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Compliments and Complaints

Annual Report 2023



Annual report: Compliments and complaints 2023

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Introduction

The Council Plan for 2021-2025 sets out the council's priorities and the outcomes we want to achieve for people who live and work in West Sussex.

Its four priorities, underpinned by a cross-cutting theme of protecting the environment are:

- Keeping people safe from vulnerable situations.
- A sustainable and prosperous economy.
- Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential.
- Making the best use of resources.

The effective handling of complaints and compliments from service users contributes to the delivery of these priorities. Addressing complaints offers a valuable source of learning to help improve services. Good complaints handling provides a direct and valuable connection between those who provide services and those receiving or relying on them.

This is the annual report for 2023 on complaints and compliments about County Council services. It also covers decisions of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and acts as the statutory reports for Adults' and for Children's Social Care.

The report contains data and analysis for a review of the complaints processes and the services to which they relate over a calendar year. It informs the Council about complaint themes and how effective the arrangements are for handling customer complaints.

The Council has three complaints procedures: the Adults' Social Care statutory procedure, the Children's Social Care statutory procedure and the Corporate Complaints procedure.

The terms stages 1, 2, and 3 are used for all but each procedure works in a different way and stage 3 is only found in the statutory children's procedure.

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How West Sussex County Council handles complaints

The Council's definition of a complaint is:

"A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standards of service, actions or lack of action by the County Council or its staff, affecting an individual customer or group of customers"

The Council's aim is to resolve complaints as quickly and simply as possible. The initial stage is for the manager responsible for the service to seek a resolution. If resolution is not reached, the customer has the right to escalate to the next stage, where the complaint is looked into by a more senior person not previously involved.

Full details of the procedures can be found on the [Council's website](#).

1 The overall picture

1.1 Complaints against the County Council from 1 January to 31 December 2023

The complaints data reported on reflects the complaints *closed* during the year not complaints *received* during the year. The numbers reported for the LGSCO reflect the number of *decisions received* from the LGSCO in the reporting period.

The table below shows the reasons recorded for complaints during 2023 in comparison with 2022. The reasons for the marked changes in some categories and overall are discussed later in the report.

Nature of complaint	Year	Count of Reference
Challenge to Fixed Penalty Notice	2023	3
Charging/Financial Assessment	2022	132
Charging/Financial Assessment	2023	97
Closure/Change/Transition between services	2022	2
Closure/Change/Transition between services	2023	2
Conduct of staff	2022	291
Conduct of staff	2023	206
Damage/nuisance/loss	2021	66
Damage/nuisance/loss	2022	37
Damage/nuisance/loss	2023	73
Data protection/FOI	2023	6
Level of general service to residents	2022	63
Level of general service to residents	2023	283
Objection to Policy	2022	3
Objection to Policy	2023	1
Operational process	2022	257
Operational process	2023	235
Quality of Service	2022	425
Quality of Service	2023	676
Quality of Service	2024	361
Safeguarding Alert	2022	1

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The table below summarises the complaints and compliments recorded by directorate or service unit in 2023.

Executive Directorate	Directorate	Stage 1 closed	ST1 In time or notified %	ST1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 In time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGO Decisions received	Compliments received
Adults and Health	Adult Services	293	65%	41%	76	49%	25%	-	33	259
Adults and Health	Safeguarding Adults Board	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Adults and Health	Social Care Joint Commissioning	2	100%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Chief Execs Office	Chief Execs Office	4	75%	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Children Young People and Learning	Children Services	292	72%	29%	40	73%	48%	11	18	-
Children Young People and Learning	Education and Skills	226	77%	51%	40	38%	55%	-	21	55
Fire and Rescue Service	Fire and Rescue Service	22	95%	45%	2	50%	-	-	1	8
HR and Organisational Development	HR and Organisational Development	10	80%	70%	2	50%	50%	-	-	2
Not WSCC	Not WSCC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Place Services	Communities	66	89%	39%	4	75%	25%	1	1	1374
Place Services	Digital Infrastructure	1	100%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Place Services	Economic Growth	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Place Services	Environment and Public Protection	55	95%	55%	2	50%	50%	-	1	28
Place Services	Highways Transport and Planning	501	82%	28%	21	62%	29%	-	14	178
Place Services	Property and Assets	7	43%	14%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Resource Services	Finance Procurement and Business Support	89	40%	54%	8	25%	25%	-	4	13
Resource Services	Law and Assurance	15	93%	27%	-	-	-	-	4	1
Whole Council	Whole Council	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-

Explanatory notes: Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) direct referrals

The Adults' Social Care appeals process offers customers direct recourse to the LGSCO for review, as do the process for applying for a Blue Badge (reported within Highways, Transport and Planning) and the Schools Admissions Appeals process. The LGSCO figures reported in relation to these processes do not reflect a failure to resolve issues locally through complaints processes but represent the numbers of *appeals* that have been referred direct to the LGSCO.

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2 Analysis of overall figures

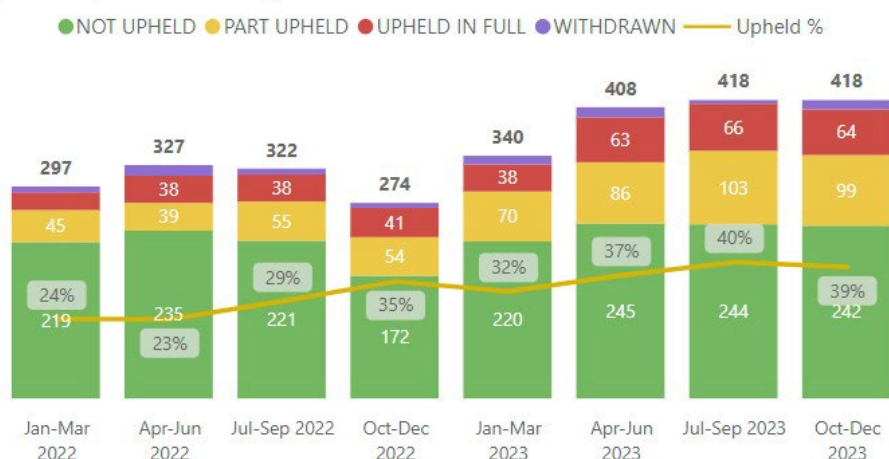
The number of complaints at the first stage increased from 1216 in 2022 to 1584 in 2023 – an increase of 30%.

The 2023 data represents an increase in complaints traffic against the directorates serving the highest number of residents when compared with 2022.

An increase in complaints was recorded against Highways, Transport and Planning (up 189); Education and Skills (up 102); and Children's Services (up 34). There was a slight reduction in the number of stage one complaints recorded against Adults' Social Care (down 12).

The number of complaints represents a very small proportion of the number of customer contacts and provisions of services, suggesting that most customers are satisfied. The Council aims however to avoid any customer needing to complain and treats every complaint as an opportunity to learn and to implement changes where needed to avoid future complaints, improving our customers' experience and satisfaction levels.

Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome



589 complaints (37%) were upheld at stage one in 2023, representing an increase from 334 (27%) in 2022. These figures include complaints that were *partially upheld*.

If a complainant is not satisfied with the response at the first stage, they can escalate their complaint. Complainants are advised of their right to escalate with clear guidance provided with every stage one response. It is important that complainants are provided with this guidance on how to pursue their complaints at all stages of the procedures to ensure integrity in the complaints process.

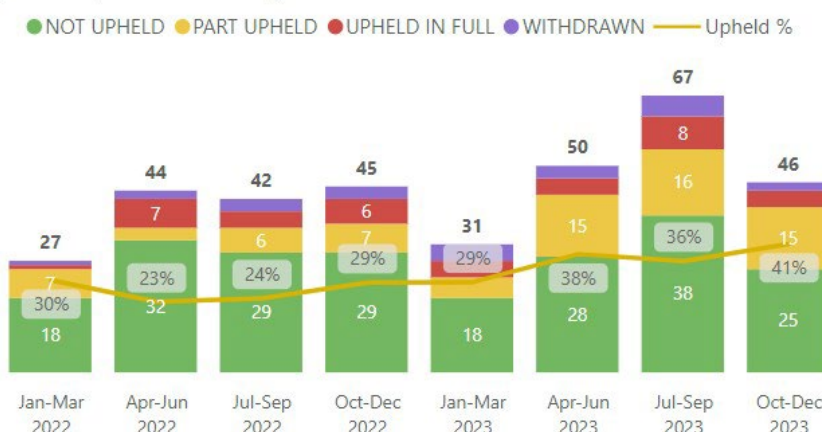
There are different names for the escalated stages under the statutory and corporate procedures, but this report describes them all as 'stage 2' for ease of comparison.

The number of complaints considered at stage two of the Council's complaints processes in 2023 was 194, an increase from the 154 recorded in 2022.

As a percentage this represents 12.2% of the total number of complaints closed at stage one in 2023. In 2022 and 2021 the percentage of escalated complaints was 12.7%. The ratio of complainants dissatisfied after stage one has decreased slightly.

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Stage 2 complaints closed by outcome



When a customer has exhausted the Council's complaints procedures, they may ask the LGSCO to consider their complaint. The data in this report focusses on the number of LGSCO *decisions reached* in the reporting period, as it is from these decisions that meaningful data and learning can be analysed.

The number of *decisions reached* by the LGSCO increased for the third year in a row, with 100 decisions received compared with 82 in 2022 and 69 in 2021.

Local resolution is key to improving the customer experience, and escalations to the LGSCO will remain a focus for continual monitoring and review, as we try to resolve complaints for customers as quickly and simply as possible.

The Council's performance with LGSCO referrals is reported directly from the Ombudsman's office in July of each year.

2.1 Timescales for Responses

Despite the increase in the number of stage one complaint responses recorded there has been an improved performance in the percentage of complaints responses issued within notified timescales. In 2023, 75% of complaints were responded to on time (including those where the customer is notified that the response will take longer than the original expectation) compared with 74% in 2022. Around 1 in 4 complaints were not responded to within the set timescales without the customer being notified of the delay, which is something that the Council will need and commit to improve on in 2024.

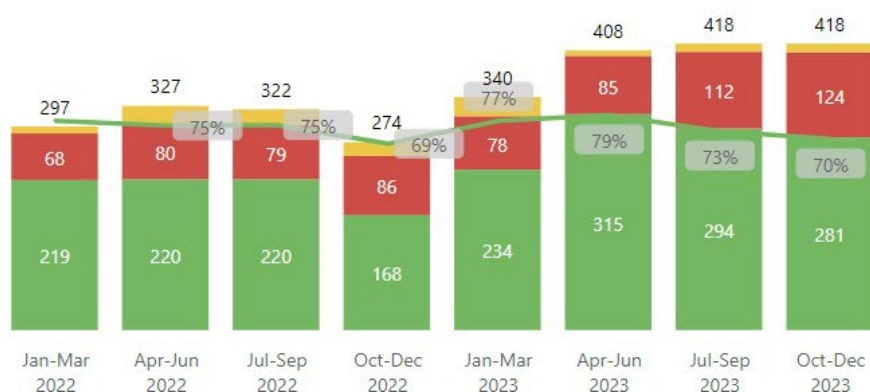
The Customer Relations Team holds weekly meetings with senior managers within Adults' Services; Children, Young People and Learning; and Highways Transport and Planning to identify potential drift in complaints handling. These focussed meetings are designed to ensure senior managers are consistently sighted on complaints within their directorate and are able to take action when potential to miss a deadline is identified.

The meetings with senior managers within the named directorates have already had a positive effect on improving the compliance with published timescales.

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Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales

● In time ● Not in time - not notified ● Not in time - notified — ST1 In time or notified %



2.2 Financial implications

The complaints process is not designed to provide compensation payments. The Council will sometimes offer financial remedies in recognition of identified fault, but this is rare. The LGSCO has published guidance on remedies for complaints scenarios, and this guidance is used when payments are considered as a result of a complaint being upheld.

Financial remedy payments are not 'compensation' but are a method recommended by the LGSCO for resolving complaints where the Council has been at fault and it is considered appropriate to recognise this in a tangible way.

A total of 38 payments were recorded as paid or offered to complainants as financial remedies following the conclusion of complaints investigations in 2023, up from 30 recorded in 2022. This figure includes all LGSCO recommended financial remedies.

The total of financial remedies awarded was £33,042.33 (£34,329.98 in 2022).

When a complaint under the Children's statutory complaints procedure is escalated to stage two, the Council must commission an investigating officer or use an operational manager to investigate the complaint; the Council must appoint an independent person to oversee the investigation of the complaint (no Council officer can take the role of independent person). Costs for these services are in line with general rates paid by neighbouring local authorities. In 2023 the cost of investigations was around £60,000.

Following a review, the Council proposes to change the way stage two reviews are undertaken whilst maintaining the appropriate level of independence.

The proposal is to improve the quality of stage two reviews by appointing a senior off-line officer within Children's social care as Investigating Officer. This proposal has met with approval from the LGSCO. The approach should also reduce costs.

It is as an opportunity to improve the Council's learning from complaints by enabling service experts within the organisation to undertake investigations and make effective and informed recommendations as a result of their investigations.

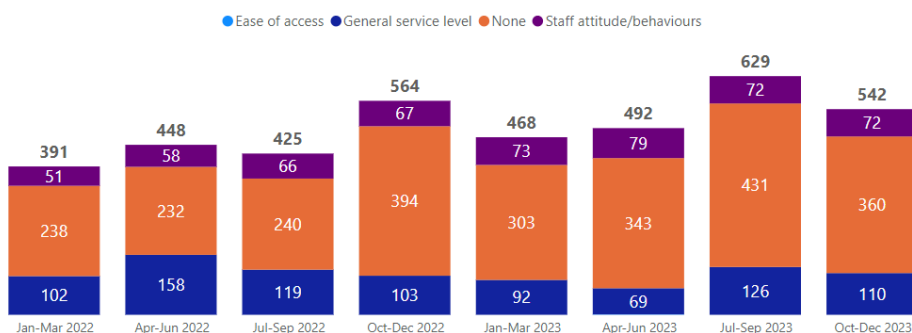
2.3 Compliments

When a customer is so pleased with the service, they have received that they make a special mention of it, the Council records this as a compliment.

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The number of recorded compliments increased by 18% from 1807 in 2022 to 2131 in 2023.

Compliments by category



These figures do not include the 2000 compliments generated for the Library Service by the Summer Reading Challenge. This number is always reported separately both to highlight the popularity of this event and to avoid distorting other reported figures.

3 Look ahead to 2024

In February 2024 the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman launched a refreshed Complaints Handling Code, which has been issued as advice and guidance for all local councils in England under section 23(12A) of the Local Government Act 1974. The LGSCO's expectation is that the new Code will be implemented by 2026.

Recognising the importance of handling complaints effectively, West Sussex County Council has volunteered to be one of a number of pilot councils the LGSCO is working with to understand the impact of the new Code and to allow the LGSCO to provide further guidance to the sector.

Alongside piloting implementation of the new Code, the focus will be on continued process improvement, working with services to ensure complaints handling is robust, efficient and provides intelligence to allow service improvement.

4 Major Service commentaries

4.1 Adults' Services

Year	Stage 1 closed	ST1 in time or notified %	St1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 in time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGSCO Decisions received	Compliments received
2023	293	65%	41%	75	49%	25%		33	259
2022	306	62%	30%	53	53%	11%		34	241

Adults' Services has the highest customer demand into the Customer Service Centre. Historically, it is also one of the services with the highest numbers of complaints and compliments.

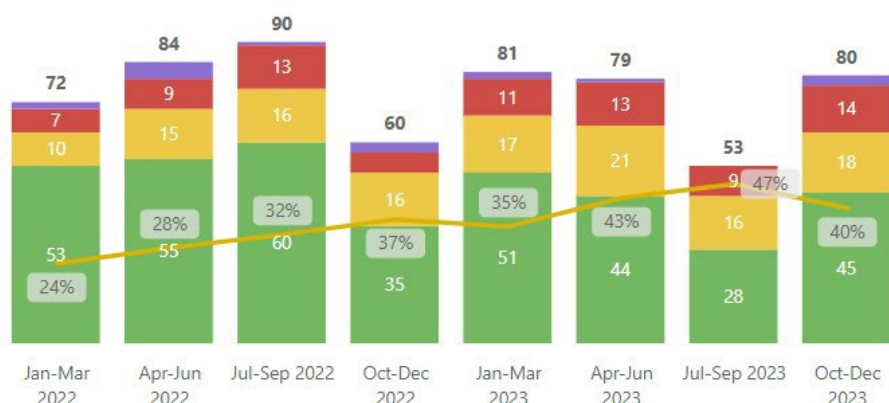
The number of complaints against Adults' Services has plateaued in 2023, with the number of stage one complaints logged (293) representing a 4% decrease when compared with the number of complaints logged in 2022 (306).

Although the number of stage one complaints logged dropped slightly, the number of complaints that were upheld or upheld in part increased to 41%.

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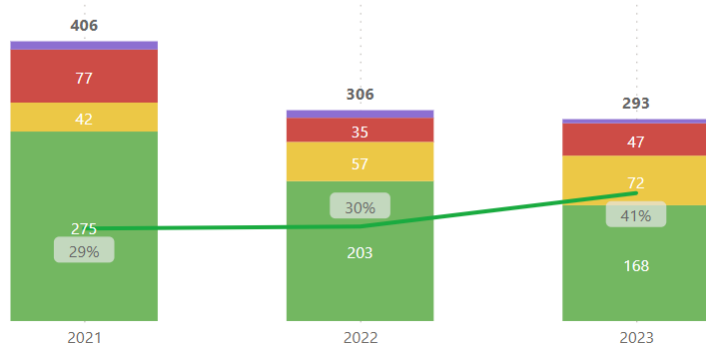
Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome

● NOT UPHELD ● PART UPHELD ● UPHELD IN FULL ● WITHDRAWN — Upheld %



Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome

● NOT UPHELD ● PART UPHELD ● UPHELD IN FULL ● WITHDRAWN — Upheld %



The number of customers who escalated their complaint beyond stage one increased from 54 in 2022 to 75 in 2023. This figure represents 25% of total complaints responded to in the period, meaning that one in four complainants remained dissatisfied with the outcome of the stage one response, exercising their statutory right to escalate to the second (and final) stage. In 2022, 18% of complainants exercised that right.

Of the 75 complaints that were escalated to stage two of the Adults' statutory complaints process, 18 (24%) were found to be upheld, or upheld in part upon review.

Regulations provide complainants with a right to a review at stage two. The Regulations do not require local authorities to include this but the Council's commitment to ensuring complaints are considered within a robust, two-tiered model, provides complainants with an assurance that each decision can be reviewed by a senior manager.

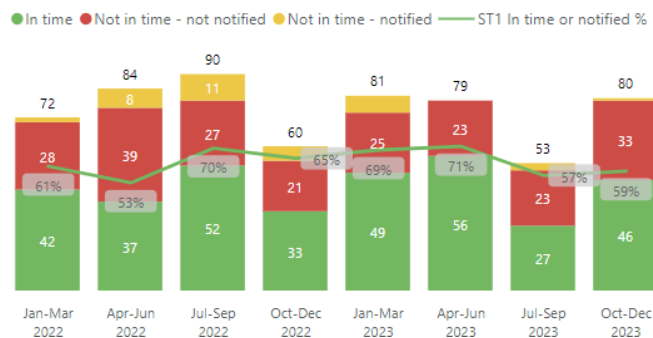
4.2 Timeliness of Responses

The Council's target for complaints responses at stage one is ten working days, with a maximum target of twenty working days unless an extension is agreed or the complainant is notified. The percentage of complaints responded to within agreed timescale in 2023 (or as extended and notified) has increased slightly in 2023 (65%) when compared with 2022 (62%).

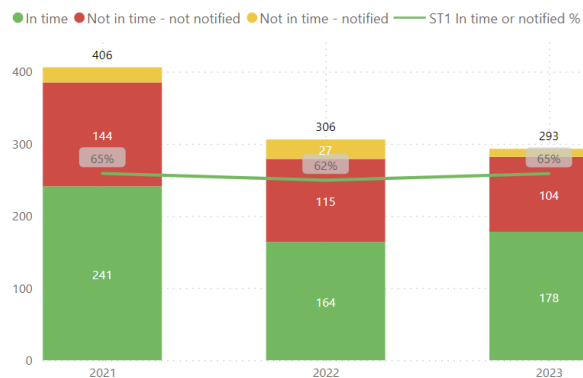
The percentage of stage one complaints responded to in time falls short of the Council average of 75%. The steps that senior managers within Adults' Social Care have taken to drive compliance rates up in 2024 are set out in section 2.1 of this report.

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Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



To better understand the figure of 293 complaints recorded against Adults' Social Care, it is necessary to drill down into the data for context.

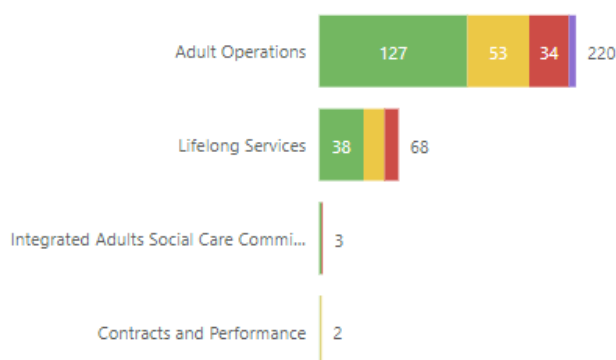
The graphs below show a breakdown of complaints by service areas and by teams where a team received 5 or more complaints in 2023.

The graphs provide an overview of the complaints received across the service areas. They are dominated by the number of complaints about Lifelong Services and then by the geographical operational areas (Community Teams).

The graphs also show how many complaints were upheld in each area as well as how many were withdrawn.

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Service and Outcome

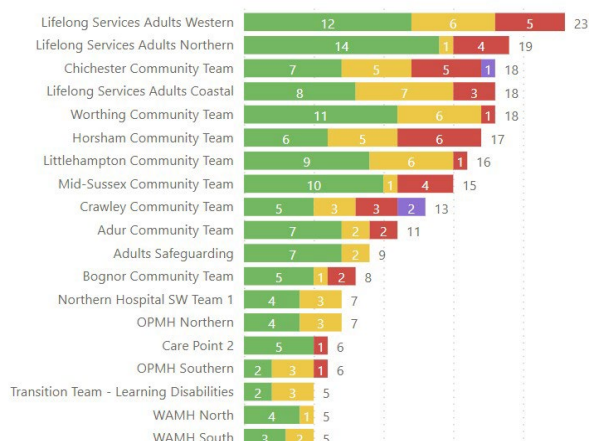
NOT UPHELD PART UPHELD UPHELD IN FULL WITHDRAWN



4.3 Complaints by Team (5 and Above):

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Team and Outcome

NOT UPHELD PART UPHELD UPHELD IN FULL WITHDRAWN

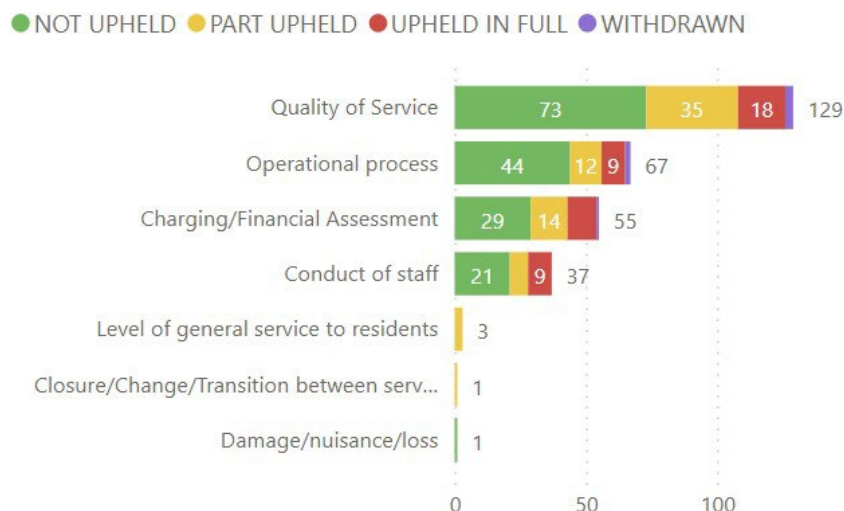


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At 41%, the percentage of upheld complaints in Adults' Social Care is slightly higher than the Council average of 37% but remains within the expected range.

The graph below shows the categories of complaints about Adults' Social Care. For reporting purposes the categories try to capture the *substantive* issue complained about.

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Theme and Outcome

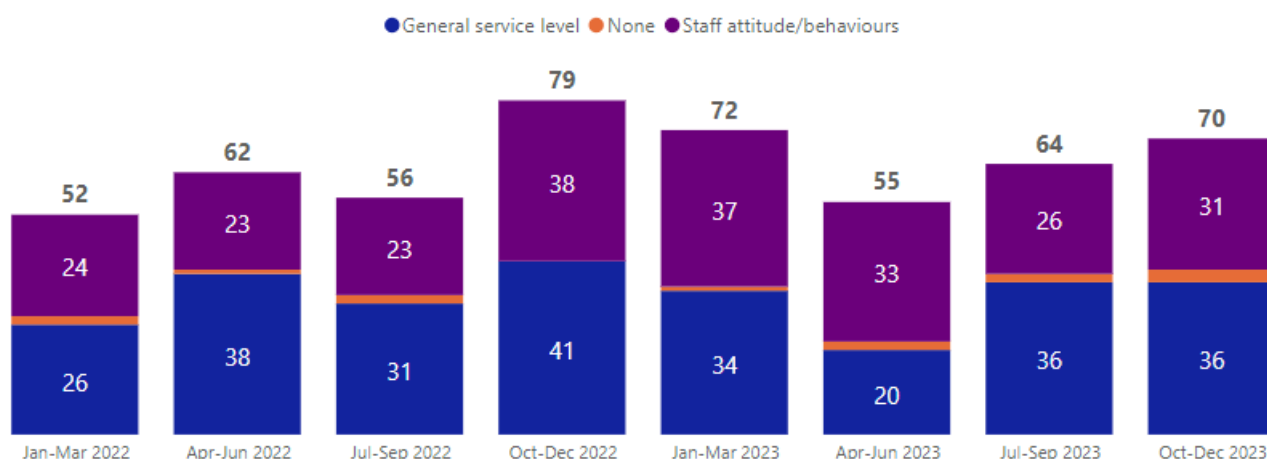


The majority of complaints received relate to complainants' expectation that the service provided to them by the Council ought to have been better or that the processes followed have not been applied correctly. Complaints about the quality of a service include issues such as the standard/level of service provided to a customer; the quality and timeliness of communication; and 'failure demand' (where someone has promised an action and failed to follow this up).

The number of formal complaints logged in relation to the quality of service provision and the application of process should be read against the number of contacts with more than 12,000 adults receiving a direct or commissioned service in 2023.

In 2023, Adults' Social Care received a total of 261 compliments.

Compliments by category



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5 Children, Young People and Learning

5.1 Children's Services

Year	Stage 1 closed	ST1 in time or notified %	St1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 in time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGSCO Decisions received	Compliments received
2023	292	72%	29%	40	73%	48%	11	18	97
2022	260	73%	26%	36	86%	39%	3	13	91

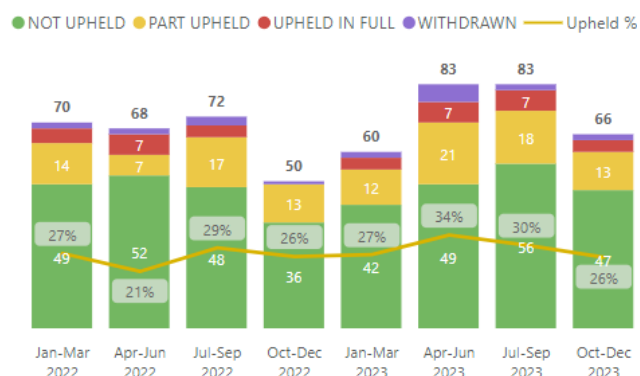
Children's Services is an area that has historically generated a high number of formal complaints. The nature of the work is often perceived to be intrusive by the families the service works with and many interventions are neither sought nor welcomed.

The number of complaints recorded against Children's Services increased from 260 in 2022 to 292 in 2023, an uplift of 13%.

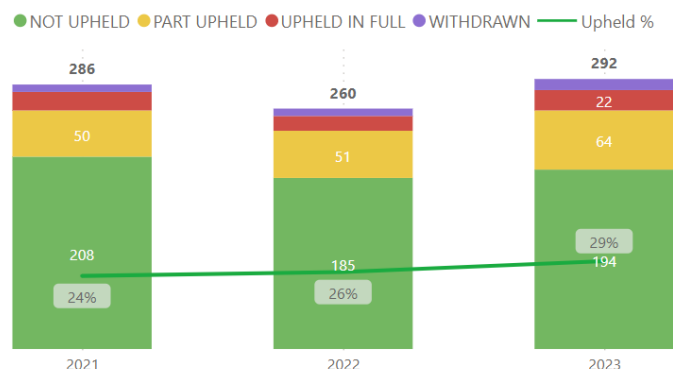
The number of customers who escalated their complaint increased from 36 in 2022 to 40 in 2023. This figure represents 14% of customers exercising their right to escalate to stage two of the statutory complaints procedure, the same as in 2022.

The statutory complaints procedure for Children's Social Care is prescriptive and all complainants have the right to escalate to the second stage.

Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome



Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome



The Council's aim is to resolve complaints quickly and locally, to ensure the customer receives a full and considered response at the first stage of the complaints process. The continued low level of escalated complaints suggests that responses at stage one answer complainants effectively.

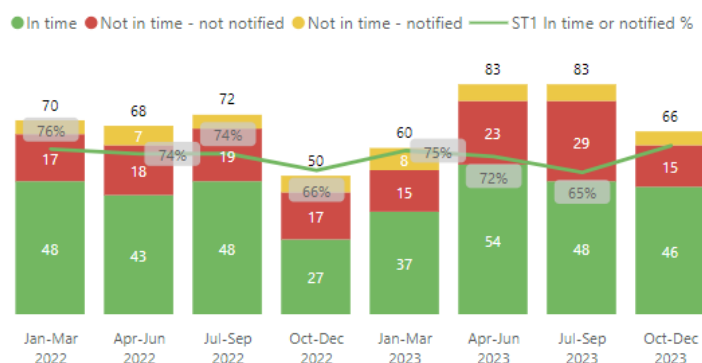
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5.2 Timeliness of Responses

The percentage of complaints responded to within agreed timescale in 2023 (as extended and notified) has decreased slightly in 2023 (72%) when compared with 2022 (73%).

The percentage of stage one complaints responded to in time falls just short of the Council average of 75%. The steps that senior managers within Children's Services have taken to drive compliance rates up in 2024 are set out in section 2.1 of this report.

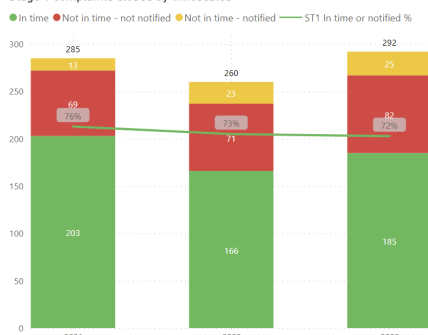
Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



The percentage of complaints upheld (or upheld in part) increased slightly from 26% in 2022 to 29% in 2023, significantly below the Council average (37%).

Most complaints about Children and Family Services are made by adults either on behalf of children or regarding their own interactions with the service.

Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



Children and young people are encouraged to access an advocate to support them in making a formal complaint through all stages of the complaints procedure.

Most young people who are supported by the West Sussex Advocacy Service use that support to resolve their concerns without making formal complaints. More details of how young people are supported by this service and the Independent Visitor service can be found in the separate *Advocacy* and *Independent Visitor* reports and through the Council's webpages dedicated to [Advocacy](#) and [Independent Visitors](#).

The graphics below show a breakdown of complaints for 2023, grouped by team and then outcome. The graphs illustrate the total number of complaints closed, the number upheld (or partially upheld) and the number withdrawn.

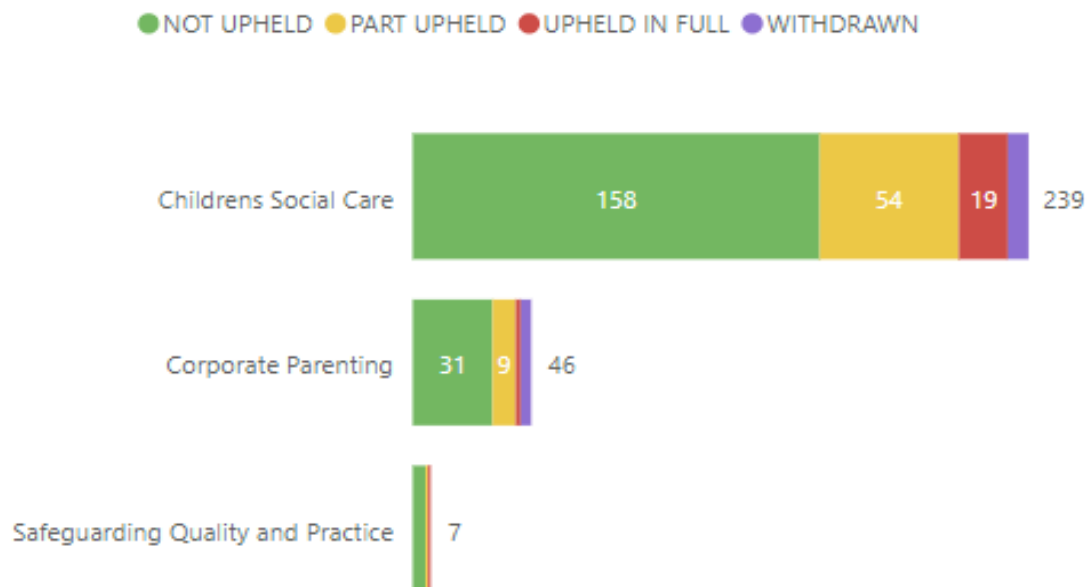
It is the service areas that have most direct contact, and which are involved in decisions about intervention, that receive the most complaints. For instance, the IFD* (Integrated Front Door) deal with incoming initial contacts and make decisions about whether concerns should be taken forward and receive complaints both about decisions that a concern does or does not meet the threshold for action.

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It is important to note that majority of complaints against these services are not upheld.

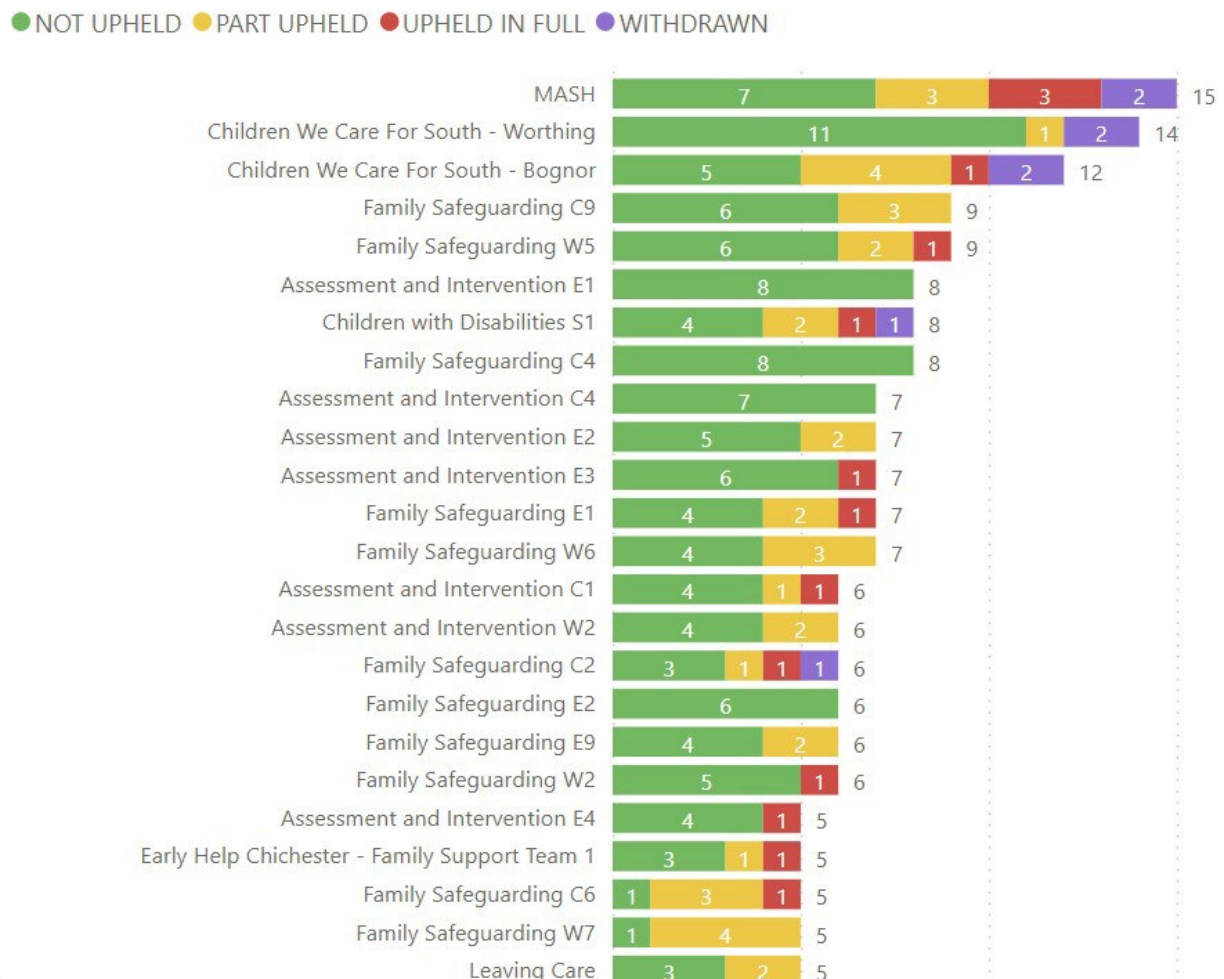
***Note that IFD figures are reported against 'MASH' (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) in the graphics below**

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Service and Outcome



5.3 Complaints by Team (5 and Above)

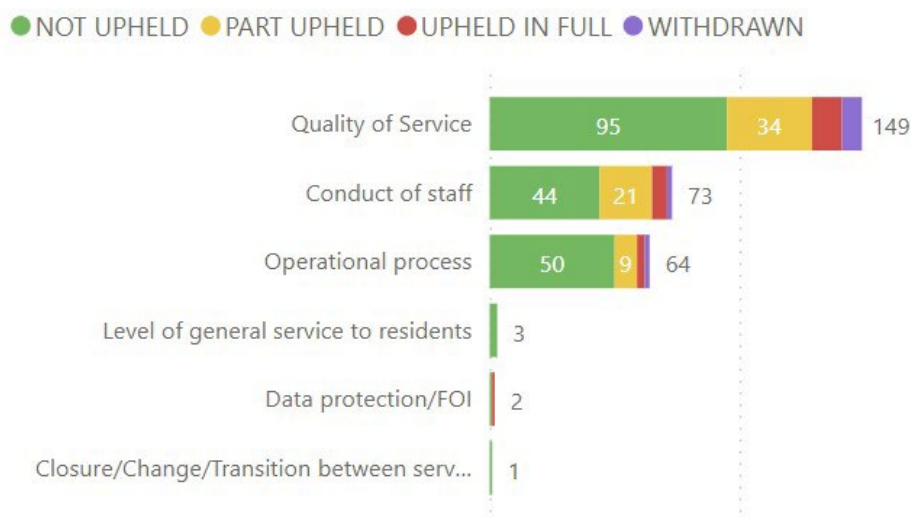
Stage 1 Complaints closed by Team and Outcome



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The graph below shows the category of complaints about Children's Services and the proportion upheld for each. Complaints about social care are often complex and can include dissatisfaction about different elements of the service provided. For reporting purposes, the category reflects the *substantive* issue complained about.

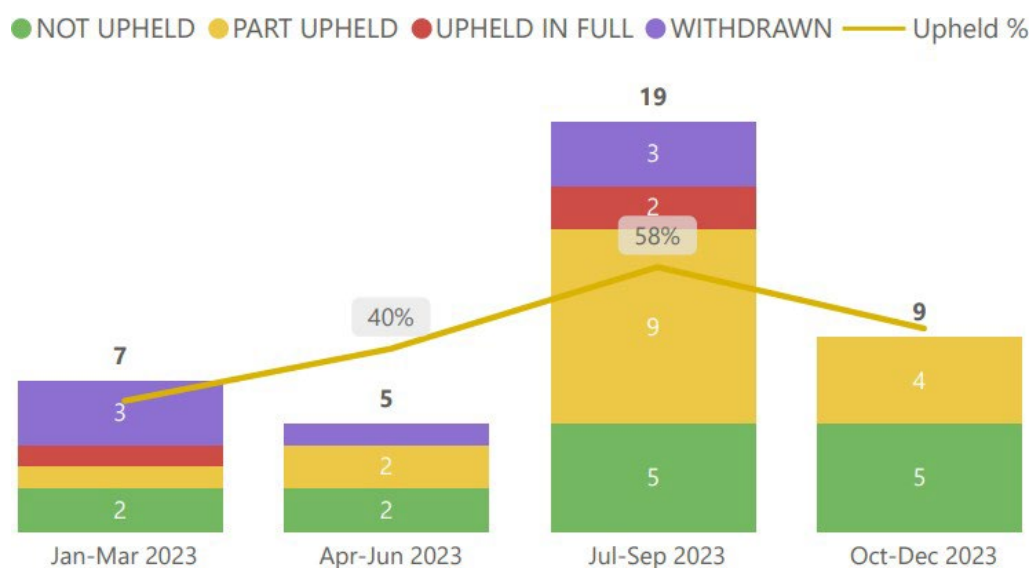
Stage 1 Complaints closed by Theme and Outcome



The statutory Children's process has three stages. Stage two requires the Council to appoint an independent person to oversee the investigation undertaken by the nominated investigating officer. Both investigating officer and Independent Person provide reports to the Council, which are considered and responded to by the Council's Adjudicating Officer.

Complainants agree a statement of complaint with the investigating officer and the independent person. Often these statements are complex and lengthy, meaning that investigations are often multi-faceted, yielding a range of outcomes on sometimes unrelated complaints.

Of the 40 stage two reviews completed in 2023, 3 were upheld in full; 16 were partially upheld; 14 were not upheld; and 7 complaints withdrew from the process. The graph below sets out the outcomes of the stage two complaints considered in 2023.

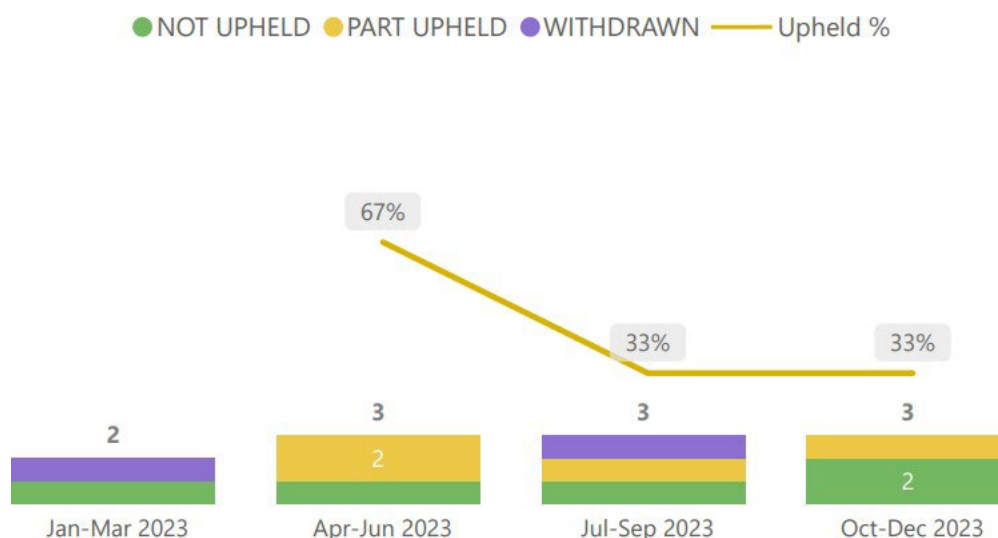


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Stage three of the process requires the Council to appoint an independent panel to review the findings at stage two. The panel is attended by the Council's Adjudicating Officer, the investigating officer at stage two, the complainant and the complaints manager.

In 2023, 11 complaints were considered at stage three of the statutory complaints process. Of the 11 panels convened by the Council, 5 found complaints to be not upheld, 4 were found to be partially upheld and no complaints were found to be upheld in full.

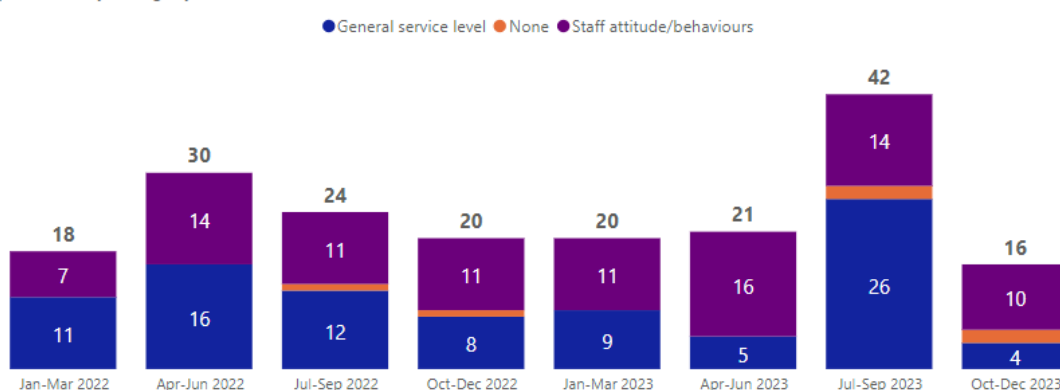
Two complainants decided to withdraw from the process.



Managers and operational staff are encouraged to report compliments received by them in recognition of their good practice. In recent years the Complaints Manager has stressed the importance of staff reporting the receipt of a compliment; the number recorded in 2023 rose for the third year in a row, from 90 to 99.

Although this is very positive, it is very likely many unreported compliments are still being received; services have been asked to ensure they report compliments to the Customer Relations Team when received.

Compliments by category



5.4 Education and Skills

Year	Stage 1 closed	ST1 in time or notified %	St1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 in time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGSCO Decisions received	Compliments received
2023	226	77%	51%	40	38%	55%		21	55
2022	123	80%	22%	31	81%	35%		18	94

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The work undertaken by many of the teams within Education & Skills involves emotive subject matter and complex decision making, which attract a relatively large number of complaints.

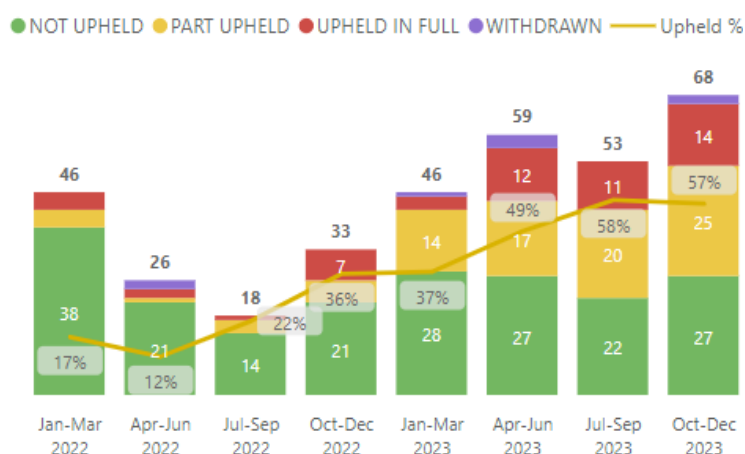
An increase in complaints in Education & Skills was anticipated as pressures in the area of special educational needs (nationally and locally) has resulted in continued delays to the assessment of children's special educational needs beyond the statutory timescales.

This is a problem that has affected authorities across the country, and although the Council has put in place measures to address this problem within the Special Educational Needs Assessment Teams (SENAT) it will some time before these measures take full effect.

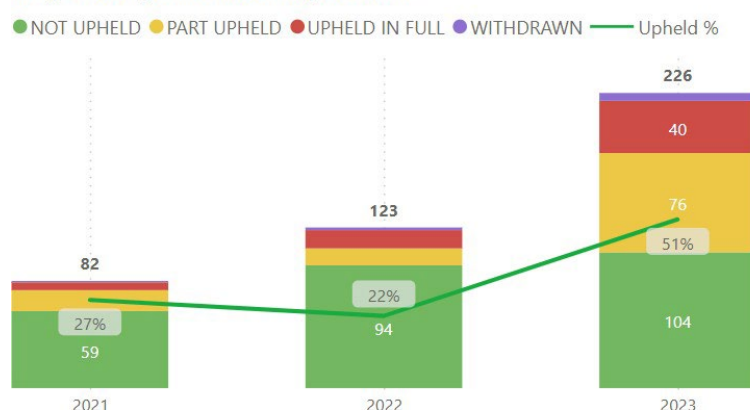
The number of complaints recorded against Education & Skills increased from 123 in 2022 to 226 in 2023. The increase in complaints recorded in 2023 represents an uplift of 84%.

The number of customers who escalated their complaint beyond stage one increased from 31 in 2022 to 40 in 2023. This figure represents 17.5% of customers exercising their right to escalate to stage two of the corporate complaints procedure; in 2022, 25% of complaints were escalated and responded to at stage two.

Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome



Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome



5.5 Timeliness of Responses

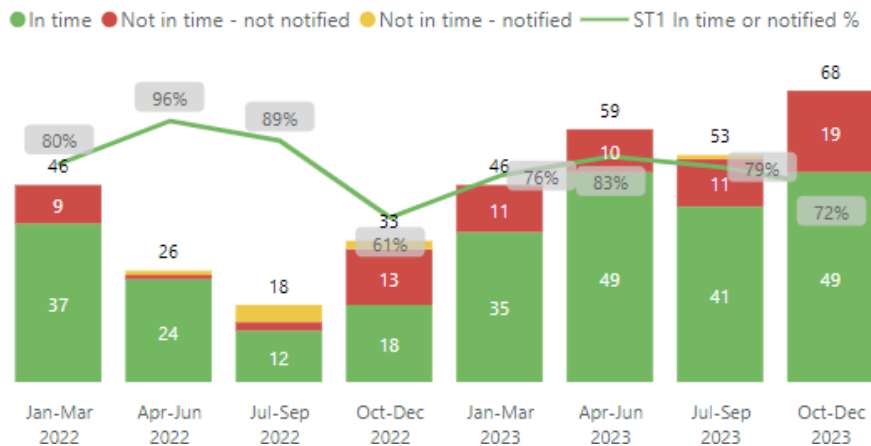
The percentage of Education & Skills complaints responded to within agreed timescale in 2023 (or as extended and notified) has decreased slightly in 2023 (77%) when compared with 2022 (80%).

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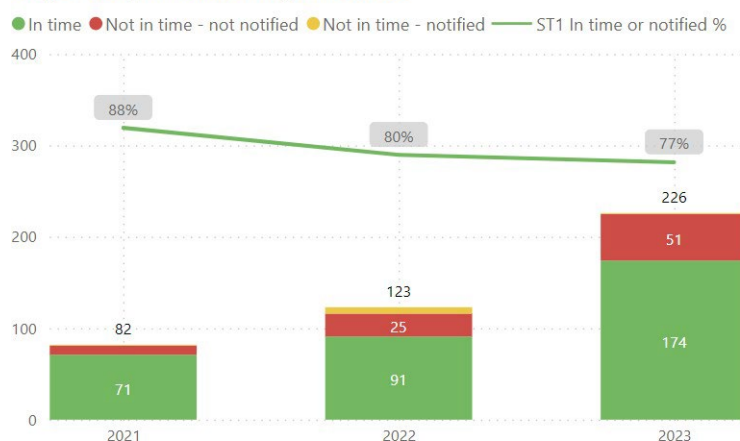
In the context of the increased operational pressure in the SENAT and the 84% increase in complaints traffic, compliance with the published timescales remains strong and remains above the Council average.

The graphs below show a breakdown of complaints by service areas and by teams where a team received 5 or more complaints in 2023.

Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



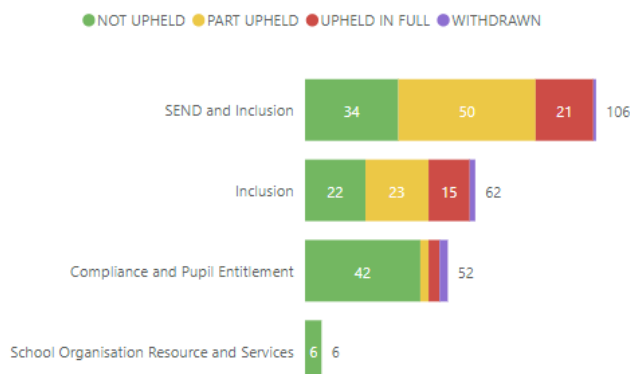
Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



The graphs provide an overview of the complaints received across the service areas. They are dominated by complaints received in relation to assessment teams. The operational pressures described at the top of this section of the report provide some explanation for the increase in dissatisfaction from service users in the assessment space; the increase in complaints was expected and is likely to continue into 2024.

The graphs also show how many complaints were upheld in each area as well as how many were withdrawn.

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Service and Outcome

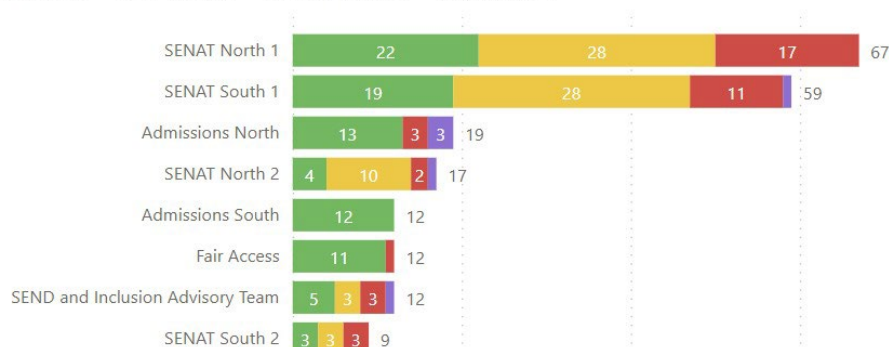


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5.6 Complaints by Team (5 and Above)

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Team and Outcome

● NOT UPHELD ● PART UPHELD ● UPHELD IN FULL ● WITHDRAWN

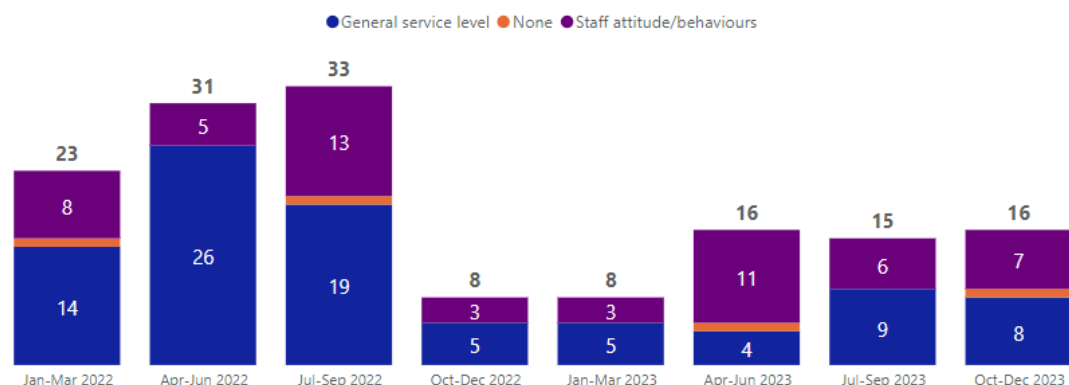


As mentioned above, delays in the special educational needs assessment process is reflected in the number of complaints against the Special Educational Needs Assessment Team (SENAT).

To provide some context the teams issued 880 new EHCPs in 2023, down by 1% from 887 in 2022. At the end of 2023 there were 7783 EHCPs maintained by West Sussex (all requiring appropriate action associated with review, monitoring and general case management) up 5% from 7442 in 2022, so less than 1% of SEN customers made complaints.

Historically, the directorate has received a large number of compliments in recognition of the good work undertaken with young people and their families, and although lower than has been the case in the last couple of years, the level of compliments still reflects well on the service offered in the context of presenting operational challenges.

Compliments by category



6 Place Services

6.1 Highways, Transport and Planning

Year	Stage 1 closed	ST1 in time or notified %	St1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 in time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGSCO Decisions received	Compliments received
2023	501	82%	28%	21	62%	29%		14	178
2022	312	81%	21%	20	90%	25%		12	185

Annual report: Compliments and complaints 2023

Highways, Transport & Planning is, historically, one of the main service delivery groups that report the highest number of complaints.

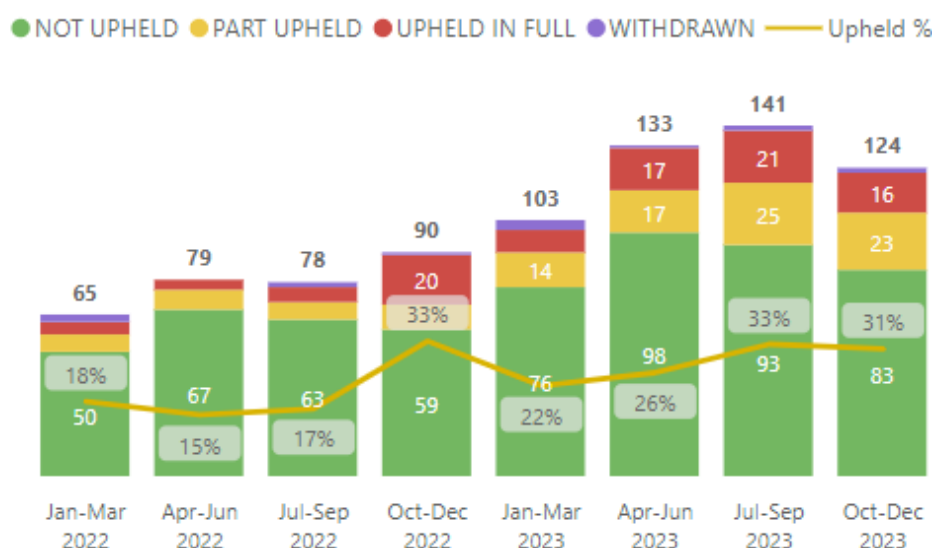
The number of complaints recorded against Highways, Transport & Planning increased from 312 in 2022 to 501 in 2023. The increase in complaints recorded in 2023 represents an uplift of 60.5%. It should be noted that claims for compensation for damage to vehicles caused by highway defects are not processed or recorded as complaints.

The increase is reflective of the general significant increase in highway enquiry/report volumes during this period mostly due to extreme weather events experienced during the year which has negatively impacted conditions on the highway network. Intensive rainfall, coupled with high ground water levels and flooding from watercourses led to widespread flooding on the network including some prolonged road closures and many high priority sites needing remedial work. The impact of improvement schemes and associated roadworks in this period also generated customer feedback.

The vast majority of complaints relate to the geographical operational teams carrying out services on the public highway. As the Highways Authority, the Council is responsible for the maintenance and repair of over 4000 kilometres of public highways; complaints recorded against Highways, Transport & Planning are historically related to the Council's operational actions in this space with 2023 being no exception.

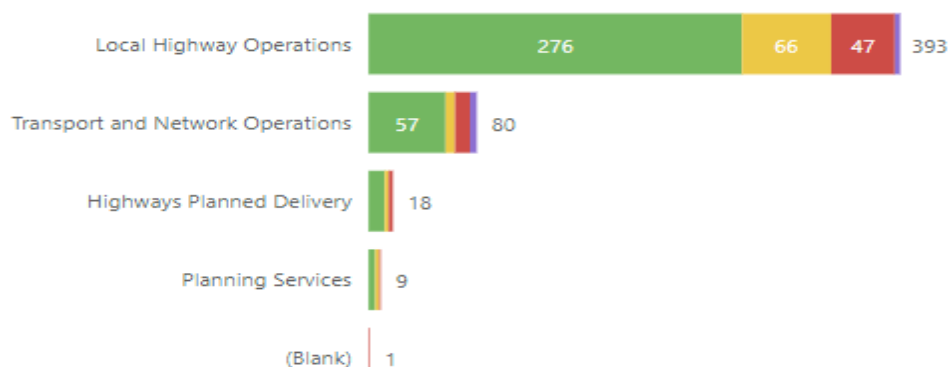
The graphs below show a breakdown of complaints by service areas and by team for 2023.

Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome



Stage 1 Complaints closed by Service and Outcome

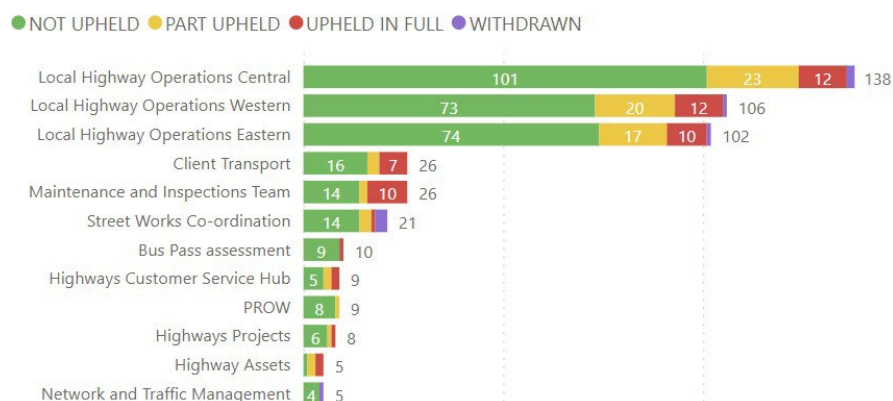
● NOT UPHELD ● PART UPHELD ● UPHELD IN FULL ● WITHDRAWN



Annual report: Compliments and complaints 2023

6.2 Complaints by Team (5 and Above)

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Team and Outcome



The percentage of complaints upheld (or upheld in part) increased from 21% in 2022 to 28% in 2023. This percentage falls significantly below the Council average for upheld complaints (37%).

The number of customers who escalated their complaint beyond stage one increased from 20 in 2022 to 21 in 2023. This figure represents 4% of customers exercising their right to escalate to stage two of the corporate complaints procedure; in 2022, 6.5% of complaints were escalated and responded to at stage two.

The low number of complainants choosing to escalate complaints suggests that responding managers in Highways, Transport & Planning are providing full, considered and robust responses at stage one of the process, making fair and informed decisions.

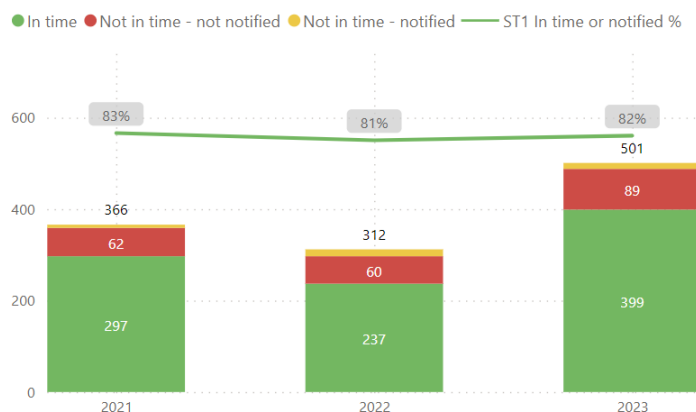
6.3 Timeliness of Responses

The Council's timescale for responses at stage one is ten working days, with a maximum target of twenty working days unless an extension is agreed or the complainant is notified.

In 2023 Highways, Transport & Planning responded to 82% of complaints within 10 working days (or with an agreed extension); this compares with 81% in 2022.

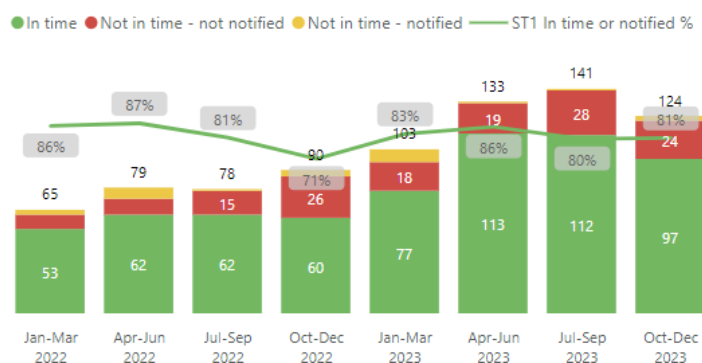
This high level of compliance has remained consistently strong over the past three years and this performance has been unaffected by the increase in complaints traffic and the continued operational challenges.

Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



Annual report: Compliments and complaints 2023

Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales



The broad spectrum of services provided and the large number of residents affected by operational decisions means that expressions of dissatisfaction are to be expected.

The distribution of complaints is not surprising, with Local Highway Operations having responsibility for much of the work that impinges on the public, such as checks on the condition of the highway and the ordering of repair work which can affect traffic flow.

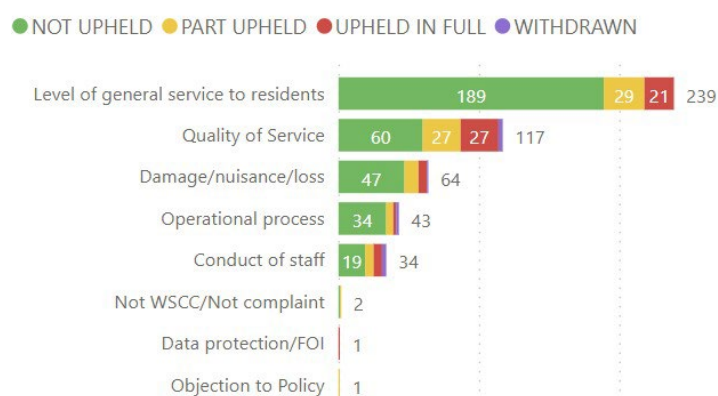
Similarly Streetworks Coordination, with responsibility for issuing licences for repair and other works, receive complaints about delays caused by traffic controls, although these are not likely to be upheld, and often these are emergency works which by their nature are put in place with little or no notice and can give rise to a number of similar complaints by residents.

The graph below shows the *category* of complaints received along with the outcome. For reporting purposes, the assigned category reflects the *substantive* issue complained about.

Complaints most likely to be upheld are those about communication and delays and these are included within the two categories with the highest numbers of complaints.

The directorate continues to work on the importance of customer service and encouraging staff to prioritise this alongside the priority of maintaining infrastructure.

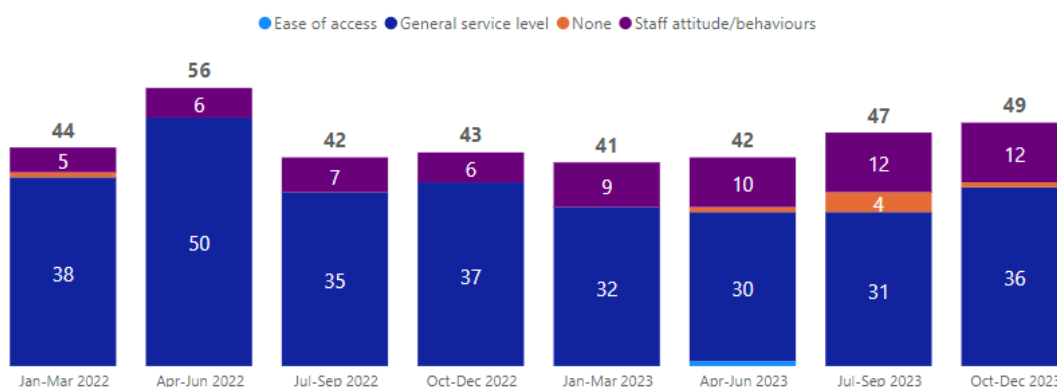
Stage 1 Complaints closed by Theme and Outcome



As staff behaviour is a key area of customer service, where complaints were found to be upheld or partially upheld, appropriate steps were taken, and appropriate remedies were offered to customers following the conclusion of complaints investigations.

Annual report: Compliments and complaints 2023

Compliments by category



7 Communities

Year	Stage 1 closed	ST1 in time or notified %	St1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 in time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGSCO Decisions received	Compliments received
2023	66	89%	39%	4	75%	25%	1	1	1374
2022	48	90%	28%	5	80%	40%			1128

Teams in this directorate historically receive a large number of compliments and very few complaints. In 2023, 66 stage one complaints were received in relation to services provided by Communities, and increase of 37.5% in comparison to the 48 complaints recorded in 2022.

During a period of change, the blue badge service sought to manage casework received in response to the length of time the processing of applications was taking. This operational challenge resulted in an increase in customer complaints and MP enquiries; this increase in traffic is not expected to be repeated in 2024 as the operational issue has been successfully addressed. It should be noted that the blue badge service moved under Communities in 2023, which has added to the increase of complaints traffic reported in the period.

Through restructuring and streamlining the application process, as well as providing additional training and support to staff members has resulted in faster processing times and improved customer satisfaction.

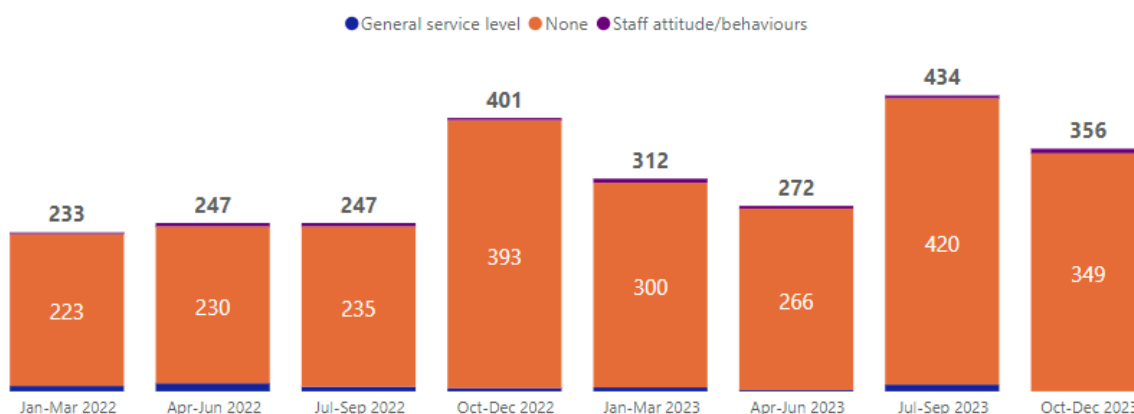
Although the percentage of complaints upheld at stage 1 across the directorate in 2023 (39%) was higher than the average for the Council, this only amounts to 25 complaints upheld across the entire directorate.

In 2023 the directorate responded to 89% of complaints within 10 working days (or with agreed extension) down slightly from 90% recorded in 2022. This remains some distance above the Council average of 75%.

Historically, the number of compliments received in relation to Communities has dwarfed those received by other directorates within the Council, with the Library Service receiving a huge number of compliments (493) throughout the year. The figures reported here do not include *2000 compliments* received in response to the Summer Reading Challenge, which has historically proven to be very popular with a broad range of customers of all ages.

Annual report: Compliments and complaints 2023

Compliments by category



8 Environment and Public Protection

Year	Stage 1 closed	ST1 in time or notified %	St1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 in time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGSCO Decisions received	Compliments received
2023	55	95%	55%	2	50%	50%	1	1	28
2022	84	93%	38%	2	100%				37

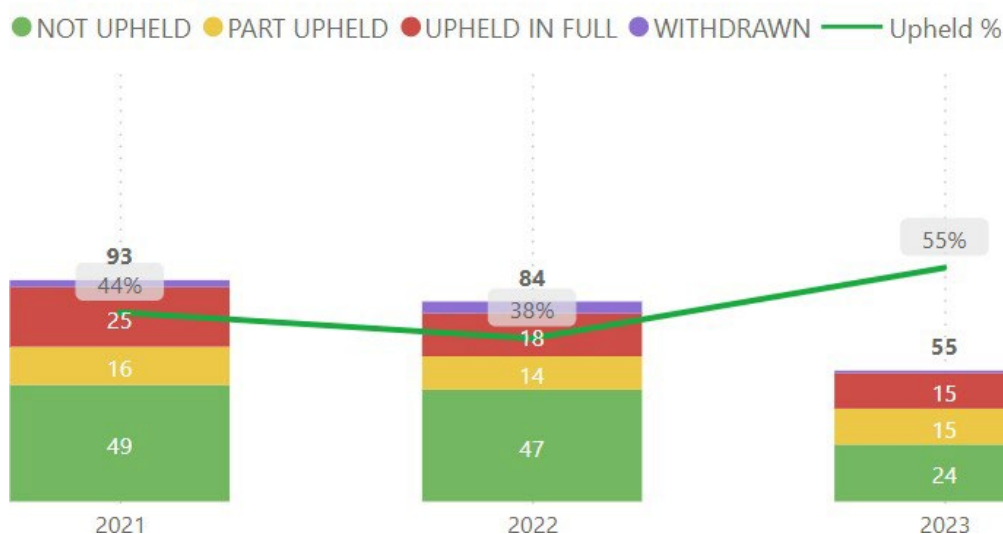
The Environment & Public Protection directorate includes services such as Trading Standards; Energy Services; Sustainability; Digital/Broadband delivery; and one of the Council's largest services, Waste Management.

The number of complaints recorded against Environment and Public Protection decreased from 84 in 2022 to 55 in 2023. The decrease in complaints recorded in 2023 represents an uplift of 34%.

The percentage of complaints upheld (or upheld in part) increased from 38% in 2022 to 55% in 2023. This percentage of upheld complaints is higher than the Council average for upheld complaints (37%).

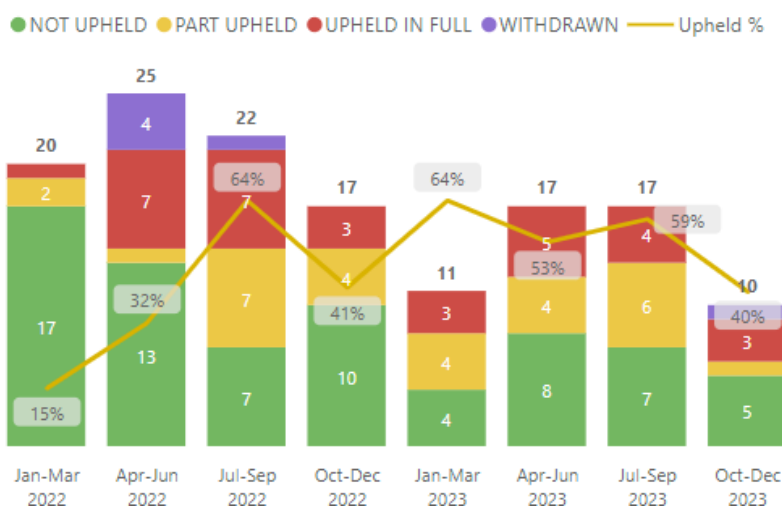
The following graphs show a breakdown of complaints by service areas and by team for 2023.

Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome

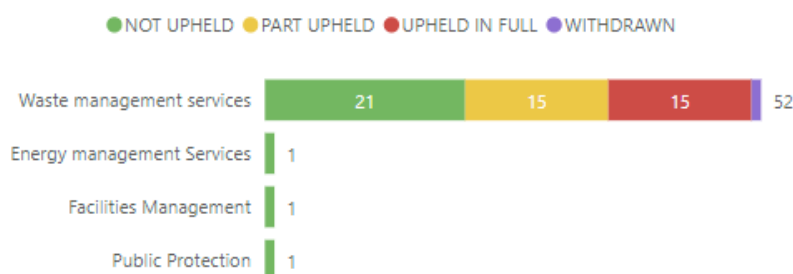


Annual report: Compliments and complaints 2023

Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome



Stage 1 Complaints closed by Service and Outcome



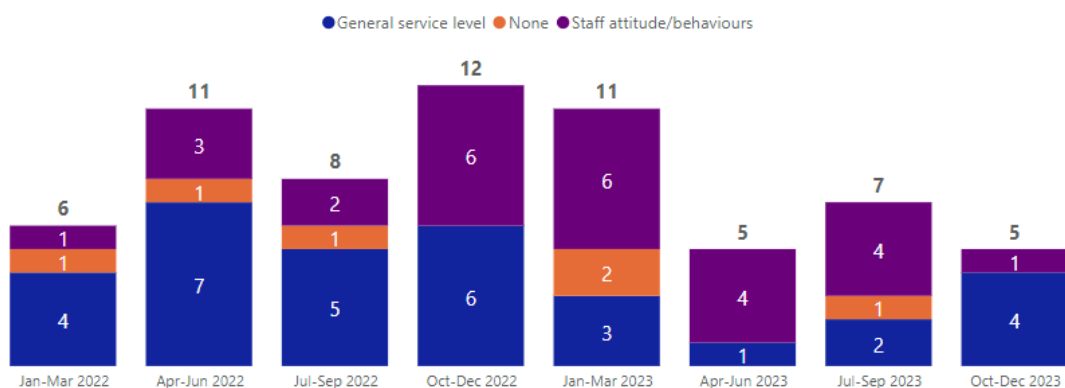
Waste Managements and especially the outsourced recycling sites across West Sussex generate the majority of complaints, compliments and objections to policy.

The majority of complaints relate to the services provided by the Household Waste Recycling Sites (52) run by Biffa on behalf of the Council, but this should be viewed in the context of well over a million visits to the sites across the year.

Many complaints received in relation to Biffa are anecdotal accounts of a customer's dissatisfaction with the customer service received on site. Biffa Area Managers investigate these complaints, often without any concrete evidence on which to rely. Responses are often very customer focussed, with an apology provided as a suitable remedy with an assurance that staff will be reminded of their commitment to excellent customer service, regardless of the challenges faced.

These complaints are formally logged as 'upheld' which provides useful context when considering the high percentage of complaints upheld within the Environment & Public Protection directorate.

Compliments by category



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9 Finance, Procurement and Business Support (Now Finance and Support Services)

Year	Stage 1 closed	ST1 in time or notified %	St1 Upheld %	Stage 2 closed	ST2 in time or notified %	ST2 Upheld %	Stage 3 closed	LGSCO Decisions received	Compliments received
2023	89	40%	54%	8	25%	25%		4	13
2022	66	58%	39%	9	44%	33%			4

The Finance and Support Services directorate includes the Welfare Benefits Advisors who undertake the financial assessments of clients received adult social care support. The service that has historically attracted a higher number of complaints from customers and families of customers unhappy with the service provided to them, or the outcome of the service.

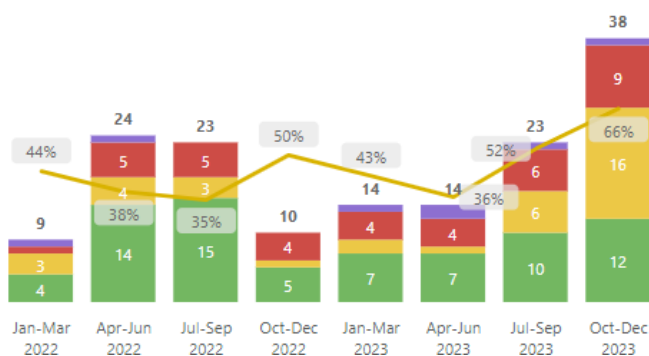
The number of complaints recorded against Finance and Support Services increased from 66 in 2022 to 89 in 2023 which represents an uplift of 35%. The percentage of complaints upheld (or upheld in part) increased from 39% in 2022 to 54% in 2023 and 1 in 4 escalated complaints were upheld following senior management review at stage two of the complaints process.

This percentage of upheld complaints is higher than the Council average for upheld complaints (37%) but the service has also seen a steady increase in the compliments received as the improvements have been implemented over the last year.

The graphs below show a breakdown of complaints by service areas and by team for 2023.

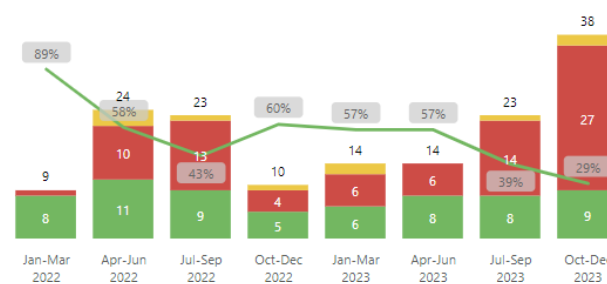
Stage 1 complaints closed by outcome

● NOT UPHELD ● PART UPHELD ● UPHELD IN FULL ● WITHDRAWN — Upheld %



Stage 1 complaints closed by timescales

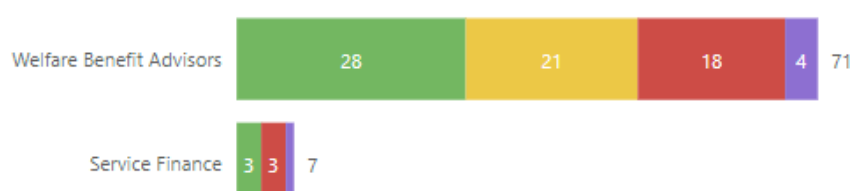
● In time ● Not in time - not notified ● Not in time - notified — ST1 In time or notified %



9.1 Complaints by Team (5 and Above)

Stage 1 Complaints closed by Team and Outcome

● NOT UPHELD ● PART UPHELD ● UPHELD IN FULL ● WITHDRAWN



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Compliments by category



10 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Once a customer has exhausted the Council's complaints procedures, they may ask the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) to consider their complaint. This report focusses on the number of LGSCO decisions reached in the reporting period.

The LGSCO has four *headline* upheld categories:

1. Upheld: Fault & Injustice
2. Upheld: Fault, No Injustice
3. Upheld: Maladministration with Injustice
4. Upheld: Maladministration, No Injustice

The LGSCO publishes a range of decisions on all complaints that are not upheld; discontinued following assessment; considered to be out of jurisdiction; or withdrawn completely by the complainant.

The number of LGSCO decisions issued in 2023 was 99. This is an increase in decisions received when compared with the 82 recorded in 2022. This uplift in LGSCO decisions recorded is in keeping with the increase in complaints traffic across Council services in 2023.

Of the 99 decisions issued in 2023:

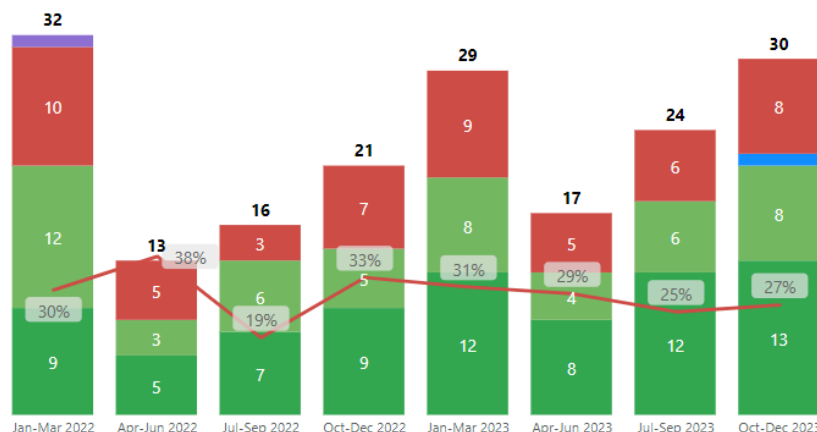
- 32 were closed after initial enquiries with NFA required;
- 18 were considered to be 'premature' meaning the Council had not had a chance to consider the complaint at the point of referral to the LGSCO;
- 16 were recorded as *Upheld: Fault & Injustice*;
- 12 were closed after initial enquiries as 'out of jurisdiction';
- were closed as *Upheld: Fault – NFA as Organisation Already Remedied*;
- were closed as Not Upheld: No Fault;
- were closed as Upheld: Fault, No Injustice;
- were closed as Not Upheld: No Further Action;
- were closed as Upheld: Fault & Injustice – NFA as Organisation Already Remedied;
- 1 was closed as Declined: Invalid Complaint;

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- 1 was Not Investigated: Injustice Remedied During Complaints Process;
- 1 was closed as Upheld: Maladministration & Injustice.
- At the time of writing, 1 case remains without a confirmed decision.

LGSCO decisions received by outcome

● CLOSED AFTER INITIAL ENQUIRIES ● NOT UPHELD ● STILL OPEN ● UPHELD ● WITHDRAWN — Upheld %



In 27 of the 99 decisions the LGSCO found fault in the Council's actions. This is down from 23 in 2022, but in that year only 82 decisions were issued, so the percentage of findings against the Council remained steady with 27% upheld in 2023 when compared with 28% in 2022.

In those cases where fault was identified, the LGSCO and the Council agreed a suitable remedy, usually an apology or a review of decision.

All recommendations from LGSCO cases are followed up and a letter confirming compliance with all remedies was received from the Ombudsman in relation to all upheld cases in 2023.

It is encouraging to note that 8 cases were resolved by the Council during consideration of complaints locally and prior to the LGSCO making enquiries. Early resolution is key when fault is identified by responding managers; the LGSCO's formal recognition that the Council sought to take appropriate action following its own investigations into matters arising is evidence that operational and systemic changes are being made as a result of complaints investigations.

An anonymised list of cases considered by the LGSCO is available from the Complaints Manager David.Tominey@westsussex.gov.uk and all anonymised decision reports are held on the [Ombudsman website](#).

11 Equalities Monitoring

The process for monitoring complaints by age, sex, race, disability, religion or belief, and gender reassignment has historically produced insufficient data to form any realistic judgement as to the effectiveness of the procedure for individual groups.

Complainants are surveyed regarding their customer experience of the complaints process; that survey also requests equality data.