

**South Lakeland District Council**  
**Standards Committee**  
**Monday, 10 October 2022**  
**Local Government Ombudsman Annual Review,**  
**Complaints received from April 2021 to March**  
**2022**

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<b>Portfolio:</b>	Customer and Locality Services Portfolio Holder
<b>Report from:</b>	Simon McVey, Director Strategy, Innovation and Resources
<b>Report Author:</b>	Vicky McDonald – Operational Lead People, Welfare and Income Maximisation
<b>Wards:</b>	Not applicable
<b>Forward Plan:</b>	Not applicable

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**1.0 Expected Outcome and Measures of Success**

- 1.1 That the Standards Committee receive the annual report of the Local Government Ombudsman for 2021/22 and the summary of complaints and compliments received from April 2021 to March 2022. The learning from complaints is applied to the improvement of Council services.

**2.0 Recommendation**

- 2.1 It is recommended that these reports are received and recent decisions of the Local Government Ombudsman noted by the Committee.**

**3.0 Background and Proposals**

- 3.1 The Council strives to improve customer service and to support this, complaints and compliments data has been monitored for a number of years. All complaints, comments and compliments are recorded and managed by the Customer and Commercial Services Case Management Team.
- 3.2 In May 2020, in line with customer connect, the council implemented an online system for logging, monitoring and responding to customer comments, compliments and complaints. This approach supports the council to ensure that complaints are responded to within the appropriate timeframe and all relevant documents are stored in a central location, and provides a much simpler way for customers to report any complaints.
- 3.3 Following the implementation of the online complaints reporting system the council introduced a streamlined complaints policy reducing the levels of complaint stages from three to two.
- 3.4 Over the period of 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 the council received a total of 658 complaints and enquiries through the customer complaints channels. These channels include emails to the complaints address, letters addressed to complaints or through the online complaints reporting system.

- 3.5 The 658 enquires received through the complaints, comments and compliments process are broken down by the following:
- 302 Stage 1 complaints investigated
  - 13 Stage 2 complaints investigated
  - 111 were not classed as a complaint (i.e. request for service or information)
  - 53 enquiries were resolved through an informal solution
  - 85 enquiries received, SLDC was not the governing authority (i.e. Cumbria County Council, Registered Housing Providers)
  - 94 were compliments
- 3.6 The total number of formal complaints logged between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 was 315. This shows an overall increase of 56 (22%) in comparison to 259 received during 2020/2021. Year on year comparisons from 2017 to 2022 are shown in Appendix 1, identifying significant percentage increases in complaints in 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, compared to percentage increases in 2018/2019 and 2019/2020. The increase in the number of complaints received since 2020 could also be reflective of the changes made to the policy in May 2020 and the simplified on line channels introduced to allow complaints to be made.
- 3.7 The total number of stage 1 complaints logged between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 was 302. This shows an increase of 67 (29%) stage 1 complaints made in comparison to the 235 made in 2020/2021.
- 3.8 The total number of stage 2 complaints logged between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 was 13, a decrease of 11 (46%) compared to 24 in 2020/2021. The relatively low levels of stage 2 complaints made indicate that the vast majority of complaints are resolved to customer satisfaction at stage 1.
- 3.9 The reasons for complaints are wide and varied and there is no underlying trend, although during 2021/2022, the complexity of a significant amount of complaints made increased based on previous years. However, it should be noted that the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic continued to impact on service delivery in some areas due to additional demands placed on local authorities, self-isolation, and increased absence of vital resources, which impacted on the number of complaints received. In particular, challenges in delivering refuse services were apparent due to the lack of availability and recruitment of qualified drivers nationally, and resources in some areas, particularly revenues and environmental protection, were diverted to develop and deliver government mandated schemes such as business grants, and test and trace, which inevitably impacted on delivering business as usual and it could be considered was attributable to the increase in complaints compared to 2020/2021 related to those service areas. It could be considered that prolonged periods of lockdown and isolation was a contributing factor to the increased amount of complaints received.
- 3.10 A breakdown of the total number of complaints received relating to service areas (Appendix 1) shows that 166 (53%) of the total number of complaints received were related to 2 predominant service areas, refuse, recycling and Streetscene (34%) which is indicative of the large number of public interactions that take place, and planning (19%), and is comparable to 2020/2021. 2021/2022 saw significant increases in complaints for council tax and business rates, and environmental protection which is reflective of the challenges experienced in those service areas as explained above. It should be noted that the council undertake millions of customer interactions and transactions each year, almost 3 million transactions alone relate to refuse and recycling for over 55,000 households.

- 3.11 The council recognises the value of complaints made and uses the insight gained to drive service improvements and promote a culture that is open to challenge, with a willingness to change, considering the wider implications, as opposed to focusing on resolution of individual issues. Officers involved in complaint resolution apply lessons learned to identify opportunities for continuous improvement, and strive to turn what may initially be a negative issue into a positive outcome. An example of the application of this approach would be following negative feedback with regards to the council tax section of the website, which was preventing a customer from calculating their council tax charge, the web team worked collaboratively with the Revenues team to improve the usability of the content, adding further functionality to allow this to happen. Following the changes applied, positive feedback was received from the customer who was able to then calculate the council tax.
- 3.12 Further examples of continuous improvements made to existing processes as a result of complaints received include revising the procedure in relation to issuing council tax refunds to the estate of a deceased tax payer, at what is a difficult and sensitive time for the bereaved, removing the need to contact the Executors, and directing the refund into the bank account of the deceased person. This has resulted in refunds being issued in a much timelier manner, minimising unnecessary contact and delays. In addition, the Disabled Facilities Grants procurement process, policy and procedures have recently been revised and reviewed based upon lessons learned as a result of a particularly complex complaint, all of which should result in a more streamlined, transparent and positive experience for customers and will ensure that in the event of substandard works carried out by contractors, the appropriate contractual arrangements will be enforced as appropriate.
- 3.13 The complaints policy aims to respond to all formal complaints within 10 working days. A total of 61% (192) complaints were responded to within 10 working days. Of the 39% (123) falling outside of this time, the majority were more complex complaints requiring detailed investigations and on some occasions, required a site visit. It should also be noted that Officers make every effort to respond within the 10 day deadline, however, additional challenges during 2021/2022 has impacted on response times. Every effort will be made during 2022/2023 to increase the percentage of complaints responded to within the 10 working days and process changes will be introduced to improve response times.
- 3.14 Over the period of 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 the council received a total of 94 compliments through the customer compliments channels. A breakdown of the compliments received by service area is contained within Appendix 2. 23% (24) of compliments received relate to Street scene, 19% (20) related to council staff conduct and 10% (11) related to Bereavement Services.
- 3.15 In accordance with the new streamlined approach to working through customer connect, all compliments and complaints are logged and responded by the Complaints Administration Team. This provides a more effective way to monitor the appropriate stages and storage of documents to support Local Government Ombudsman investigations.
- 3.16 Attached to this report members will find a copy of the Local Government Ombudsman Annual Review 2021/2022 letter (Appendix 3).
- 3.17 During this reporting period the Local Government Ombudsman made a decision on 16 cases (Appendix 4), 10 of which were in relation to planning and development, 2 in relation to highways and transport, 3 in relation to environmental services and public protection and regulation, and 1 to corporate and other services. In comparison, there were 9 decisions in 2020/2021, 13 decisions in 2019/2020, 7 decisions in 2018/19, 7 decisions in 2017/18 and 10 decisions in 2016/17.

- 3.18 In 2021/2022 no decisions were upheld against the council as the Ombudsman did not find any evidence that the council acted with maladministration. As a comparison, an average of 51% of decisions for similar councils are upheld.

This annual review findings are also available on the Local Government Ombudsman website.

- 3.19 The council continues to work hard to resolve any complaints that arise before any referral to the Ombudsman.
- 3.20 Members are asked to receive the report.

#### 4.0 Appendices Attached to this Report

Appendix No.	Name of Appendix
1	Complaints data
2	Compliments received during 2020/2021 and 2021/22 by service area
3	Annual Review letter of the LGO 2021/2022
4	SLDC LGO complaints and decisions 2021/2022

#### 5.0 Consultation

- 5.1 Not applicable

#### 6.0 Alternative Options

- 6.1 There are no alternative options, this report is only for the Committee to note.

#### 7.0 Implications

#### Financial, Resources and Procurement

- 7.1 Not applicable

#### Human Resources

- 7.2 Not applicable

#### Legal

- 7.3 No issues to raise

#### Health and Sustainability Impact Assessment

- 7.4 Have you completed a Health and Sustainability Impact Assessment? No not applicable

#### Equality and Diversity

- 7.5 Have you completed an Equality Impact Analysis? No
- 7.8 If you have not completed an Impact Analysis, please explain your reasons: Not applicable

Risk Management	Consequence	Controls required
Reputational as a result of adverse complaints	Reputation of the Council is diminished	Regular review of complaints policy and handling of complaints

## Contact Officers

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## Background Documents Available

Name of Background document	Where it is available
Customer feedback policy	<a href="https://www.southlakeland.gov.uk">Customer feedback policy (southlakeland.gov.uk)</a>

## Tracking Information

Signed off by	Date sent	Date Signed off
Section 151 Officer	07.09.22	07.09.22
Monitoring Officer	07.09.22	28.09.22
CMT	06.09.22	08.09.22

Circulated to	Date sent
Lead Specialist	N/A
Human Resources Lead Specialist	N/A
Communications Team	N/A
Leader	N/A
Committee Chairman	N/A
Portfolio Holder	09.09.22
Ward Councillor(s)	N/A
Committee	N/A
Executive (Cabinet)	N/A
Council	N/A