**SMBC Customer Feedback Annual Report**

**2024/25**

August 2025

**Background Information**

Delivering excellent customer service is more than just one of our organisational values — it is a shared commitment and a responsibility embraced by every council officer. Each interaction with our residents is an opportunity to build trust by being accountable, friendly, helpful, and striving for excellence in everything we do. In March 2025, our CEO introduced our new Customer Standards for Staff, clearly setting out the expectations we all share, no matter the service we provide or the way we engage with customers.

At Sandwell, we recognise that listening to our residents, especially when we don’t get things right, is just as important as celebrating when we do. We are committed to learning from feedback and complaints to ensure that every concern becomes a chance to reflect, improve, and strengthen the services we offer. By working together as One Council, One Team, and by taking ownership of both successes and challenges, we can continuously raise the standard of public services.

Every Sandwell customer deserves the highest level of service, and through our collective dedication and a culture of continuous improvement, we can make a lasting, positive difference in the lives of our residents as we move forward on our journey to becoming an outstanding council

**Purpose of Report**

This report summarises data, trends, issues and lessons learnt arising from the Compliments, Complaints, Members’ and Ombudsman Enquiries from across Sandwell Council. Reporting covers the period from **1 April 2024** to **31 March 2025.**

This annual report does not include complaints relating to **Adult Social Care** or the **Children’s Trust**. Both areas are governed by statutory complaints regulations which set out specific procedures and reporting requirements. In line with these statutory frameworks, complaints about Adult Social Care and the Children’s Trust are managed, monitored, and reported through their own dedicated annual reports. These are produced and presented separately to ensure compliance with statutory obligations and to provide a focused analysis of complaints within those service areas.

This report includes recommendations and details the key priorities for the upcoming year, based on the findings presented.

This report will be shared with Cabinet and presented to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board to comply with statutory guidelines as outlined in the Housing Ombudsman (**HO**) and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (**LGSCO**) Complaint Handling Codes.

The customer feedback detailed in this report—totalling 10,686 cases—accounts for less than 1% of the 1,436,475 total public interactions with the Council across all channels in 2024/25, including General Enquiries, One Stop Shop, the Contact Centres, and MySandwell. This strikingly low percentage underscores that most of our interactions with residents are handled effectively and without the need for formal complaints or feedback, reflecting a strong overall performance in service delivery.

**1. Headline Findings**

Breakdown of complaints, compliments and Member enquiries managed by the Customer Feedback Team (CFT) in 2024/25 (\*While formal Councillor enquiries are managed by Democratic Services, the Customer Feedback Team plays a key supporting role in many councillor interactions)

**Chart 1** below breaks down the total number of feedback interactions in 2024/25. Here you can see the proportion that each takes up of the total number of these enquiries that have been received this year.

**Comparison of Customer Feedback over the last three financial years:**

**Chart 2** details the number of Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints received by Sandwell Council in 2024/25 and compares these numbers with the data from the previous two years.

Stage 2 complaints saw a significant increase of 75% from the previous financial year to 378 in 2024/25, this was mainly driven by Stage 2 investigations in Housing that had a 106% increase in Stage 2 investigations compared to the previous year.

The 10% decrease in Stage 1 complaints, from 3,514 in 2023/24 to 3,147 in 2024/25, reflects a positive overall trend. This was partly driven by an 8% reduction in complaints within the Environment service area, particularly in Serco-managed services, where common issues included service delays and incomplete work.

Over the past 12 months, we have seen a positive reduction in the proportion of complaints upheld following investigation. At Stage 1, 518 complaints (16%) were upheld, while at Stage 2, 72 complaints (19%) were upheld. This marks a notable improvement compared to the previous year, where 23% of complaints were upheld overall. These figures reflect the positive impact of our ongoing efforts to improve service delivery and decision-making across the Council.

**Performance Comparison**

In the 2024/25 financial year, 65% of all complaints received by the Council were responded to within the target timeframes set by their Service Level Agreements (SLAs): 10 working days for Stage 1 complaints and 20 working days for Stage 2. The overall average response time was 16 working days.

While this represents a slight decline from the previous year, when 69% of complaints met the SLA and the average response time was 15 working days, it highlights the ongoing need for a much more focused effort by all service area to meet the SLA target. We recognise that delays in responses can impact customer experience, and we remain committed to addressing this through continued service improvements.

* **Stage 1 complaints:** 66% were resolved within the 10-day SLA, with an average response time of 15 working days.
* **Stage 2 complaints:** 51% met the 20-day SLA, with an average response time of 25 working days.

**Performance Against Complaint Response SLAs**

An overview of performance across Directorates in meeting complaint response times (SLA compliance) shows varying levels of success, with several standout performers and areas requiring attention.

**Housing – 44%** SLA Compliance

Housing remained the most affected Directorate, receiving the highest number of complaints with a total of 1,506. Performance across its various service areas was mixed.

* **Housing Resolutions** received the highest number of complaints (763), but only 25% were responded to within the SLA timeframe, highlighting a key area for improvement.

**Homes & Communities**, while handling a smaller volume of complaints (26), achieved strong performance with 96% of responses meeting the SLA.To improve their SLA the Housing Resolutions team have recruited 5 additional temporary officers to provide added resource to reduce the existing backlog, which has increased the team from 5 to 10.

The backlog has been separated from new complaints, with a team dedicated to the backlog, and new complaints being picked up and responded to within SLA. This will keep the backlog from increasing, and ensure SLAs are met for all new complaints. The Housing Resolution Team have confirmed that recent data shows progress on reducing the backlog since the temps have been in place.

**Regeneration & Growth – 96% SLA Compliance** having the lowest number of complaints across the board with a total of 52, Regeneration & Growth delivered one of the strongest SLA performances, achieving 96% compliance for the year

**Environment – 84%** SLA Compliance

Borough Economy delivered a solid performance, especially considering complaint volume with a total of 1,494.

* **Refuse and Recycling**, which generated the highest number of complaints in this Directorate (863), maintained a commendable 87% SLA compliance rate.

**Finance and Transformation – 84% SLA Compliance**

Finance mirrored Borough Economy’s performance at 84% SLA compliance overall, with a total of 407 complaints.

The **Council Tax Billing** service area received the most complaints (159) and performed on par with the Directorate average, also achieving 84% SLA compliance.

**Assistant Chief Executive (ACE) – 95% SLA**   
ACE demonstrated excellent performance, with 95% of complaints responded to within the SLA with a total of 65.

* Though complaint volumes were comparatively low, the Customer Contact Centre stood out, handling 54 complaints with an impressive 96% SLA compliance rate.

**Compliments**

* **Chart 3** details the number of all compliments received by Sandwell Council in 2024/25 and compares these numbers with the data from the previous two years.

The 45% increase in compliments in 2024/25 when compared to the previous year was driven in part by training sessions run by the Customer Feedback Team for all service areas throughout the year. Officers were reminded of the importance of logging all compliments and being able to use these compliments in monthly check-ins with their staff.

**Chart 4** details the top three and by service area for compliments:

**MP Enquiries**

* **Chart 5** details the number of all MP enquiries received by Sandwell Council in 2024/25 and compares these numbers with the data from the previous two years:

MP enquiries were significantly down (62%) in 2024/25 compared to the previous year; this is due to the fact of having the General Election in July and Sandwell electing four new MPs from the previous Parliament.

Another contributing factor to the decline in MP enquiries was the series of targeted training sessions held throughout the financial year. These sessions were organised by the Customer Feedback Team and delivered by service area teams directly to caseworkers in MP offices. The training focused on high-volume enquiry topics such as anti-social behaviour (ASB), homelessness, and repairs. These areas were identified based on both data from the Customer Feedback Team and direct input from MP office who handle day-to-day enquiries.

In 2024/25, the average response time for MP enquiries increased to 16 working days, compared to 10 working days in the previous year, despite a notable reduction in the total number of enquiries (1,446 in 2024/25 compared to 2,340 in 2023/24).

This increase in response times can largely be attributed to the July 2024 General Election, which resulted in four new MPs representing constituencies within Sandwell. As a result, time was required to establish working relationships and ensure new MPs, and their teams were fully briefed on local processes and ongoing issues.

Additionally, during the transition period, some complex enquiries from outgoing MPs remained unresolved, and delays in receiving further information from their closing offices contributed to longer processing times.

**Chart 6** details the top three areas for MP enquiries for 2024/25:

The main increase in MP enquiries is in Housing Solutions which accounts for almost 25% of all MP enquiries in the period 2024/25.

**Ombudsman Enquiries**

The Customer Feedback Team (CFT) acts as the Ombudsman Link Officer for both the Housing Ombudsman (HO) and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman(LGSCO). These bodies play a critical role in overseeing complaints and ensuring accountability across housing and local authority services.

The Housing Ombudsman investigates complaints related to social housing providers, including issues such as repairs, tenancy management, and complaint handling.

In contrast, the LGSCO deals with complaints about wider local authority services, including housing allocations, homelessness support, and adult social care.

As a local authority, we are responsible for managing and responding to complaints in accordance with the frameworks set by both Ombudsmen. This ensures residents have access to fair, transparent, and effective complaint resolution processes. Both organisations provide independent oversight and contribute to service improvement by identifying systemic issues and sharing best practices.

More information on the Complaint Handling Codes from each Ombudsman can be found at:

* + [Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code](https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/landlords-info/complaint-handling-code/)
  + [LGSCO Complaint Handling Code](https://www.lgo.org.uk/information-centre/information-for-organisations-we-investigate/complaint-handling-code)

**Housing Ombudsman Data**

Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, the Housing Ombudsman (HO) handled 38 cases relating to Sandwell Council. Of these, all 38 were enquiries, and 35 progressed to full investigations, an increase from 29 investigations in 2023/24. (Appendix 1)

The outcomes of these investigations were as follows:

| **Case Outcome** | **Number of Cases** |
| --- | --- |
| Findings of maladministration | 18 |
| Classified as service failures | 13 |
| Required redress | 2 |
| No maladministration found | 2 |
| Outside the HO’s jurisdiction | 3 |

In terms of financial impact, the Housing Ombudsman awarded a total of £11,270 in compensation during the year, including £4,778 in formal orders and £3,000 in recommendations, totalling £7,470. This represents a significant increase from the previous year’s total of £2,128. A major contributor to this rise was complaints related to property conditions.

A separate end-of-year report will be produced by the Housing service, providing full details of the HO investigations and the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code self-assessment.

**Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Data**

* Between 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025, the LGSCO dealt with 122 Sandwell Council complaints. Of these, 66 were not for them or were ready for them to investigate. The LGSCO assessed and closed 40 complaints. They fully investigated 16 complaints**.**

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* **Complaints dealt with** – the total number of complaints and enquiries considered. It is not appropriate to investigate all of them.
* **Not for LGSCO** – includes complaints brought to LGSCO before the council was given chance to consider it, or the complainant came to the wrong Ombudsman.
* **Assessed and closed** – includes complaints where the law says the LGSCO is not allowed to investigate, or it would be a poor use of public funds if we did.
* **Investigated** – The LGSCO completed an investigation and made a decision on whether fault was found, or no fault.

**Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) Investigations and Outcomes**

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) conducted 16 full investigations involving Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council during the reporting period. Of the 16 cases there were 14 upheld – this means an investigation was completed and LGSCO found evidence of fault, or Sandwell Council provided a suitable remedy early on.



When adjusted for population, Sandwell recorded 4 upheld decisions per 100,000 residents—lower than the average of 4.7 for similar local authorities. The LGSCO also reviewed compliance in 11 cases and confirmed satisfaction with the actions taken by Sandwell Council in all instances, resulting in a 100% compliance rate. This matches the average for comparable councils.

These figures are taken from the LGSCO Annual Statistics Report for 2024/25. [Click here to view the full report.](https://www.lgo.org.uk/your-councils-performance/sandwell-metropolitan-borough-council/statistics/)

**Response to LGSCO Annual Review – Actions Taken (2024/25)**

In response to the feedback provided by the LGSCO in both their previous and current annual review letters (Appendix 2), the CFT has undertaken a range of actions over the past 12 months to address the concerns raised and strengthen our engagement with the LGSCO service. A separate report outlining further actions in response to this letter was presented to Strategic Leadership Team and the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services in July 2025.

**Training and Development:**

In 2024/25, over 50 officers involved in handling corporate complaints successfully completed the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman’s (LGSCO) official complaints training. This directly responds to previous feedback noting that the Council had not made use of this training in recent years.

Due to the positive impact of the sessions, the Customer Feedback Team will continue to offer further training opportunities. In recognition of national trends and areas of concern, the Ombudsman has now introduced specialised training sessions focused on Adult Services and Education complaints—two areas consistently highlighted across regions as needing additional support. These new sessions aim to strengthen officers’ skills and ensure a more consistent and effective approach to complaint handling.

**LGSCO Complaint Handling Code Awareness:**

The Customer Feedback Team has delivered bespoke training sessions to all service areas involved in LGSCO cases. These sessions introduced the forthcoming LGSCO Complaint Handling Code (becoming statutory in April 2026) and clarified the roles of both the LGSCO and Housing Ombudsman, particularly in cross-jurisdiction cases.

**Ongoing Support and Reminders:**

Following receipt of the 2025 Annual Review Letter in July, a reminder was issued to all relevant officers, accompanied by the LGSCO’s training materials, to reinforce best practices in complaint handling and signposting. The Council will continue to monitor and proactively address known areas of concern to ensure ongoing improvement.

**Signposting Errors:**

Three cases were identified where complainants were incorrectly referred to the Housing Ombudsman instead of the LGSCO. These cases were dealt with at Stage 2 in March 2023, December 2023, and February 2024. All instances occurred prior to the roll-out of the enhanced training referenced above.

The Council remains committed to learning from complaints and will continue to strengthen its approach to Ombudsman engagement, training, and case management going forward.

**2. Lessons learnt from complaints:**

Sandwell Council recognises the importance of learning from complaints as a key element of service improvement. Complaints provide an opportunity to identify weaknesses in our processes and service delivery, and CFT are committed to using this feedback constructively.

In line with the Complaint Handling Codes issued by both the HO and the LGSCO, we take a systematic approach to reviewing complaint outcomes. This includes identifying learning points, implementing corrective actions, and monitoring progress to ensure improvements are sustained. We ensure that any lessons learned from complaints are shared across the relevant teams and services, contributing to a culture of accountability, continuous improvement, and better outcomes for residents.

Examples of lessons learned from various Council directorates during the reporting period are outlined in the (Appendix 3 - Lessons Learnt 2024-25)

**3.Recommendations for actions to be taken in response to any issues/concerns raised.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Recommendations** | **Actions** |
| To replace the current systems used for logging and managing customer feedback (DASH and Open Housing) with a single, easy-to-use, streamlined solution that not only manages feedback but also serves as a unified system capable of handling Information Governance contacts, such as FOIs and SARs. | Business case to be reviewed by the Executive Director of Finance and Transformation and the Assistant Chief Executive as part of developing a digital blueprint for the organisation. In view of the importance of improving the Customer Experience, alongside the emerging proposals for a digital blueprint, a solution will be identified, and a procurement process will be initiated. |
| Learning from Positive Feedback | Compliments provide valuable insight into areas of good practice and highlight where services are making a positive difference.  Managers should ensure that compliments are:   * Recorded appropriately - so they can be monitored and reported alongside complaints. * Shared with the relevant officers and teams to recognise good practice and reinforce positive behaviours. * Reviewed as part of lessons learned activity, so that examples of good practice can be circulated across the organisation and embedded into service delivery.   Recognising and learning from compliments is an important part of continuous improvement, helping to build on strengths and an opportunity to share good practice. |
| Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints will be treated as a priority and responded to within the required timeframes. | To improve our corporate response performance and reinforce a customer-first culture, it is recommended that all Executive Directors and Service Directors take ownership of complaint handling within their directorates. Each service area must prioritise responding to Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints within the 10 and 20 working day SLA respectively.  Given the decline in our average response time (from 15 to 16 days), this requires renewed focus to reverse the trend. Executive Directors and Service Directors should ensure that complaint resolution is embedded as a service priority and that teams are fully aligned with the council’s wider customer experience strategy. |
| Ensure good communication through timely acknowledgement of complaints with responses that demonstrate empathy, use an appropriate tone, and are person-centred | Monitor Quality – Regularly review complaint responses to ensure standards of empathy, tone, and person-centredness are being met.  Deliver training for staff on empathetic communication, active listening, and tone of voice. Encourage personalisation rather than generic replies. |
| Complaints provide a valuable source of intelligence which can be a driver for implementing service improvement. All Directorates are responsible for capturing and applying lessons learned, helping to embed a culture of continuous improvement across the organisation. | The Customer Feedback Team will carry out quarterly lessons learned reviews for each directorate.  All Service Areas are required to complete the Lessons Learned Form for all complaints and are responsible for sharing and implementing any improvements or recommendations.  Lessons Learned, Complaints, and Compliments to be a standing agenda items at monthly Directorate Leadership Team meetings and Service Area team meetings. |
| Recommendations for Improving Complaint Response Performance | Targeted Improvement Plan for Housing Resolutions.  Develop a focused action plan to address delays within the Housing Resolutions team.  Introduce weekly monitoring of open complaints and response times to improve accountability. |
| Service Areas Training Sessions | The Customer Feedback Team (CFT) will continue to provide regular refresher training to service areas that face challenges in meeting complaint response SLAs. These sessions will also cover updates on Ombudsman guidance, changes to internal processes, and provide performance feedback and advice. |
| MP Training sessions | The CFT will continue to monitor areas with high volumes of complaints and will work with the relevant service areas to arrange and deliver sessions with the MP’s officers to ensure they are provided with insight why volumes are high and what they are doing to address the issues as well as provide a valuable insight into the various processes across their specific areas.  This will enable MP offices to support constituents more effectively and efficiently. This proactive approach not only enhances the service experience for our residents but also contributes to a reduction in the volume of MP enquiries received by our officers, allowing resources to be used more strategically. Sustaining this initiative will help maintain strong working relationships and continued improvements in service delivery |
| MP Enquiries | Following meetings with each of the MP offices they have requested that they are provided with a dedicated account on the councils MySandwell portal linked to the MP’s email address  This would allow MP caseworkers to report non-complex issues (e.g. potholes, broken pavement slabs) as general enquiries rather than submitting them as formal MP enquiries, which currently carry a response time of up to 10 working days.  Using the portal for straightforward service requests would enable faster resolution, improve the resident experience, and reduce the volume of formal MP enquiries needing full investigation.  MP offices would retain the ability to track the progress of these enquiries, ensuring transparency and confidence when updating their constituents |
| Local Government and Social Ombudsman (LGSO) - Strengthening Ombudsman Engagement and Service Accountability | Reinforce accountability:  To emphasise the importance of a timely and reasoned challenge to LGSCO draft decisions, the CFT now forward the draft decisions to the Service Director for their consideration, this is currently in place.  Maintain communication protocols:  CFT will continue to proactively request extensions from the Ombudsman if necessary and escalate delays to the lead officer investigating the complaint from the Ombudsman which is currently in place. Moving forward this information will also be escalated to the Director of that service area.  Training participation:  LGSCO is offering targeted training for Children’s and Adults complaint teams. Executive Directors to nominate key officers for training and the CFT to arrange. |
| Compliant with LGSCO Complaint Handling Code when it becomes statutory in April 2026. | CFT have already delivered training sessions with service areas within the Council that fall under the jurisdiction of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and they are fully aware of the LGSCO's Complaint Handling Code ahead of its implementation as a statutory requirement in April 2026. However, to ensure full compliance, a coordinated approach will be taken to ensure that the principles of the Code are fully embedded across all relevant teams, with clear guidance, further training, and oversight. This will ensure consistent, fair, and effective complaint handling, in line with national standards, and further strengthen public confidence in the Council’s approach to resolving concerns. |

**Appendices:**

**1 - Housing Ombudsman Landlord Data**

**2 - LGSCO Annual Review Letters July 2025**

**3 - Lessons Learnt 2024-25**