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**Compliments and Complaints Six monthly Report**

**April – September 2024**

**March 2025**

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# **Foreword from Cllr Carl Johnson, Deputy Mayor and Member Responsible for Corporate Complaints, and Cllr John Harrison, Member Responsible for Housing Complaints**

We are delighted to introduce the Six-Monthly Compliments and Complaints Report for North Tyneside Council. This report sets out customer complaints for the period April 2024 to September 2024. We would like to thank our customers who have taken the time to raise complaints with us and thank them for their effort in doing so.

On the 1 April 2024 a new Corporate and Housing Complaint Handling Procedure for the Authority was introduced. This Procedure makes it easier for customers to make a complaint and also ensures they receive a timely response to their complaint.

We are encouraged to see, and want to highlight, that the complaint numbers continue to be very low as a proportion of the overall volume of services and transactions the Authority provides every day.

Whilst complaints are of course often about what has gone wrong – as an Authority we view each complaint as an opportunity for the council to listen, learn and improve.

The Governing Body and we as Members Responsible for Complaints will continue to monitor complaint activity throughout the year to ensure the Authority is supporting customers and resolving complaints effectively.

*This report was agreed by the Authority’s Cabinet on 17 March 2025, who also agreed to it being published on the Authority’s website.*

# **Purpose**

This report details complaints to the Authority for the period April 2024 to September 2024 registered through the formal process.

The Authority is committed to doing everything possible to resolve complaints for its customers fairly, early and as efficiently as possible. We recognise the work undertaken by staff and Members, who are committed to problem solving for our customers without the need for escalation to the Customer First Team and the use of the formal complaints route. The Authority continues to demonstrate that they listen and care about our customers and their experiences.

The aim of the report is to:

* review and share how complaints have been responded to and what has been done as a result
* demonstrate learning from complaints so the Authority can continually improve customer experience and outcomes, and
* encourage a culture of feedback, comments and suggestions, to support continuous service improvement.

This is the first time the Authority has produced a six-monthly update on complaints. The Authority is preparing for changes introduced by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) to their Complaint Code, which will come into force in April 2026. The changes increase the importance of reporting on complaint activity to the Governing Body to allow for greater oversight and scrutiny.

# **Data headlines: April – September 2024**

Complaints are higher than last year, where 250 complaints were resolved in the same period. Complaints were unseasonably low in the same period in 2023, which explains the increase this year. Comparing complaints over a three-year period suggests complaints this year are consistent with previous years (22/23 and 21/22).

**385 complaints resolved**

**48% upheld or partially upheld**

Complaints upheld is comparable with the same period in 2023 where 51% were either upheld in full or partially.

Fewer complaints were resolved at Stage 1 this year compared to last (77%). This is in part related to changes to the Complaint Code which means customers can escalate their complaint to Stage 2 without providing a reason why they remain dissatisfied.

**64% resolved Stage 1**

**95% in time**

Complaints closed in timescale is slightly lower than last year where 97% were completed in timescale, at both Stages.

The LGSCO received 20 complaints during the period, comparable with last year.

**Ombudsman received 21 complaints**

The Housing Ombudsman concluded one investigation. This is lower than last year where four complaints were investigated by the Ombudsman.

Of the 21 Ombudsman complaints, the LGSCO upheld one complaint, and the Housing Ombudsman upheld one complaint. This is lower than the 24% uphold rate last year.

**10% (2)**

**upheld**

**100% compliance**

We have complied with all Ombudsman decisions and outcomes during the period. This is consistent with last year.

Service requests are slightly higher than last year (379 service requests). Most service requests relate to Environment and Housing services.

**388 service requests**

**Complaints received during the period by service area**

# **Key Complaint Areas and Learning**

The Authority monitors complaint activity on a monthly basis to understand not just overall numbers of complaints received but also to identify any themes or areas of focus relating to key services. During the six-month period the Housing & Property Service, Environmental Services, Resources and Childrens Services team received the most complaints. This section explores the themes and issues of those complaints further, as well as learning as a result.

The Authority’s services reflect on each complaint they receive to understand, learn and then improve; including reviewing the experience of the customer and the outcomes they wanted and then received. This helps services to identify key areas of learning and identify actions where relevant.

## **Complaints about Environmental Services**

Environmental services continue to be in high demand by our customers, and not just in relation to complaints.

Over 47,000 customers contacted the Authority to report issues related to our green spaces and waste collection services between April and September 2024. In the same period, 73 complaints were received regarding environmental services.

Compared with the same period last year this is an increase by 42%, however exploring this apparent increase further has identified that complaints to the Authority about this service were very low last year. Comparison over a three-year period suggests complaints this year are consistent with complaints received in previous years (2022/23 and 2021/22).

79% of all the service requests (305) resolved during the period related to environmental services; predominantly issues relating to missed or delayed services which were resolved for the customer within a day or two of reporting.

The environment service has identified the following themes and improvements from the complaints received during the period.

| **Themes** | **Improvements made** |
| --- | --- |
| Grass cutting services | The team have revised the induction programme for seasonal workers on how to use equipment correctly and expected standards when maintaining the Authority’s green spaces. This will tackle issues relating to the quality of grass cutting.  Team leaders are also carrying out quarterly site checks to ensure cutting is to the expected standard. |
| Winter Works Programme | The Winter Works Programme between October – March is currently being reviewed. This review will enable the teams to provide customers with definitive timeframes for when they can expect works to be completed. It will also better explain the impact of seasonal weather on the team’s ability to carry out necessary work.  The “Neat Streets” resource, introduced in 2023, has proved hugely successfully in reacting to areas of high demand and continues to focus on priority areas in the borough. |
| Arborist service | The Arborist service is in the process of becoming a fully digital service, moving away from paper documentation, in particular surveys.  The service is also being restructured (April 2025) to introduce a dedicated Tree Asset Manager to oversee and manage our approach to tree management.  A revised Tree Management policy will be reviewed by Cabinet in April 2025. |

## **Corporate complaints about Childrens Services**

A significant number of corporate complaints about Childrens Services during the period relate to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) services. This is not just a localised issue; complaints about SEND services are high across the country, and the LGSCO are also seeing a high volume of complaints in this area. In North Tyneside the SEND Support Team are experiencing high demand, with 2314 children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in place.

During the period April to September 2024 the Commissioning, Partnerships and Transformation service have seen an increase in the number of complaints received around EHCPs. 15 complaints were resolved, an increase from three complaints across the three-year average for the same period.

Through these complaints the Commissioning, Partnerships and Transformation service has identified the following themes and improvements for the SEND support service.

| **Themes** | **Improvements made** |
| --- | --- |
| Delay in finalising EHCP, due to lack of Educational Psychologists | Work continues to recruit to the vacant Educational Psychologist posts to ease the pressure on delayed EHC plans.  The LGSCO acknowledge there is a national shortage of Educational Psychologists, and this is having a significant impact on councils’ ability to set out the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities. |
| Provision for Children out of Education | The SEND Support team have worked with colleagues in Education North Tyneside to introduce a new procedure to support children who are unable to attend school (as outlined in the Education Act 1996, Section 19 [requires local authorities to make arrangements to provide suitable education for children of compulsory school age who, due to illness, exclusion, or other reasons, may not otherwise receive suitable education](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=523e95d935d1c22c847f4ad5878885fd582ceb9586a26b92bc24c779440863ccJmltdHM9MTczODU0MDgwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=25012ba4-5a8d-63aa-36be-3ee95b6f62ab&psq=education+act+section+19&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYnJvbWxleS5nb3YudWsvZG93bmxvYWRzL2ZpbGUvMjM1OS9hY2Nlc3MtdG8tZWR1Y2F0aW9uLWd1aWRhbmNlLXNlY3Rpb24tMTktZWR1Y2F0aW9uLWFjdC0xOTk2&ntb=1))[.](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=523e95d935d1c22c847f4ad5878885fd582ceb9586a26b92bc24c779440863ccJmltdHM9MTczODU0MDgwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=25012ba4-5a8d-63aa-36be-3ee95b6f62ab&psq=education+act+section+19&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYnJvbWxleS5nb3YudWsvZG93bmxvYWRzL2ZpbGUvMjM1OS9hY2Nlc3MtdG8tZWR1Y2F0aW9uLWd1aWRhbmNlLXNlY3Rpb24tMTktZWR1Y2F0aW9uLWFjdC0xOTk2&ntb=1)  The Senior Manager for SEND Quality of practice has been instrumental in drafting new guidance regarding provision of Personal Budgets with a specific section clarifying the process for children where they can’t be educated at School. |
| Named school provision within EHCP | The service has increased the offer of Additionally Resourced Provisions (ARP’s) and SEN Units as alternatives to special school provision. This offer gives children the opportunity to experience the mainstream school environment whilst the service continues to work with families to find the most suitable provision for their child as early as possible.  The service has also strengthened their systems and approach to phase transfer and preparation for adulthood. |

## **Complaints about Resources Services**

8% of corporate complaints during the period relate to the Resources Directorate, and more specifically the Revenue and Benefits service. This service is responsible for Council Tax payments for over 102,000 properties in North Tyneside. This year the service has supported residents with a range of issues relating to their payments and have sent 31,946 reminders, issued 13,760 summonses, and processed 77,537 documents during this period.

In the period April to September 2024 they received 14 complaints, consistent with the previous three-year average for the service.

Complaints ranged from delays in communication to the customer service received from the council tax support team.

Through these complaints the Revenue and Benefits service has identified the following themes and improvements.

| **Themes** | **Improvements made** |
| --- | --- |
| Delay in communication | At peak times of the year, such as annually billing, processing customer requests can take longer. The council monitor the performance of the service closely to ensure they are meeting the targets that the council has set, or that action is taken where performance does not.  The team continues to look at processes and online systems to ensure customers can effectively self-serve to find the information they need and resolve any issues they may have quicker and earlier. The team will continue to make the best of opportunities available to them to improve their customer experience. |
| Council tax arrears provision | Working with colleagues in the Housing & Property Team, the Council Tax team are developing a pilot scheme to explore different ways of working with those in debt to the Authority. The pilot, starting in April 2025, will focus on the support offered to customers who are struggling financially, ensuring the right teams and services are connected to offer the right support at the right time.    The team continue to look at ways they can help customers with the finances they have, their eligibility for benefits, and wider support they can be signposted to, to help their financial situation. |
| Council Tax support | A thorough Quality Assurance process has been introduced to identify mistakes during transaction processing and avoid any errors that could impact on customer accounts and payments. Additionally monthly sample checks also take place, and any errors identified are corrected and training is put in place to stop it happening again. |

## **Complaints about Housing Services**

Housing Services is responsible for managing and maintaining over 14,000 social housing properties and almost 1,000 leasehold properties.

The number of complaints received about the services provided have increased for the period April to September 2024 to 184. Compared to the previous three-year average for the service (130 complaints) this is an increase of 29%.

70% of the complaints received for the service were for responsive repairs and planned investment. This needs to be put in context against the volume of contacts the service receives, around 40,000 calls, and work the service carries out, approximately 24,000 jobs during the period.

Complaint reasons include delays to a service being received, poor communication, issues with, or non-compliance with, policy, and quality of the workmanship the customer received.

Through these complaints Housing Services has identified the following themes and improvements.

| **Themes** | **Improvements made** |
| --- | --- |
| Delay to a service being received. | The service has explored these complaints in more detail to understand why a service has been delayed and could the delay have been avoided.  In one case they identified a service improvement by introducing ladders for small-scale, low-level roof related repairs to reduce the need for and use of scaffolding. As a result, reducing the time the customer waits for the repair to be completed. |
| Poor communication | The service has carried out a review of how they communicate with residents and what improvements they can make. This has included looking at the different communication methods available and used by the service, and the number of attempts the service will make to contact the customer about a repair or issue. |
| Learning from complaints | The service has introduced learning outcome reports which are shared with the relevant service area to reflect on the issues raised within the complaint. If a contractor has contributed to a complaint, a report is also shared with the Contracts Officer. |

# **Statutory complaints**

## **Adult Social Care**

The number of statutory adult social care complaints has increased in the last six months compared to the previous three-year average for the service. 25 complaints were closed within the period, compared with 16 complaints on average over the last three years. This is a 33% increase.

28% of complainants in the last six months told us their complaint was about ‘requesting advice and information’. A further 28% told us their complaint was about ‘poor customer service’. This is comparable with the reasons for complaints in previous years.

A theme running through the complaints resolved during the period related to communication, and failing to keep customers or family members updated, or contacting them when we said we would. As a result, the service has identified the following improvements.

| **Themes** | **Improvements made** |
| --- | --- |
| Communication with customers and family members around key information, particularly finances and charging. | Practice issue sessions have been held with social care teams focussed on ways to communicate better with customers and their families. The sessions also focussed on how information is shared with customers, as well as improving the quality of data recording. |
| Information and advice checklists have been updated to evidence where the team have discussed finance and charging information with customers and their family members. The team are now also recording conversations regarding finances and charges so they can evidence that customers and family members have been made aware. |
| Managing risk for customers who have more complex care and support needs, as well as for those who are waiting for assessment or services. | The team have completed additional risk assessments and have arranged additional multi- disciplinary meetings for more complex cases. |
| In managing waiting times for assessment, the service has introduced a robust way of assessing the risk of the person waiting for an assessment or service, including how often the social worker should maintain contact with the person. |
| Ensuring charges for care and support are accurate and reflect services delivered, to reduce over charging. | Working with care providers, the service has introduced a more robust way to flag discrepancies between the service that is actually delivered to the customer versus the service that is planned to be delivered. This is to reduce the risk of overcharging customers for the care and support they receive. |

## **Childrens Social Care**

Complaints about statutory children social care services are consistent with the three-year average for the service. Nine complaints were resolved during the period.

Two thirds of complainants told us their complaint was about poor customer service and communication. There is a theme running through complaints; communication and not providing updates on time when we said we would. As a result, the service has identified the following improvements.

| **Themes** | **Improvements made** |
| --- | --- |
| Communication with families | The service has reminded their teams about the importance of communication with families, using staff briefing bulletins. These bulletins have emphasised the importance of explaining their processes to customers, and often explaining them more than once, to ensure that children and families understand why the team are involved, what intervention methods they are using and what their causes of concern relate to. |
| Recording of meetings with parents / carers either as formal minutes or as case summaries. | The Senior Manager for Quality of Practice has reviewed practice standards in respect of case recording, and an audit has been undertaken to ensure that these standards are being met. Findings and good practice from the audit will be shared will all staff in staff briefing bulletins. |
| Develop knowledge and awareness of Section 117 MHA After-care. | The Authority’s Section 117 Mental Health Act 1993 process has been reviewed and a refresh of guidance for teams has taken place. Longer-term the service plan to develop expertise in key staff members. |

## **Ombudsman investigations and learning**

The LGSCO received 20 complaints about North Tyneside council during the period. The LGSCO review each complaint they receive before they take any further action.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Number of complaints** | **Outcomes** |
| 10 | Not investigated - closed after initial investigations – no further action |
| 5 | Not investigated - closed after initial enquiries – out of jurisdiction |
| 3 | Not investigated - premature |
| 1 | Investigated – no fault |
| 1 | Investigated – upheld: fault and injustice |
| **20** | **Total** |

The LGSCO investigated two complaints during the period and found fault and injustice in one complaint relating to adult social care. The Ombudsman required the service to:

* apologise to the customer
* pay £500 to acknowledge the uncertainty and distress caused, and
* as part of quality assurance visits with the Care Home ensure they are keeping accurate and up to date records for residents.

The service complied in full to the requirements specified.

The Housing Ombudsman investigated one complaint about North Tyneside council’s Housing Service during the period. The investigation related to anti-social behaviour and harassment and the Ombudsman found maladministration and service failure, asking the service to:

* apologise to the resident for the failures identified
* pay £700 directly to the resident, to recognise the distress and inconvenience caused by its handling of his reports of harassment and its complaint handling failures
* provide the Ombudsman with an explanation for its complaint handling failures and what steps we have taken to resolve them, and
* carry out a self-assessment of its knowledge and information practices and share it with the Ombudsman.

The service complied in full to the requirements. Specifically in relation to the complaint handling element they:

* clarified that the customers complaint had been handled correctly and all information provided to the Ombudsman, and
* held a learning session with all complaint handlers to clarify the importance of clarifying, investigating, responding to, and escalating complaints.

## **LGSCO Self-Assessment**

In advance of the LGSCO Complaint Code coming into effect in April 2026 the Authority has produced a self-assessment to ensure its compliance with requirements in the Ombudsman’s complaint handling policy.This self-assessment can be found in Appendix A of this report.

The self-assessment identifies the Authority is compliant in all areas, prescribed by the Ombudsman, however areas of further future development have been identified to make improvements. These relate to creating and embedding processes within the new complaint system to make processes more effective.

## **Priorities and Key Actions**

Complaint priorities and actions were set out in the annual complaints report to Cabinet on 16 September 2024. Progress in achieving these actions is detailed below.

| **We will …** | **We have …** |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Further embed the new Corporate Complaint Procedure and recently launched complaint IT system to ensure the Authority can provide the very best information and monitoring on its complaints handling processes, providing assurance to the MRC and Governing Body and meaningful information to relevant stakeholders | Developed data dashboards for the Member Responsible for Complaints and Senior Leadership Team to provide greater assurance and inform customer service improvements across the Authority around timescales, quality and outcomes, and identifying areas of concern that need further investigation.  The new complaint IT system went live in June 2024. We continue to work closely with the ICT team in the ongoing development of the system, as well as identifying improvements to the complaint management process.  The Complaints team is currently undergoing an Internal Audit to provide reassurance that we are following complaint governance and providing good complaint management to both internal and external customers. |
| 1. Continue to improve quality assurance of Stage 1 processes and sign off, including quality monitoring, to ensure the Authority is doing everything possible to seek early resolution of complaint investigations. | The Customer First Office continue to quality assure complaint responses, including Stage 1, to ensure services have fully addressed the complaint and the outcomes the customer asked for.  Quality Assurance of complaint responses takes place on a monthly basis by the Complaint Management team, and on a quarterly basis by the Head of Service. This identifies areas of improvement to ensure accuracy and quality of responses in the future. |
| 1. Improve how the Authority demonstrates and evidence learning from complaints, and how it helps to improve services, through the introduction of learning, reflection and development activities across services and the wider organisation | Working with the Policy, Performance and Research team, we are developing a new lessons learned procedure, which will involve reviewing key lessons learned from complaints on a quarterly basis with individual service teams. |
| 1. Learn from Ombudsman reports and other Local Authorities and Housing Providers to help improve services locally | We have complied with all Ombudsman investigations during the period; two complaints resulted in action plans. |
| 1. Ensure full compliance of the LGSCO Complaint Handling Code ahead of the 2026 requirement date, and active participation in the national pilot | We continue to be involved in the LGSCO Pilot ensuring we are at the forefront of good complaint handling in line with the LGSCO Ombudsman.  Appendix A details the Authorities Self-Assessment against the new Code requirements.  We recently shared our approach to reaching full compliance with the new code at the LGSCO quarterly meeting with their teams and investigators. |

## **Complaint Feedback**

The Authority asks all customers whose complaints have been investigated, to share their experience of the complaints process. This is via a customer feedback survey.

Responses to the survey are incredibly low, and the Authority continues to do everything it can to encourage feedback and make it as easy as possible to do so. The Ombudsman recognises that response rates are typically low nationally, given the nature of the service.

The satisfaction survey helps the Authority collect customer equality data; this informs any barriers to service. The Customer First Office also aim to capture this information at the start of the complaint process, either through a telephone conversation or at the time of completing the statement of complaint.

Whilst only 10 survey returns have been received during this period, we do review these and take action where needed. Of the ten responses received, all ten respondents told us they found the information on how to make a complaint, and the information provided during the process, easy to understand and helpful.

# **Compliments**

Compliments are described as unsolicited expressions of gratitude or praise. Compliments detailed in this report are gathered and recorded by individual service areas; however, we know that services receive many more which are not reported.

The compliments below provide a snapshot of customer feedback within the last six months and were received by a range of council services.

* *My daughter has been singing your praises because you don't forget what she talks about like other people. You have really helped her with her mental health. Thank you*
* *I felt that having an Early Help worker involved helped get my granddaughter the right support she needed, and this helped her behaviour improve. Thank you so much*
* *Thank you so much for all your dedicated work, support and help over the hardest time of my life, and every issue known. You'll be a huge miss*
* *I’m so happy with the work that has been carried out to my home and thank you so much for your help!*
* *Wow thanks so much for your prompt attention, I’m thrilled, extra scaffolding has just gone up, and the door is being fixed*
* *2024 (specially the 2nd half) has not been easy for us, but I am grateful that you have been there for us, and you have supported us to get through it. You were truly our rock.*
* *I would just like to say though I am extremely grateful for what you've done. I know you're just doing your job, but it does feel like you've went the extra mile, and I appreciate it so much.*

The Authority also gathers customer feedback on services. This feedback is usually gathered via satisfaction surveys or feedback forms, and therefore cannot be classed as unsolicited. Similarly, the Resident Survey, carried out every two years, gathers resident experiences when contacting and accessing council services.

Improving the reporting and recording of compliments is an area of development for 2025/26. The existing complaint system is able to record this type of information but will need to be developed further. This will improve how we gather customer compliments in the future.