



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL



Governance and Audit Committee

13 March 2024

Report of Councillor Philip Knowles,
Cabinet Member for Corporate
Governance and Licensing

Complaints Statistics: April 2022 to February 2024

Report Author

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Purpose of Report

To present the complaints statistics for the period April 2022 to February 2024.

Recommendations

That the Committee:

1. Notes the information contained within the report;
2. Notes that from 1 April 2024 complaints will be regularly reported under the new Key Performance Indicator (KPI) suite accompanying the Corporate Plan 2024-2027.

Decision Information

Does the report contain any exempt or confidential information not for publication?	No
What are the relevant corporate priorities?	High performing Council
Which wards are impacted?	All

1. Implications

Taking into consideration implications relating to finance and procurement, legal and governance, risk and mitigation, health and safety, diversity and inclusion, safeguarding, staffing, community safety, mental health and wellbeing and the impact on the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency, the following implications have been identified:

Finance and Procurement

1.1 There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

Completed by: Alison Hall-Wright, Deputy Director (Finance & ICT) and Deputy S151 Officer

Legal and Governance

- 1.2 The Statutory Officers of the Council review the complaints on a monthly basis as is best practice.
- 1.3 The number of complaints received to the Council should be publicly available at the end of each year and will be published on the Council's website.
- 1.4 As part of the proposed new Corporate Plan the KPIs will include reporting the Q2 (mid-year) and end of year information to the appropriate scrutiny committee.
- 1.5 The customer feedback process is outlined in the report below.

Completed by: James Welbourn, Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer

2. Background to the Report

- 2.1 The Council has operated a Customer Feedback Process, Compliments, Comments and Complaints since 2013. Feedback can be provided via completion of a form online, emailing the customer services team, calling the customer service team or submitting written correspondence.
- 2.2 The current Customer Feedback Process: Compliments, Comments & Complaints was introduced in October 2021. Housing complaints are dealt with via the Housing Customer Feedback Policy 2021. Both follow the same process and timescales, the difference is the responsible Ombudsman in escalated cases.
- 2.3 There are three stages to the complaints process:
- Stage 1: the Council will acknowledge a formal complaint within three working days and provide a full response within ten working days.
 - Stage 2: If the complainant is not satisfied with the response, the complaint can be escalated with a request to review the Stage 1 response. Council will acknowledge the review request within three working days and provide a full response within twenty working days.
 - If the complainant remains dissatisfied by the Stage 2 review, the matter can be escalated to either the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman or the Housing Ombudsman (depending on subject of the complaint), which will carry out an independent investigation into allegations of maladministration causing an injustice to anybody who has complained.
- 2.4 Received complaints are initially assessed for their information, and whether the request has been allocated to the service area correctly. For example, Waste service requests e.g. to collect a missed bin are not logged as complaints. Complaints are defined according to the definition set out in the Customer Feedback Process and Housing Customer Feedback Policy. The Council is unable to investigate a complaint if any of the following circumstances is the case:
- More than three months has passed since the problem occurred.
 - The new complaint is a previously concluded complaint, or the complainant is wanting a previous complaint reconsidered.
 - The complaint has not been escalated within 30 days.
- 2.5 The process for managing vexatious, unreasonable and/or persistent behaviour is detailed in Appendix 1 of the Customer Feedback Process, and section 19 of the Housing Customer Feedback Policy.

- 2.6 The Council is committed to learning from complaints to help identify where service improvements are required. All complaints are recorded and monitored. The information is used to help and inform service delivery and improvement. This process takes place on an individual service by service basis.
- 2.7 The information on complaints is reported to the relevant Council committees, the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and Statutory Officers meeting.
- 2.8 In March 2022, the Council changed complaint management and monitoring system. This change has significantly improved the monitoring and management of complaints.
- 2.9 In February 2024, the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman, and the Housing Ombudsman published new Complaints Handling Codes.

3. Key Considerations

- 3.1 Trends are presented and analysed at the organisation and service level. For each service the views of the responsible officers have been sought to explain trends, lessons learned and planned work to deliver further improvements in 2024- 2025.

Organisation Level Trends

- 3.2 Over the period April 2021 to February 2024, the Council received 3243 complaints. There has been a steady improvement in resolution times (detailed in Table 1). In the period April 2021-2022 of the 879 complaints received only 9.97% or 85 were closed within the defined timeframes. The average complaint was open for 73 working days. In 2022-2023 the resolution time rate was improved to 38.18%, with the average time open falling to 39 working days. The trend continued in 2023-2024. 59% of complaints were resolved on time, with the average complaint open for 16 working days. This is a significant improvement based on previous years; however, performance remains below target timeframes. An action plan is being developed to improve performance further.
- 3.3 A very small proportion of complaints generally are escalated to stage 2. In 2023-2024 3.19% or 27 complaints were escalated. This compares to 61 or 5.18% in 2022-2023. For Housing, 19.81% of complaints (22) were escalated to Stage 2. 1 Housing complaint was escalated to Stage 2 in 2022-2023.

Table 1: SKDC Complaints – All Services - April 2021-Feb 2024			
	1 April – 31 March 2021/22	1 April –31 March 2022/23	April to date (13 Feb 2024) 2023/24
Complaints Received (incl. open complaints)	879	1359	1005
Total closed on time	85	519	593
% closed on time	9.97%	38.18%	59%
Total overdue	794	840	410
Total open (date of export)	0	0	28
Average working days open (all)	73	39	16
Average working days open (overdue)	81	61	32
Overdue complaints open 50+ days	576	426	84
Overdue complaints open 100+ days	148	165	8
Overdue complaints open 150+ days	94	28	1
Overdue complaints open 200+ days	58	3	0
Overdue complaints open 250+ days	15	1	0
Overdue complaints open 365+ days	1	1	0

3.4 Considered by Service Area, there is substantial variation in the number of complaints received and the degree of improvement, as detailed in Table 2. Note a service level breakdown is not available for 2021-2022.

Table 2: SKDC Complaints by Service Area - April 2021-Feb 2024							
Service	1 April – 31 March 2021/22	1 April –31 March 2022/23			April to date (13 Feb 2024) 2023/24		
	Complaints Received	Complaints Received	Closed on time	Average days for overdue complaints	Complaints Received	Closed on time	Average days for overdue complaints
Council Total	879	1359	519 (38.19%)	61	1005	593 (59%)	32
Waste	N/A	440	273 (62.05%)	53	351	304 (86.61%)	36
Housing	N/A	478	105 (21.97%)	72	364	181 (49.73%)	29
Public Protection	N/A	80	28 (35%)	47	77	29 (37.66%)	33
Parks & Street Scene	N/A	26	5 (19.23%)	69	36	17 (47.22%)	43
Corporate ¹	N/A	53	25 (47.17%)	48	28	10 (35.71%)	33
Revenue & Benefits	N/A	121	19 (15.70%)	53	73	20 (27.40%)	33
Customer Services	N/A	25	7 (28%)	49	7	5 (71.43%)	20
Leisure & Arts	N/A	13	7 (53.85%)	79	3	2 (66.67%)	47
Planning	N/A	61	30 (49.18%)	29	46	17 (36.96%)	32
Property	N/A	61	20 (32.79%)	51	18	7 (38.89%)	41
Building Control	N/A	0	0	0	2	2 (100%)	0

3.5 The majority of complaints are directed to Waste and Housing, combined 71.14% of total complaints in 2023-2024 so far. Building Control and the multiple services composing the aggregated category of Corporate received the fewest. The proportion of complaints to each service has remained consistent over the examined period.

3.6 With the exception of Planning and the aggregated Corporate Services, improvements in the rate of resolution within the required timescales have occurred for all examined service areas (Figure 2). The greatest improvement has been in Waste (58.17% to 82.93%) and Housing (16.52% to 54.86%). This is positive progress, yet significant scope for further improvement remains. Building Control have a 100% resolution rate, but only two complaints.

¹ Corporate is an aggregation of the following services for the purpose of this exercise: Business Support, Communications, Commercial & Operational, Corporate Projects & Performance, Democratic Services, Facilities, Finance, HR, ICT and Legal.

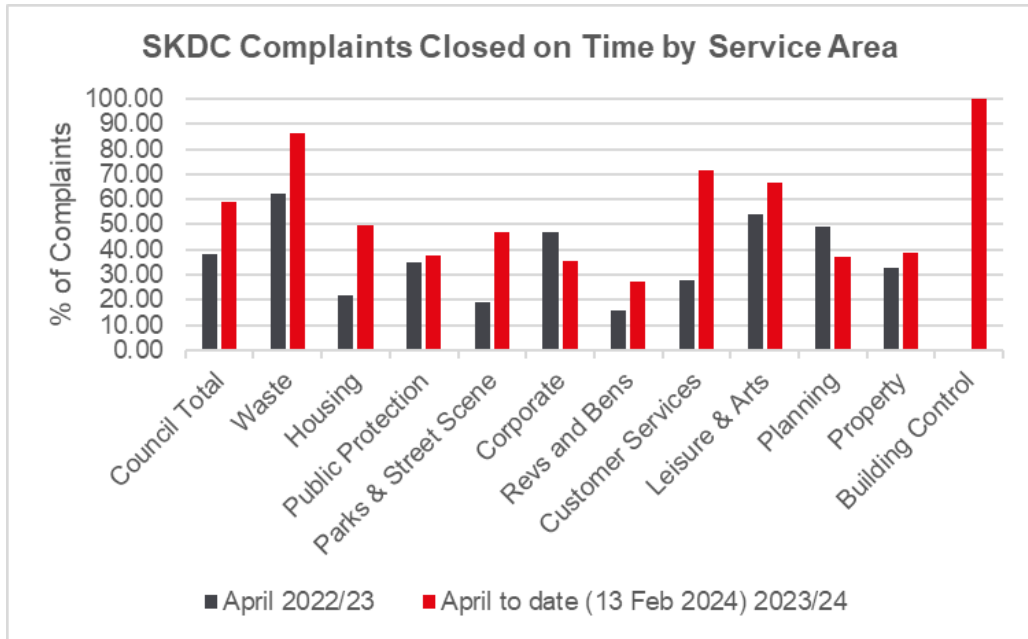


Figure 1 - SKDC Complaints Closed on Time by Service Area April 2022 to February 2024, Meritec Complaints Dashboard

3.7 A similar positive trajectory is seen in reductions of the resolution time for overdue complaints (Figure 3). The best performer here is Housing with a reduction from an average of 72 working days for overdue complaints to 29. Customer Services and Arts & Leisure have also seen significant reductions, although with a far smaller number of complaints to process.

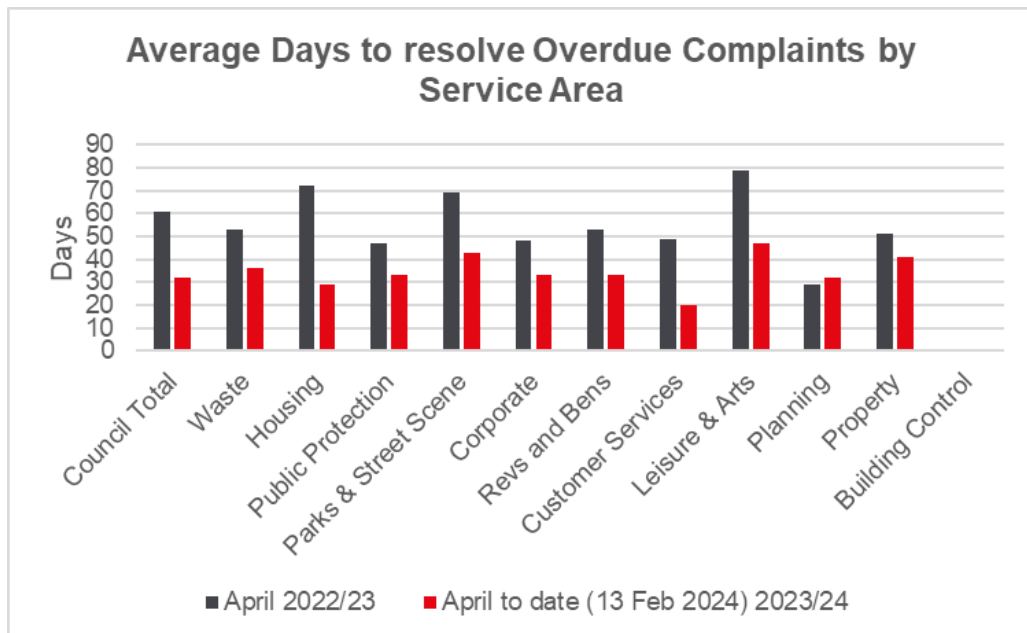


Figure 2 - Average working days to resolve overdue complaints by Service Area April 2022 to February 2024, Meritec Complaints Dashboard

Service Level Trends

Waste

- 3.8 Over the examined period, a little over a third of total annual complaints were directed to the Waste service (351 for 2023-2024 so far). For context, the service provides over 3.9 million collections across the district annually. There has been a significantly improvement in the rate of closing complaints. In 2022-2023, 62.05% of complaints were resolved within the defined timescales, for 2023-2024 (so far) that figure has increased to 86.61%. The average time for overdue complaints to remain in the system has been reduced from 53 working days to 36 days.
- 3.9 Since 2022-2023, Street Cleaning activities have been moved out of the service and a refresh of complaints processes has been undertaken. This has included an ongoing migration from paper to electronic systems and improved communications between the operational and administration teams.
- 3.10 Waste complaints generally focus on a core group of issues: stolen and/or damaged bins, delivery of new bins, staff behaviour, and property and/or vehicle damage. Weekly toolbox talks (training sessions) are delivered to ensure process and messaging on these issues is fully understood by the team.

Housing

- 3.11 Housing complaints follow the same two stage process and timescales; but escalation is to the Housing Ombudsman. This does not affect this analysis of internal complaints handling and comparison to other service areas. The Housing Ombudsman has a duty to monitor compliance with the (Housing) Complaint Handling Code under Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023. Landlords must submit an annual self-assessment of their compliance to the Ombudsman. Hence there is an additional requirement for Housing to demonstrate compliant performance.
- 3.12 By contrast the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) lacks a specific monitoring duty and their equivalent Complaints Handling Code is strictly best practice. However, LGSCO expects councils to have regard for the Code when developing policies and procedures and the Ombudsman may make a finding of maladministration in cases where a council's policies and procedures depart from the Code without sufficient reason and explanation.
- 3.13 Over the examined period, a little over a third of total annual complaints were directed to Housing (364 for 2023-2024 so far). There has a been substantial improvement in the rate of resolving complaints. In 2022/23, 21.97% of complaints were resolved within the defined timescales, for 2023-2024 (so far) that figure has increased to 49.73%. The average time for overdue complaints to remain in the system has been reduced from 72 working days to 29 days.
- 3.14 The service is divided into two business units on Meritec: Housing Services and Housing Technical Services. The performance for each is displayed in Table 3. The improvements in complaints handling is repeated across both units. A

greater proportion of complaints, increasingly in 2023-2024 is directed to Housing Technical Services.

Table 3: SKDC Complaints - Housing - April 2021-February 2024							
Business Unit	1 April – 31 March 2021/22	1 April –31 March 2022/23			April to date (13 Feb 2024) 2023/24		
	Complaints Received	Complaints Received	Closed on time	Average days for overdue complaints	Complaints Received	Closed on time	Average days for overdue complaints
Housing	N/A	478 (35.17%)	105 (21.96%)	72	364 (36.21%)	181 (49.72%)	29
Housing Services	N/A	217 (45.40%)	50 (23.04%)	66	148 (40.65%)	71 (47.97%)	34
Housing Technical Services	N/A	261 (54.60%)	55 (21.07%)	77	216 (59.35%)	110 (50.92%)	24

3.15 The implementation of a new complaints management system has greatly improved the monitoring and tracking of complaints. Meritec enabled complaints to be logged accurately with clear reports produced. In the same period, a dedicated team was set up to coordinate responses from across the directorate and provide effective oversight of the process. Improving response times will be the key focus of the service in 2024-2025 in line with the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.

Public Protection

3.16 In 2023-2024 so far, 7.66% of complaints have involved Public Protection. At a service level there has been a slight improvement in the rate of resolving complaints (35% to 37.66%) and more substantial fall in the average number of working days for overdue complaints to be resolved 47 days to 33 days.

3.17 The service consists of four business units: Environmental Health, Neighbourhoods, Community Protection, and Licensing. The performance of each is detailed in Table 4. The service level trend is repeated for Environmental Health and Neighbourhoods. The proportion of complaints by sub team is more variable with Environmental Health's share doubling and Neighbourhoods falling so far in 2023-2024. Community Protection's resolution rate has fallen, however average resolution times for overdue complaints has significantly improved. The complaints response times of Licensing has increased, albeit with a relatively small number of complaints.

Table 4: SKDC Complaints - Public Protection - March 2021-Jan 2024							
Business Unit	1 April – 31 March 2021/22	1 April –31 March 2022/23			April to date (13 Feb 2024) 2023/24		
	Complaints Received	Complaints Received	Closed on time	Average days for overdue complaints	Complaints Received	Closed on time	Average days for overdue complaints
Public Protection	N/A	80 (5.88%)	28 (35%)	47	77 (7.66%)	29 (37.66%)	33
Environmental Health	N/A	22 (27.5%)	8 (36.36%)	32	41 (53.24%)	16 (46.34%)	32
Neighbourhoods	N/A	29 (36.25%)	9 (31.03%)	54	14 (34.14%)	8 (57.14%)	40
Community Protection	N/A	23 (28.75%)	8 (34.78%)	54	11 (14.28%)	0 (0%)	27
Licensing	N/A	6 (7.5%)	3 (50%)	32	11 (14.28%)	5 (45.45%)	46

3.18 Since 2022, the various teams have amended their allocation processes to speed up case referrals, introduced response time targets and undertaken ongoing training to improve case management.

Revenue & Benefits

3.19 73 complaints have been directed to Revenue & Benefits in 2023-2024 so far. There have been improvements in the resolution rate within the defined timescales (15.70% to 27.40%) and the average time to resolve overdue complaints, 54 working days to 35 days.

3.20 The recent implementation of the Council Tax Self Service Portal and the Rent Balance Checker has reduced complaints to Revenues. The majority of complaints are regarding legislative decisions or wording of documents, of which has been taken as a lesson learnt and wording improvements have been made. A new system has been implemented, which from April 2024 will allow for any reminder or summons where there are outstanding documents to be suppressed.

3.21 Understanding the root causes of complaints during 2023-2024 will be used as part of the review of the Customer Experience Strategy in 2024-2025.

Customer Services

3.22 7 complaints have been directed to Customer Services in 2023/24 so far (February 2024). There have been significant improvements in the resolution rate within the defined timescales (28% to 71.43%) and the average time to resolve overdue complaints (49 working days to 20).

3.23 The feedback process is managed by the Customer Services Team Leader, supported by two Coordinators. Regular discussions take place with the Head of Service to consider common feedback and complaints, face-to-face and telephone customer interactions and whether any improvements or changes to service that can be made. Call recordings of the customer interaction are always

reviewed prior to the response. The launch of the new website, which includes improved navigation of information, review of online forms, introduction of other online services such as the Council Tax Portal and Planning Portal, and the launch of Virtual Officer have reduced complaints.

- 3.24 The outcome of complaints during 2023/24 will be used as part of the review of the Customer Experience Strategy working group in 2024/25.

Arts and Leisure

- 3.25 The service has received a minimal level of complaints 3 in 2023-2024 so far, down on the 13 in the previous year (although it is noted that of the 13 complaints 7 were for other service areas; parks, grounds maintenance and arts much reducing the number). As such identifying firm trends is difficult 66.67% were resolved on time, and the overdue complaint was open for 47 working days. The latter is a significant improvement on 2022-2023, 79 working days.
- 3.26 Any complaints relating to the management of the leisure centres and which are received directly by the Council are shared with the onsite teams and responded to directly. For the upcoming year, complaint handling will continue to be monitored and discussed through team meetings.
- 3.27 For the Arts service, complaints have focused on changes to the operational changes at the Arts venues. A specific example of a regular complaint is regarding the phone systems. Since the implementation of the review, box office calls for ticket bookings have been taken by customer services. This arrangement is currently under review and improvements are being introduced.

Property Services

- 3.28 18 complaints have been directed to Property Services so in 2023-2024. This a significant reduction on the 61 in 2022-2023. The resolution rate has risen from 32.79% to 38.89% and the average time for overdue complaints has fallen slightly from 51 working days to 41 days.
- 3.29 The reduction in complaints is attributed to a number of factors, including a restructure of the property services team, change in service directorate, improved service resourcing and the ongoing implementation of a new property management system. The service is planning to implement a new maintenance strategy in approach to how SKDC maintains its commercial property portfolio, so moving from a reactive maintenance strategy to a planned maintenance strategy across the portfolio. This will mean that the authorities' assets will be maintained proactively and so reduce the number of failures from reactive repairs. It is envisaged that this in turn will assist in reducing the number of complaints received by the service.

Planning and Enforcement

- 3.30 It should be recognised that planning complaints are often complex in their nature. The complaints received by the service tend to fall into two categories: either the customer disagrees with the Council's decision making or the customer is raising issues around poor communication or the length of time it has taken to

deal with an application or enforcement query. A small amount of complaints concern cases where customers have indicated that they have not received letter notifying them about the application proposals.

- 3.31 The service will often receive complaints where the complainant disagrees with the Council's decision and where they claim that the application has been processed the application incorrectly; this is common placed given the nature of the service. However, it is important that a full investigation takes place and the concerns raised reviewed. Where the complainant disagrees with the Council's decision, there hasn't been a trend identified indicating service failure i.e. the Council has erred in how it has determined or processed an application.
- 3.32 Complaints regarding the sending of notification letters consulting residents on planning applications have stimulated service improvements. Extra steps have been put in place to allow officers to check with more certainty that the letters were printed. The service has received one Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) decision on this type of complaint and the LGO found that the Council had not erred in its processes and that the Council cannot be responsible for any failure to deliver letters by Royal Mail; this is consistent with LGO decisions elsewhere.
- 3.33 Poor communication and time that it takes to determine planning applications is however an area that has already been identified for further improvement within the service. Where issues are raised, the individual case officers at the time are supported with their caseloads and case management.
- 3.34 Complaints about the planning enforcement team generally relate to discontent with the Council's decision and/or concerns about the length of time it takes the Council to deal with enforcement cases. Dealing with enforcement cases will always vary from case to case and is often dependent on the nature and complexity of the case and how quickly the property owner/developer responds to the Council. Whilst some of these timelines are not within the control of the Council, officers can ensure that cases are logged quickly and the initial site visit carried out in line with the Council's Enforcement Policy. Steps have been put in place to better monitor performance against these set standards.

The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

- 3.35 Nineteen complaints over the period 2022-2023 to January 2024 were escalated to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman. Considering 2023-2024 in its entirety (so far), five complaints have been escalated to the Ombudsman. In 2022-2023, fourteen complaints were escalated to the Ombudsman. 33% of these complaints were upheld. The average upheld rate for authorities similar to South Kesteven (CIPFA nearest neighbours) was 59%. The rate for Lincolnshire was 69%.
- 3.36 Escalations to the Local Government Ombudsman is one of the metrics presented by the Office for Local Government (OFLOG) Local Authority Data Explorer under the Corporate & Finance suite. The metric is number of upheld complaints per 100,000 population. In 2022-2023 (the latest presented by

OFLOG), the rate for South Kesteven was 0.7. The median of the district's CIPFA nearest neighbours was 0.8. The median for England was 1.0.

3.37 Historically this metric has fluctuated depending on the number of complaints made, as presented in Figure 4.

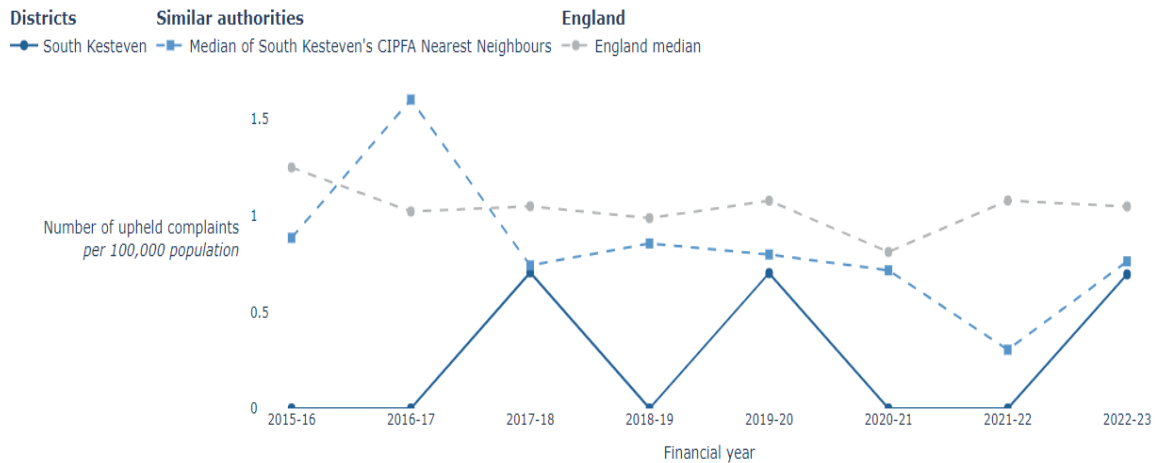


Figure 3 - Number of upheld complaints per 100,000 population, 2015/16-2022/23, Source: Office for Local Government (OFLOG) Local Authority Data Explorer

The Housing Ombudsman

3.38 In 2022-2023 four cases were escalated to the Housing Ombudsman. Three were upheld, with no maladministration found. One remains open in a suspended state. Of these cases three involved repairs and one tenancy services. A further five cases were directly referred to the Housing Ombudsman without first entering the Council's complaints process. The Housing Ombudsman advised these were to be logged as Stage 1 Complaints and should follow the Council's complaints policy. In 2023-2024 so far, three cases have been escalated to the Housing Ombudsman, all involve tenancy services and are currently open. Further cases are a single self-referral involving repairs that has yet to go through the process and one case which was referred to the Local Government Ombudsman.

3.39 From April 2024, complaints statistics will be reported regularly as part of the new suite of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) accompanying the Corporate Plan 2024-27. A bi-annual report will be made to the Governance & Audit Committee. Work is underway to review and refresh the complaints dashboard on Power BI. A summary report of key trends will be published on the Performance Management page of the Council's website.

3.40 The Statutory Officers of the Council reviews this information monthly.

4. Other Options Considered

4.1 The Committee had requested statistics of the Council's complaints process, thus there were no viable alternative options to consider.

5. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 5.1 The proposed Corporate Plan 2024-2027 sets out an ambition for the Council to always: *Manage our resources and assets effectively with open, transparent, and accountable decision making*. The complaints statistics are reported to the Committee in line with that commitment to openness and transparency.