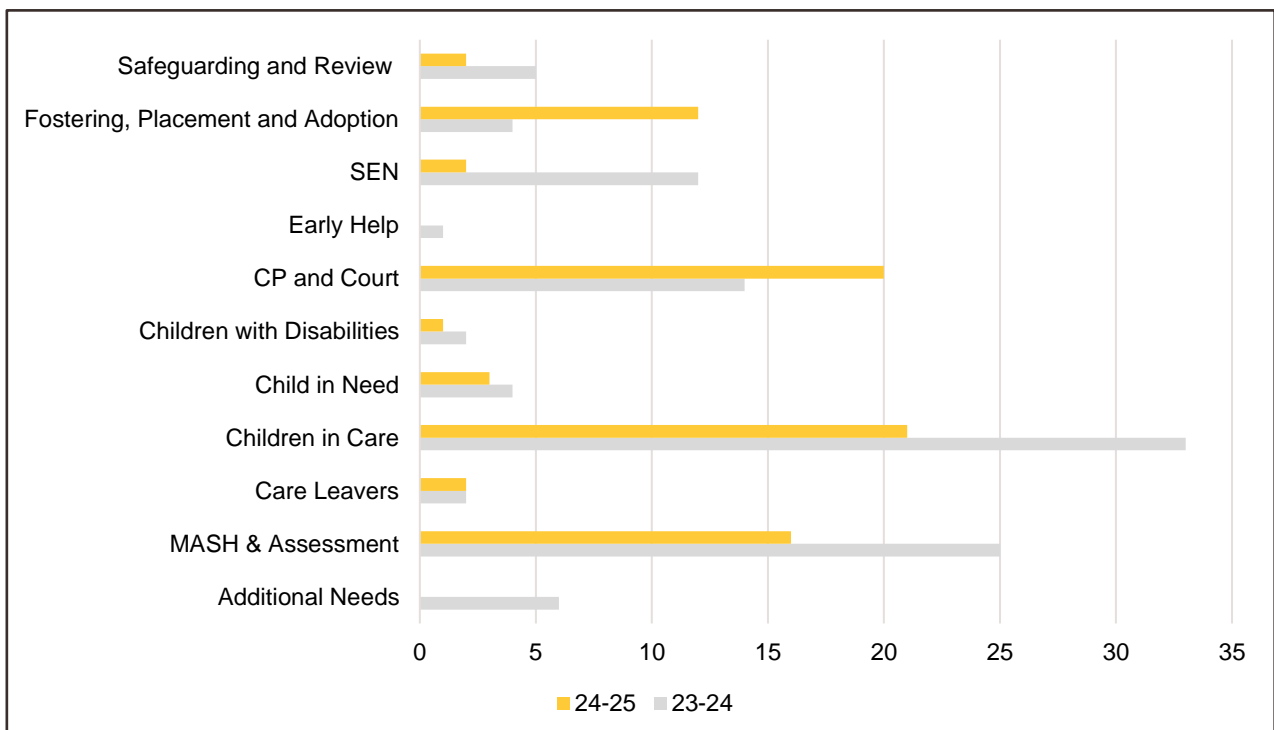


The Children's Complaints and Representations policy has demonstrably fostered a more open and responsive environment since 2022/2023. While the initial years saw an increase in processed complaints, this can be interpreted positively as reflecting greater awareness and accessibility of the complaint procedure. The changes implemented have empowered families, children, and young people to voice their concerns with confidence, knowing that Children's Services values their feedback and is committed to learning and improvement. Moreover, the encouraging decrease in complaints received this year suggests that the changes implemented are having a positive impact and result in improved service delivery and a higher degree of satisfaction among those utilizing children's services.

The below chart highlights the complaints received from April 2024 – March 2025, in comparison to the previous year.



The below chart shows the number of complaints received by service area.



Of the 75 complaints received;

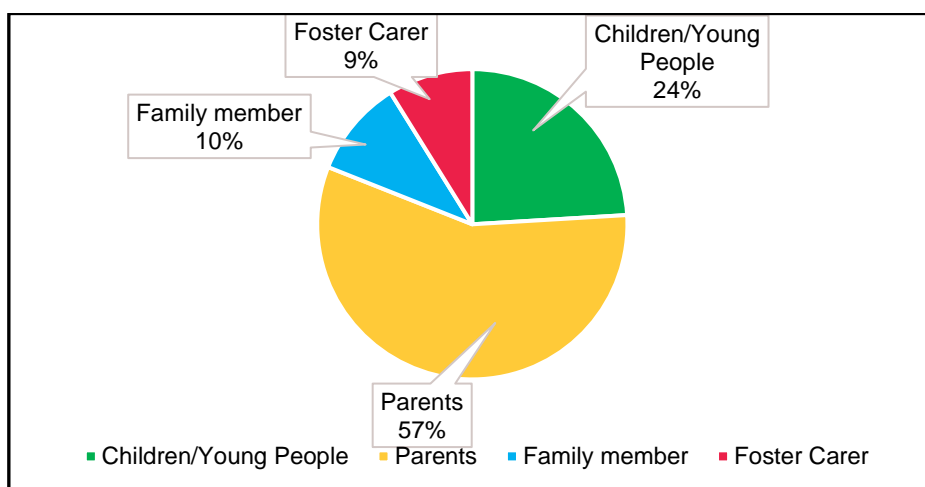
- 53 were resolved at stage 1
- 22 were progressed to stage 2 (see point 8 for reasons)
- 5 were progressed to a stage 3

70% of complaints were resolved at the local resolution stage, stage 1, this is a slight decrease in resolution from the previous year where 77.45% complaints were resolved but still a significant improvement from previous years and another notable improvement from 22/23 where 52% were resolved with local resolution.

The apparent increase in complainant satisfaction with Stage 1 responses suggests a positive trend in Children's Services' engagement with families to address their concerns. This improvement is likely facilitated by the complaints procedure, which prioritises the thorough exploration of all internal resolution avenues before escalating complaints to Stage 2. While families retain the right to escalate their complaint to Stage 2 should they choose not to engage with internal resolution attempts, or in the absence of a timely and substantive response from the Local Authority at Stage 1, the data indicates a growing effectiveness in resolving issues at the initial stage. This proactive approach to addressing concerns contributes to a more efficient complaints process and potentially mitigates the need for further escalation.

3.2 Who has made complaints?

Most complaints were made by family members of children both currently and previously receiving support from children's services within the local authority, with the rest of complaints coming from children and young people either directly or with support of an advocate. Of the 79 complaints received, 19 of those were received directly from the child or young person, 14 of those were supported by an advocate.



Below indicates who can complain on behalf of the children and young people;

Section 26(3) and Section 24D of the Children Act 1989 and Section 3(1) of the Adoption & Children Act 2002 require the responsible authority to consider representations, including complaints, made to it by:

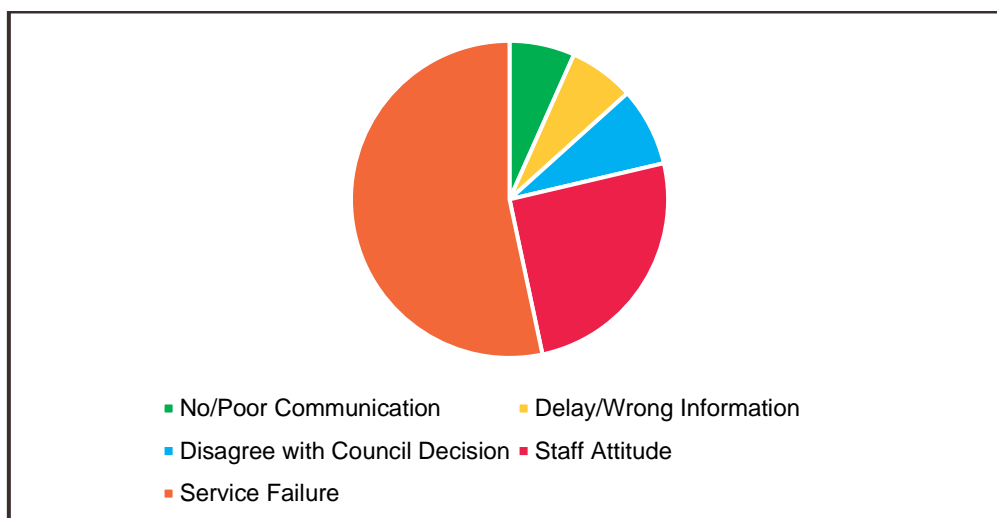
- Any child or young person (or a parent of theirs or someone who has parental responsibility for them) who is being looked after by the local authority or is not looked after by them but is in need;
- Any local authority foster carer (including those caring for children placed through independent fostering agencies);
- Children leaving care;
- Special Guardians;
- A child or young person (or their parent) to whom a Special Guardian Order is in force;
- Any person who has applied for an assessment under Section 14F(3) or (4);
- Any child or young person who may be adopted, their parents and guardians;

- *Persons wishing to adopt a child;*
- *Any other person whom arrangements for the provision of adoption services extend;*
- *Adopted persons, their parents, natural parents and former guardians; and*
- *Such other person as the local authority consider has sufficient interest in the child or young person's welfare to warrant their representations being made by them*

3.3 Category of complaints

There can be multiple reasons for a complaint, which is why the total number of complaints and total number of reasons for complaint will differ. The complaints raised relate to:

- Service failure - This has included quality of service, errors made in assessments or lack of support/services being provided that had been offered;
- No/Poor communication – This included not being kept informed or involved through the process, information not being explained, relevant staff not being available at time of contact, the complainant feeling that they are not being listened too;
- Staff attitude – This included complainants feeling that the Social Worker does not involve them in the decision making process;
- Disagree with council decision – The complainant felt that the process was not effective and they did not agree with the decision making process
- Delay/wrong Information – The complainant believes that their information had been shared inappropriately (also shared with Information Governance as a data breach)



3.4 Outcomes from complaint investigations

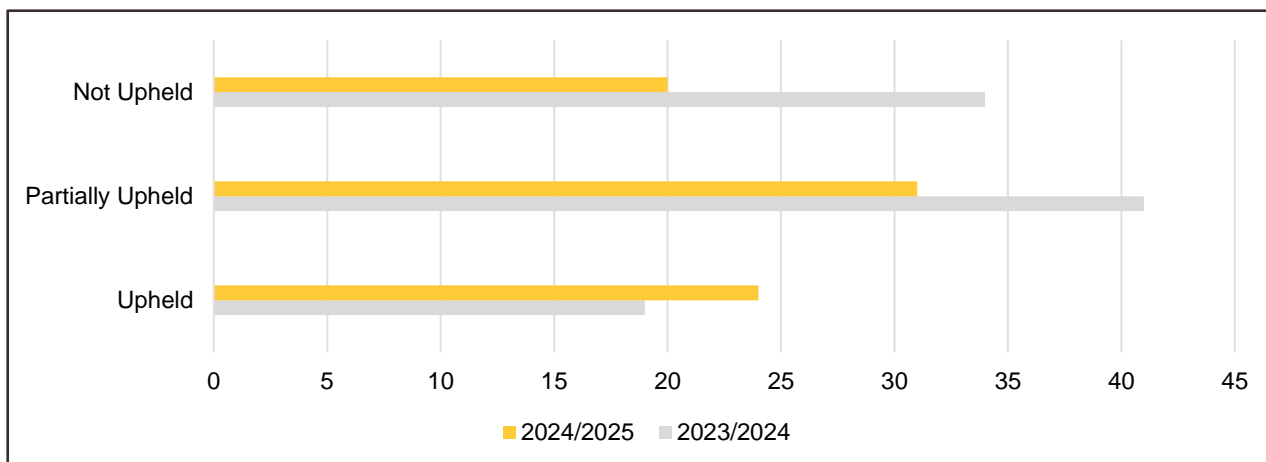
Reporting Period	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
2023/2024	19	41	34
2024/2025	24	31	20
% difference	27.27%	27.78%	51.85%

NB: At the time of writing this report, a number of complaints remained open/outstanding, therefore these figures are not definitive and may alter should data be requested in the future.

This data shows there has been a decrease in complaints found to be fully upheld, with an increase in those found to be partially upheld. Stage 1 of the Statutory Complaints Procedure is classed as 'local resolution' where the Quality Assurance will investigate and respond at Stage 1.

Of the 75 complaints received in 2024/2025, outcomes from Investigation Officers include:

- 24 were upheld;
- 31 were partially upheld;
- 20 were not upheld;



It is the view of the Ombudsman that complaints should be 'upheld' or 'not upheld' and as such, this is the expectation of the Local Authority.

3. 5 Timescales for Responding to Stage 1 Statutory Complaints

The statutory timescale for response at the first stage of investigation of a children's complaint is 10 working days, though this can be extended to 20 working days if the complaint is complex or a large investigation would need to be carried out.

- 45 of the 75 complaints were extended to take longer than 10 working days

- 21 of these 45 were responded to within 20 working days

This has been identified as a significant area for improvement. If we aim to respond to complainants and resolve the concerns within 10 working days we are less likely to receive more complaints due to a lack of response. The extension of a further 10 working days should only be used for large / complex / collaborative responses.

- 24 of the 75 complaints were responded to late at the first stage, over the 20 working days. Meaning 32% of complaints were responded too out of statutory timescale, although this is a decrease from the 40% last year and 62% the year before, there continues to be a significant area for development.

- 51 of the 75 complaints were responded to within statutory timescales,

	23/24	%	24/25	%
Within 10	54	52.9%	30	40%
11-20	6	5.8%	21	28%
20+	42	41.2%	24	32%

3.6 Stage 2 Statutory Independent Investigations

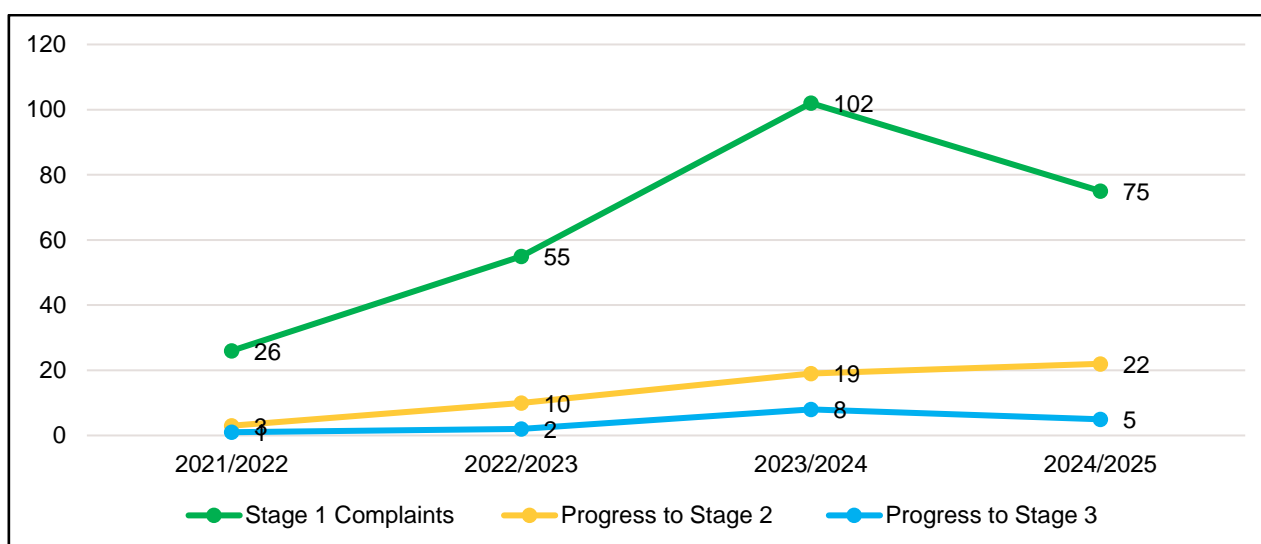
Following the stage 1 internal investigation if a complainant remains dissatisfied they have the right to progress their complaint to stage 2. Reasons for escalating to stage 2 have been;

- Late response at stage 1
- Lack of response at stage 1
- No actions completed following stage 1
- Dispute/disagree with the councils view/decision

The below table shows the number of Stage 2 Investigations commissioned this reporting year whilst also some comparative data of the preceding year with the percentage of stage 1 complaints progressing to the next stage.

Reporting Period	Number of Stage 1 Complaints	Number of Stage 2 Investigations	Percentage of stage 1 progressing to stage 2
2022/2023	55	10	18.18%
2023/2024	102	19	18.63%
2024/2025	75	22	29.33%

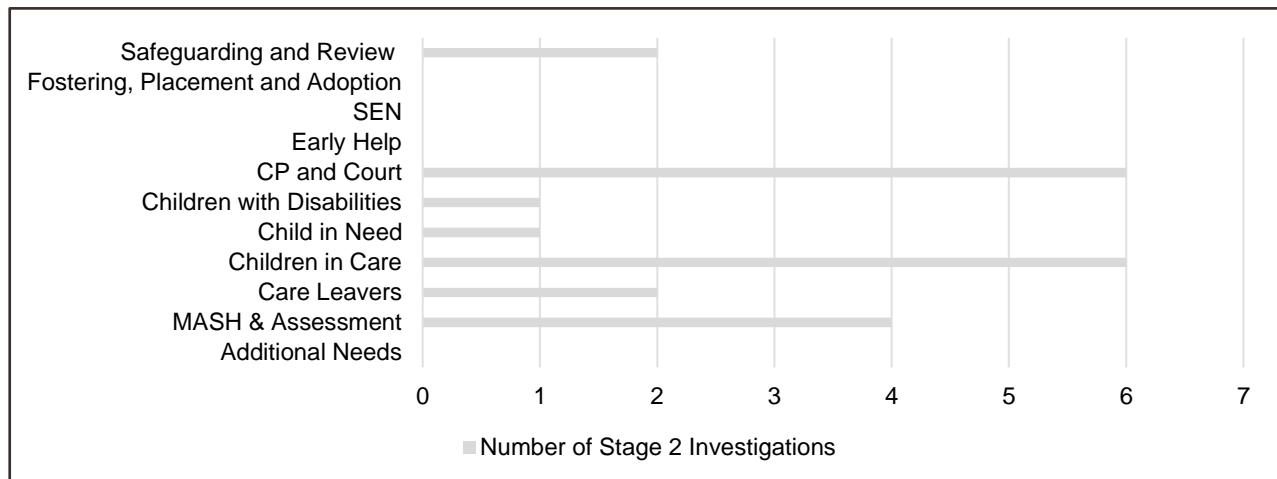
While we are pleased to report a reduction in the number of initial Stage 1 complaints received, we observed a corresponding increase in escalations to Stage 2 of the statutory complaints procedure during the year. Notably, 50% of these escalations, totalling 11 cases, occurred in the fourth quarter. We are actively analysing the reasons behind this trend to identify areas for improvement in our initial complaint resolution processes and prevent future escalations.



This data shows that the percentage of complaints escalating to a Stage 2 Independent Investigation previously remained under 20% however this has increased to nearly 30%. It should be noted that escalation to Stage 2 is a right which the complainant holds and as such if a complainant is firm in that view, we are duty bound to commission officers to undertake this work. We wish to thank the services who are extremely supportive and accommodating when we receive such requests as Senior Managers will often make arrangements to meet with complainants to try and resolve the concerns through a final attempt.

It should not be assumed that a request to escalate to Stage 2 of the Statutory Complaints Procedure is because of a poor response from Stage 1. A complainant may disagree with a Stage

1 response for a variety of reasons and ultimately their view on matters may differ from that of the Local Authority. The Complaints Team continue to work alongside the service areas to ensure a thorough a robust response is provided at Stage 1, which is evidence based and can be used to support the stance of the service should the complaint escalate to a Stage 2.



3.7 Recommendations and Learning from Stage 2 Statutory Investigations

The below provides a selection of recommendations which have been accepted by the Council following a Stage 2 Independent Investigation.

Care Leaver / 16+ Service
<p>Recommendation The IO has upheld all four complaints raised by X and as such, recommends that full and frank apologies are provided</p> <p>Recommendation Regarding the fact that no C&F Assessment was undertaken, the IO recommends that Children's Services work to ensure and assure themselves that a failure of this nature cannot happen in the future</p>
Children in Care
<p>Recommendation The Investigator recommended that the Complainant be offered an apology for the failings outlined within this report.</p> <p>Recommendation The Investigator would recommend that Children's Social Care review the way in which children's wishes and feelings are considered and ensure that robust management oversight is maintained.</p> <p>Recommendation The Investigator would recommend that emails which are relevant to the case management of a child's case are added to the child's case file. The case guidance is clear if there are emails which are pertinent or where there are decisions, they should be uploaded. Emails are sometimes used as a 'conversation' and when this happens it would not be appropriate for all to be on file. The fostering SW can be sent any emails which are not on the file to ascertain which are appropriate</p> <p>Recommendation: For SW to reflect on their management of this case and receive any additional training and enhanced supervisory oversight until she is able to demonstrate positive working practice.</p>
CP & Court
<p>Recommendation I recommend that this report is shared with the Service Manager and Team Manager for Social Worker to address the issues about their practice that this investigation has uncovered.</p> <p>Recommendation I recommend the Council ensures all Children's Services managers are given training on complaints handling and resolution.</p> <p>Recommendation I recommend that this report, the Independent Person's report and the Adjudication Report is shared with the staff listed in section 6 for their learning.</p>
MASH & Assessment
<p>Recommendation I recommend that a senior manager reviews the case to see where improvements need to be made and put training in place if appropriate. I do not have the remit to direct managers to invoke disciplinary procedures</p>

3.8 Stage 3 Complaints

Assuming complainants exhausted the complaints procedure by the time of writing the annual report, the annual report cannot give an accurate reflection of the number of complaints received in 24/25 that escalated to stage 3 as they have not all concluded the stage 2 procedure. At the time of writing, April 2025, 5 complaints received this year escalated to stage 3.

3 Compliments

This report seeks to recognise the determination of children and young people to see that Social Care processes improve and develop and outline not just what complaints were made, but what difference they have made in the work of Herefordshire Children's Services and the recognition of individual officers.

4.1 Volume of compliments received

External compliments are recorded and reported centrally by the complaints team. This year, Children's Services received 126 compliments about professionals and services.

4.2 Who complimented

The majority of our external compliments received came via members of the public, predominantly from families involved with Children's Services. We also received a large number from young people within Children's Services, highlighting the positive working relationships being developed. A smaller proportion of these external compliments were received via professionals, such as schools and fostering agencies.

5 Support Services

5.1 Hear Me, Children's Rights and Advocacy Service

Development of the Hear Me Advocacy services, pending a successful bid of funds to develop the service:

- Increase in advocacy staff (additional 82 hours to provide additional services and grow our offer)
- Introduction of an administrative post to support the team and manage all administrative functions that are currently managed by the service manager
- Increase in capacity to support children and young people to make complaints and ensure their voice is heard in all aspects of their journey

Hear Me provides a children's rights and advocacy support service. They can help find information needed, or go to meetings, in a supportive role, write letters on a young person's behalf, or speak for them in situations where they don't feel able to speak for themselves. They also help children and young people make complaints against the local authority.

They can help if one or more of the following apply:

- Child in care
- Unaccompanied asylum seeker child
- Homeless and aged 16-17
- Child in need plan and need support making a complaint against the local authority
- Care leaver and under 25 years of age
- Child protection plan
- Receive support from the children with disabilities team

All children and young people making complaints are offered support from a professional advocacy service. Of the 75 complaints received, 14 of these were made by the child or young person, supported by an Advocate.

5.2 Onside Advocacy

Onside is a charity set up in 1993 and currently providing support across Worcestershire and Herefordshire. Onside recognises that for a range of reasons, many people in our local communities face disadvantage and inequality of access, and may encounter barriers to getting the right support, services, information and advice. Onside provide a range of services and support options to help people overcome those barriers and feel more confident and empowered to speak up, make decisions and choices, improve their health and wellbeing and engage with other people and their communities. Herefordshire Council commission Onside to provide advocacy support to Adults wanting to raise a complaint against the Local Authority. Onside provide skilled and trained advocates to offer practical and proactive guidance and support to ensure people facing disadvantage are treated fairly as citizens, have equal rights within all aspects of their lives and have access to the right services.

5.3 The Complaints Team

Growth of the Complaints Team to act as dedicated support for Children's complaints:

- Supporting the organisation to remain compliant and meeting our statutory responsibilities
- Protecting the organisation from reputational and financial damage
- Facilitate LGSCO complaints handling training for Children's Services managers

A review of the website is underway to ensure that it is accessible to all those who have a right to complaint, this includes translated complaints forms, easy read versions of information and up to date contact details.

The Complaints Team will continue to work with Social Care teams to ensure that awareness is raised amongst children and young people regarding making complaints if they feel the need to.

6.1 Complaint responses taken to the LGSCO:

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) looks at complaints about councils and some other authorities and organisations, including education admissions appeal panels and adult social care providers (such as care homes and home care providers). The service is free, independent and impartial.

2019-2020

9 complainants took their complaints to the LGSCO for review:

- 3 were not upheld
- 3 were closed after initial enquiries
- 1 was deemed as premature
- 2 were upheld and the complainant(s) was awarded £2500 and £300

2020-2021

6 complainants took their complaints to the LGSCO for review:

- 1 was not upheld
- 2 were closed after initial enquiries
- 3 were upheld and the complainant(s) was awarded £1000 and £300 and upheld but no injustice

2021-2022

13 complainants took their complaints to the LGSCO for review:

- 2 were not upheld
- 7 were closed after initial enquiries
- 1 was deemed as premature
- 2 were upheld and one complainant was awarded £600
- 1 concluded complaint in 2020 was reviewed by the LGSCO in 2021, with an outcome of: Upheld - Maladministration & Injustice, awarding £4,270.00 and £600.00

2022-2023

9 complainants took their complaints to the LGSCO for review:

- 1 was not upheld
- 4 were closed after initial enquiries
- 2 were deemed as premature
- 1 was upheld and the complainant was awarded £100
- 1 was upheld with no further action

2023-2024

12 complainants took their complaints to the LGSCO for review:

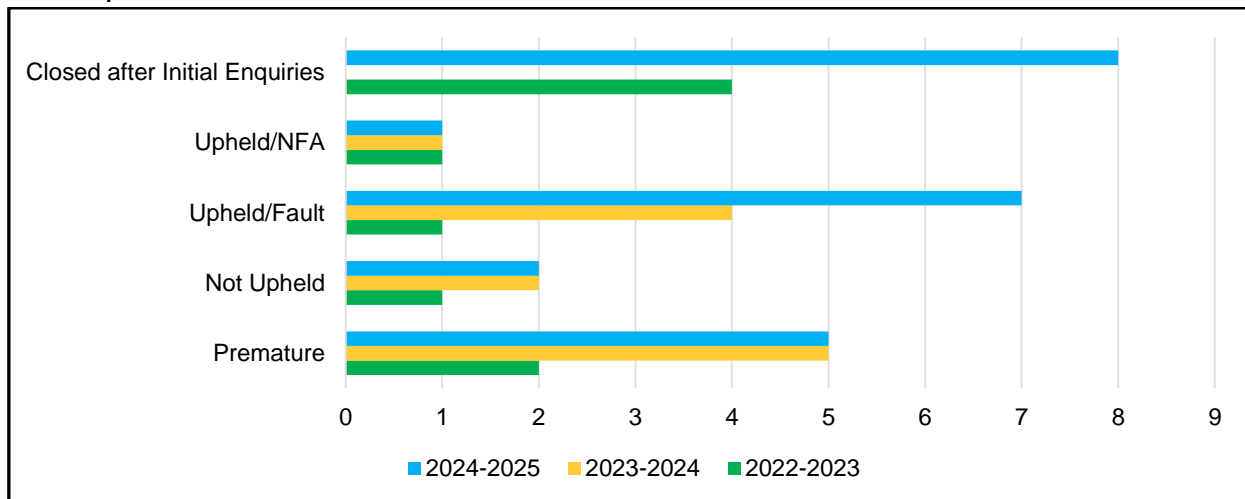
- 5 were deemed as premature
- 3 Upheld: Fault and Injustice
- 1 Not upheld: no injustice
- 1 Upheld: Fault and Injustice, financial redress of £250 plus cost of doorbell
- 1 Upheld: no further action, organisation already remedied.
- 1 Not upheld, no further action

2024-2025

23 complainants took their complaints to the LGSCO for review:

- 5 were deemed as premature
- 1 Not upheld: no injustice

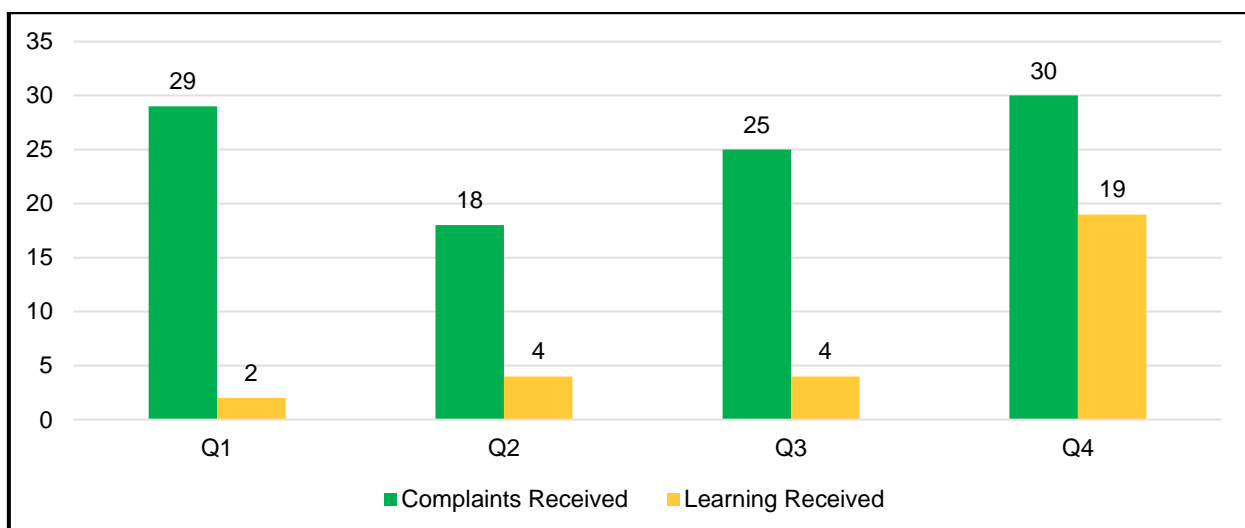
- 0 Upheld: Fault and Injustice
- 7 Upheld: Fault and Injustice, financial redress
- 1 Upheld: no further action, organisation already remedied
- 1 Not upheld, no further action
- 8 Closed after initial enquires



6.2 Learning: what difference have complaints made?

Learning from complaints helps social care practitioners in their practice development and wider service improvement, which benefits other children and young people receiving services. When complaints are seen as, constructive, feedback and tools for improvement they can shape the way to making things better for all.

The below chart highlights the number of learning templates completed and returned this year, in comparison to the number of complaints received:



Numbers of lessons learnt forms being completed, remains low. It is the expectation of all officers at Herefordshire Council that a lessons learnt form is completed as part of the complaint investigation.

Some examples of improvements and changes that have been made as a result of the complaints made in 2023-2024 are as follows:

- Communication has been an ongoing issue for Children's Services and is a key area of learning and improvement; this is a part of wider learning across Children's Services currently, embedded into the Quality Improvement Plan.
- There is an increase in the recognition and use of the interpreter services and ensuring this is in place consistently for those where English is not the individuals first language.
- There is wider recognition that information needs to be passed to families in a timelier manner to ensure that they are able to review and process this prior to meetings; in addition communicating information in an effective way that makes sense to the family involved.
- For all staff to utilise the information recording systems held to ensure that all information is logged appropriately and is correct. When Investigating Officers have investigated complaints, it is advised that the complaint reference number is added to the case file of the complainant so that, should it be needed, professionals can request complaint information from the Complaints Team.

In addition to the above, stage 2 Investigating Officers have made the below recommendations to encourage learning throughout the service and to support the continued improvements being made;

- Children's Services to review its contractual arrangements with providers as a matter of urgency.
- That formal written responses should be provided to Complainants at Stage 1 of the Complaints Procedure.
- Children's Services staff are reminded that any complaint received by them should be forwarded to the Complaints Team in order for it to be formally logged and monitored.
- The IO recommends that following on from the review into the matter of children and young people being the subject of S20 Voluntary Care Orders for extended periods of time, the Local Authority reassure itself that all current cases are consistently examined and assessed for appropriateness.
- The IO recommends that the Local Authority reassures itself that oversights of this nature, YP's not participating in a Pathway Plan Review, cannot reoccur.
- The IO recommends that Stage 1 complaint responders are reminded of the benefits of meeting with complainants prior to the production of a Stage 1 response letter. Providing complainants with an early opportunity to discuss their concerns, might assist in the context and understanding of a complaint, which in turn, might allow for a response to thoroughly addresses all aspects.
- In both complaints that have no findings this decision is made due to a lack of evidence. In this case specifically, the IO recommends that case file recording include copies of recording from externally commissioned agencies such as supported housing providers. Ensuring all relevant information pertaining to individual young people is accessible, should simplify data collection.

6.3 Financial Implication of Complaints

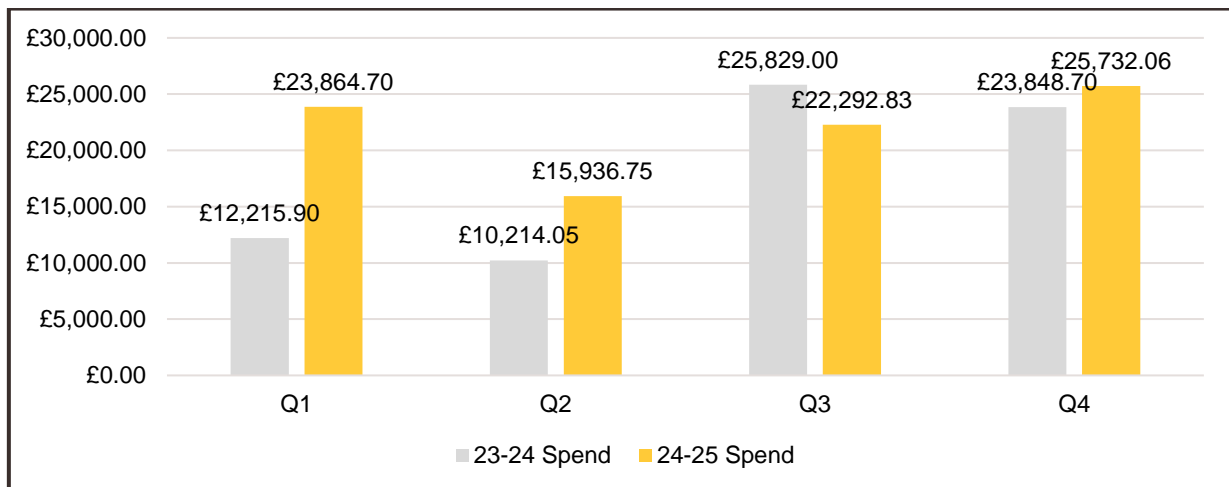
Financial year 22/23, concluded stage 2 and stage 3 complaints cost a total of; **£19,830.20**

Financial year 23/24, concluded stage 2 and stage 3 complaints cost a total of; **£72,107.65**

Financial year 24/25, concluded stage 2 and stage 3 complaints cost a total of; **£87,826.34**

These figures have been taken from invoices submitted following the conclusion of stage 2 investigations and stage 3 panel hearings during the financial year.

The below chart offers a comparison on spent from the previous financial year.



NB: this does not include the current complaints that are being investigated at stage 2 and pending stage 3 review panel

7. Analysis

7.1 Analysis of Complaints and Compliments Report: Corporate Complaints, Children's Services

This report analyses complaints and compliments data related to Children's Services, focusing on trends, key messages, and recommendations for continued improvement. The analysis covers the period from 2019/2020 to 2024/2025, with a specific focus on comparing the last two financial years.

Key Observations:

- **Overall Reduction in Corporate Complaints:** A significant decrease in Corporate Stage 1 complaints (-28%) indicates improvement in Children's Services. This reverses a trend of increasing complaints seen over the previous four years (2019-2023).
- **Increase in Statutory Stage 2, Stage 3, and LGSCO Complaints:** While Corporate Stage 1 complaints have decreased, there has been an increase in complaints escalated to Statutory Stage 2 and 3, as well as complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO). This could suggest that while initial issues are being addressed more effectively, more complex or unresolved issues are being escalated.
- **Positive Trend in Compliments:** The presence of 126 compliments suggests a positive shift in perception and service delivery.
- **Timeliness Improvement:** A significant reduction in the percentage of complaints responded to outside the 15-day timeframe (from 45% in 2022-23 to 12.5% in 2024-25) demonstrates improved efficiency in complaint handling.

Root Cause Analysis of Complaints:

Analysis of complaints over the past five years identifies recurring themes:

- **Inadequate Communication:** Difficulties contacting social workers, lack of introductions, and delays in responses are major concerns. High staff turnover exacerbates this issue, leading to inconsistent case handovers and the feeling of being unheard.
- **Service Failures:** Perceived lack of support or failure to deliver promised services is a frequent complaint. This is often linked to communication issues and misunderstandings regarding expectations.
- **Staff Attitudes:** Unsatisfactory staff attitudes contribute to negative experiences and complaints.

Contributing Factors:

- **Staffing Complexities:** High turnover among frontline staff has negatively impacted communication and continuity of care.
- **Lack of Understanding:** Initially, a lack of understanding of how Children's Complaints should be differentiated impacted the handling process.

Positive Developments:

- **Improved Staffing:** Achieving 100% permanent managers and 70% permanent social workers is a significant step forward.
- **Perception of the Complaints Procedure:** Families acknowledge that the complaints procedure provides a platform to be heard.
- **Progress Recognition:** Families have noticed considerable progress made within Children's Services in recent years.
- **Emphasis on Timely Resolution:** Leadership has emphasized the importance of timely and effective complaint resolution at the local level.
- **Proactive Collaboration:** The Complaints Team proactively collaborates with Investigating Officers to manage workloads and provide realistic response timelines.
- **Operational Manager Oversight:** The new process includes operational manager oversight, ensuring promptness and thoroughness in complaint responses.

Recommendations:

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Sustain and Enhance Communication Strategies:**
 - Implement mandatory introduction protocols for new social workers assigned to cases.
 - Establish clear communication channels and response timeframes, ensuring they are communicated effectively to families.

- Utilise technology to improve communication, such as secure messaging platforms or dedicated phone lines.
- 2. **Address Service Delivery Gaps:**
 - Conduct thorough assessments to identify and address service delivery gaps.
 - Develop clear service agreements outlining expectations and responsibilities for both service providers and families.
 - Regularly review and update service plans to ensure they meet evolving needs.
- 3. **Enhance Staff Training and Development:**
 - Provide comprehensive training on effective communication, conflict resolution, and empathy.
 - Offer ongoing professional development opportunities to improve staff skills and knowledge.
 - Implement mentorship programs to support new staff and promote knowledge transfer.
- 4. **Improve Case Handovers:**
 - Establish standardized protocols for case handovers to ensure seamless transitions.
 - Involve young people and families in the handover process to ensure their voices are heard.
 - Provide comprehensive documentation and information sharing to maintain continuity of care.
- 5. **Address Escalated Complaints:**
 - Analyse the reasons for the increase in Statutory Stage 2 and 3 complaints and LGSCO complaints.
 - Implement strategies to address the root causes of these escalated complaints and prevent future occurrences.
- 6. **Acknowledge and Celebrate Successes:**
 - Recognize and reward staff for positive contributions and improved outcomes.
 - Share success stories and positive feedback to promote a culture of continuous improvement.
- 7. **Utilise Compliments for Learning:**
 - Analyse compliments to identify areas of strength and best practices.
 - Share these best practices across the organisation to improve overall service delivery.
- 8. **Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:**
 - Regularly monitor complaint and compliment data to identify trends and patterns.
 - Evaluate the effectiveness of implemented strategies and make adjustments as needed.
 - Seek feedback from families and stakeholders to inform ongoing improvement efforts.

Conclusion:

The decrease in corporate complaints and the improved timeliness of responses are encouraging signs of progress within Children's Services. However, the increase in escalated complaints highlights the need for continued focus on addressing root causes and improving communication, service delivery, and staff training. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, Children's Services can build upon its successes and further enhance the quality of care provided to children and families. The rise in compliments is a testament to the hard work of the staff, and acknowledging these positive outcomes alongside the complaints will foster a culture of continuous improvement.

7.2 Analysis of Statutory Children's Complaints and Representations Report (2024/2025)

This report analyses complaints made under the Children's Complaints and Representations Policy, highlighting key trends, areas of improvement, and recommendations for Children's Services. The analysis considers data from the past several years to provide context and identify significant shifts.

Key Messages:

- **Overall Decrease in Complaints:** There has been a 22.5% decrease in complaints received compared to the previous year (2023/2024), with 75 complaints recorded in 2024/2025 (4 withdrawn) compared to 102 in 2023/2024. This suggests a possible improvement in service delivery and/or increased user satisfaction.
- **Positive Impact of the Complaints Policy:** The increase in complaints processed since 2022/2023 can be seen as a positive sign, indicating greater awareness and accessibility of the complaint procedure. This has empowered families, children, and young people to voice their concerns.
- **Effective Local Resolution:** A significant 70% of complaints were resolved at Stage 1, demonstrating the effectiveness of local resolution efforts. This is a slight decrease from the previous year's 77.45% but remains a considerable improvement compared to 2022/2023 where only 52% were resolved at Stage 1.
- **Complaint Origins:** Most complaints originate from family members of children both currently and previously receiving support from Children's Services, with a significant number also received directly from children and young people, often supported by an advocate.
- **Common Complaint Themes:** Recurring reasons for complaints include:
 - Service failure (quality, errors, lack of promised support).
 - No/Poor communication (lack of information, unavailability of staff, feeling unheard).
 - Staff attitude (lack of involvement in decision-making).
 - Disagreement with council decision.
 - Delay/wrong Information (inappropriate information sharing).
- **Shift in Complaint Outcomes:** There's a notable shift in the outcomes of investigations. While the number of fully upheld complaints has decreased, the number of partially upheld complaints has increased.
- **Timeliness Issues:** A substantial number of complaints (45 out of 75) required an extension beyond the initial 10-day response timeframe. Of these, 24 were responded to late at the first stage, exceeding the extended 20-day statutory timescale. This indicates a continued challenge with responding to complaints within the required timeframe, despite improvements from previous years.
- **Escalation to Stage 2:** The most common reasons for complainants escalating to Stage 2 are: Late response at stage 1, lack of response at stage 1, No actions completed following stage 1 and disagreement with the councils view/decision
- **Increase in Stage 2 Progression:** There has been an increase in the percentage of complaints progressing from Stage 1 to Stage 2, rising from 18.63% in 2023/2024 to 29.33% in 2024/2025.

Recommendations:

1. **Address Timeliness of Responses:**
 - Implement strategies to ensure adherence to the statutory response times for Stage 1 complaints.
 - Review and streamline internal processes to expedite investigations.
 - Provide additional training to staff on complaint handling procedures and the importance of timely communication.
 - Explore opportunities to improve communication with complainants during the investigation process, particularly when extensions are necessary.

2. Focus on Communication:

- Develop clear communication protocols to ensure families and children are kept informed and involved in decision-making processes.
- Emphasize the importance of active listening and empathy in staff training.
- Provide training on clear and accessible communication techniques.

3. Improve Service Delivery:

- Conduct a thorough review of service delivery processes to identify and address recurring issues leading to complaints.
- Implement quality assurance measures to prevent errors in assessments and ensure consistent service provision.
- Strengthen internal communication and collaboration to ensure a coordinated approach to service delivery.

4. Reduce Escalation to Stage 2:

- Prioritize thorough and comprehensive responses at Stage 1 to address complainant concerns effectively.
- Ensure that all actions promised at Stage 1 are completed promptly and communicated to the complainant.
- Explore alternative dispute resolution methods to resolve disagreements and prevent escalation.

5. Analyse partially upheld complaints:

- A review should be carried out of all partially upheld complaints to ascertain what themes are emerging to see if changes to policy / practice can be implemented to improve

6. Data Analysis and Reporting:

- Continue to monitor complaint data closely to identify trends and emerging issues.
- Regularly review and update the Children's Complaints and Representations Policy to ensure it remains effective and accessible.
- Share learning from complaints with staff to promote continuous improvement and prevent future occurrences.

By addressing these recommendations, Children's Services can further enhance its complaint handling process, improve service delivery, and build stronger relationships with the families and children it serves.



Title of report: Work programme

Meeting: Audit and Governance Committee

Meeting date: 25 September 2025

Report by: Democratic Services Officer

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision.

Wards affected

(All Wards)

Purpose

To consider the committee's work programme (Appendix A).

Recommendation(s)

- (a) **That, subject to any further updates made by the committee, the work programme for the Audit and Governance Committee be noted.**

Alternative options

1. There are no alternative options, as the committee requires such a programme in order to set out its work for the coming year.
2. Updating the work programme is recommended, as the committee is required to define and make known its work. This will ensure that matters pertaining to audit and governance are tracked and progressed in order to provide sound governance for the council.

Key considerations

3. The routine business of the committee has been reflected as far as is known, including the regular reporting from both internal and external auditors.
4. The committee is asked to consider any adjustments.

Community impact

5. A clear and transparent work programme provides a visible demonstration of how the

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Jen Preece, email: jennypreece@herefordshire.gov.uk

committee is fulfilling its role as set out in the council's constitution.

Environmental impact

6. Whilst this is an update on the work programme and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the council's Environmental Policy.

Equality duty

7. This report does not impact on this area.

Resource implications

8. There are no financial implications.

Legal implications

9. The work programme reflects any statutory or constitutional requirements.

Risk management

10. The programme can be adjusted in year to respond as necessary to risks as they are identified; the committee also provides assurances that risk management processes are robust and effective.

Consultees

11. The Director of Finance and Assurance / S151 Officer, Director of Governance and Legal Services / Monitoring Officer, and committee members contribute to the work programme; the work programme is reviewed at each meeting of the committee.

Appendices

Appendix A Work programme for the Audit and Governance Committee

Background papers

None identified.

Audit and Governance Committee Constitution		Report	July 2025	September 2025	October 2025	January 2026	March 2026	June 2026
3.5.10	Internal Audit	Internal Audit						
a	To consider the Head of Internal Audit’s annual report and opinion, and a summary of internal Audit activity (actual and proposed) and the level of assurance it can give over the Council’s corporate governance arrangements.	Planning Paper Audit Charter Rolling Plan (also inclu. in Progress Report)		Internal Audit Plan 25/26			Planning Paper Audit Charter Rolling Plan (inclu. in Progress Report)	
b	To consider summaries of specific Internal Audit reports and the main issues arising and seek assurance that action has been taken where necessary.	Progress Report	Progress Report		Internal Audit – Progress Report	Progress Report	Annual opinion to inc Q4 update	
c	To consider reports dealing with the management and performance of the providers of Internal Audit Services.							
d	To consider a report from Internal Audit on agreed recommendations not implemented within a reasonable timescale.	Progress Report	Progress Report			Progress Report		
e	To be able to call senior officers and appropriate members to account for relevant issues within the remit of the Committee.	<i>This would support progress report when necessary</i>						
f	The Committee will not receive detailed information on investigations relating to individuals. The general governance principles and control issues may be discussed, in confidential session if applicable, at an appropriate time, to protect the identity of individuals and so as not to prejudice any action being taken by the Council.	As and when investigations take part as part of progress reports (see part b for timings)						
3.5.11	External Audit	External Audit						
a & b	Review and agree the External Auditors annual plan, including the annual audit Fee and annual letter and receive regular update reports on progress. To consider specific reports from the External Auditor.	External Audit Annual Plan Annual Audit Fee Letter External Audit Progress Update External Audit Findings Report External Auditor’s Annual Report Update on Audit Recommendations Report	External Audit Progress Report	1) External Audit Findings Report 2) External Audit – Auditor’s Annual Report 2024/25			External Audit - Audit Plan 2025/26	External Auditor’s Draft Plan (including indicative fee)
c	To meet privately with the External Auditor once a year if required.	Not required to be scheduled on work programme						
d	To comment on the scope and depth of external audit work and to ensure it gives value for money.	No specific activity required as part of normal questioning activity						
e	To recommend appointment of the council’s local (external) auditor.	As and when required.						
f	Ensure that there are effective relationships between external and internal audit that the value of the combined internal and external audit process is maximised.	No specific activity required as part of normal questioning activity. External Audit can place limited reliance on Internal Audit Work.						
3.5.12	Governance							
a	To maintain an overview of the council’s Constitution, conduct a biennial review and recommend any changes to council other than changes to the contract procedure rules, finance procedure rules which have been delegated to the committee for adoption.	Accounting Policy Update Contract and Finance Procedure Rules Proposed Changes to the Constitution			Constitution updates	Contract and Financial Procedure Rules Update	Accounting Policy Update (if required)	Annual review of exemptions to contract procedure rules
b	To monitor the effective development and operation of risk management and corporate governance in the council.	Work Programme Corporate Risk Register	Work Programme	Work Programme	Work Programme 1) Annual review of the Council’s use of the Regulation of. Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA). 2) Review of Risk Management arrangements	Work Programme Review of Risk Management arrangements	Work Programme	Work Programme 1) Review of Risk Management arrangements 2) Dates of future meetings / work programme Draft Annual Report of the Audit & Governance Committee
c	To maintain an overview and agree changes to the council policies on whistleblowing and the ‘Anti-fraud and corruption strategy’.	Whistleblowing Policy Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Strategy	Anti-fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy		Whistleblowing Policy	Annual Fraud Report		
d	To oversee the production of the authority’s Statement on Internal Control and to recommend its adoption.	Statement of Accounts						2025/26 Draft Statement of accounts
e	To annually conduct a review of the effectiveness of the council’s governance process and system of internal control which will inform the Annual Governance statement.	Annual Governance Statement		Final Annual Governance Statement				Draft Annual Governance Statement
f	The council’s arrangements for corporate governance and agreeing necessary actions to ensure compliance.	Annual Governance Statement Progress Report				Governance Statement Progress Report on Actions		

Audit and Governance Committee Constitution		Report	July 2025	September 2025	October 2025	January 2026	March 2026	June 2026
g	To annually review the council's information governance requirements.	Annual Review of Information Access / Governance		Annual Review of Information Access / Governance				
h	To agree the annual governance statement (which includes an annual review of the effectiveness of partnership arrangements together with monitoring officer, s151 officer, caldicott guardian and equality and compliance manager reviews).	Annual Governance Statement Annual Governance Statement Progress Report						
i	To adopt an audit and governance code.	On an ad hoc basis only						
j	To undertake community governance reviews and to make recommendations to Council.	On an ad hoc basis only						
3.5.13	Waste Contract							
a	To review, in conjunction with external advisers advising the council as lender, the risks being borne as a result of the funding provided by the council to Mercia Waste Management Ltd and consider whether the risks being borne by the council, as lender, are reasonable and appropriate having regard to the risks typically assumed by long term senior funders to waste projects in the United Kingdom and best banking practice.	Energy from Waste Loan Update			Energy from Waste Loan Update			
b	To monitor the administration of the loan to the waste project in line with best banking practice having regard to any such external advice, including the terms of any waivers or amendments which may be required or are desirable.	Energy from Waste Loan Update			Energy from Waste Loan Update			
c	Consider what steps should be taken to protect the interests of the council as lender in the event of a default or breach of covenant by Mercia Waste Management Ltd, and make recommendations as appropriate to Council, the council's statutory officers or cabinet as appropriate to ensure the appropriate enforcement of security and litigation in relation to the loan to Mercia Waste Management Ltd	Energy from Waste Loan Update			Energy from Waste Loan Update			
d	Consider and recommend appropriate courses of action to protect the position of the council as lender to the waste project: (i) make recommendation as appropriate to Council with regards to its budget and policy framework and the loan to the waste project (ii) generally to take such other steps in relation to the loan within the scope of these terms of reference as the committee considers to be appropriate.	Energy from Waste Loan Update			Energy from Waste Loan Update			
3.5.14	Code of Conduct: To promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the Council							
a	To support Town and Parish Councils within the county to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the Council.	Annual Code of Conduct Report	Code of Conduct for Councillors - 6 monthly update			Code of Conduct for Councillors - 6 monthly update		
b	To recommend to Council the adoption of a code dealing with the conduct that is expected of members and co-opted members of the Council.							
c	To keep the code of conduct under review and recommend changes/replacement to Council as appropriate.							
d	To publicise the adoption, revision or replacement of the Council's Code of Conduct.							
e	To oversee the process for the recruitment of the Independent Persons and make recommendations to Council for their appointment.	Recruitment done on an as required basis						
f	To annually review overall figures and trends from code of conduct complaints which will include number of upheld complaints by reference to individual councillors within unitary, town and parish councils and when a code of conduct complaint has been upheld by the Monitoring Officer or by the Standards Panel, after the option of any appeal has been concluded, promptly to publish the name of the councillor, the council, the nature of the breach and any recommendation or sanction applied.	Annual Code of Conduct Report						
g	To grant dispensations under Section 33 (2)(b)(d) and (c) Localism Act 2011 or any subsequent amendment.	On an ad hoc basis only						
h	To hear appeals in relation to dispensations granted under section 33 (2)(a) and (c) Localism Act 2011 by the monitoring officer.	On an ad hoc basis only						
3.5.15	Accounts							
	To review and approve the Statement of Accounts, external auditor's opinion and reports on them and monitor management action in response to the issues raised by external audit.	Statement of Accounts External Auditor Report		Final Statement of Accounts				