

Reigate & Banstead Borough Council

Annual Complaints Report 2023-2024

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Reigate & Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) serves some 156,000 residents with high levels of customer contact. In 2023-24 the council received over 100,000 calls, 4 million webpage views, nearly 9,000 social media contacts and interactions, around 7,000 visitors to the Town Hall. In the same period, it received 370 corporate complaints.

RBBC takes complaints very seriously and is keen to learn from them to improve how it delivers its services. This inaugural annual report therefore not only explores our complaints performance but also explores the reasons behind the complaints and the learnings we are taking away from them.

Findings

Over the past three years valid complaint volumes have fluctuated (from a high of 598 complaints in 2022-23 to this year's 370) and response times dipped with 85% being responded to within our 15- day response deadline.

The percentage of complaints escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2 remains unchanged at between 9- 10% of valid complaints. Escalation of complaints from Stage 2 to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) fluctuates from year to year with no discernible trend. The majority of referrals to the LGSCO do not result in a full investigation. Over the past three years 10-23% of referrals have received an Ombudsman decision; the remainder have been closed after initial enquiries or referred back to RBBC.

Themes identified in corporate complaints are delayed responses, conduct of staff and repeated service failures. In terms of complaints about high-volume service areas, these relate to waste and recycling; it should be noted that this is a high contact service area responsible for collecting 600,000-700,000 bins and containers a month.

The LGSCO upheld one complaint relating to handling of a housing application.

Improvement Actions

Corporate and individual service improvements are underway to improve our services and our complaints management processes. At an organisational

level, changes are being made to our complaints reporting systems, our complaints policy and performance reporting to improve complaints process management and governance. Actions identified for 2024-25 include additional staff training and updates to complaints content on the website, to improve complaint management.

1. Introduction

This is Reigate & Banstead Borough Council's first annual corporate complaints report for the period 1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024. It focuses on the nature of complaints received by the council, our handling performance and the learnings we have taken from these which are being used for future service improvements.

It also includes a summary of performance, decisions and learnings from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and Housing Ombudsman (HO) complaints during the same period.

2. Complaints Procedures

2.1. Corporate complaints

A complaint can be wide-ranging but is broadly defined as an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of a service, actions or lack of actions by the organisation, its own staff or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual or group of individuals or residents. These are usually made when an individual needs an explanation or response.

Generally, issues brought to the Council for the first time are dealt with as a service request and are not processed as a complaint. However, these can be escalated to a formal complaint if the resident/customer remains unsatisfied.

RBBC has a two-stage internal complaints process:

Stage 1 – We aim to resolve the complaint as soon as possible and within 15 working days* of acknowledgement or 10 days for housing complaints

Stage 2 - If a complainant is unsatisfied with the Stage 1 response, they can escalate their complaint to Stage 2 (the final stage) for further consideration. We aim to provide a response within 21 working days** of receipt of complaint. If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they can escalate their complaint to the relevant Ombudsman.

*this will reduce to 10 working days from 2025 in line with LGSCO requirements.

** this will reduce to 20 working days from 2025 in line with LGSCO requirements.

2.2. Ombudsman

The [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman \(LGSCO\)](#) and the [Housing Ombudsman \(HO\)](#) are independent organisations providing impartial reviews of citizen complaints. Whilst most complaints come under the LGSCO's remit, the HO deals with social housing landlord related complaints.

The Ombudsman decision is final, bringing the complaint to a close.

There are 2 stages for Ombudsman complaints:

Preliminary Enquiry: Ombudsman requests original complaint and RBBC responses (first and second stages). Depending on their findings they may decide to investigate the complaint further Investigation Request: Ombudsman conducts investigation (often escalation from Preliminary Enquiry stage) resulting in Ombudsman final decision, actions for Local Authority etc.

3. Corporate Complaints Analysis

Customer Contact Context

Serving around 156,000 residents (making it the largest borough or district resident population in Surrey), initial customer contact volumes are significant. During 2023-24 the council received around 100,000 phone calls, handled 9,000 contacts and interactions via social media, supported 1,000 visitors to Reception (September 2023-March 2024 only). Over 4 million web pages were viewed, and 12,000 online service requests submitted by customers.

In addition, the council collected around 9 million bins and boxes of all waste streams (refuse, recycling, paper, food waste and garden waste), processed 17,624 Housing Benefit changes and 24,024 Council Tax Support changes, and processed 1,860 homelessness approaches, 1,400 housing register applications and 1,380 housing register calls.

3.1 Overall complaint volume

In 2023-24 the Council received 370 Stage 1 complaints and 24 Stage 2 complaints. Of these, 175 Stage 1 complaints and 16 Stage 2 complaints were 'valid' i.e. they met the criteria for a complaint as set out in the council's policy. When viewed over a three-year period, there is an upward trend in valid Stage 1 complaints. The percentage of Stage 1 complaints being escalated to Stage 2 complaints has remained static over the same period at between 9-10%.

Table 1: Complaints submitted to RBBC 1 April 2023- 31 March



Table 2: Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints comparison data 2021-22 – 2023-24

Complaints	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Received	560	598	370
Valid – Stage 1	106	129	175
Advanced to Stage 2	15	17	16
LGSCO decisions	13	17	10

3.2 Response time performance

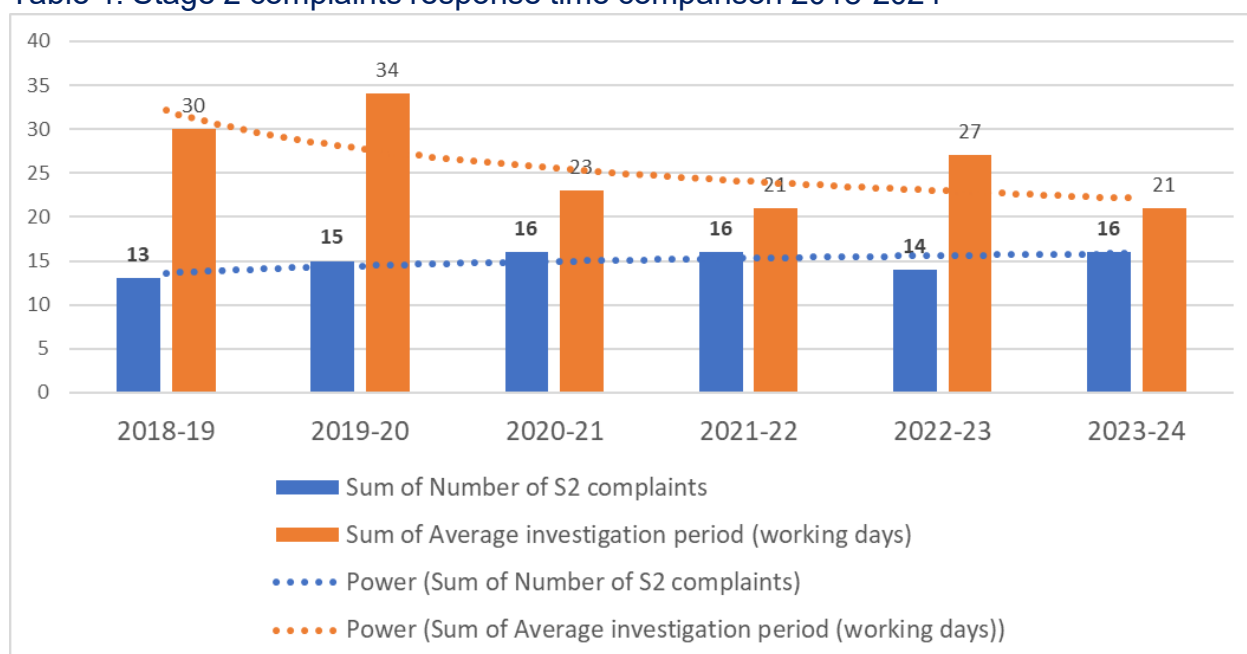
The council aims to answer all complaints promptly. During 2023-24, RBBC replied to 142 (81%) of Stage 1 complaints within the current set 15-day response time, published on our website. This presents an improvement on the previous year, but a fall on the year before that. The Council will be looking to reduce the complaint response time down to 10 days in time for 2025-26.

Table 3: Stage 1 complaints response time comparison 2021-22 – 2023-24

Complaint response time (15-day SLA)	No. of Stage 1 complaints	Response time within 15 days	Response time exceeded 15 days	% responded to within 15 days
2021-22	92	81	11	88%
2022-23	119	99	20	83%
2023-24	167*	142	25	85%

* Overall recorded Stage 1 complaints figure is 175; however, 4 of those related to complaints for which there was separate redress, and which were dealt with via those routes (not as part of the complaints process).

Table 4: Stage 2 complaints response time comparison 2018-2024



The number of stage 2 complaint investigations has remained consistent, averaging 15 per year. In some cases, during 2023-24, complaints were referred to a stage 2 investigation because the stage 1 response did not address all aspects of a complaint and could have otherwise been avoided.

The average number of days between the receipt of a stage 2 complaint and notification of a decision has gradually fallen from a 30-working-day average to a 21-working-day average in 2023-24. The target deadline for a decision during this period was 21 working days.

3.3 Service Level Complaint Volumes and Themes

Complaint Volumes

The following chart lists Services receiving complaints during 2023-24.

Table 5: Stage 1 Complaint numbers by Service 2023-24

Stage 1 Complaint numbers by Service					
Service	Total no. of complaints	Valid	Upheld	Not upheld	Other*
Waste & recycling	125	55	47	7	1
Council Tax	42	33	11	22	0
Development Management	35	27	6	19	2
Housing	32	18	2	16	2
Benefits	12	10	1	9	0
Car Parking	11	5	0	5	0
Environmental Health	11	1	1	0	0
Licensing	9	4	1	1	0 * See footnote
Green Spaces	9	3	1	2	0
Cleansing	8	5	4	1	0
Property	5	4	1	3	0
HR	4	3	1	2	0
Customer Contact	3	1	0	0	1
Finance	3	2	2	0	0
JET	2	0	0	0	0
Legal	2	0	0	2	0
Revs & Bens	2	2	0	2	0 * See footnote
Web/GIS	2	1	0	1	1
Economic Prosperity	1	0	0	0	N/A
Leisure	1	0	0	0	N/A
Partnerships	1	0	0	0	N/A
Total*	320	174	78	92	7

* Footnote:

1. Some small anomalies in the data result from a move from manual to automated data collection during the period and some complaints having been responded to outside of the complaints system.
2. Other - this category caters for when a complaint has been submitted but another form of redress exists - Parking PCNs for example have a standalone appeal process for people complaining about a ticket. Improvements are being made to ensure correct future categorisation at outset, which will result in this *Other categorisation ceasing.
3. Revenue & Benefits appear twice due to a system categorisation duplication which has been corrected for future data capture.

Table 6: Stage 2 Complaint numbers by Service 2023-24

Stage 2 Complaint numbers by Service					
Service	Total no. of complaints	Valid	Upheld	Not upheld	Other* See footnote
Council Tax	3	3		3	
Housing Benefits	2	2	1	1	
Housing Services	2	2		1	1 *
Greenspaces	2	2	1		1*
Fraud/Benefit	1	1		1	
Planning	1	1		1	
Parking Enforcement	1	1		1	
Licensing	1	1		1	
Electoral Services	1	1		1	
Street Cleaning	1	1		1	
Property	1	1		1	
Total	16	16	2	12	2

*Complaint withdrawn as issue was resolved by Service.

Complaint Themes

There are four Services receiving a higher volume of complaints, these being:

- Waste & recycling
- Council Tax
- Development Management (Planning)
- Housing

It should be noted that these also experience high volumes of service usage:

- Council Tax administers 64,946 live accounts
- Waste & Recycling collects from a similar number of households
- Development Management – handles anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 planning applications a year, issues 10,000 neighbour notifications and thousands of objections
- Housing deals with over 1,800 homelessness approaches and 1,400 housing register applications.

From the services receiving higher volumes of complaints, complaint volumes may be modest in relation to the service usage. However, there are consistent themes, these being:

- Staff conduct (Council Tax, Housing)
- Delayed responses (Council Tax, Housing, Development Management)
- Repeated Service failure (Waste & Recycling – missed bins).

3.4 Complaints Upheld

Measuring upheld complaints allows the Council to be focused and targeted in directing betterment actions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the services we provide to residents. Whilst initial complaint numbers have decreased, there is an increase in valid Stage 1 complaints and in the percentage of these upheld. The percentage of upheld Stage 2 complaints remains fairly consistent fluctuating from 19-24% over the past three years.

Table 7: Stage 2 Complaints upheld numbers 2021-22 – 2023-24

Complaints	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Received	560	598	370
Valid	106	129	175

	(19% of all received))	(21%)	(47%)
Stage 1 upheld	45 (49% of valid complaints)	54 (45%)	78 (49%)
Advanced to Stage 2	15	17	16
Stage 2 upheld (or partially upheld)	3 (20%)	4 (24%)	3 (19%)

4. Ombudsman Complaints

4.1 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO)

The following information summarises the complaints received by the LGSCO within the Reigate and Banstead area over the past three years:

Table 8: LGSCO complaints relating to Reigate & Banstead Borough Council from 2021-22 to 2023-24

Year	Number of complaints received by LGSCO (total)	Breakdown of complaints by Service
2021-22	13	Planning -& Development - 3
		Environmental Service & Public Protection - 2
		Highways & Transport – 2
		Corporate - 2
		Housing – 2
		Adult Social Care – 1
		Benefits & Tax - 1
2022-23	15	Planning -& Development – 4
		Environmental Service & Public Protection – 3
		Housing – 3
		Benefits & Tax - 3
		Corporate - 1
		Adult Social Care – 1
2023-24	10	Housing – 4
		Benefits & Tax -3
		Environment Service & Public Protection - 1
		Highways & Transport – 1
		Planning & Development – 1

Compliance with the new LGSCO Code of Practice on complaint handling is required from 2025-26 and we are confident we will do so.

4.1.2 LGSCO Complaints Decided and Upheld

The following complaints were decided by the LGSCO from 2021-22 to 2023-24:

Table 9: LGSCO complaints decisions 2021-22 to 2023-24

Year	Number of complaints decided on by LGSCO (total)	Breakdown of decisions	Number of decisions (by category)
2021-22	13	Upheld	3
		Not upheld	1
		Referred back for local resolution	3
		Invalid or incomplete	0
		Closed after initial enquiry	6
		Advice given	0
2022-23	17	Upheld	3
		Not upheld	1
		Referred back for local resolution	7
		Invalid or incomplete	0
		Closed after initial enquiry	6
		Advice given	0
2023-24	10	Upheld	1
		Not upheld	0
		Referred back for local resolution	4
		Closed after initial enquiry	4
		Advice given	1

It should be noted that LGSCO complaints may run over multiple years depending on the length of time the LGSCO takes in assessment and (on occasion) investigation of the complaints. Hence the number decided may not always equal the number received.

For full details of the LGSCO complaints report on Reigate & Banstead BC please visit the [LGSCO website](#).

4.2 Housing Ombudsman

The Housing Ombudsman code of practice applies to the council in respect of its responsibilities as a social housing landlord only, and currently applies to secure tenants. Compliance with the Code is required from 2024-25 and we are confident we are well placed to do so.

During 2023-24 no complaints were escalated to the Housing Ombudsman.

5. Learning from Complaints

The next section identifies the learnings taken away from complaints received and

focuses on the areas of highest complaint volume. It also details additional context and our ongoing improvement actions.

5.1 Staff conduct

'Preventing abuse of staff' training has been provided, equipping staff with de-escalation techniques when dealing with challenging audiences.

Complaints handling refresher training is being arranged for Services complaint champions.

Waste & Recycling complaints discussed with the individual crew(s) involved, learnings taken and remedies put in place as appropriate e.g. training, warnings etc.

5.2 Delayed responses

Council Tax telephone contact opening hours have been extended, five days a week, to enable faster access to the Council Tax team.

Planning case officers have been asked to be timelier in responding to customers, within the budget and resources available.

5.3 Service failure (waste & recycling)

Approach to 'Missed bin' reports reviewed – on balance, the decision remains to put staff effort into remedying failure and ensuring our return to collect missed item(s) within 2 days.

5.4 General

To support Services in complaint handling, other improvements are being introduced including:

- An updated complaints policy, ensuring alignment between the council's approach and the LGSCO and HO codes of practice
- Raising the profile of complaints through a wider, and more regular internal reporting cycle, analysis and recommendation of solutions
- Increasing effectiveness and efficiency of the process (for Stage 1 & Stage 2 complaints) brought about through improvements to the IT platform supporting our complaints procedures
- Creation of a Complaints report dashboard, using PowerBI, to which all of the council's Management Team have access and can use to regularly monitor

complaint volumes, including within their respective Services.

- Training and development of staff to embed an ethos of learning from complaints and a reminder of our complaints process and timescales to adhere to.
- Revised key performance indicators (KPIs) for complaints.

6. Compliments

Compliments are received but currently, there is no formal means of recording them. This will be addressed going forward. In the meantime, ad hoc feedback received during 2023-24 includes:

'I wanted to pass on my thanks for your help in retrieving my son's laptop, accidentally placed in a recycling bin in one of your car parks. It has been returned!'

'Thank you for the great service when I was receiving Benefits'

'Brilliant customer service from a lady who cared'

'Over and above – you were a star'

'Everyone is quick to complain these days; I wanted to take the time to say how well I have been treated, as an individual – you went over and beyond'.

'Thank you to my Stage 2 complaint reviewer for a highly professional response to my complaint. Although I did not reach the full outcome I wanted, I felt that my voice was heard and action taken appropriately where possible.'

7. Conclusion

2023-24 saw a notable decrease in the number of complaints received, possibly as a result of improved Complaints information published on our website, through which the majority of complaints are submitted. However, there is an upward trend in the percentage of complaints accepted as valid; there is also a need to improve the time taken to respond to complaints, in line with our set complaint response timescales.

Learnings have been identified to address the themes emerging from the previous year's complaint data and will be implemented in the coming months.

Both the LGSCO and HO have introduced new Codes of Practice for complaint handling, applicable from 2025-26 and 2024-25 respectively. The council's approach to complaint handling is in place to meet the requirements of these codes.

Timescales for complaint responses (non-HO) will be adjusted in time for the LGSCO code coming into force.

Appendix – Ombudsmen Annual Performance Letters

1. Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

<https://www.lgo.org.uk/>

2. Housing Ombudsman

Please note the Housing Ombudsman Service did not issue an annual performance report on RBBC this year in the absence of any complaints referred to it about this council.