

**Report to:** Governance Committee

**Date of meeting:** 26 September 2024

**By:** Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

**Title:** Customer Experience Annual Report

**Purpose:** To provide an update on measures being taken to further improve customer experience by the Customer Experience Board and information about the Council's performance in 2023/24 in handling complaints, compliments, and formal requests for information, including the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Governance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) note the progress of the Customer Experience Board in the implementation of a series of measures to improve customer experience;**
  - (2) support the Customer Experience Board's focus in 2024/25 in utilising the Customer Contact Dashboard to improve service delivery and to aim to provide savings and manage demand by channel shift;**
  - (3) support the Customer Experience Board's focus to adopt the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's new Complaint Handling Code;**
  - (4) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2023/24; and**
  - (5) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.**
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## **1 Background**

1.1 The Customer Experience Board (the Board) leads on the development and implementation of a series of measures to improve Customer Experience across the Council. The Board has the following priorities:

- To ensure the content of ESCC website is the best that it can be with close links to exploring customer journeys and end to end processes;
- To develop the capturing of data on our customer contact in order to inform service delivery and improvements;
- Continue to review customer feedback from customer contact channels to drive our commitment to improving customer experience and satisfaction; and
- Explore customer journeys by mapping end to end customer contact with us.

1.2 The Board's aim is to identify issues and deliver improvements that result in a better and more consistent customer experience across the authority, considering our corporate priorities, particularly making best use of our resources, and a One Council approach.

1.3 In support of the Board's priorities, the primary focus in 2023/24 has been the development of a Customer Contact Dashboard, which is explained further in this report. This report also provides a summary of our customer feedback surveys, Council complaints, Ombudsman complaints, compliments, and formal information requests.

## 2 Customer Experience achievements and developments in 2023/24

### Improvements to customer experience - understanding Council-wide customer contact

2.1 As reported to Governance Committee last year, ESCC lacked a single view of customer contact volumes and the Board committed to presenting a Customer Contact Dashboard in this annual report 2023/24. This has now been developed and includes data for the three main customers contact channels across the Council:

1. external received calls,
2. external emails received to ESCC public facing group inboxes, and
3. data on webforms used on ESCC corporate website.

2.2 The development of the dashboard has been a significant milestone as it provides information about contact points and volumes in a centralised view of customer contact across the Council. It creates a baseline of data and is crucially important as the data can be used as evidence to support services with managing demand and in developing plans for channel shift to achieve potential cost savings, but equally, improving service delivery and customer journeys.

2.3 From August 2023 to March 2024 (eight months), customers contacted the Council by telephone calls, emails and webforms a total of approx. 566,000 times. The following is a breakdown by contact channel and department. Council building receptions are listed separately, highlighting the significance of this contact method used by customers. Please note that these figures do not represent all contact channels within the Council. This is explained further in Appendix 1.

#### **2.3.1 Telephone calls** (the figures below do not include personal or mobile numbers)

- Approx. total of 301,200 received phone calls from August 2023 to March 2024
- An average of approx. 37,650 per month
- Community, Economy & Transport at 38% (approx. 120,000)
- Adult Social Care & Health at 26% (approx. 70,000)
- Children's Services at 16% (approx. 49,500)
- Business Services at 7% (approx. 21,500)
- Governance Services at <1% (approx. 150)
- Receptions at 13% (approx. 41,000)

#### **2.3.2 Email** received to ESCC (only: @eastsussex.gov.uk) public facing group inboxes (the figures below do not include emails to individual staff):

- Approx. total of 234,000 emails were received from August 2023 to March 2024
- An average of approx. 29,250 per month
- Community, Economy & Transport at 43% (approx. 93,000)
- Adult Social Care & Health at 16% (approx. 40,000)
- Children's Services at 27% (approx. 67,000)
- Business Services at 12% (approx. 30,000)
- Governance Services at <1% (approx. 500)
- Receptions at 1% (approx. 3,000)

#### **2.3.3 Online webforms** used on ESCC corporate website (the figures below do not include any webforms from other systems or microsites except for eastsussexhighways.com):

- Approx. total of 30,800 online forms were received from August 2023 to March 2024
- An average of approx. 3,850 online forms per month
- Community, Economy & Transport at 94% (approx. 29,000) (includes Highways webforms)
- Adult Social Care & Health at 1% (approx. 300)
- Children's Services at 5% (approx. 1,500)
- Business Services at <1% (approx. 100)
- Governance Services at <1% (approx. 50)

2.4 Although the dashboard only shows eight months of the year, it has already started to reveal the fluctuations in demand that we experience across the Council in peak times of customer contact, such as submission deadlines or seasonal impacts. Further details of the customer contact dashboard are presented in Appendix 1. The appendix provides details about the parameters of the customer contact points, engagement with services across the council, a brief analysis of customer contact data, and an illustration of the dashboard.

Channel shifting - delivering service improvements and efficiencies

2.5 The customer contact dashboard has the potential to improve customer journeys as well as contribute to cost savings for the Council through identifying opportunities for channel shifting. The dashboard provides an invest to save development through using data to pinpoint high volume areas of contact and where online options for contact can be expanded and improved, therefore reducing contact with staff and allowing customers to self-serve at a time most convenient to them.

2.6 There will always be a need for telephone contact and for some services this is the most effective way for customers or clients to contact us. The development of the dashboard is not about removing telephone contact from those customers who need it; however, our customers have an expectation that online self-service or automated help will be available to them. The dashboard development allows ESCC to continue to move customers towards self-service where possible and assist further with providing opportunities for our customers to access our services 24 hours 7 days a week, whilst at the same time providing opportunities to reduce costs.

2.7 The figures set out in the table below are the most quoted for channel shift savings in the UK and have been used in many Local and Central Government papers and Channel Strategies.

Source	Face to Face	Telephone	Post	Interactive Voice Response	Online
PWC Report	£10.53	£3.39	£12.10	N/A	£0.08
SOCITM	£14.00	£5.00	N/A	£0.20	£0.17

2.8 Since these were published in 2017, more recent research by ContactBabel (contact centre analyst company) in November 2023 has also found that the cost per inbound call has risen 57% since 2017 and that webchat costs stand at over half the cost of a phone call.

2.9 Using the dashboard to analyse our existing customer contact and identify more costly high-volume areas, provides the opportunity to see how contact could be handled more effectively and efficiently for our customers. It can benefit our customers by creating efficient, effective and task-focused journeys for them. However, equally it will enable the Council to deliver services in the most cost-effective way and reduce pressures on Council budgets.

2.10 For example, access to up-to-date and relevant web content (especially outside of opening times) and other online self-service options, such as online applications and payment options are essential to support the needs of our customers. Instead of an email address, where these online options are provided, more details are gathered upfront for an enquiry or transaction. This serves the customer better and allows staff immediate access to action or resolve an enquiry at the first point of contact. This would prevent a number of repeated contacts to the customer to gather relevant information which can cause frustration. It can speed up the handling of their enquiry whilst being cost efficient. This potentially has a significant benefit of staff being able to focus on more complex enquiries and reducing waiting or handling times.

2.11 In conclusion, following the development of the Customer Contact Dashboard, the Board will require a year to analyse and utilise the data to its full potential as described in this section. For the remainder of 2024/25 and until July 2025, the Board will prioritise on using the dashboard to improve service delivery and to aim to support potential savings and manage demand through channel shift.

The Board will focus on an area in Communities, Economy and Transport (CET), Children's Services (CS), and Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) to deliver efficiencies from channel shift, and results will be reported in the 2024/25 annual report. Examples of areas being investigated are:

- One of the key issues for CS is the high number of access/contact points. Currently those that need CS can contact the Council in a number of different ways and through a number of different access points. The dashboard will be used to investigate the volumes across the multiple access points in CS and seek to evaluate the points, to see if they could be rationalised and where possible, consider managing demand by shifting contact online and providing information upfront as much as possible to reduce contact to multiple front doors. The overall aim would be to make it simpler for those needing to access Children Services ensuring that they get to the right place/service as quickly as possible.
- Channel shift is a key area for people who use ASCH and for the department. With our demography and the fluctuating needs of people, computer literacy and access to the council website may prove to be a barrier for some or many. ASCH are about to launch an information and advice project, which will be key in considering access to information and channel shift. The aim of this project is to deliver on the Information and Advice elements of our new Adult Social Care strategy, including a detailed review of our information and advice offer against our Care Act duties so we can develop and improve the department's approach.
- In CET, the dashboard data has been used to start an evaluation of where there are high volumes of customer contact, which includes in the Registration Service. Currently the Registration Service receives a high volume of telephone calls. The service is currently using the dashboard to assist in understanding the nature of the enquiries, with the aim of identifying where contact can be reduced by improving online services and handling enquiries more efficiently upfront.

### Customer feedback results and the rollout programme

2.12 In 2023/24 we received over 35,000 ratings from our feedback surveys and over 8,500 verbatim comments from customers, an increase of 35% and 219% respectively from the previous year of 2022/23. Each year there is a significant increase of use of the feedback surveys. This year there has been a significant increase in comments received, which is hugely valuable in helping Council staff understand how to improve customer journeys, information we provide, and overall customer experience.

2.13 The overall customer satisfaction rating across all channels in 2023/24 was 73%, the previous year in 2022/23 was 78%, a decrease of 5%. There has been a slight decrease across all channels of feedback. As we widen and increase the offer of feedback surveys to customers, the satisfaction ratings vary between the contact channels, due their range of purposes. A breakdown of statistics and key analysis on the results for each contact channel is presented in Appendix 2.

2.14 The Board continued its programme in 2023/24 of increasing and widening the channels where feedback is gathered. The programme included increasing surveys in already established customer feedback channels and to explore rollout on further areas. Feedback surveys were increased in further team emails, webpages, face to face visits at Council buildings, and interactive forms. Feedback surveys were added to two new channels, microsites (websites outside the corporate website: [eastsussex.gov.uk](http://eastsussex.gov.uk)) and newsletters, which have both proven successful. Details of the programme is presented in Appendix 2.

2.15 A further development underway is piloting feedback 'drivers' for two services. Where a customer chose a rating (excellent, good, ok, or poor) and doesn't leave a comment, staff have voiced frustration where there is a poor rating, but no comment is left to explain why. 'Drivers' are prepopulated, quick options that customers can click, such as "relevance of information", instead (or as well as) writing a comment. Initial responses are showing meaningful results, and the use of drivers will to be refined and further developed.

### **3 Complaints and compliments**

3.1 The Council received 827 complaints in 2023/24 which represents an increase of 5% this year, compared to 785 complaints in 2022/23. Of the 827 complaints, 50% were fully or partly upheld (412), compared to last year at 49% (387) of all complaints. We continue to analyse the reasons for complaints which provides us with valuable feedback on how we can provide services that meet customers' needs and manage their expectations. How we handle complaints is a crucial element of customer experience, and the Council seeks continuous improvement to ensure we resolve individual customer's problems as effectively as possible, but also to identify where service-wide improvements can be made to create a better experience. A review of complaints by department is available in Appendix 3.

3.2 In 2023/24 we recorded 3,034 compliments received, compared to in 2022/23 we received 2,564 compliments. Compliments, where recorded, are feedback from individual customers. Ensuring that we provide channels for both positive and negative feedback which are easy for customers to access, helps services to reflect on what is or is not working. Details for compliments by department are available in Appendix 3.

### **4 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman letter**

4.1 The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) sends a letter annually to each local authority summarising the number of complaints received and decisions made during that period. It informs the Council how many complaints were investigated, either upheld or not upheld, closed after initial enquiries, or referred back to the Council for local resolution (as they were brought too early to the Ombudsman).

4.2 In 2023/24, the LGSCO made decisions on 86 complaints, which is similar to previous years (in 2022/23 there were 84). Of the 86 complaints, 32 were investigated and of these 28 (88%) were upheld. The average of similar authorities is 85%, which the LGSCO calculates and makes available on its website. It should be noted that the 'upheld' rate for LGSCO cases is generally high, as they only investigate cases where there is a likelihood of fault to be found and where the LGSCO think it is likely they will make recommendations over and above any remedies that have been offered through our own local complaints process. A breakdown of LGSCO complaints by department is provided in Appendix 3, and the LGSCO letter for 2023/24 is presented as Appendix 5.

4.3 The LGSCO annual letter notes again this year about late responses from ESCC to the LGSCO. In 2023/24 over half of the Council's responses were received after the set deadline. It is recognised by the Council that these delays were caused by how resource intensive and complex the cases are, and the continued competing challenges that services are facing. The Council will continue to endeavour to fulfil the request of the LGSCO for our Council to take the necessary steps to reduce delays going forward.

### **5 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code**

5.1 The LGSCO launched a new [Complaint Handling Code](#) (the Code) in February 2024 in order to provide a single standard for complaint handling by local councils in areas not already covered by statutory complaint processes.

5.2 It is expected by the LGSCO that councils will have a single policy for dealing with complaints covered by the Code and to adopt the Code as soon as practically possible. The LGSCO plans to apply the Code to its processes from 1 April 2026.

5.3 The planning of the adoption and embedding of the new Code will be a key focus for the Customer Experience Board for 2024/25 and 2025/26. The Board will develop a single policy and the processes and procedures required for supporting the policy and adoption of the Code by 1 April 2026. The development of the policy and procedures will be presented to Governance Committee for approval as a Council policy in September 2025.

## **6 Formal requests for information**

6.1 There were 2,107 formal information requests received in 2023/24, compared to 1,670 in 2022/23, which is a 26% increase. These requests relate to the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR), Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, and Data Protection Act. Requests include where information was provided in full or in part, where no information was provided or held, and requests not validated or withdrawn. Formal information requests have their own complaint procedure and information about complaints received is provided in Appendix 4.

6.2 Of the FOI and EIR requests which were completed (1,314) in 2023/24, the Council achieved 86% compliance in meeting the statutory deadline of responding within 20 working days. There were also 2,637 "Con29s" (a specific type of request under EIR) completed in 2023/24 and achieving 100% compliance with the statutory 20 working days deadline.

## **7 Conclusion and Recommendations**

7.1 This report provides an overview and progress update on measures taken to further improve customer experience and summarises the annual results for complaints, compliments, the LGSCO letter, and formal information requests received in 2023/24.

7.2 Governance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) note the progress of the Customer Experience Board in the implementation of a series of measures to improve customer experience;
- (2) support the Customer Experience Board's focus in 2024/25 in utilising the Customer Contact Dashboard to improve service delivery and to aim to provide savings and manage demand by channel shift;
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- (5) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.

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### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None