

Policy Committee Decision Report

Title of Report:	Sheffield City Council's Corporate Complaints Performance Report & Annual Ombudsman Report 2024-2025 and Update on apologies following publication of the Sheffield Street Trees Inquiry Report
Date of Decision:	10 th September 2025
Report To:	Strategy & Resources Policy Committee
Report Of:	Ajman Ali, Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services
Report Author:	Corleen Bygraves-Paul – Interim Head of Customer Services
Executive Summary:	<p>This report provides a summary of the Corporate Annual Complaints Performance and the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman & Housing Ombudsman Reports for Sheffield City Council for the 2024-25 reporting year.</p> <p>The report identifies key feedback and areas for further improvement as well as benchmarking against similar local authorities.</p>



Council Plan outcomes:

[A place where all children belong and all young people can build a successful future](#)

[Great neighbourhoods that people are happy to call home](#)

[People live in caring, engaged communities that value diversity and support wellbeing](#)

[A creative and prosperous city full of culture, learning, and innovation](#)

[A city on the move – growing, connected and sustainable](#)

Policy Committee remit:

This report is to be considered by the Strategy & Resources Policy Committee as its remit includes Lead responsibility for complaints including monitoring of complaint handling performance [[Part 3C - 3.3 Matters Delegated to Committees May 2024.pdf \(sheffield.gov.uk\)](#)]

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? No



Recommendations:

The Strategy & Resources Committee is recommended to:

- (a) Consider the statistical analysis of the reports and the breakdowns therein including information on the performance of complaints and the issues raised.
- (b) Approve the revised Complaint Policy which has been aligned to the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Policy Review Recommendations issued in June 2025.
- (c) Acknowledge and endorse the recommendations made by the VWV Sheffield Inquiry report (as detailed in Section 2.7 of this report), noting the Council's full acceptance of these recommendations which are now incorporated into the Council's 2025-26 Complaint Service Improvement Plan.
- (d) Agree that the conclusions and recommendations set out in paragraph 2.9 of this report should form the basis of its written response to the Annual Complaints Report for publication.
- (e) Note the links to the 'Customer Experience Strategy,' which continues to provide the fundamental support and direction needed for the continuous improvement and transformation of the way Sheffield City Council handles and manages complaints.
- (f) Note the Update on apologies following publication of the Sheffield Street Trees Inquiry Report as set out in Appendix 5

Financial Implications: [No] [Approved by: **Adrian Hart** Finance Officer]

Legal Implications: [No] [Approved by: **Andrea Simpson** Legal Officer]

Equality and Engagement Implications: [Yes] [Approved by: Equalities & **Louise Nunn** Equalities Officer]

[Initial Equalities Impact Assessment completed - EIA number: 3177]

Climate Change Implications: [No] [Approved by: **Kathryn Warrington** Sustainability Officer]

Background Papers:

- [Complaint Handling Code - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman \(LGSCO\)](#)
- [The Complaint Handling Code | Housing Ombudsman Service \(HO\)](#)
- The Customer Experience Strategy: [Ambitious transformation will deliver better customer service | Sheffield City Council](#)

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – 2025 Sheffield City Council – Revised Complaint Policy

Appendix 2 – 2024-25 Sheffield City Council's Annual Complaint Performance Report

Appendix 3 - 2024-25 Sheffield City Council's Annual Ombudsman Report

Appendix 4 – 2025-26 Sheffield City Council Complaints Service Improvement Plan

Appendix 5 - Update on apologies following publication of the Sheffield Street Trees Inquiry Report (to follow)

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- 1.1 Serving approximately 566,000 residents, Sheffield City Council's initial customer contact volumes are substantial.

In the year 2024-25, the Council's corporate contact centre received over 703,993 calls, processed 29,306 web forms, and assisted 31,851 customers in person. Additionally, over 4.3 million webpages were viewed, and 210,613 online service requests were submitted by customers.

As a social landlord for over 41,263 social housing properties, the Council processed 58,332 Housing Benefit changes, 95,844 Council Tax changes, 166,987 housing repairs, and conducted 4,000 homeless assessments.

In response to the cost-of-living crisis, Sheffield City Council supported 38,798 households with crisis grant applications. The cost-of-living support team received 21,079 calls, providing practical assistance to customers facing financial difficulties, and helped 1,017 residents increase their income or reduce their expenses by an average of £38.19 per month and £458.33 per year. Through its strategic partners Veolia and Amey, the Council collected approximately 12 million bins, responded to over 123,000 waste management enquiries, and addressed 98,561 Streetscene enquiries.

Despite this high level of customer contact, the overall number of complaints received during this period was comparatively low, with 7,899 complaints; with even fewer referred to the Ombudsman, and only 33 formally investigated by them.

- 1.2 At its meeting in April 2024 Strategy and Resources Policy Committee approved a revised Sheffield City Council Complaint Handling Policy. The current version, aligned with the Complaint Handling Codes of both the Housing Ombudsman (HO) and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), which has been in force since September 2024, providing consistent standards across corporate services for customers.
- 1.3 The closer working relationship between the Housing Ombudsman (HO) and the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) is defined by a Memorandum of Understanding. It outlines their collaborative efforts to ensure effective regulation and resolution of complaints within the housing sector. The HO handles individual complaints from tenants, while the RSH focuses on systemic issues and compliance with regulatory standards.

Regarding the Complaints element of the consumer standard, the RSH expects transparency, influence, and accountability. This means that housing providers must have clear and accessible complaints procedures, involve tenants in the

development and review of these procedures, and ensure that complaints are handled promptly and effectively. Providers must also demonstrate how they use complaints to improve services and maintain accountability to their tenants.

- 1.4 Sheffield City Council's Complaints Managers have continued to provide objective support and advice for Managers across the organisation. They have also attended quarterly service leadership meetings to discuss performance and to inform service leaders on how improvements may be achieved.
- 1.7 In addition to these annual reports, complaints data is included as part of the Council's performance framework and is circulated on a regular basis to management for review and action.
- 1.8 The Annual Ombudsman and Annual Corporate Complaint Performance reports for previous years are available here: [Complaints | Data Mill North](#)

2. PROPOSAL

- 2.1 The report also explains how Sheffield City Council has performed against the required standards and includes examples of how services have learned from complaints received - a most valuable aspect of the complaints process.
- 2.2 The Ombudsman Codes further require that an annual complaints performance and service improvement report should be reported through the organisation's governance arrangements and published on the section of its website relating to complaints with the response to the report from the relevant governance arrangement be published alongside this. This report meets the requirement and presents at paragraph 2.8 conclusions and recommendations arising from the information in the Annual Complaint & Annual Ombudsman Reports which, if the Committee agrees, will form the basis of its written response for publication.
- 2.3 The 2024-25 Annual Corporate Complaint Performance Report is appended to this report. See **Appendix 2**
- 2.4 The 2024-25 Annual Ombudsman Report is appended to this report. See **Appendix 3**
- 2.5 Since April 2024, an annual Housing Ombudsman self-assessment has been completed to ensure that the Council's approach to complaint handling is in line with the new Code. This year, the self-assessment will be submitted by the 30th of September 2025. See: [Self-assessment guidance | Housing Ombudsman Service](#).
- 2.6 Following submission of the annual Complaint Handling Code compliance submission on 29th June 2024, the Housing Ombudsman subsequently reviewed the Council's complaint policy to ensure consistency was achieved across the sector to ensure that residents received a fair service, regardless of where they live and who provides the housing service.



Whilst the Housing Ombudsman noted that Sheffield City Council has

‘...a well-structured policy and a clear commitment to effective complaints handling,’

it made eight recommendations for further improvement to the Council’s complaint policy. Consequently, Council Officers have undertaken a thorough review of Sheffield Council’s Complaint Policy to update and align it with the recommendations provided.

The draft revised policy is attached to this report as **Appendix 1** and is presented to the committee for approval.

The associated procedures, training materials, and the training of Council Officers are scheduled for completion by March 2026.

The Policy Review recommendations form part of the Council’s 2025-26 Complaints Service Improvement plan (See **Appendix 4**) and the key updates are summarised below:

- (i) Clarification that all complaints submitted via a third party or representative may include an advocate, such as a friend, relative or a representative from an external organisation. See **Appendix 1 – Section 1.5 & Section 12.1**
- (ii) Clarification and inclusion that the Council will consider resident requests to make the complaints policy available in an accessible format. See **Appendix 1 – Section 3.6**
- (iii) Clarification to emphasise that there are only 2 stages in the complaints process. See **Appendix 1 – Section 5.1**
- (iv) Clarification that when a complaint is received, it enters the complaint process at Stage 1 even if it is not complex, and we will focus on early resolution. Importantly, early resolution will not be viewed as a stage prior to stage 1 but rather, it is an approach to expedite the resolution process. When a complaint is received it enters the Council’s stage 1 complaint process. The acknowledgment and Stage 1 response may be combined into one letter if sent within 5 working days, detailing the outcome of the investigation. If residents remain dissatisfied, they should have the option to escalate the complaint. If we are unable to resolve the complaint earlier, the Council will adhere to the full response times for addressing complaints as set out in the Code for Stage 1. See **Appendix 1 – Section 5.2 & Section 5.3**
- (v) Clarification that for Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints, the complainant will receive an acknowledgement letter within 5 working days of the complaint being received. This is regardless of whether the landlord responds within the timescales outlined in the Code. That the acknowledgment at Stage 1 & Stage 2 will set out the landlord/Council’s a) understanding of the complaint, b) the outcomes the resident is seeking, c) which aspects it is and is not responsible for and that if there any aspects of the complaint which is unclear, the landlord/Council will ask the resident for clarification. See **Appendix 1 – Section 6.1.2 & Section 6.2.3**

- (vi) Clarification that for Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints, in addition the landlord/Council will make clear which aspects of the complaint the landlord is and is not responsible for. See **Appendix 1 – Section 6.1.7 & Section 6.2.8**
- (vii) Clarification that for Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints, if it has been unable to issue a full complaint response following the initial period and the extended timescales set out in the Code, it will contact the customer/resident to agree suitable intervals for being updated on the progress of the complaint. See **Appendix 1 – Section 6.1.8 & Section 6.2.11**
- (viii) Clarification that, in addition to Stage 1 complaints, a response for Stage 2 complaints will be provided to the customer/resident when the answer to the complaint is known, not when the outstanding actions required to address the issue are completed. Outstanding actions will be tracked and actioned promptly with appropriate updates provided to the customer/resident. See **Appendix 1 – Section 6.1.6 & Section 6.2.7**

2.7 In 2021, complaints were made by four Complainants about the way legal proceedings were undertaken against them in connection with the Street Trees protests. The complaints were actively pursued but there were significant delays in responding to them. The complaints were not directly considered by the Lowcock Inquiry and so in December 2023, an external independent investigation by an independent firm of solicitors (VWV) was commissioned by the General Counsel to Sheffield City Council. The VWV report was produced in February 2025 and presented to Finance and Performance Policy Committee in July 2025 with recommendation including *“To note there will be specific mention of this complaint in the annual complaints review to be received by Strategy and Resources Committee in September 2025 to reflect the wider context surrounding the Sheffield Street Tree Inquiry and the lessons learned from this investigation and to update on the apologies”*.

VWV’s findings and recommendations identified the need for further improvements to the Council’s complaints process. This was specifically with reference to the delays at Stage 2 of the process, having taken longer than necessary and that an external investigator should have been commissioned earlier when it was clear that the specific issues raised by the complainants would not be fully addressed in the Inquiry. In recognition of the need to improve processes, the Council has embarked on a major transformation programme including a renewed focus on customer experience, its complaints processes with the creation of a new council service explicitly responsible for customer experience and strengthened complaints management. The establishment of this new function is underway with recruitment and development underway.

All of the VWV Inquiry recommendations relating to the Council’s complaint process were accepted in full and now form part of the Council’s 2025-26 Complaint Service Improvement plan (See **Appendix 4**) - the key points as extracted from the Inquiry AP2 Trees Action Plan are summarised below:

	VWV Inquiry Action	Owner	Deadline	Appendix 4 - SCC's Complaint Improvement Plan 2025-26 corresponding Action
7.1	7.1 When the new Customer Experience Department is established review and develop a wider range of customer complaints measures, including complaints and resolution data to be reported in public quarterly to Finance and Performance Committee (as part of the council's outcome framework).	Head of Customer Experience	December 2025	See Issue 9A
7.2	2 Publish the lessons learnt in a you said we did format on council's web site.	Head of Customer Experience	January 2026	See Issue 8
7.3	Undertake six monthly deep dives into complaints management at the operational Performance and Delivery Board to ensure lessons learnt are reflected and embedded.	Head of Performance and Insight	From October 2025	See Issue 9C
7.4	At the Performance and Delivery board ensure departmental compliance statistics are shared and where there is a lack of compliance require the Director responsible to share their action plan to address.	Head of Performance and Insight	From October 2025	See Issue 9B
7.5	Review Complaints Training and Communications approaches, undertake an internal campaign to improve awareness and compliance.	Head of Customer Experience	December 2025	See Issue 7

The reports can be found here under Item 9 of: [Agenda for Finance and Performance Policy Committee on Monday 21 July 2025, 2.00 pm | Sheffield City Council](#). The VWV Investigation Report is at Appendix 1 to the main report and the Council's action plan to address the findings and recommendations is at Appendix 2.

The VWV Report sets out the complaint, analysis of the issues and findings. Analysis of the issue concerning the process and handling of the complaints is set out in paragraphs 7.78 – 7.88 and the resulting recommendations and the Council's response to them are at Actions 7 & 8 of the Action Plan.

Action 7 is set out in the table above and incorporated into the Improvement Plan at Appendix 4. This section of this report is the outcome of Action 7-9.

The completion of the VWV Report allowed the Council to make further progress in issuing apologies as set out in the decision of this Committee at its meeting on 19 June 2023. An update on apologies is included in Appendix

5 to this report and Strategy and Resources Policy Committee is recommended to note the progress.

2.8 The Customer Experience Strategy is a key driver in the delivery and success of making the necessary improvements in complaint handling for Sheffield's residents.

2.9 A number of conclusions and recommendations for future improvements can be drawn from the information in the Annual Complaints & Annual Ombudsman Reports. It is proposed that these form the basis of the written response of Strategy & Resources Policy Committee, to be published alongside the Annual Report. These include:

- To update the Council's Complaint Policy in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Policy Review's recent recommendations.
- To implement fully the recommendations made by the VWV Inquiry and ensure that these are implemented within the timescales provided, ensuring progress in doing so is monitored by this Committee.
- To continue to improve performance in line with complaint policy timescales.
- To reduce the Housing Ombudsman's maladministration rate by reducing the number of complaint handling findings by improving response timescales and by more consistent and accurate complaint recording.
- To continue to improve the way in which the Council learns from complaints. This will ensure that all learning reported is considered and the impact of service improvement is understood and recorded.
To seek support guidance and direction from the Customer Experience program which will support continuous service/process improvements for customers and complaint handling.

2.10 The Customer Experience Programme and the Council's Feedback & Complaints Team will continue to support Officers in improving response timescales thereby improving the future maladministration rate. We will continue the work required to become fully compliant with all requirements during the rest of 2025, and beyond.

3 SUMMARY FINDINGS

3.1 Annual Corporate Complaint Performance Report Summary–Appendix 2

Section 3 of the report includes an analysis of complaint data including:

Complaints received and trends:

- 7899 new complaints overall, 8.5% (735) less complaints compared with the previous year.
- 94.3% received at Stage 1
- 4.5% received at Stage 2



Acknowledgements:

- 44.7% of complaints were acknowledged within 5 working days of receipt

Timeliness – Stage 1 (investigation):

- 80% of complaints responded to at Stage 1, were within 10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.
- 89% of complaints responded to at Stage 1, were responded to within 20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.
- The average response time for a Stage 1 complaint was for the Council (excluding strategic partners) 15 working days; Amey, 9 working days and Veolia, 12 working days.

Timeliness – Stage 2 (investigation review):

- 46.2% of complaints responded to at Stage 2, were within 20 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.
- 62.9% of complaints responded to at Stage 2, were responded to within 40 working days of the complaint being acknowledged.
- The average response time for a Stage 2 complaint was for the Council (excluding strategic partners) 55 working days; Amey, 32.5 working days and Veolia, 19 working days.

Complaint Outcomes:

- **Upheld Rate:** The upheld rate (both partially upheld and fully upheld complaints) including strategic partners was 16.6%
- **Remedies:** 1519 remedies were recorded. This represents 40% of complaints where a remedy may have been recorded.
- **Reason for complaints:** The highest reason category recorded was 'Policy' (490) 40%, followed by 'Staff' (383) 32% and 'Failure' (121) 10%.
- **Equality Issues:** Of complaints recorded (including strategic partners) that involved an equality issue/protected characteristic, 5% (73) related to Race (2%) or Disability (3%). Of the Race/Disability concerns recorded, 30% (22/73) were upheld, which in context, represents 1.5% of all equality cases recorded.
- **Quality Assurance:** The corporate target for Quality Assurance is 85%. Overall performance for 2024-25 was 84%, compared with 83% in the previous year.
- **Satisfaction survey:** 38% of customers completing the survey recorded a score of 5 or more, (where 1 is poor and 10 is good). This is an improvement of 32% on the previous year's results.
- **Compliments and suggestions:** 387 compliments and 19 suggestions were recorded. This compares with 214 compliments and 33 suggestions recorded in the previous year.
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3.2 Annual Ombudsman Report Summary – Appendix 3



Section 3 of the report includes an analysis of complaint data including:

- Of the 33 (LGSCO -22; HO -11) complaints which were formally investigated, the highest numbers were regarding Housing & Repairs Services (36%-12), Adults Social Care (21% - 7) and Children's Services (18% - 6).
- The LGSCO upheld 73% of complaints (16 out of 22) compared with 83% (20 out of 24) in the previous year. The average for similar authorities of 81%.
- There were 2.8 LGSCO upheld decisions per 100,000 residents compared with 3.5 in the previous year and the average of 4.7 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents for authorities of this type.
- With regards to compliance, for the LGSCO - Ten cases were recorded for compliance outcomes, and the Council achieved 100% compliance rate with the recommendations made.
- With regards to the HO - The Council received forty Orders and met 100% compliance with all orders.
- There were no HO complaint handling failure orders compared with 1 in the previous year.
- The HO found Sheffield City Council's Maladministration rate to be 83%, which related to 9 of the 11 cases investigated. This compares with the national average of 71% and an average of 80% for Landlords of a similar size.
- Both the LGSCO & HO made no Public Interest Reports.

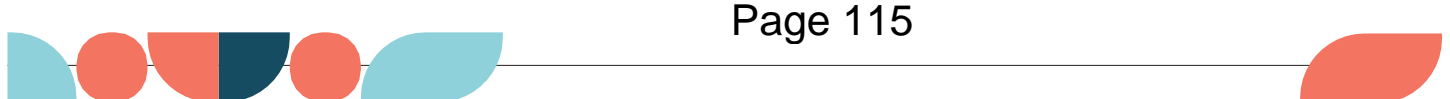
Officers are satisfied that the concerns from this reporting year and previous years raised by the Ombudsman have been appropriately addressed.

The Council's Monitoring Officer has a duty to report to Full Council matters giving rise to maladministration or service failure. In accordance with the guidance in the LGSCO's Manual for Councils it is proposed that the Annual Ombudsman Report be presented to Full Council by the Monitoring Officer.

4 How does this decision contribute to the Council Plan?

4.1 Council Plan outcome

4.1.1 The Corporate Annual Complaints and Ombudsman reports has synergies with the Council Plan and the Council Values – putting people at the heart of what we do and ensuring that maximising outcomes for our customers is central to our work as a whole organisation. Because complaints handling concerns putting right and improving delivery of all Council services it supports all the Council Plan outcomes.



4.1.2 The Customer Experience Strategy will continue to support our complaint transformation journey, to ensure that we provide the best service we can to everyone who interacts with us when making a complaint. This strategy which focuses on delivering and improving customer experience (including complaints) will support learning from complaints and any associated service improvements needed.

4.1.3 The Council has continued to enhance its complaints handling and management, by adopting a revised Sheffield City Council Complaint Handling Policy incorporating the principles of the new Ombudsman Codes, the recommendations of the Housing Ombudsman Policy Review Recommendations and by improved transparency, accessibility, and complaint handling governance; demonstrating that individuals are at the heart of its service delivery.

4.2 People – Prosperity - Planet

The review of the Council's Complaints Handling Policy is itself underpinned by the Council's policy triple-lock (People, Prosperity and Planet) and as described above good complaints handling, resulting in improved service further supports those aims

5. What community or partner engagement has been undertaken and how has it informed the proposal?

No consultation is needed in respect of this report. By their nature, the complaints described in the Annual Complaints and Ombudsman Report provide feedback to the Council

6. What alternative options did we consider?

Not applicable

7. How has equality, diversity and inclusion been actively considered?

Investigations through the complaint procedure considers all relevant policy and legislation including those relating to equalities and human rights.

8. Financial and Commercial Implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

However, as the Council faces pressures on services due to the ongoing impact of national and local economic conditions, we are committed to using complaint information to transform services and assist where possible in delivering financial savings and to improve customer experiences.

9. Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.



10. Climate and Environmental Implications

There are no direct implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change arising from this report.

Customers are able to complain relating to its approach to CO2 emissions and climate change which are addressed and formally considered through the complaint procedures.

11. Other implications

Not applicable

12. Reasons for decision

Strategy & Resources Policy Committee has lead responsibility for complaints including monitoring of complaint handling performance on behalf of the Council.



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