

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 21 October 2025

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 2024/25 in handling complaints, compliments, and formal requests for information, including the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter.

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) note the Customer Experience Board's ongoing focus on using the Customer Contact Dashboard to improve service delivery, reduce costs, and support channel shift;
 - 3) agree the new ESCC Complaints Policy with an implementation date of 1 January 2026, in order to be compliant when the new Complaint Handling Code is applied to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman processes in April 2026;
 - 4) recommend that the County Council amend the Terms of Reference of the Governance Committee to include within them the Governance Committee undertaking the role of "Member Responsible for Complaints" to comply to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code;
 - 5) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2024/25; and
 - 6) 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.

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.

2 Updated priorities for the Customer Experience Board

2.1 In January 2025, the Board carried out a review of its achievements against its priorities which were established in 2021. These achievements have been reported in this annual report to demonstrate the progress made for improving the quality and consistency of customer experience across all services.

2.2 In order to continue its accountability, the Board reviewed its priorities to ensure their relevance and suitability, particularly in the context of working within the Council's challenges and budgetary constraints, and the commitment to providing the best customer experience possible.

2.3 The Board approved five updated priorities for 2025/26 and 2026/27, noting they may need further review should local government reorganisation go forward. For the time being the following are the Board's priorities until further development:

1. Ensure the content of East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) website is the best that it can be within available resources with a focus on up to date, relevant, concise and accessible content.
2. Support services to make use of data on customer contact for the purpose of channel shifting to self-service options and reduce costs associated with other methods of contact.
3. Review customer feedback from customer contact channels to maintain our commitment to improving customer experience and satisfaction.
4. Seek to improve customer experience by reviewing customer journeys.
5. Implement the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman complaint handling code and monitor the impact of the code and new policy.

2.4 In support of the Board's priorities, the focus in 2024/25 has been exploring potential channel shifting by utilising the Customer Contact Dashboard. Recent developments are presented in this report. The report also provides a summary of our customer feedback survey results, Council complaints, Ombudsman complaints, compliments, and formal information requests.

3 Customer Experience developments in 2024/25

Improvements to customer experience - understanding Council-wide customer contact

3.1 The Board rolled out a Customer Contact Dashboard in this annual report in the last year. The dashboard 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.

3.2 The dashboard continues to be updated and provides information about contact points and volumes in a centralised view of customer contact across the Council. It has created a baseline of data crucially important 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.

3.3 Data from August 2023 to March 2024 (eight months) was presented in the annual report last year, showing customers contact to the Council by telephone calls, emails and webforms as a total of approximately 566,000. The same timeframe for this year (August 2024 to March 2025), in order to compare like for like, is a total of approximately 706,700. Please note that the increase of total contact in the like for like period is due to approximately 80 new contact points added to the dashboard. This accounts for the increase in the total customer contact in the latter period. There are over 300 contact points included in the dashboard.

3.4 We now have complete data for the full year 2024/25, with a total of approximately 1,045,900 contacts recorded. Appendix 1 includes screenshots of the dashboard that illustrate these totals. Please note that these figures do not represent all contact channels within the Council. A reminder of what is counted is provided in Appendix 1.

Channel shifting - delivering service improvements and efficiencies

3.5 The most important purpose of the dashboard is to understand customer contact which will assist in identifying opportunities for channel shift. The dashboard provides 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.

3.6 It is important to note that 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. In other instances, our customers have an expectation that online self-service or automated help will be available to them, and access to our services 24 hours, 7 days a week, whilst at the same time providing opportunities to reduce costs.

3.7 For 2024/25, the Board prioritised using the dashboard to improve service delivery and to support potential savings by managing demand through channel shift. The Board focused on a channel shifting exercise in each of the following departments: Communities, Economy and Transport (CET), Children's Services (CS), and Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH). The following are updates from each of these departments.

3.8 For CET in 2024/25, the dashboard was used to identify customer contact for the Registration Service. The data showed that the Registration Service had a significantly high volume of telephone calls in total for CET. The data from the dashboard indicated the need for further investigation. In order to understand the data further, an enquiry survey was carried out to understand the nature of the enquiry calls and what better ways could be developed to better serve the customers. It was discovered that some services were solely available via the telephone, and a development is underway to provide more options for customers to access the service 24/7 online, and to handle enquiries more efficiently upfront. A number of actions are underway to make these improvements and full details of the development is provided in Appendix 1. However, it was noted that many telephone calls were for services which customers could self-serve through the website and by amending communication on the website, directing people to online booking the following has been achieved, below is a one-month snapshot:

3.8.1 Births

- March 2024 – 210 booked online, 251 in total – 84% appointments booked online
- March 2025 - 243 booked online, 267 in total - 91% of appointments booked online

3.8.2 Deaths

- March 2024 - 169 booked online, 532 in total – 32% of appointments booked online
- March 2025 - 345 booked online, 576 in total - 60% of appointments booked online

3.8.3 By directing people to book online the phone calls reduced by 3,559 / 22% when compared to March 2024. The Registration Service recognises that there are further opportunities to meet customer needs with their online requirements and further work will continue during 2025/26.

3.9 ASCH's Information and Advice Project has made inroads into making information available on our website clearer and succinct. Tackling parts of the website that had more complex information, as well as by creating pages specifically for some communities. The page for carers and on financial assessment have improved information and there is a page for people who fully fund their care. ASCH has made significant progress in enhancing communication by developing a comprehensive language guide for ASCH colleagues, designed to support and improve effective language usage. ASCH has undertaken user testing to identify ways to enhance users' experience on our website and are working to implement these improvements.

3.10 As part of the Transformation Programme, CS are completing a project on how we offer information, advice and guidance (IAG). This is currently offered by phone and online by multiple services. IAG offered by CS and professional partners is being mapped and the effectiveness reviewed. CS will then look at options for improvements to reduce duplication of efforts, ensure staff and partners know what we are offering and how, and potentially reduce contact points. The overall aim is to ensure families can access good information, advice and guidance quickly and easily and at the right time. This will help us manage demand and avoid families' needs escalating.

Customer feedback results

3.11 In 2024/25 we received approximately 33,000 customer survey ratings, which is similar to last year with over 35,000 ratings from our feedback surveys. In 2024/25 we continued to collect feedback from customers using all methods of contact possible, these were: ESCC website, online forms, email correspondence, e-newsletters, in-house microsites and feedback devices. However, in 2024/25 we have missing survey results from the feedback devices as there is an error with the system occurring which is currently being investigated and fixed.

3.12 The feedback surveys are well used across all channels and continue to provide valuable insight, particularly for webpages where the results are used as an essential tool when revising and improving web content. A breakdown of results for each contact channel is presented as Appendix 2.

3.13 One area of development which continued in 2024/25 was the 'one click' feedback comments on the feedback surveys. We now have five services in a pilot, which have the 'one click' options on their surveys. A one click comment is where a customer can choose from a number of prepopulated comments instead of having to write out their comment, for example they can choose "I found the information useful" or "I didn't find the information I wanted". Customers can also write an additional comment if they like.

3.14 Staff had voiced frustration where customers left no comments to explain their satisfaction rating. Results of the pilot have shown that customers are using the one click comments and are providing useful information for staff to act upon to provide better customer experience. The pilot of the one click comments will be analysed, and results will be reported in next year's report.

4 Complaints and compliments

4.1 The Council received 840 complaints in 2024/25 compared to 827 complaints in 2023/24 which represents an increase of 1.5% this year. Of the 840 complaints, 49% were fully or partly upheld (412), compared to last year at 50% (412) 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.

4.2 In 2024/25 we recorded 4,042 compliments, compared to 2023/24 we recorded 3,034 compliments received. 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.

5 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman letter

5.1 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).

5.2 In 2024/25, the LGSCO dealt with 106 complaints regarding ESCC, compared to 86 in 2023/24. Although there was an increase in the number of complaints dealt with by the Ombudsman, the number of complaints investigated was similar to previous years. In 2024/25, 28 were investigated compared to 32 in 2023/24. Out of the 106 complaints, the LGSCO states there were 22 complaints that were not for the LGSCO or too early for it to investigate, which could contribute to the higher total number of complaints dealt with by the LGSCO in 2024/25.

5.3 There were 21 complaints upheld out of 28 complaints investigated (75%), which is lower than the average of similar authorities at 89% upheld (the LGSCO calculates this and makes available on its website). It should be noted that the 'upheld' rate for LGSCO cases is generally high as it only investigates cases where there is a likelihood of fault to be found and where the LGSCO thinks it is likely it 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 2024/25 is provided as Appendix 5.

5.4 The LGSCO annual letter was sent earlier this year (in May) in response to councils requesting that performance data was made available earlier in the year. This letter is only for statistical data. A separate letter would have been issued mid-July by the Ombudsman if there were any performance concerns in 2024/25. ESCC did not receive a performance letter.

6 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

6.1 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. In response, the Board has developed a new draft Complaints Policy for ESCC in order to adhere to the Code. The new Complaints Policy is presented within this annual report to the Governance Committee for consideration. The draft Complaints Policy is presented as Appendix 6.

6.2 If agreed by the Governance Committee, launching the new Complaints Policy and adhering to the new Code will be a key focus for the Customer Experience Board in 2025/26. The new policy would be implemented on 1 January 2026 for the Council. The LGSCO plans to apply the Code to its processes from 1 April 2026.

6.3 The new Code recommends a role of 'Member Responsible for Complaints' (the Member). This role has responsibility for complaints and to support a positive complaint handling culture in the Council. This role can be carried out by an individual or committee depending on the governance arrangements already in place. The 'Member' should receive information on complaints that provides insight on the Council's complaint handling performance.

6.4 It has been included in the new Complaints Policy (Appendix 6), that the Governance Committee is the 'Member Responsible for Complaints', as this reflects the governance arrangements already in place, with the Governance Committee already receiving the Customer Experience Annual Report, which provides insight on the Council's complaint handling performance.

6.5 As outlined in the Code, the 'Member' should receive updates on volume, categories, and outcomes of complaints, alongside complaint handling performance; and also reviews of issues and trends arising from complaint handling. These should be provided in an annual complaints performance and service improvement report, which for the Council, is already provided in this Customer Experience Annual Report.

6.6 With this in mind, it is recommended that the Governance Committee recommend to the County Council to amend the Terms of Reference of the Governance Committee to include that the Governance Committee undertakes the role of "Member Responsible for Complaints" in order to comply to the LGSCO Code.

7 Formal requests for information

7.1 There were 2,159 formal information requests received in 2024/25 compared to 2,107 formal information requests received in 2023/24, which was a small increase of 2.5%. This total of 2,159 requests is the highest in 7 years. These requests relate to the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR), Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, and Data Protection Act. These requests include where information was provided in full or in part, where no information was provided or held, and requests not validated or withdrawn. There were 1,346 FOI and EIR requests completed in 2024/25, and the Council achieved 86% compliance in meeting the statutory deadline of responding within 20 working days. Formal information requests have their own complaint procedure and information about complaints received is provided in Appendix 4.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 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 2024/25.

8.2 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) note the Customer Experience Board's ongoing focus on using the Customer Contact Dashboard to improve service delivery, reduce costs, and support channel shift;
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- 5) note the number and nature of complaints made to the Council in 2024/25; and
- 6) note the contents of the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman's annual letter to the Chief Executive.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None