

Annual Complaints Report 2023-2024

Author: Complaints Team

Table of Contents

Executive summary..... 2

1. Epping District Overview..... 3

2. Accountability for complaints management..... 3

3. Complaints Reporting..... 4

4. Total complaints received..... 4

 4.1 Complaints investigated per Service Area..... 5

5. Outcomes..... 6

6. Complaint Themes..... 7

7. Complaints Service Level Performance 7

8. Complaints escalated to the LGSCO and HO..... 8

9. Learning from Complaints 10

10. The Way Forward 11

Executive summary

This report sets out a detailed analysis of the complaints received by Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) between April 2023 to March 2024.

- Running quarter statistics relating to complaints are reported weekly to the Customer Service Team Manager, monthly to the Service Director, quarterly to our Service Areas, quarterly to our Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) and our Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee.
- EFDC received 1,204 formal complaints, of which 578 fit the criteria of a complaint as per our Complaints Policy, giving an average of 100 complaints per month or 23 per week.
- In 2023-2024, 38% of Stage One complaints were upheld, 16% partially upheld, 35% not upheld and 6% fell into the other category.
- For Stage Two complaints 15% were upheld, 8% partially upheld, 56% not upheld and 15% fell into the other category.
- The main themes emerging for complaints in 2023-2024 were services not provided, repair delays, dissatisfaction with EFDC policies, action not taken, limited communication, conduct of staff and contractors, and customer expectations.
- In 2023-2024 66% of Stage One responses were sent within 10 working days, while 15% of complainants were sent holding letters, and received responses by the stipulated date in their letters.
- 81% of Stage Two responses were sent within 15 working days, while 69% of responses were sent within SLA for the previous year.
- The Council received 23 complaints from the LGSCO, and 7 complaints from the HO. This is an increase of 10% LGSCO complaints, and a decrease of 36% HO complaints compared to the previous year.
- It is crucial for us to learn from complaints and pinpoint areas where we can enhance our customer service. This is extremely helpful in assessing our alignment with our overall vision.
- We are dedicated to enhancing our handling of complaints and strive to provide the best possible service to our customers. Being adaptable is crucial for delivering excellent customer service.
- We will be posting our Annual Complaints Report on our website along with our Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) findings, to meet our quality reporting requirements as per the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

1. Epping District Overview

The Epping District is a three-tier area with public services split between Essex County Council (ECC), EFDC, Town Councils and Parish Councils. There are 58,440 properties registered for Council Tax and 4,541 properties registered for Business Rates in the district. As of 31st March 2024, EFDC has 6,392 properties in our housing stock, 1,089 leased housing units, and 418 commercial properties.

Census 2021 revealed that there is a population of 135,000 living in the area. Based on the population size, EFDC received 1% district wide complaints for 2023-2024.

EFDC and Qualis Property Solutions (QPS)

In 2020, EFDC established Qualis Group Ltd as a means of improving the Epping Forest District by focusing on regeneration, investment, and asset management in order to benefit the community. The company which is now called Qualis Property Solutions (QPS), is a Local Authority Trading Company (LATCo), which is a separated commercial entity from EFDC. It provides repair and ground maintenance services that are no longer in-house for the Council.

2. Accountability for complaints management

- EFDC has a two stage Complaints Process. Stage One complaints should be responded to within 10 working days, and Stage Two complaints should be responded to within 15 working days.
- Where the response timescale cannot be achieved, a holding letter is sent to the complainant, explaining why more time is required to complete the investigation.
- Complainants are sent acknowledgements advising them of the specific date to expect a response if the matter is being investigated, to signpost, or to advise that their concerns are raised with the appropriate teams.
- Complainants receive a comprehensive written response from the investigating senior officer, manager, or director.
- All complaints are fully investigated, and findings are based on available information.
- Complainants are advised that they can escalate their complaint to Stage Two if they are dissatisfied with the Stage One investigation outcome.
- Complainants are advised that they can escalate any concerns to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), or the Housing Ombudsman (HO) during the investigation stage and after the conclusion of Stage Two reviews.
- When complaints are received from the Ombudsman, responses are promptly provided to aid with the initial assessment and investigation.

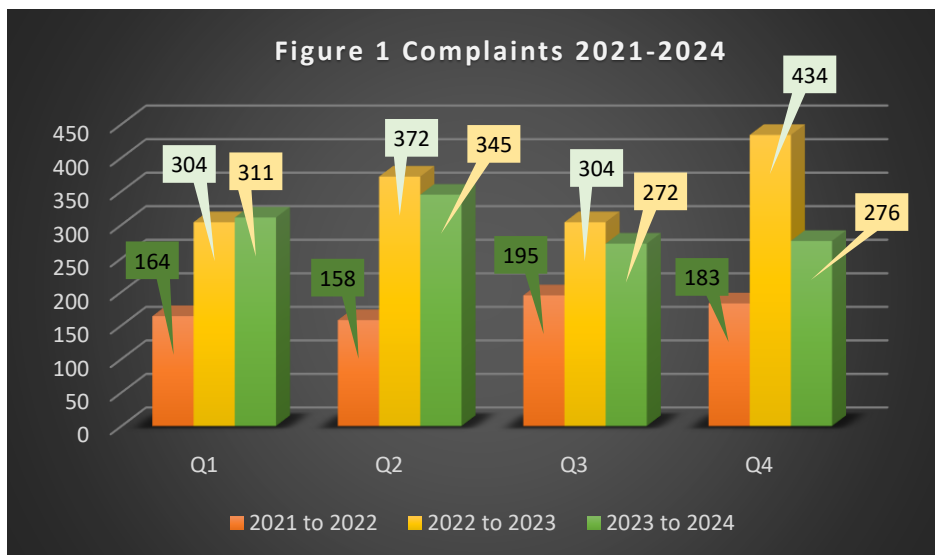
The Complaints Team consisted of the Customer Service Team Manager, Lead Complaints Officer, and Complaints Officer for 2023-2024. The team is responsible for overseeing our Corporate Complaints Process to ensure that we are adhering to the service level agreement outlined in our Complaints Policy. The team also acts as a liaison to the LGSCO and HO when complaints are escalated to them.

3. Complaints Reporting

Running quarter statistics relating to complaints are reported weekly to the Customer Service Team Manager, monthly to the Service Director, quarterly to our Service Areas, quarterly to our Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) and our Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee. To improve our service level, quarterly complaints review meetings are held with Service Areas to explore learning from complaints, discuss recommendations, and agree necessary changes. We conduct a yearly self-assessment to ensure that we are adhering to the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code. We will be posting our Annual Complaints Report on our website along with our Member Responsible for Complaints (MRC) findings, to meet our quality reporting requirements as per the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

4. Total complaints received

Figure 1 shows the total number of complaints received per quarter during 2023-2024 compared to the two previous years.



EFDC received 1,204 formal complaints, of which 578 fit the criteria of a complaint as per our Complaints Policy, giving an average of 100 complaints per month or 23 per week. This compares to 1,414 formal complaints received by EFDC for the previous fiscal year. This is a decrease in complaints of approximately 15%.

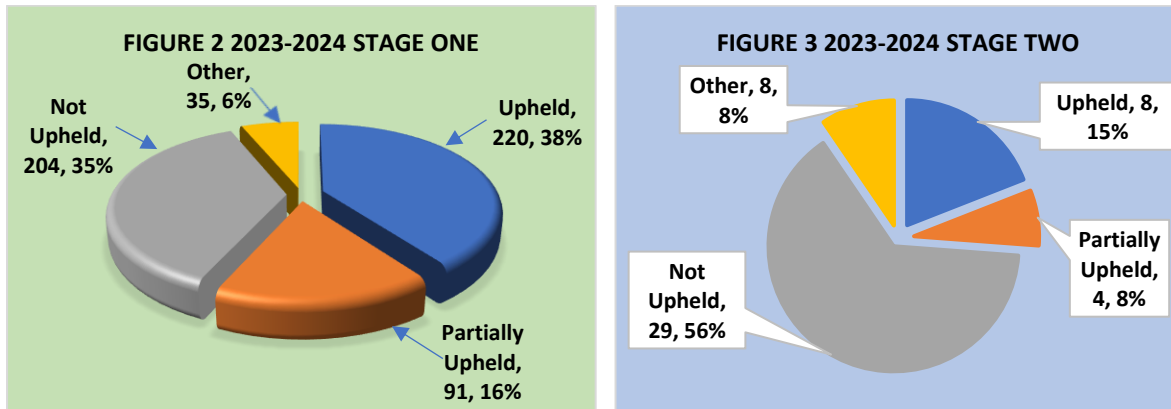
4.1 Complaints investigated per Service Area

EFDC Service Area	Complaints 2022-2023	Complaints 2023-2024
Community Culture & Wellbeing	1	1
Community Resilience (ASB, noise, fly tips etc.)	8	15
Compliance ICT	5	0
Corporate Services	1	1
Customer Services	7	2
Democratic Services (elections etc.)	2	1
Home Ownership	1	0
Homelessness	14	22
Housing Allocations	5	9
Housing Assets & Maintenance	51	60
Housing Development	0	2
Housing Income Recovery	8	6
Housing Options	0	0
Housing Tenancy & Estates	43	30
Independent Living (older people service)	4	1
Legal Shared Services	4	1
Leisure/Car Parking	7	2
Planning & Enforcement	34	52
QPS (Grounds Maintenance) (verge cutting, etc.)	1	10
QPS (Repairs)	92	135
Regulatory & Commercial (environment, licencing etc.)	2	5
Revenues & Benefits (council tax, benefits, etc.)	40	58
Technical (trees, drainage, etc.)	7	5
Waste	406	160
Total	743	578

QPS and the Council's Planning Team saw the highest increase in the number of complaints received in 2023-2024 with 52 (56%) and 18 (53%) respectively. These increases were due to delays in QPS completing repairs and delays in planning applications being determined by the Planning Team. The Waste Team saw a significant reduction with 246 (61%) less complaints received in this period.

5. Outcomes

Figures 2 and 3 shows the categories of complaints outcomes by percentage.



Complaints outcomes are categorised as upheld, partially upheld, not upheld, or other.

Upheld: If evidence presented substantiates the concerns and shows that the Council was at fault, this should be recorded as upheld.

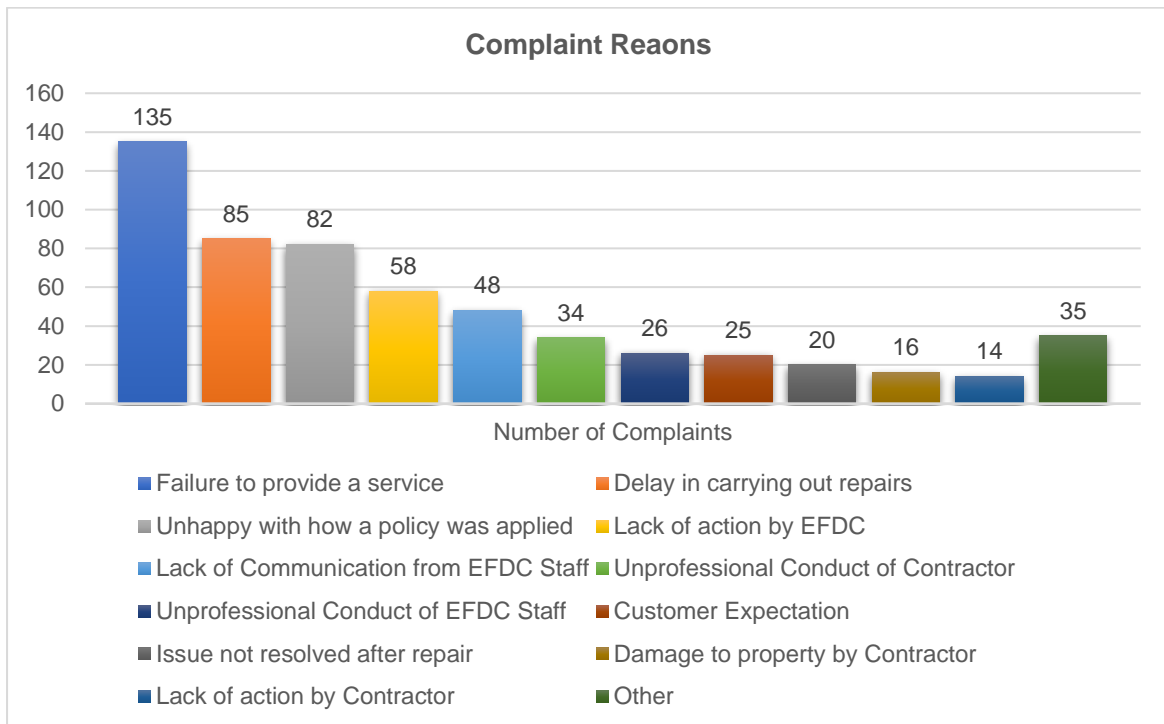
Partially Upheld: If evidence presented substantiates the concerns and shows that the Council was at some fault, this should be recorded as partially upheld. As of 1st April 2024, this complaint outcome will be removed as per the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code 2024.

Not Upheld: If no evidence has been presented to prove that the Council has been at fault, this should be recorded as not upheld.

Other: Where matters that are initially raised as formal complaints but are resolved informally, as appeals, or withdrawn by complainants, this should be recorded as other.

In 2023-2024, 38% of Stage One complaints were upheld, 16% partially upheld, 35% not upheld and 6% fell into the other category. When compared to the previous year, 17% less stage one complaints were upheld, 2% more partially upheld, 13% more not upheld and 3% less fell into the other category. For Stage Two complaints 15% were upheld, 8% partially upheld, 56% not upheld and 15% fell into the other category. When compared to the previous year, 14% less stage two complaints were upheld, 2% more same partially upheld, 2% more not upheld and 3% less fell into the other category.

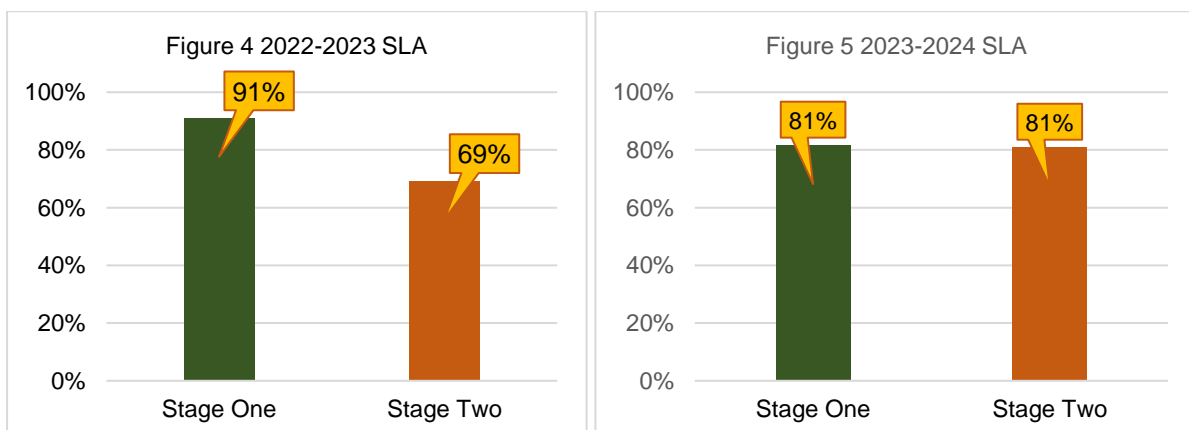
6. Complaint Themes



The main themes emerging for complaints in 2023-2024 were services not provided, repair delays, dissatisfaction with EFDC policies, action not taken, limited communication, conduct of staff and contractors, and customer expectations. These complaints spanned different departments across the council with most concerns being raised about waste collection matters. When compared to the previous year, similar themes emerged. Most concerns raised during the previous year were also about waste related matters.

7. Complaints Service Level Performance

Figures 4 and 5 shows service level performance for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024.

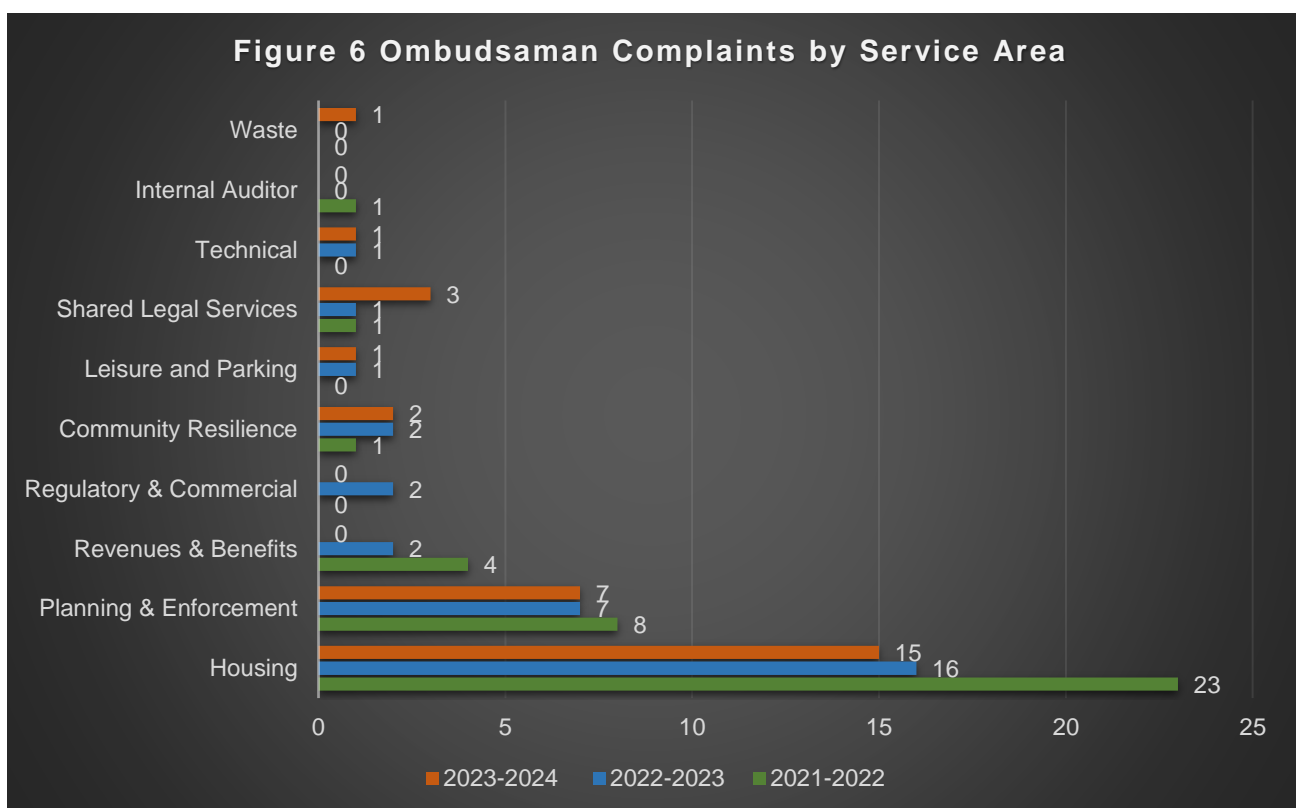


All complainants were sent acknowledgements advising them of the specific date to expect a response if the matter was being investigated, to signpost, or to advise that their concerns were raised with the appropriate teams. In 2023-2024 66% of Stage One responses were

sent within 10 working days, while 15% of complainants were sent holding letters, and received responses by the stipulated date in their letters. This means that 81% of responses were sent within the required time, which is a decrease of 10% from the previous year. 81% of Stage Two responses were sent within 15 working days, while 69% of responses were sent within SLA for the previous year. Though below our expected target for Stage Two, this was an increase of 12% from the previous year. We did not achieve the 85% SLA target for complaints due to staff capacity and new starters learning curve in Service Areas that received a significant volume of complaints.

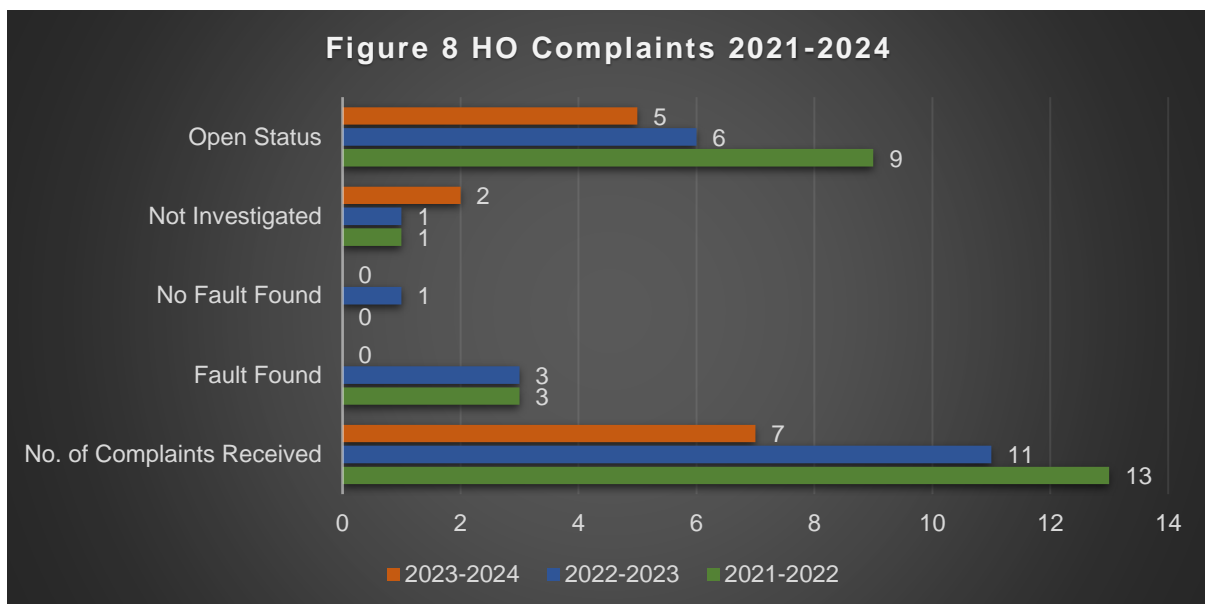
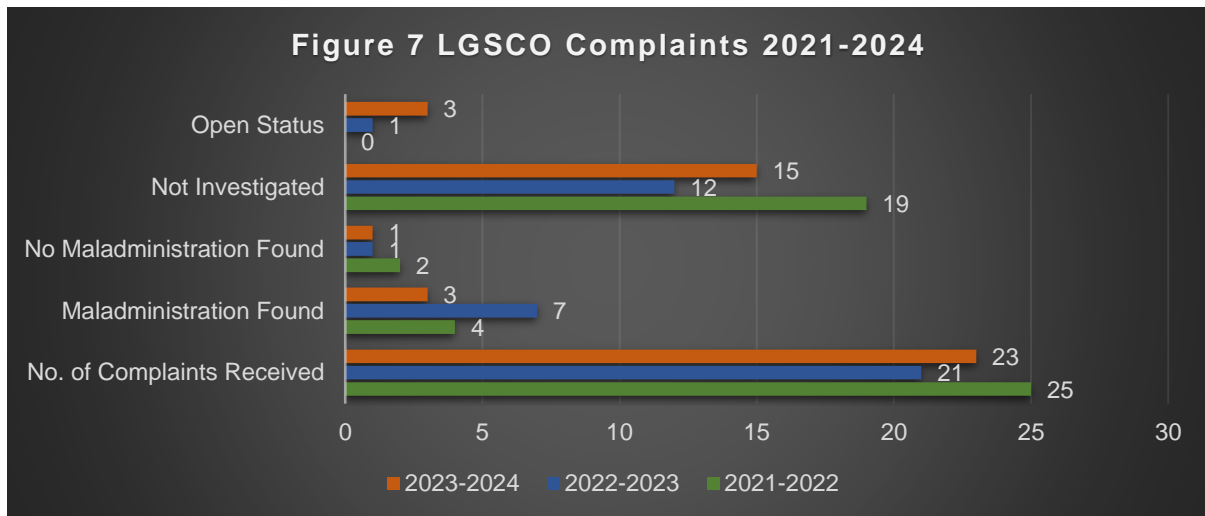
8. Complaints escalated to the LGSCO and HO

Figure 6 shows Ombudsman complaints escalations per Service Area for 2021-2024.



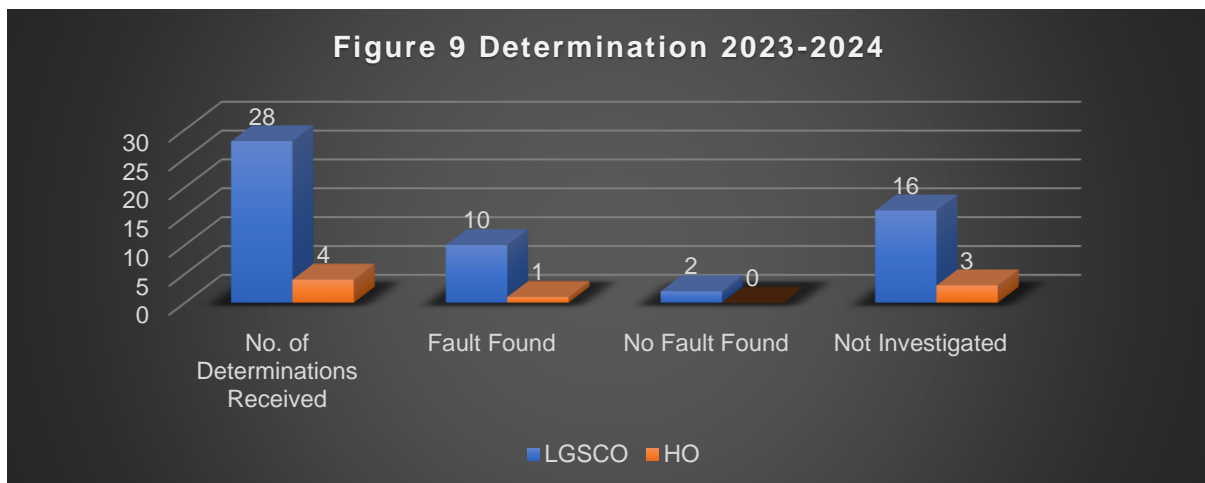
In 2023-2024, Housing and Planning received the highest number of Ombudsman complaints. Combined they represent 73% of complaints escalated to the Ombudsman. When compared to the previous year there was a 1% increase in their combined complaints escalation numbers.

Figures 7 and 8 shows Ombudsman complaints escalations for 2023-2024.



The Council received 23 complaints from the LGSCO, and 7 complaints from the HO. This is an increase of 10% LGSCO complaints, and a decrease of 36% HO complaints compared to the previous year.

Figure 9 shows Ombudsman Determinations for 2023-2024.



There were 28 determinations received from the LGSCO during 2023-2024 of which the outcomes were: 10 Fault Found/Maladministration, 2 No Fault Found/No Maladministration, and 16 Not Investigated. While 4 determinations were received from the HO of which the outcomes were: 1 Fault Found/ Maladministration, 0 No Fault Found/No Maladministration and 3 Not Investigated.

57% LGSCO cases and 75% HO cases determined in 2023-2024 were **not** investigated.

9. Learning from Complaints

It is crucial for us to learn from complaints and pinpoint areas where we can enhance our customer service. This is extremely helpful in assessing our alignment with our overall vision.

Below are key takeaways we have gathered from customer complaints.

- There were instances of residents making multiple complaint submissions for the same concern and repeat complaints for ongoing matters.
- Our approved response templates are being used more frequently. However, we recognise that there is more work that needs to be done to have the templates used at all times.
- There has been better communication with investigators and residents. However, we recognise that there is more work to be done to get our communication to its optimal level.
- There were delays in responding to complaints due to staff capacity and new starters learning curve.
- Implementing a Trends Analysis in our Service Area Reviews helped us to identify and discuss issues before they became formal complaints.

- There needs to be a closer working relationship with our contractors to improve service delivery.

10. The Way Forward

We are dedicated to enhancing our handling of complaints and strive to provide the best possible service to our customers. Being adaptable is crucial for delivering excellent customer service. The following measures will help improve the overall customer complaints journey.

- Workload and capacity management will remain a key focus of Service Area Review discussions.
- We will continue conducting frequent Trends Analysis to identify concerns that may become a major problem.
- We will continue to conduct Complaints Handling Workshops to ensure that all new starters/investigators are aware of our complaints process and the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- Council wide complaints training will be done to ensure that all staff are aware of the Council's complaints procedure.
- Mandatory complaints refresher training will be done with all investigating officers, managers, and directors bi-annually.
- Our complaint response templates have been revamped and are now easier to access. The most up to date templates will always be available for investigators as any updated template will be accessible real time.
- We will conduct random quality sampling of complaint response letters to ensure that we are compliant with the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.
- We will have regular service reviews with QPS to ensure that we remain in sync when responding to complaints.