



**COUNCIL**  
**16 October 2024**

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**Report of: Assistant Director of Corporate & Customer Services**

**Relevant Lead Members: Councillor M Anderson and Councillor N Pryce-Roberts**

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**SUBJECT: COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT - 2023-2024**

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Wards affected: Borough wide.

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 To present the annual performance data in relation to Complaints received between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.
- 1.2 To present the Council's continuous improvement plan for the same period, evidencing the Council's commitment to learning from complaints.
- 1.3 To present the annual self-assessment against the Housing Ombudsman statutory complaint handling code.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 In accordance with the requirements of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code, Members review and note the performance data, continuous improvement plan and self-assessment.
  - 2.2 That the Director of Housing & Environment and Assistant Director of Corporate & Customer Services be given delegated authority to implement any agreed recommendations or changes arising out of the meeting.
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## **3.0 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 In 2022 following a review of the Council's complaints process, a new Customer Feedback policy was approved and published. The Customer Feedback policy sets out how the Council will handle comments, compliments and complaints received.
- 3.2 The Customer Feedback policy was introduced to support the Council, as a landlord, to meet the Housing Ombudsman (HO) Complaint Handling code.
- 3.3 Whilst the code is for complaints in relation to Landlord Services, the Council has adopted one policy, to ensure there is a consistent approach for all complainants. The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) has now published their own code, with an expectation that Councils will adopt this from 2026. The Customer Feedback policy supports the Council to meet both complaint handling codes.
- 3.4 In previous years, an annual members update on complaint handling was circulated to all Members. The HO code now requires Landlords to produce an annual complaints performance and service improvement report, which includes the annual self-assessment against the code, to ensure its policy is in line with the codes requirements. The report must be reported to the landlords governing body (or equivalent) and published on the Council's website. Members are therefore requested to note the report and provide any agreed comments.
- 3.5 There is also a requirement to have a lead member responsible for complaints. As the HO code relates to Housing Services, the lead member for Housing Services has been identified as the Member Responsible for Complaints.
- 3.6 The Lead Member for Housing Services, engaged with officers within the Council, undertaking the annual self-assessment for 2023 – 2024, to oversee and ratify the assessment.

#### **4.0 CURRENT POSITION**

- 4.1 The HO complaint handling code became statutory in April 2024. The code aims to achieve best practice in complaint handling, to ensure a positive complaint handling culture and to encourage the use of complaints to identify issues and introduce positive changes to service delivery.
- 4.2 The introduction of the Customer Feedback policy, process and ongoing promotion to ensure customers understand how to complain, actively encourages complaints. This, along with a significant staff training programme supports the creation of a positive complaints culture. It also enables the Council to understand and resolve issues for customers, understand themes, use feedback to improve services and demonstrate that it listens and learns from feedback.
- 4.3 If a complainant wishes to pursue an issue further after exhausting the Council's internal process, they can raise this with either the LGSCO or the HO, depending on the nature of the complaint.

#### **5.0 ANALYSIS OF FEEDBACK BETWEEN 1 APRIL 2023 TO 31 MARCH 2024**

- 5.1 604 complaints were received at stage 1, of which 84% were responded to within timescales (10 working days).

5.2 Of these, 72 (12%) stage 1 complaints were escalated to stage 2, of which 78% were responded to within timescales (20 working days).

## 6.0 SERVICE AREA PERFORMANCE

6.1 Complaints enable the Council to understand customer views, improve services and prevent any re-occurrence.

6.2 Table 1 below details the number of complaints submitted and subsequently escalated, broken down by service area. It also provides the percentage of these complaints that were responded to in timescales.

**Table 1**

Service Area	Number of complaints submitted/escalated	
	(% responded to in timescales)	
	Stage 1	Stage 2
Corporate & Customer Services	57 (100%)	3 (100%)
Environmental Services	172 (93.6%)	12 (83.3%)
Finance, Procurement & Commercial Services	1 (100%)	0 n/a
Housing Services	293 (78.5%)	32 (69%)
Legal and Democratic Services	1 (100%)	0 n/a
Planning and Regulatory Services	60 (63.3%)	24 (83.3%)
Wellbeing & Place	20 (100%)	1 (100%)
<b>Total submitted/escalated</b>	<b>604</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>(% responded to in timescales)</b>	<b>(84%)</b>	<b>(78%)</b>

6.3 There is a clear commitment by officers to improve handling times for responses, with systems in place to monitor performance and ensure improvements are made, whilst also balancing the quality and depth of investigations to ensure we respond fully. To support this, particularly in complex cases, the use of extensions in line with the policy (appendix 1, page 8) will be considered.

- 6.4 During Q1 of 2024/25, 88% of stage 1 complaints and 100% of stage 2 complaints were responded to in timescales demonstrating an improvement of 4% and 22% respectively. There is a continued commitment and drive to further improve in this area.
- 6.5 The evidence indicates that from 2022/23 to 23/4, the number of compliments from customers expressing satisfaction with services, has increased. Table 2 below details the number of compliments received by service area.

**Table 2**

<b>Service Area - compliments</b>	<b>Number received</b>
Corporate & Customer Services	39
Environmental Services	32
Housing Services	19
Planning and Regulatory Services	5
Wellbeing & Place	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>

## 7.0 COMPLAINT OUTCOMES

- 7.1 Tables 3 and 4 below detail the number of complaints upheld, partially upheld, or not upheld following the Council's investigations.

**Table 3**

<b>Stage 1 complaints</b>			
<b>Service Area</b>	<b>Upheld</b>	<b>Partially Upheld</b>	<b>Not Upheld</b>
Corporate & Customer Services (57)	10	8	39
Environmental Services (172)	110	26	36
Finance, Procurement & Commercial Services (1)	1	0	0
Housing Services (293)	168	60	65
Legal and Democratic Services (1)	0	0	1
Planning & Regulatory (60)	5	8	47
Wellbeing & Place (20)	8	7	5
<b>Total (604)</b>	<b>302 (50%)</b>	<b>109 (18%)</b>	<b>193 (32%)</b>

**Table 4**

<b>Complaints subsequently escalated to stage 2</b>			
<b>Service Area</b>	<b>Upheld</b>	<b>Partially Upheld</b>	<b>Not Upheld</b>
Corporate & Customer Services (3)	0	1	2
Environmental Services (12)	8	1	3
Housing Services (32)	19	7	6
Planning & Regulatory (24)	0	1	23
Wellbeing & Place (1)	1	0	0
<b>Total (72)</b>	<b>28 (39%)</b>	<b>10 (14%)</b>	<b>34 (47%)</b>

## 8.0 HIGH LEVEL THEMES

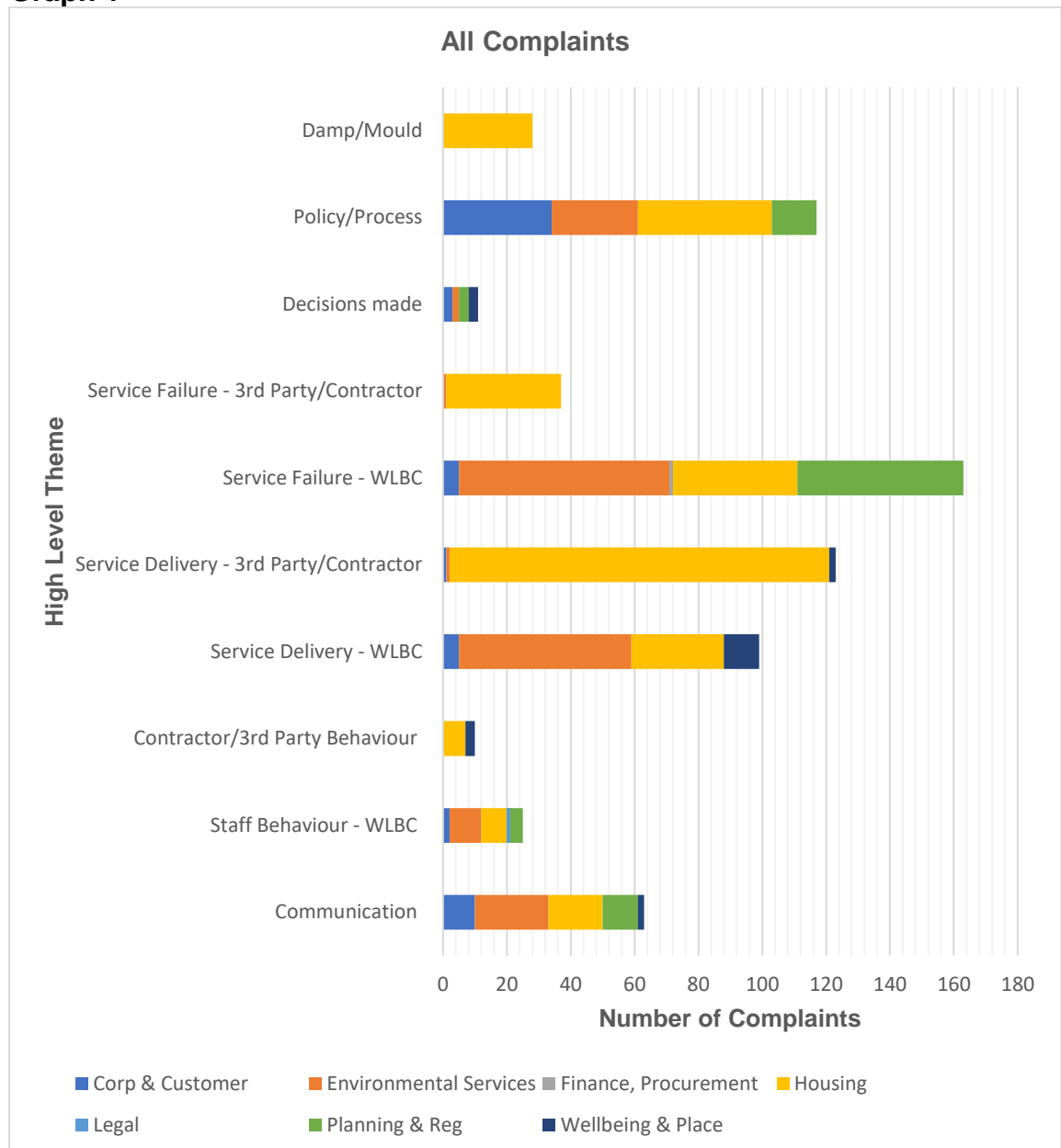
- 8.1 High level themes enable service areas to categorise the complaints received, undertake further analysis of the root cause of the issues and develop action plans to resolve issues.
- 8.2 Table 5 below provides the definitions of the high-level themes.

**Table 5**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Staff Behaviour	The actions or behaviours of an officer of the Council or a third party/contactor acting on behalf of the Council.
Communication	Failing to keep customers informed or where communication is not clear.
Decisions	Customer is unhappy with a decision made by an officer of the Council. This does not include decisions made where there is a formal right to an appeal, as these are not investigated under the Customer Feedback policy (see appendix 1 for further details).
Service Delivery	The standard or quality of service provided by the Council or a third party/contractor acting on behalf of the Council.
Service Failure	Failing to provide a service. Either the Council or a third party/contractor acting on behalf of the Council.
Policy or Process	Dissatisfaction with a policy/process.
Damp/Mould	Complaints from Council tenants regarding damp and mould issues in their home.

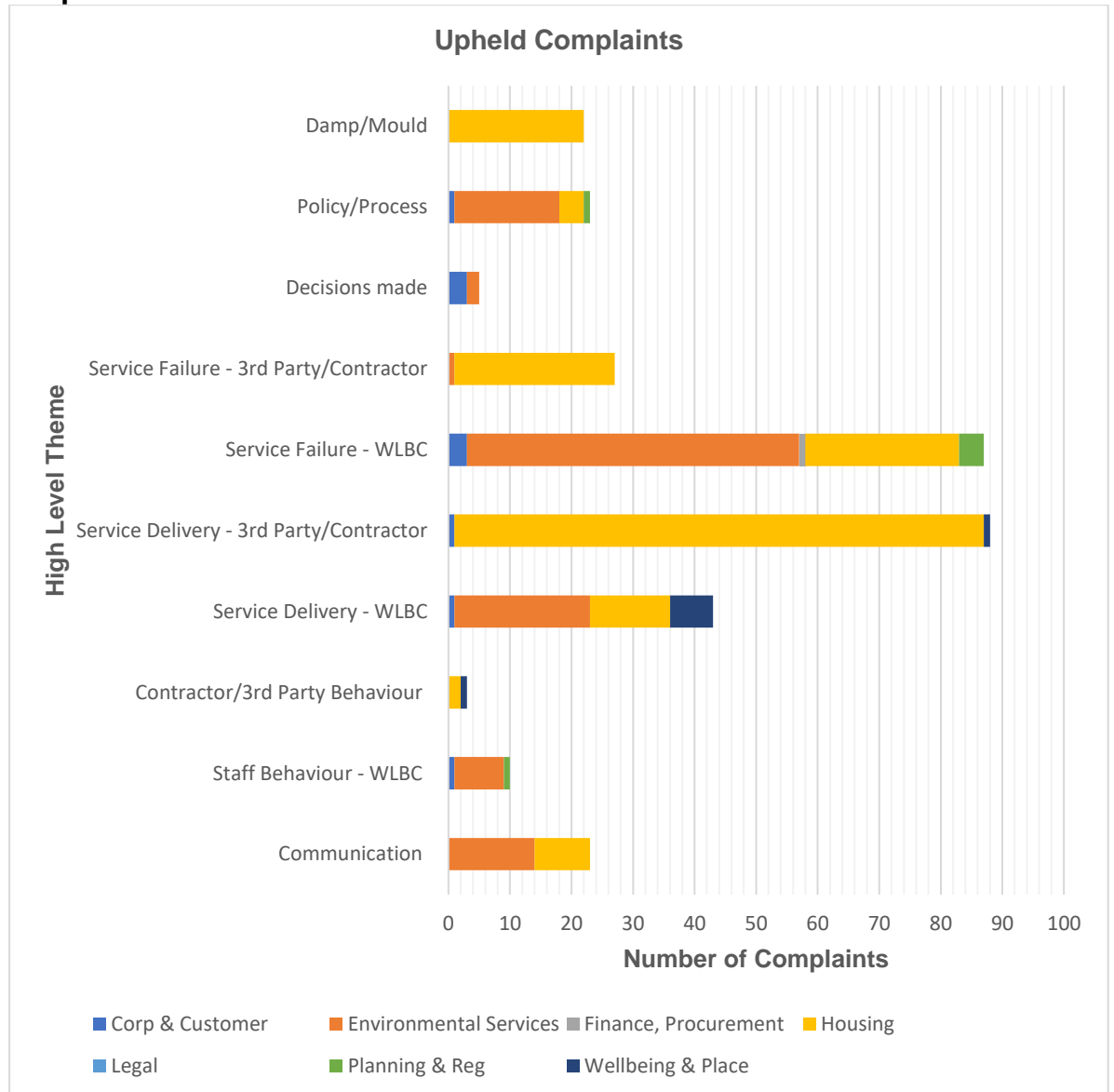
- 8.3 Graph 1 below demonstrates the total number of complaints received, categorised by theme and service area.

**Graph 1**



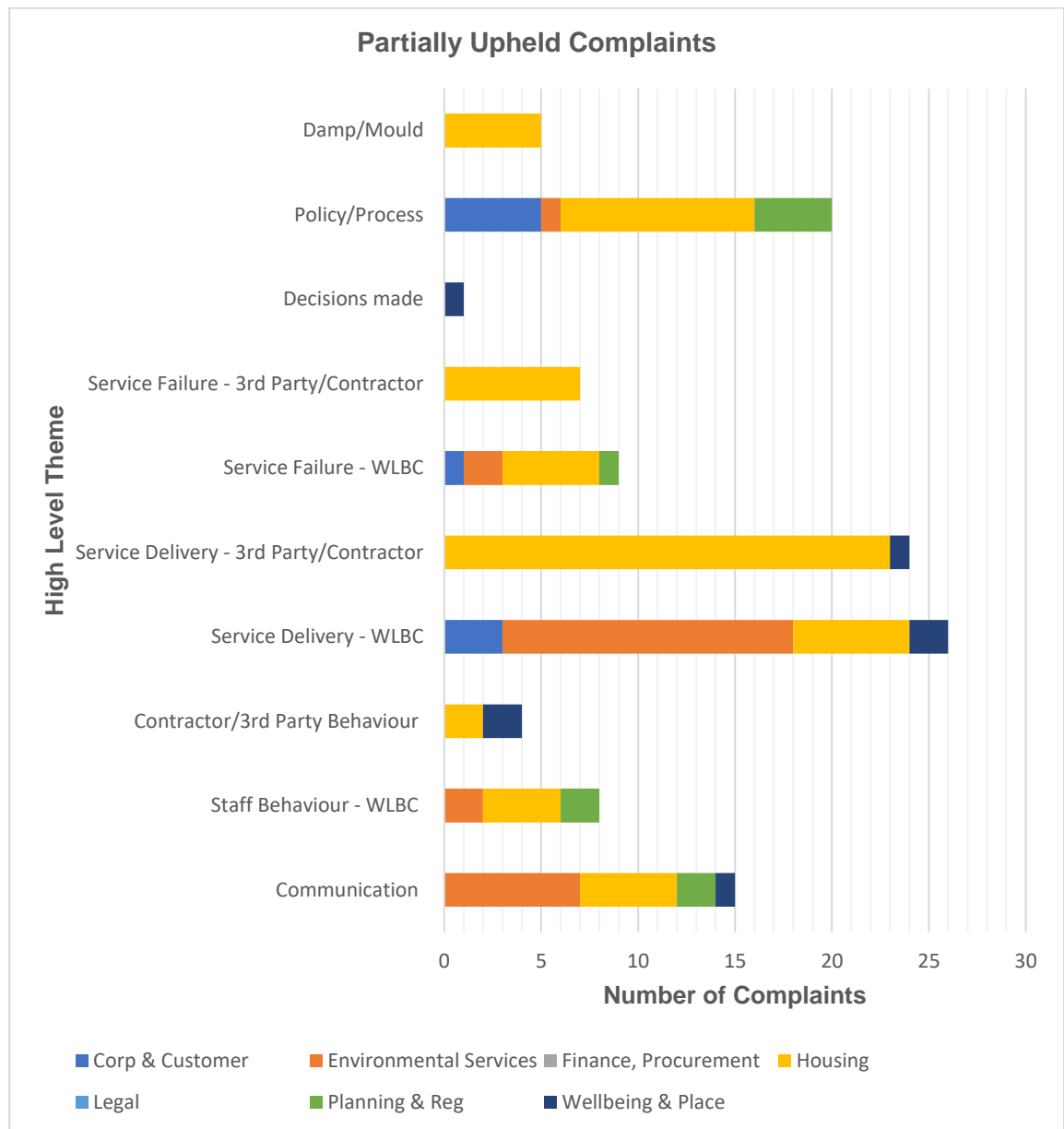
8.4 Graph 2 below demonstrates the number of complaints that were determined as upheld, by theme and service area.

**Graph 2**



8.5 Graph 3 below demonstrates the number of complaints that were determined as partially upheld, by theme and service area.

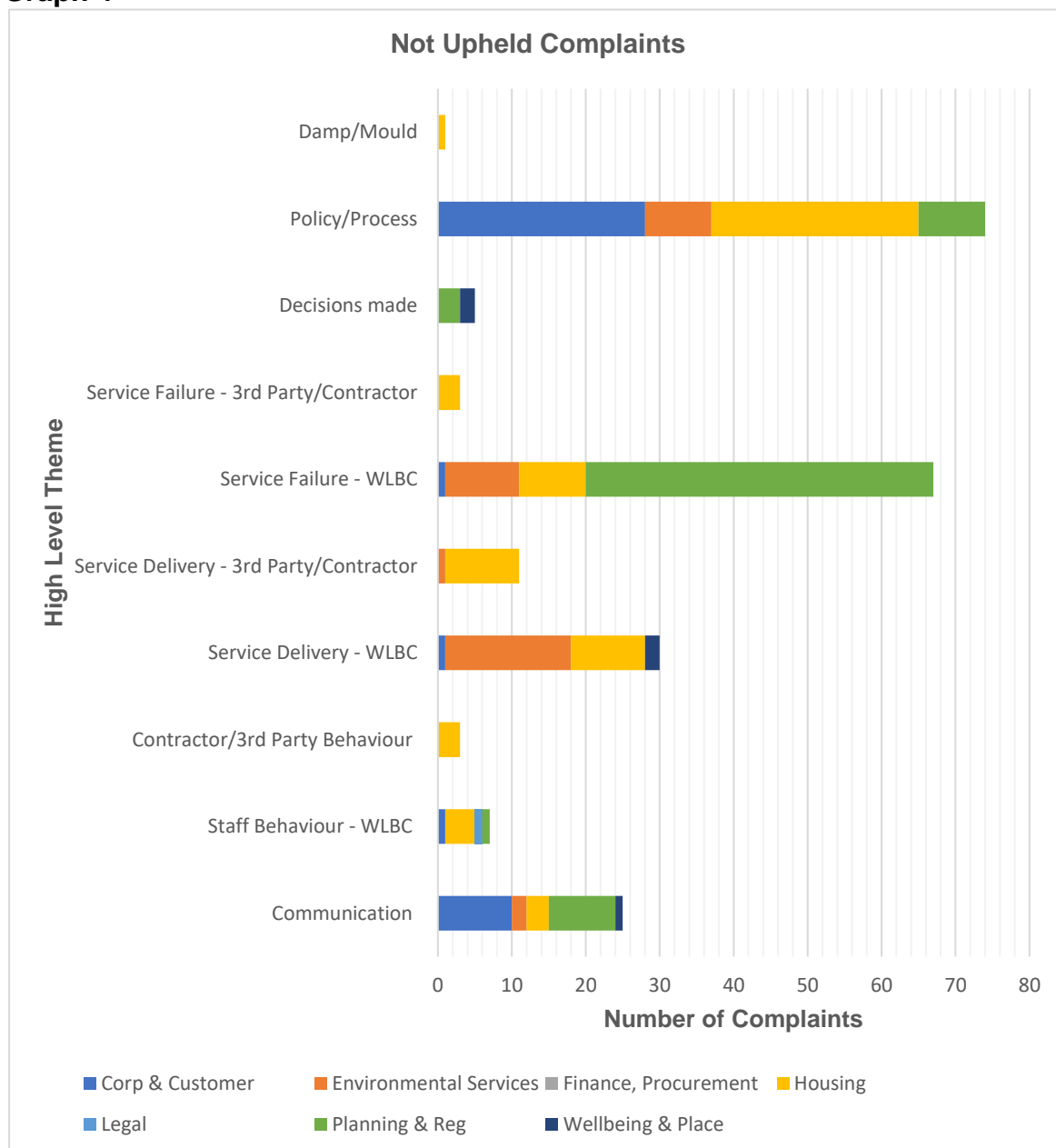
**Graph 3**





8.6 Graph 4 below demonstrates the number of complaints that were determined as not upheld, by theme and service area.

**Graph 4**



## 9.0 OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

9.1 The LGSCO provides an annual report to each Council on the number of complaints referred to them, along with the outcome of their investigations and the decisions made. This information will be presented to Members by way of a Members Update later this year.

9.2 Moving forward, in line with the introduction of the LGSCO complaint handling code, Members will receive information in relation to the Ombudsman findings, as part of the Annual Customer Feedback report.

9.3 At the time of writing this report, the Housing Ombudsman has not produced their Landlord performance data report.

## **10.0 CONCLUSION**

- 10.1 Complaints provide valuable customer feedback and the principal purpose of investigating, monitoring, and responding to complaints is always to improve service delivery. On the occasions where the Council acknowledged that the service was not up to the required standard, the focus is on putting the matter right and preventing any re-occurrence. By taking complaints seriously, the Council is ensuring that all genuine grievances are recognised, and action taken to address the issue.
- 10.2 Complaints are written expressions of dissatisfaction and not always substantiated. This is demonstrated at section 8 which details the number of complaints that were not upheld.
- 10.3 12% of stage 1 complaints were escalated to Stage 2. This demonstrates that in most cases, officers are understanding, acknowledging, listening to customers concerns and rectifying the issue appropriately at stage 1.
- 10.4 The level of complaints in relation to each service area during the year must also be put into perspective, in comparison to the number of services delivered:
- For Housing Services, 198 complaints relating to the repairs service were received. This equates to 1% of the 19,663 repairs completed.
  - For Planning and Regulatory, 47 complaints relating to the planning service were received. This equates to 2.7% of the 1172 planning applications received.
  - For Environmental Services, 93 complaints were received, relating to refuse and recycling collections. This equates to 0.0027% of the 3,356,000 refuse and recycling collections, that the Council undertakes on an annual basis.
- 10.5 Feedback is not fully resolved until the actions identified as part of the investigation are completed. Appendix 3 provides a summary of the high-level themes and actions taken/planned as a result. These actions and progress are consistently monitored by individual service areas.

## **11.0 PROMOTION OF CUSTOMER FEEDBACK DATA**

- 11.1 The Housing Ombudsman requires landlords to publish their complaint handling data performance in relation to Housing Services and any actions/lessons learnt as a result on the Council's website, alongside the annual self-assessment against the Code. This can be found at [Our Performance - West Lancashire Borough Council \(westlancs.gov.uk\)](http://www.westlancs.gov.uk/Our-Performance)

## **12.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 There are no significant sustainability impacts associated with this report and in particular no significant impact on crime and disorder.

## **13.0 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1. There are no significant financial or resource implications arising from this report.

## **14.0 RISK ASSESSMENT**

14.1 This item is for information only and makes no recommendations. It therefore does not require a formal risk assessment and no changes have been made to the risk registers.

## **15.0 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS**

15.1 There are no health and wellbeing implications arising from this report.

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### **Background Documents**

There are no background documents (as defined in Section 100D (5) of the Local Government Act 1972) to this Report.

### **Equality Impact Assessment**

The decision does not have any direct impact on members of the public, employees, elected members and / or stakeholders. Therefore, an Equality Impact Assessment is not required.

### **Appendices**

1. Customer Feedback Policy
2. Continuous Improvement Plan
3. Annual Self-Assessment