

CABINET
9 SEPTEMBER 2025

COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS AND COMMENTS ANNUAL REPORTS 2024/25

Councillor Mandy Porter, Resources Portfolio

Elizabeth Davison, Executive Director Resources and Governance

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Cabinet with the 2024/25 Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports for:
 - (a) Adult Social Care (**Appendix 2**);
 - (b) Children's Social Care (**Appendix 3**);
 - (c) Corporate (**Appendix 4**);
 - (d) Housing (**Appendix 5**); and
 - (e) Public Health (**Appendix 6**).

Summary

2. It is important that the Council's complaints, compliments and comments procedures are accessible so people can tell us what they think about the services we provide. The Council constantly strives to ensure an organisational culture in which complaints are accepted, owned and resolved as quickly as possible and one in which learning from complaints is used to improve services.
 3. The Council received a total of 747 complaints during 2024/25, an increase from 746 in 2023/24. Given the Council's well publicised and accessible complaints procedures, along with its positive complaints handling culture, the comparatively low number of complaints despite the wide range of services provided and the high volume of interactions with residents and visitors demonstrates the quality of our service delivery.
 4. The Council received a total of 219 compliments during 2024/25, a decrease from 231 in 2023/24.
 5. The Council received a total of 45 comments during 2024/25, a decrease from 77 in 2023/24.
 6. A summary table is provided at **Appendix 1**.
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7. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Adult Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009.
8. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.
9. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Public Health Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the NHS Bodies and Local Authorities (Partnership Arrangements, Care Trusts, Public Health and Local Healthwatch) Regulations 2012.
10. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the new Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, which became statutory on 1 April 2024.
11. The production of an annual report in respect of representations received under the Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure is a requirement of the new Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code, which the Ombudsman issued as 'advice and guidance' for all local councils in England under section 23(12A) of the Local Government Act 1974.

Recommendations

12. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) That Cabinet notes the content of the attached reports.
 - (b) That Cabinet endorses the further recommendations made in the Corporate, Children's and Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports.

Reasons

13. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:-
 - (a) To make Cabinet aware of the number and nature of the complaints, compliments and comments received by the Council and the resulting organisational learning.
 - (b) To ensure the Council is:
 - (i) Complying with the Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006;
 - (ii) Complying with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code;

- (iii) Complying with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code;
- (iv) Complying with the Council's Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedures; and
- (v) To improve satisfaction with complaints handling.

Elizabeth Davison
Executive Director Resources and Governance

Background Papers

- (i) 2024/25 Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports for:
 - (1) Adult Social Care (**Appendix 2**);
 - (2) Children's Social Care (**Appendix 3**);
 - (3) Corporate (**Appendix 4**);
 - (4) Housing (**Appendix 5**); and
 - (5) Public Health (**Appendix 6**).
- (ii) The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009.
- (iii) The Children Act 1989 Representation Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.
- (iv) The NHS Bodies and Local Authorities (Partnership Arrangements, Care Trusts, Public Health and Local Healthwatch) Regulations 2012.
- (v) The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.
- (vi) The Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

Council Plan	Learning from complaints contributes towards the delivery of the priorities in the Plan.
Addressing inequalities	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to addressing inequality.
Tackling Climate Change	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to tackling climate change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	The revised procedures aim to improve the efficiency with which complaints are handled. The recommendations contained within the appended reports aim to reduce risk and improve efficiency in the way we interact with our customers.
Health and Wellbeing	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to the effective delivery and the improved health and well-being of the population of Darlington.
S17 Crime and Disorder	Learning from complaints, compliments and comments contributes to the effective delivery of the Community Safety services.
Wards Affected	All.
Groups Affected	All.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not have a direct impact on the Budget and Policy Framework.
Key Decision	This report does not constitute a Key Decision.
Urgent Decision	This report does not require an Urgent Decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	The purpose of the Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report is, in part, to improve the service we provide to Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

14. Our aim is to put people first and provide them with the best possible service. To make this aim a reality it is important people have the opportunity to tell us what they think about the services we provide. The Council's Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedures are one way they can do this. They can tell us when we get things wrong so we can put them right. They can also tell us when we get things right, make comments about the things we do and suggest new ways of doing things.
15. We understand that sometimes it is difficult to complain and work hard to ensure an organisational culture in which complaints are seen as a positive means of engagement and an opportunity for the Council to learn and improve services. If people do need to complain we always take their concerns seriously, treat them fairly and with respect and assure them they will not receive a poorer service as a result.
16. Adult Social Care had a particularly positive year, which is worthy of note, seeing a decrease in the overall number of representations made under the Adult Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure during 2024/25. There was a significant decrease in the number of complaints received compared to 2023/24. There was an increase in the number of compliments received, while no comments were received. Full details are attached at Appendix 2. Children's Social Care also had a generally positive year seeing a decrease in the overall number of representations made

under the Children's Social Care Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure during 2024/25. There was a significant decrease in the number of complaints received at Stage 1 of the procedure compared to 2023/24. However, there was an increase in the number of complaints escalated to Stage 2 and the same number of complaints progressed to Stage 3. There was a decrease in the number of compliments received, while no comments were received. Full details are attached at Appendix 3.

18. There was a decrease in the overall number of representations made under the Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure during 2024/25. There was an increase in the number of complaints received. There was also an increase in the number of compliments received, while there was a significant decrease in the number of comments received. Full details are attached at Appendix 4.
19. While there was a decrease in the number of representations made under the Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure during 2024/25, there was an increase in the number of Stage 1 complaints received. Although, there was a decrease in the number of Stage 2 complaints received. This increase can in part be attributed to the additional promotional work undertaken by Housing Services to highlight the complaints procedure and the launch of the Housing Ombudsman's Statutory Complaints Handling Code on 1 April 2024. It also reflects a national trend with the Housing Ombudsman reporting an unprecedented 474% increase in complaints between 2019/20 and 2024/25, with complaints about repairs accounting for 45%. There was a significant decrease in the number of compliments received. No comments were received. Full details are attached at Appendix 5.
20. The number of representations made under the Public Health Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure during 2024/25 remained low. The Council received one complaint in 2024/25. The Council did not receive any compliments and received one comment. Full details are attached at Appendix 6.
21. Some examples of organisational learning resulting from complaints have been extracted from the appended reports and are provided below:

Adult Social Care Complaints:

- (a) It was agreed additional training in relation to recording would be made available for social workers.
- (b) Social workers were reminded that the care providers should receive a copy of the person's Support Plan prior to admission, to ensure they have all relevant information.
- (c) Shortfalls in the effectiveness of the provider's risk assessment and care planning process for falls and moving and handling were identified and it was recommended the provider reflects on the findings and implemented a more effectively risk assessment for falls, which clearly identifies the level of risk and appropriate risk reduction measures.
- (d) The Council agreed to ensure that social work teams do not delay submission of paperwork to the Financial Protection Team.

- (e) The Council issued a guidance note to all relevant staff advising them of the legal duty to ensure, where specific individual circumstances apply, the personal budget covers the cost of support that has been specified in the care plan, not a sum equivalent to the cost of council-run services. The Council also agreed to amend any relevant policies to reflect this.

Children's Social Care Complaints:

- (a) Children's Services considered an urgent update of its Children with Disabilities eligibility criteria document.
- (b) Darlington Borough Council agreed to advise staff providing responses to complaints raised by service users of the need to send the response to the Complaints Team and advise the complainant of their right to progress to stage 2.
- (c) Agreed to reminder to all social workers and team managers of the importance of detailed and timely case recording.
- (d) Children's Services agreed to reminder to all social workers and team managers of the importance of detailed and timely case recording.
- (e) Children's Services agreed to provide an update to social workers and managers regarding their duties and responsibilities under Section 47 of The Children Act 1989, in respect of gathering relevant information and including foster carers where the allegations is against them.

Corporate Complaints:

- (a) Following a complaint for Systems and Information, the Council corrected its website to indicate when maintenance tasks may affect the availability of the public access section of the website, which allows people to view planning applications on-line.
- (b) Following a complaint for Housing Options, the Council made sure officers making decisions on housing applications are clear, that in accordance with the Housing Services Allocations Policy 2023 – 2028, they cannot consider spent convictions as part of the assessment process.
- (c) Following another complaint for Housing Options, it was agreed that in accordance with the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities, the Housing Options service would incorporate the duty to refer into their wider homelessness strategy and joint working arrangements and establish local arrangements with agencies in regard to referrals.
- (d) Following a complaint for Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) staff were reminded of the importance of Adult and Children's Services sharing information. Training was also provided on the Local Authority's duties under the Mental Health Act 1983 and the Children with Disabilities Eligibility Criteria.

- (e) Following a complaint for Inclusion the Vulnerable Pupil Panel Protocol was updated with regard to the Home to Hospital Teaching Service. The Council also reviewed its internal processes to ensure it is able make timely arrangements for the provision of suitable education in accordance with its duties under Section 19(1) of the Education Act 1996.
- (f) Following a complaint for the Dolphin Centre a formalised procedure was implemented to ensure that our pensioner swim price is offered to anyone from outside of Darlington on providing evidence of their eligibility for the concession.
- (g) Following a complaint for Highways Network Management it was agreed the Council would raise awareness of the Customer Standards with officers.

Housing Complaints:

- (a) Following a complaint about the gas servicing process it was agreed the process and letters would be reviewed with a view to improving communication between teams and tenants and ultimately the timeliness in which repairs are completed. It was also agreed to discuss the gas servicing process with the Tenant's Panel and seek their views on what we could have done differently.
 - (b) After receiving a complaint about contractors not being aware of tenant vulnerabilities, staff were reminded to ensure they are updating the Vulnerability User defined Characteristic (UDC) on the internal ICT system so that all staff are aware and to include this information on all orders for contractors where appropriate.
 - (c) Following a complaint about missed issues, staff were reminded of the need to ensure they read and address all aspects of service requests from tenants to ensure they feel listened to fully.
 - (d) Following a complaint about delays in a tenant receiving additional keys, the key-cutting process was reviewed to ensure tenants are aware of the duration to obtain keys and deliver them.
 - (e) After a complaint was received about delays in responding to tenants' queries, staff were reminded to return phone calls within the seven working days outlined in the Customer Standards.
 - (f) Following a complaint about delays to a complaint being logged and subsequently responded to, Housing Income Management were made aware that the Complaints Team need consent from a tenant in order to accept a complaint from a third party. They were reminded that the Housing Services Access to Personal Information form should be completed, but also that the form required updating to ensure it reflected the more stringent consent requirements introduced by UK GDPR and those detailed in our Housing Complaints Procedure.
22. The further recommendations set out in the Children's, Corporate and Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Reports are:

Children's Social Care Complaints

- (a) Children's Services and the Complaints Manager should work to improve the timeliness and quality of stage 1 responses, ensuring lessons are learned in order to reduce the overall number of complaints received and the number progressing to stages 2 and 3. The Complaints Manager has already ran several in house training sessions for staff required to respond to stage 1 complaints.
- (b) Children's Services and the Complaints Manager should work to performance against stage 2 response timescale.

Corporate Complaints

- (a) The Complaints Manager should provide training for stage 1 responding officers on the updated complaints procedure (introduced by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code on 1 April 2024), to improve performance against timescales prior to them being monitored by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman from 1 April 2026.
- (b) The Complaints & Information Governance Team should work to improve compliance with the new Stage 2 timescales (introduced by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code on 1 April 2024), prior to the Council's performance against them being monitored by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman from 1 April 2026.

Housing Complaints

- (a) Housing Services should consider what can be done to reduce complaints about the timeliness and quality of repairs and poor communication and to improve relationships between officers and tenants.
- (b) Housing Services should consider reviewing resources to ensure all stage 1 complaints are responded to within Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code timescales.
- (c) The Complaints & Information Governance Team should consider reviewing resources to ensure all stage 2 complaints are responded to within Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code timescales.

Consultation

- 23. No consultation was required in preparing this report.

Appendix 1

Total Representations by Year

Type of representation	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21
Complaints					
Corporate					
Stage 1 complaints	467	463	478	532	457
Direct to Stage 2 complaints	21	14	21	17	24
Direct to Ombudsman	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Total complaints</i>	<i>488</i>	<i>477</i>	<i>499</i>	<i>549</i>	<i>483</i>
Stage 1 escalated to Stage 2	52	70	49	53	26
<i>Total Stage 2 complaints</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>50</i>
Adult Social Care	39	61	54	48	46
Children's Social Care					
Stage 1 complaints	55	65	56	49	37
Direct to Stage 2 complaints	1	1	0	4	0
<i>Total complaints</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>37</i>
Stage 1 escalated to Stage 2	21	14	20	8	7
<i>Total Stage 2 complaints</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>7</i>
Stage 3 complaints	4	4	2	1	2
Housing					
Stage 1 complaints	163	140	98	88	60
Direct to Stage 2 complaints	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Total complaints</i>	<i>163</i>	<i>140</i>	<i>98</i>	<i>88</i>	<i>61</i>
Stage 1 escalated to Stage 2	27	30	17	16	12
<i>Total Stage 2 complaints</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>13</i>
Public Health	1	2	2	1	2
Total Complaints	747	746	709	739	629
Compliments					
Corporate	143	130	130	154	209
Adult Social Care	42	39	31	33	38
Children's Social Care	5	6	8	8	15
Housing	29	55	33	21	47
Public Health	0	1	0	1	0
Total Compliments	219	231	202	217	309
Comments					
Corporate	44	77	110	123	171
Adult Social Care	0	0	0	2	1
Children's Social Care	0	0	0	1	0
Housing	0	0	2	1	4
Public Health	1	0	0	0	2
Total Comments	45	77	112	127	178