

Lancashire Combined Fire Authority

Audit Committee

Meeting to be held on Tuesday 30 June 2026

Compliments and Complaints

Appendix 1 Overview of Complaints

Appendix 2 Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code

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Executive Summary

For many years the Service has recorded compliments and complaints to help understand performance, identify learning, and ensure feedback is handled fairly and consistently. From 1 April 2026 the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman expects organisations to follow a new Complaints Code. This seeks to ensure complaints are handled fairly, consistently and promptly, while using learning to improve services and strengthen public confidence. The Code also expects organisations to prepare an annual complaints performance and service improvement report for scrutiny and challenge, and that it should be reported through the organisation's governance arrangements.

This report gives the Audit Committee an overview of the Compliments and Complaints activity during 2025-26, for background information, and explains the changes the Service is making in response to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code, which will be used by the Ombudsman when considering compliance from April 2026.

Recommendations

- Note the compliments and complaints activity for 2025-26.
- Endorse the revised complaint handling arrangements to align with the Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code.
- Support the introduction of enhanced governance and reporting arrangements.
- Note a further annual report including performance against the new Code and identified service improvements will be provided at the end of 2026-27.

Purpose of the report

This report provides the Audit Committee with an overview of compliments and complaints received during 2025-26, highlights the main themes emerging from that activity, and explains the new complaint handling arrangements being introduced in response to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code. It is intended to provide members with assurance that complaints are being monitored, that learning is being identified, and that the Service is strengthening its arrangements in line with recognised good practice.

Overview of 2025-26 activity

The Service continued to receive both compliments and complaints during 2025-26. Compliments highlight where services are performing well, while complaints help identify where improvements are needed about where services are working well and help recognise good service. Complaints are equally valuable because they provide insight into where communication, operational practice or service processes may need to improve.

During 2025-26, complaints were managed through the Service's existing process. Complaints were logged and acknowledged, then referred to an appropriate Investigating Officer to review the issues and provide a response within the relevant timescales. Where a complainant remained dissatisfied, they could ask for the matter to be reviewed at an appeal stage. This section summarises the complaints received during the year and the key themes arising.

In 2025-26 the Service received 105 compliments and 65 complaints. Compliments were received across all areas of the Service. Complaint volumes have risen over the last three years, from 25 in 2023-24 to 46 in 2024-25 and 65 in 2025-26. While complaint numbers have increased, this does not necessarily indicate a decline in service quality. The increase is partly attributable to improved access to the complaints process, including increased use of digital channels. In part it reflects improved access to the complaints process, including the wider use of the Service website, and a clearer route for the public to raise concerns.

Appendix 1 sets out the breakdown of the complaints, the main messages from the 2025-26 data are:

- Complaint volumes have increased;
- Email and website routes are now the main channels for complaints;
- 41% (27) of complaints are 'Against the Service'
 - Complaints against the Service were spread across a wide range of issues, with Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service (LFRS) procedures the largest single category, alongside one-off concerns about inspections, communications, social media, signage and noise.
- 20% (13) of complaints are 'Against LFRS Staff'
 - Complaints against LFRS staff were mainly about behaviour and professional conduct.
- The two other significant areas relate to damage to property (10) and driving (11).
- Most complaints are resolved early and quickly.

While complaint volumes have increased, analysis does not indicate systemic service failure. Instead, themes point to opportunities to improve communication, consistency in procedures, and public interaction.

Changes arising from the Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has introduced a Complaint Handling Code to promote fairer, more consistent and more transparent complaint handling across local government. The Code is issued as advice and guidance for councils and is regarded by the Ombudsman as good practice for other bodies it investigates. The Ombudsman has confirmed that it will begin considering compliance with the Code from April 2026.

For the Service, the main practical changes are set out below.

- **Clearer distinction between service requests and complaints.** The revised approach recognises that not every expression of dissatisfaction should immediately be treated as a formal complaint. Where an issue can be addressed quickly through normal service delivery, it may be handled first as a service request. If the person remains dissatisfied with the response or the handling of that request, it should then become a complaint.
- **A standard two-stage complaint process.** Stage 1 complaints must be acknowledged within 5 working days and responded to within 10 working days. Stage 2 reviews must be acknowledged within 5 working days and responded to within 20 working days. Extensions are only intended for exceptional circumstances and should be explained clearly to the complainant.
- **Stronger governance and reporting.** The Code places greater emphasis on senior oversight, regular performance reporting, organisational learning and an annual self-assessment of compliance.
- **Greater focus on learning and improvement.** Complaint information should not only be used to respond to individuals, but also to identify themes, improve services and demonstrate a positive complaint-handling culture.

These changes mean the previous description of an informal, formal and appeal process needs to be updated so that the Service's arrangements are clearer, more consistent and better aligned to the Ombudsman's expectations. The revised Service Order and supporting templates in the appendices are intended to provide that updated framework.

Governance, assurance and future reporting

It is good governance for members to have visibility of complaint activity, particularly where themes may indicate wider service issues, reputational risk or opportunities for improvement. Regular oversight helps provide assurance that concerns are being handled fairly, that the Service is learning from feedback, and that complaint handling remains aligned with external expectations.

Going forward, reporting will be focused on the number of complaints received, broad themes, timeliness, outcomes, notable learning points and any service improvements made as a result.

The new Code also introduces an expectation of annual self-assessment and a complaints performance and service improvement report, with appropriate oversight by senior leaders and members responsible for complaints. That provides a stronger framework for future assurance reporting than the Service has previously operated.

Business risk

Failure to comply with the Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code could result in adverse findings, reputational damage, and reduced public confidence. Increased complaint volumes may also place additional pressure on service capacity if not actively managed.

If complaints are not handled consistently, within timescales and in line with the Ombudsman's expectations, there could be reputational damage, reduced public

confidence, missed learning opportunities and adverse findings from external review. Strengthening the Service Order, clarifying responsibilities and improving oversight will help mitigate these risks.

Sustainability or Environmental Impact

There are no direct sustainability or environmental implications arising from this report.

Equality and Diversity Implications

Effective complaint handling supports fairness, accessibility and accountability for all members of the public. The revised approach should help ensure that concerns are dealt with more consistently and that learning is used to improve services for different groups. Any specific equality impacts arising from operational changes should be considered through normal service procedures.

Data Protection (GDPR)

This report itself does not require the processing of personal data beyond normal complaint administration arrangements already in place. Individual complaint cases continue to require careful handling of personal data in line with data protection requirements.

Appendix information should continue to be reviewed before publication to ensure that any personal or sensitive information is handled appropriately.

HR implications

There are no direct HR implications arising from the report itself. However, the revised process will require staff and managers involved in complaint handling to understand the new timescales, responsibilities and expectations for responses and escalation.

Financial implications

There are no significant direct financial implications arising from this report. The revised complaint handling arrangements will be delivered within existing resources. However, there is a potential risk of additional costs arising from complaint remedies or increased workload if complaint volumes continue to rise. These will be monitored and managed within existing budget frameworks.

Legal implications

The revised complaint handling arrangements are intended to align the Service more closely with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code and associated good practice. Although the Code is issued as advice and guidance rather than a statutory code, the Ombudsman has confirmed that it will consider compliance when reviewing complaints from April 2026.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

List of background papers

Paper:

Date:

Contact:

Reason for inclusion in Part 2 if appropriate: Insert Exemption Clause

Appendix 1

Overview of Complaints

Nature of the complaint

Nature	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Against LFRS Staff	13	25	13
Against the Service	2	12	27
Damage to property	1	6	10
Driving	8	-	11
Erroneous	-	3	-
External Associations	-	-	4
Query re procedure	1	-	-
Total	25	46	65

Table 1 – Nature of complaints

Service Area

Area	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Central	10	8	4
Eastern	22	7	27
Northern	15	6	13
Pennine	16	11	15
Southern	24	15	19
Western	16	15	27
Total	103	62	105

Table 2 – Service area of complaints

Complaint volumes have increased, particularly in areas relating to service delivery and staff conduct. This suggests a need to ensure consistency in operational practice and communication, rather than indicating widespread service failure.

Appendix 2

Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code

The Ombudsman Complaints Handling Code 'the Code' implemented the 1 April 2026 sets out a process for organisations that will allow them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The purpose of the Code is to enable organisations to resolve complaints raised by individuals promptly, and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals.

Effective complaint handling enables individuals to be heard and understood. The starting point for this is a shared understanding of what constitutes a complaint. In most cases organisations should be able to put things right through normal service delivery processes.

All complaints into the Service will firstly be treated as a 'service request' unless the severity of the complaint dictates otherwise.

A service request may be defined as: a request that the organisation provides or improves a service, fixes a problem or reconsiders a decision.

This provides the Service with opportunities to resolve matters to an individual's satisfaction before they become a complaint. All service requests will be logged, monitored and reviewed regularly.

If the individual is dissatisfied with the findings/outcomes, then the 'service request' will escalate to a complaint.

A complaint may be defined as: an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about the standard of service, actions or lack of action by the organisation, its own staff, or those acting on its behalf, affecting an individual or group of individuals.

A service request must become a complaint where:

- The individual expresses dissatisfaction with:
 - The response, or
 - The handling of the request

Complaint Stage 1: Complaints will be acknowledged and logged at stage 1 of the complaint's procedure within five working days of the complaint being received or within five working days of the noted dissatisfaction of the service request being received.

The Service should provide a full response to stage 1 complaints within 10 working days of the complaint being acknowledged. Any extension should be no more than 10 working days without good reason, and the reason(s) should be clearly explained to the individual by the Investigating Officer.

At the conclusion of stage 1 details will be provided of how to escalate the matter to stage 2 if the individual is not satisfied with the response.