

Customer Feedback Annual Report

Shropshire Council

2021/22

Feedback and Insight Team, Shropshire Council
August 2022



1. Introduction

Shropshire Council's annual customer feedback report presents an overview of the formal feedback received, and responded to, by Shropshire Council between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022.

The report includes key performance data for complaints, compliments and comments. The annual customer feedback report is made available to members of the public, councillors and council staff. The report complements the quarterly reporting and regular service-based monitoring reporting that takes place within the Council during the year. This more regular reporting is used to gain an understanding of customer experiences and the identification of any patterns in feedback. It supports the work that takes place to identify learning and actions designed to prevent further complaints and generate improvement.

Complaints containing an element of social care fall under the statutory guidelines. These are classed as statutory complaints for either adult or children's services and are handled in line with the national statutory complaint procedures. The remainder of complaints are corporate complaints. Corporate complaints relate to a support service or services that do not provide social care and these are handled under the Council's corporate complaints procedure, set locally. You can find out more on Shropshire Council's website.

This report provides a council-wide view of formal customer feedback. Annual reports are also prepared for Adult Services and Children's Services allowing for a more detailed consideration of feedback for those service areas. Those reports are also published on Shropshire Council's website and are used to support key performance and inspection processes.

Complaint

We aim to make it as easy as possible to make a complaint. A complaint is a written or verbal expression of dissatisfaction about a service provided. Family members and advocates may also make a complaint on behalf of one of our customers. We will ask for consent to ensure that the complaint is not being made against the customer's wishes.

Compliment

Many people get in touch with a compliment when the information or support they have received has exceeded their expectations. It is helpful to learn when a service has been provided well or when a member of staff has done a great job. We like to recognise compliments alongside any complaints. It is good for us to say 'thank you' to our teams and staff members too.

Comment

Feedback about a service could be:

- a suggestion to improve it.
- a question as to whether something could be done differently.
- an idea for delivering a service differently.

2. The Complaints Process

Feedback Received

Shropshire Council encourages users of our services, their family members and carers to give feedback and highlight any concerns so that they may be addressed as quickly as possible. If problems cannot be resolved and the customer wishes to make a complaint, staff members can offer advice on how to make a complaint. Support is also available from complaints officers based within Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team.

Telephone: 0345 678 9000

Email: customer.feedback@shropshire.gov.uk

Website: <https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/feedback/>

Online: Log into the My Shropshire portal

Acknowledgment

Complaints will be acknowledged within 5 working days of being received and we let the complainant know how their complaint will be handled.

STAGE 1

An appropriate Investigating Officer will be allocated to the case and asked to investigate the complaint. This is usually a manager within the service area the complaint relates to. The complainant will be provided with a written response within approximately 6 weeks (12 weeks is the timescale for stage 1 and stage 2 responses and 6 weeks is usually allocated to each). In some complex cases it may take longer than 6 weeks at stage 1 but we let the customer know if this extra time is needed and why. The Investigating Officer will write to explain the outcome of their investigation, any learning or actions and information outlining how to progress the complaint if the customer is not satisfied with the outcome.

STAGE 2 - Review

The complaint will be reviewed by a more senior manager, commissioner, or in most cases, the Complaints Monitoring Officer. They will review the Stage 1 complaint and decide if there is more the service can do to address the concerns raised. If the reviewing officer believes the service has done all they can reasonably do, the customer will be written to and advised of this. They will also be given information about the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

Ombudsman If a complaint cannot be resolved locally it can be investigated by the Ombudsman. The Council has a timescale of 28 calendar days to provide a response to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO). Responses are often complex, lengthy and require a large volume of appendices to be collated, catalogued and returned to the LGO. Complainants can request to go to the Ombudsman without a review if they choose to.

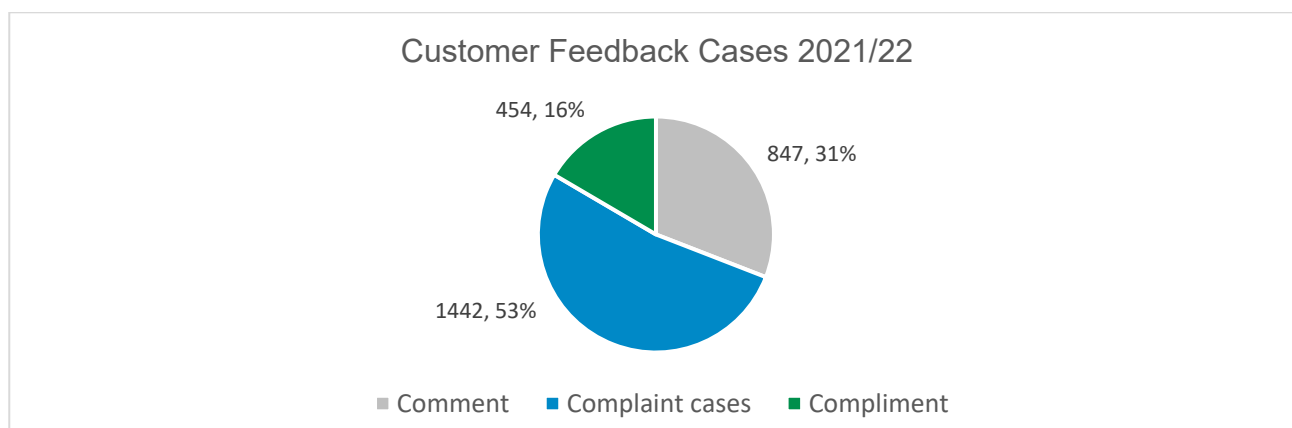
The Feedback and Insight Team coordinates the complaints process, recording and allocating complaints for investigation, monitoring response dates and overseeing performance. We cannot promise to get the result complainants want, but we do make sure that complaints are dealt with in line with the complaints procedures. We aim to keep customers informed of what is happening and the progress being made.

3. Customer Feedback 2021/22

In 2021/22 Shropshire Council received and recorded 2,743 cases of formal feedback. There were:

- 1,442 complaint cases
- 847 comments
- 454 compliments

In addition, there were also 439 MP enquiries recorded between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022. MP enquiries are covered separately later in the report since MP enquiries often relate to complaints and inclusion in the figures for feedback would result in double counting and the over reporting of cases.

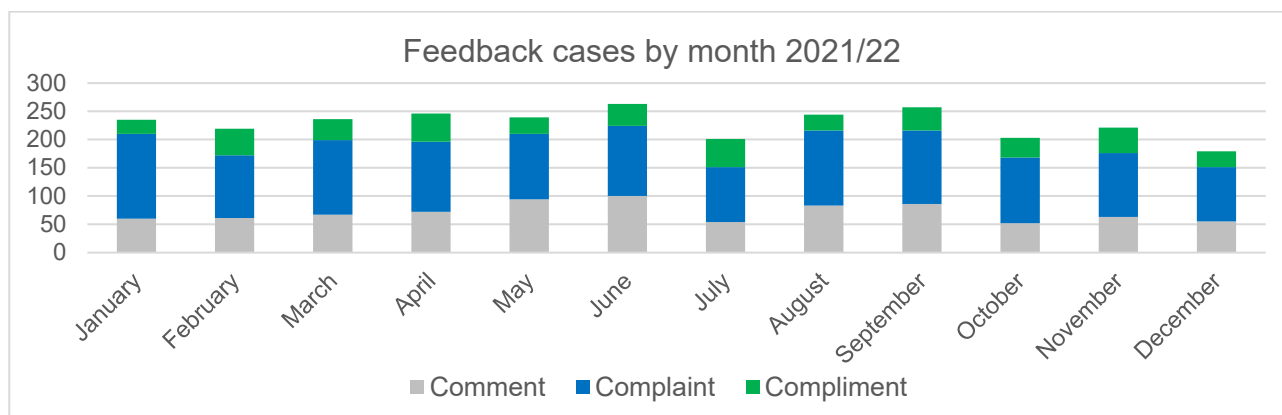


Comments and other enquiries formed 31% of all feedback cases and 16% of all customer feedback cases were compliments. The 1,422 complaint cases formed 53% of all formal feedback and resulted in 1,190 complaint investigations.

The 1,190 complaint investigations were handled under the different statutory and corporate complaints processes. There were:

- 1,010 Corporate complaints
- 134 Adult Services statutory complaints (including provider and multi-agency complaints)
- 46 Children’s Services statutory complaints

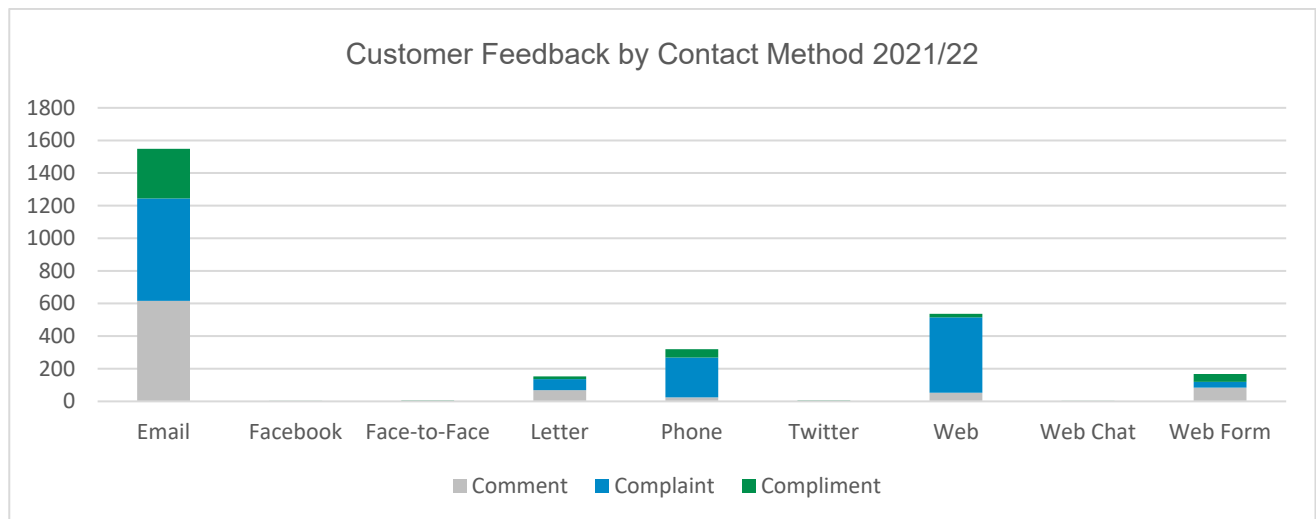
Feedback levels can vary over the year with slight fluctuations influenced by changes in weather conditions (e.g. heavy rain or snow and ice can lead to place-based complaints) or other factors. Overall, 2021/22 didn’t see any dramatic increases due to extreme weather conditions, as seen in some previous years.



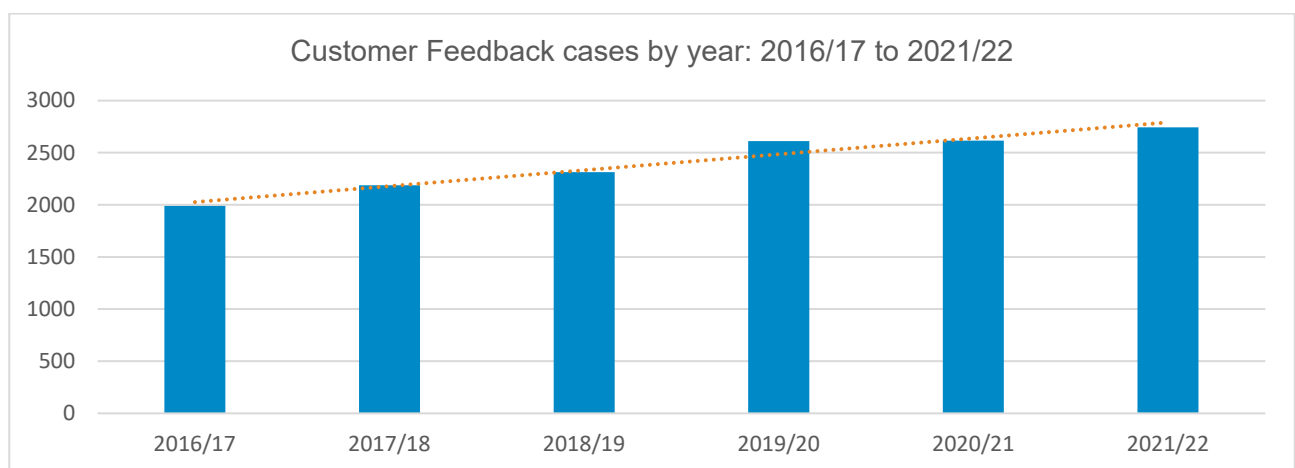
Over the year, the monthly average was 228 customer feedback cases (on average 10 more per month compared to the previous year). Customer feedback cases were relatively steady across the

year with slight decreases in July and December. June (263) and September (257) saw the greatest number of feedback cases and looking across years it is possible to see that September is often a busy month. There were 179 customer feedback cases in December, and this is commonly the month with the fewest cases. Performance data is considered by quarter. In 2021/22 quarter 1 (April to the end of June) and quarter 2 (July to the end of September) saw higher case numbers (725 on average) compared to the second half of the year (647 on average). It seems unlikely that this decrease in case numbers in the second half of the year is a trend that will continue, and numbers increased again slightly during quarter 1 2022/23.

Consideration of contact method highlights that 56% of customer feedback cases (and 43% of complaints) are made by email. 26% of customer feedback is obtained through the website-based methods and 12% over the phone. 6% of customer feedback is provided by letter.

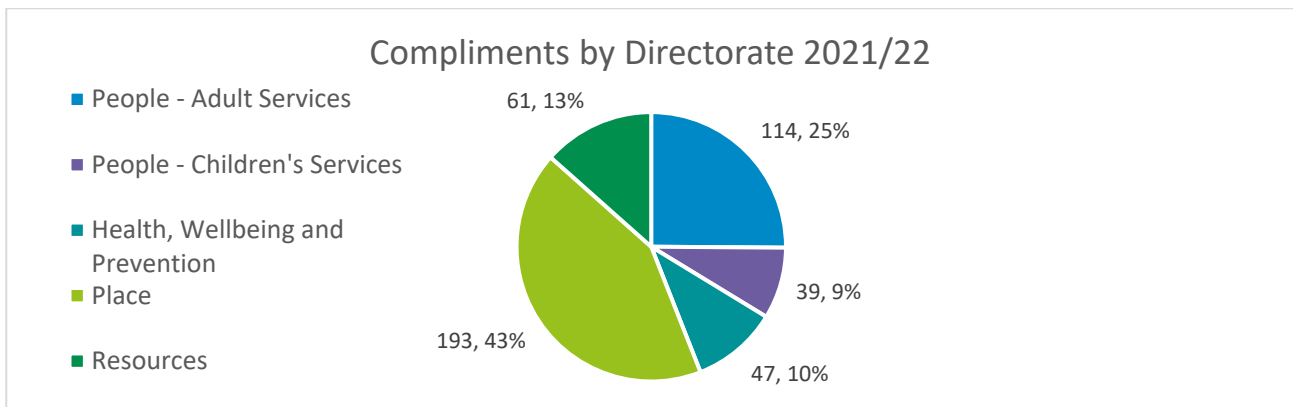


Overall customer feedback case volumes have increased over recent years. There were 5% more customer feedback cases in 2021/22 compared to 2020/21. There has been a 38% increase in customer feedback since 2016/17 and the chart below shows the upward trend line for customer feedback.



Work takes place to monitor the proportion of complaints within annual customer feedback totals. There is some fluctuation annually, but overall, the total has remained relatively similar and in 2020/21 the proportion of feedback cases that were complaints was in line with the average (at 43%).

A closer look at compliments shows that the Place directorate received the largest number of compliments (193 compliments, 43%) followed by People Adult Services (114, 25%).



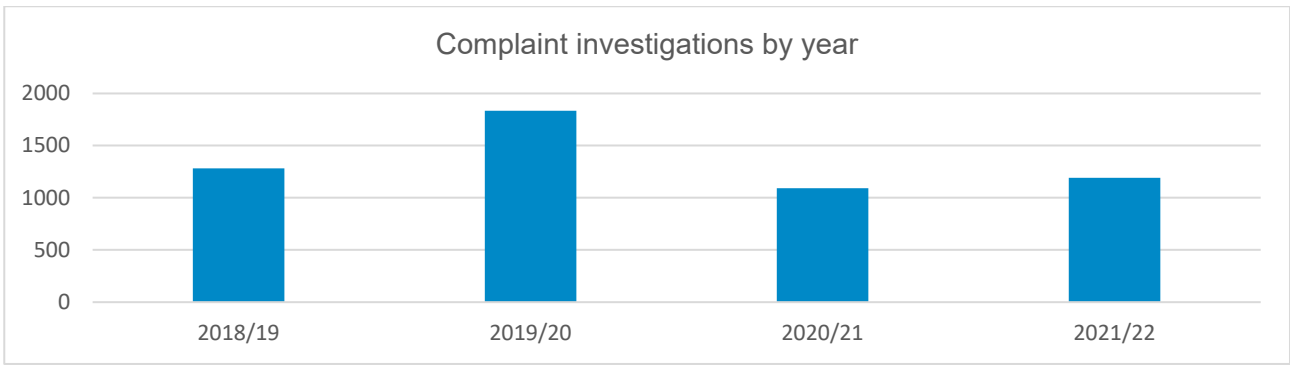
Since the previous annual report Shropshire Council has brought Adult Services and Children's Services together into the People Directorate. For this report the data is presented separately due to the different complaint procedures for statutory cases and the need to provide some comparison year on year. There are still more changes that need to be made to more accurately reflect the new Council structures (particularly at team level). The Dynamics customer feedback and complaints system will need to be reviewed and changed to more accurately reflect new Council structures and allocation of team, service, unit and directorate (see recommendations).

Complaints (and some comments) are explored at greater depth than other types of feedback and may result in investigations. There may be multiple investigations for each complaints case, or a complaint case may be closed before it reaches investigation stage (for example it may be outside of the council's jurisdiction or the complainant may decide to withdraw their complaint). A complaint may refer to the services provided by more than one council department, in which case there will be more than one investigation. Investigations are led by officers (usually team or service managers) with a detailed knowledge of the service area. In 2021/22 there were 1,442 complaints cases and 1,190 complaints investigations.

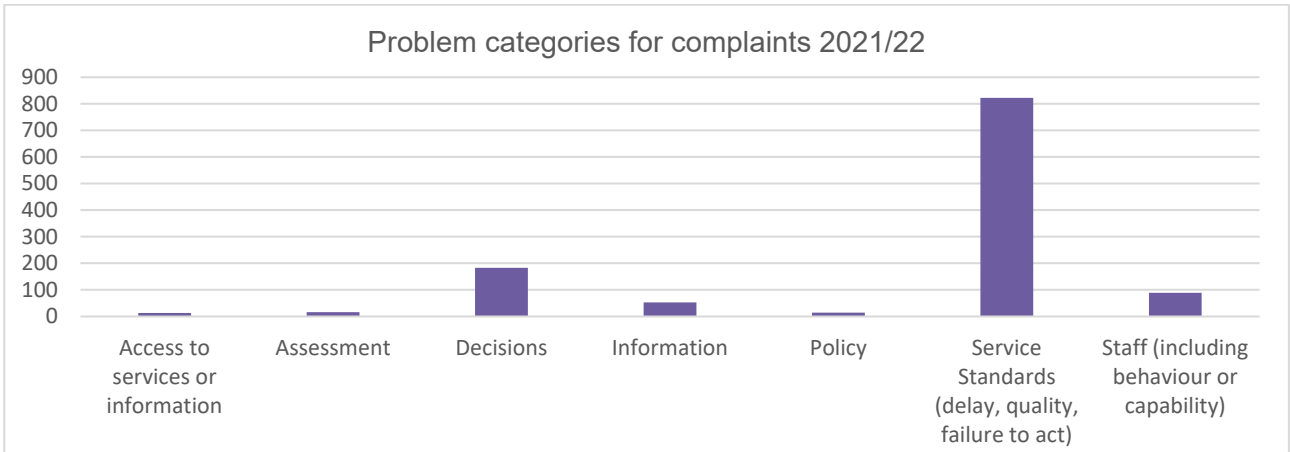
Complaint investigations do not always result in a complete investigation and outcome. Once a complaint case is explored, it is possible that a different course of action is required (e.g. an insurance claim or appeals process), or once the complaint is more fully understood it may be concluded that the complainant is merely asking for a simple remedial action to resolve a concern rather than wishing to proceed through a formal investigation (a request for a service). Of the 1,442 complaints cases, 447 had an early closure reason allocated to indicate that the complaint did not result in a full investigation. Reasons for early closure may be that the complainant did not want to provide contact details or details to allow an investigation to proceed, the issue may not have been concerning a council or commissioned service, or a more appropriate process may have been available (such as an appeal). Complaint outcomes are explored later in the report.

The following paragraphs are based on complaints investigations against which more detailed information is captured. The performance measures Shropshire Council uses to monitor complaints are largely based on complaints investigations.

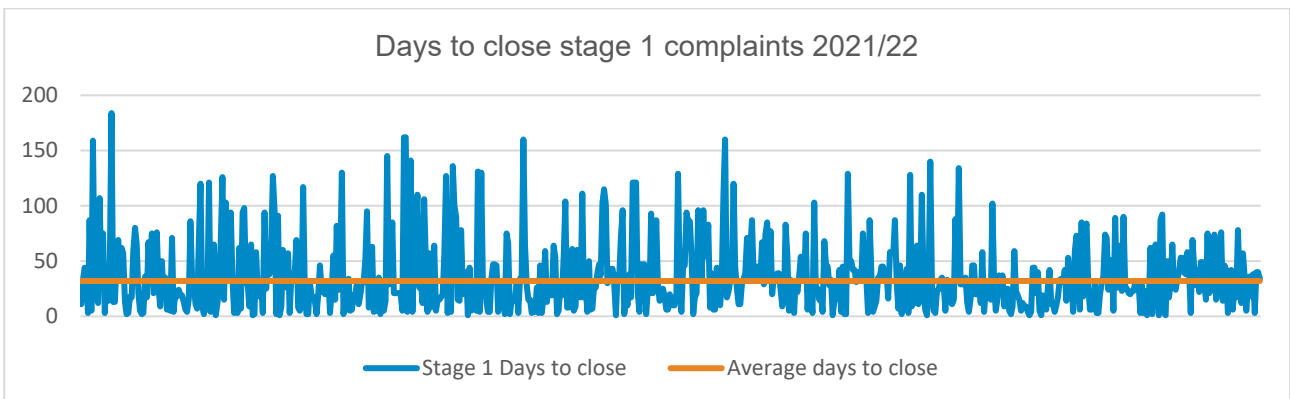
The chart below illustrates that in 2019/20 there were a large number of complaint investigations, out of line with other annual totals. Closer investigation found that too many requests for services were being wrongly categorised as complaints (for example, people saying their bin had been missed were really requesting a service i.e. a bin collection). Within the last two years considerable effort has been made to assess and 'triage' feedback prior to implementing the complaints process (where the process of incoming feedback makes that possible e.g. it is not possible through the portal online customer recording). This has avoided certain issues becoming complaints when they are a request for a service or can be remedied quickly, such as a request to cut back foliage or replace a streetlight. Complaints should be made when there are concerns about the quality of service or other action taken by the council and not before services have had the opportunity to respond or have not been previously aware of an issue. An effective complaints process requires support across the organisation to manage incoming issues and enquiries effectively.



The complaint investigation data collected highlights the reasons for complaints. 'Service standards' was the main category under which complaints were made in 2021/22. Within 'service standards' there are sub-categories and analysis highlights that 'service standards – failure to provide a service/take action', 'service standards – communication (failure/poor)' and 'service standards – inappropriate/incorrect action' and were the dominant sub-categories. 'Decisions' was the second main category under which complaints were recorded. Complaints under the category decisions are usually made because someone is dissatisfied with a decision made.

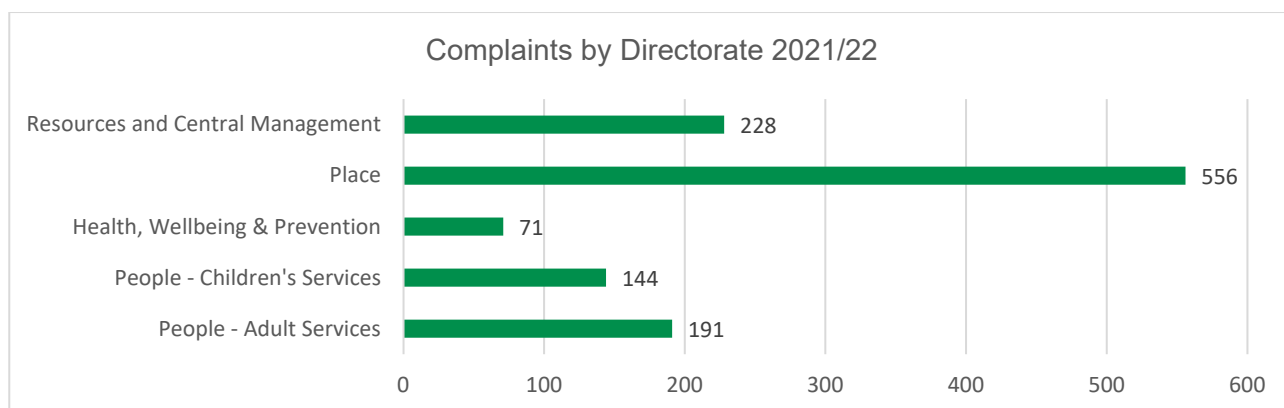


During 2021/22 Shropshire Council took an average of 32 working days to respond to stage 1 complaints (longer than the 30 working day timescale). The median was 24 working days. This has been the dominant performance issue through the year. Quarterly performance reporting has been highlighting the increase in average time taken to respond to stage 1 complaints (the average in 2020/21 was 23 working days (a noticeable increase on the 14 working days average in 2018/19). The trend has been for longer response times over the last few years. The Council has 60 working days in total to respond to corporate complaints, 30 working days for each stage (stage 1 and stage 2). Days to close is a key measure within ongoing performance monitoring. Feedback and Insight Team officers report increasing complexity within complaints cases and this, alongside service pressures, appears to be contributing to longer-running cases. Too many cases exceed timescales (as shown below).



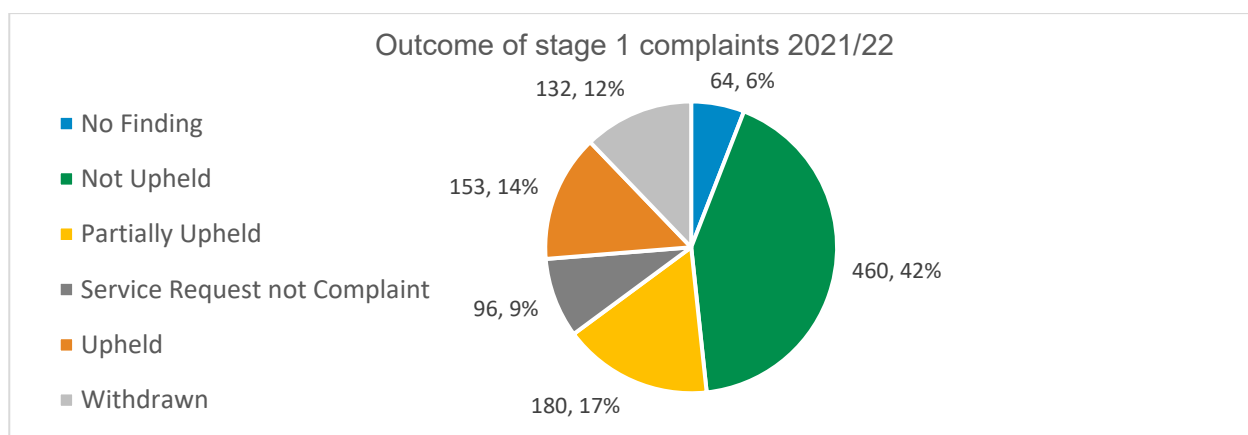
Some types of service are more likely to result in complaints than others and the chart below highlights complaints by directorate. Shropshire Council's Place Directorate handles the largest proportion of complaints compared to other directorates within Shropshire Council (47% of all complaints) followed by Resources (19%) and Adult Services (16%). The proportions are very similar to 2020/21.

Taking a closer look at the breakdown of complaints by service highlights that Highways and Transport received 27% of all Shropshire Council's complaints in 2021/22 (very similar to the previous year). Waste services accounted for 8% of all the complaints. These are services used by all residents. Complaints relating to Adult Services form 16% of all complaints and complaints relating to Children's Services 12%. Data for Adult Services and Children's services is explored in more detail throughout the year and within the annual reports for these services. The Resources directorate includes a smaller number of customer-facing services (many providing services to other council departments). A significant proportion of the complaints allocated to Resources are not related to its own services but to those of other departments. An example of this is that the finance department may deal with a complaint relating to the financial arrangements in a different service or, for example a complaint may be made to progress an insurance claim. Legal services will be allocated complaints at the second stage of the corporate complaint process.



When considering complaints performance, the outcome is very important. The data for 2021/22 shows that:

- At the end of the 12-month period 2020/21, there were 1085 closed stage 1 complaints.
- Of the closed stage 1 complaints 14% were upheld (153 complaints), 17% were partially upheld and 42% were not upheld.
- Considering the complaints that were upheld, 32% were with Highways and Transport and 11% were with Waste Management.
- 6% of complaints investigations resulted in no finding. A complaints investigator may find that not enough evidence or information is available to draw a conclusion, or they may be unable to obtain enough information from the complainant to fully complete the investigation. Occasionally it may be a sign of failure to investigate. The proportion of 'no finding' outcomes has reduced for 2021/22 following a focus within performance reporting.

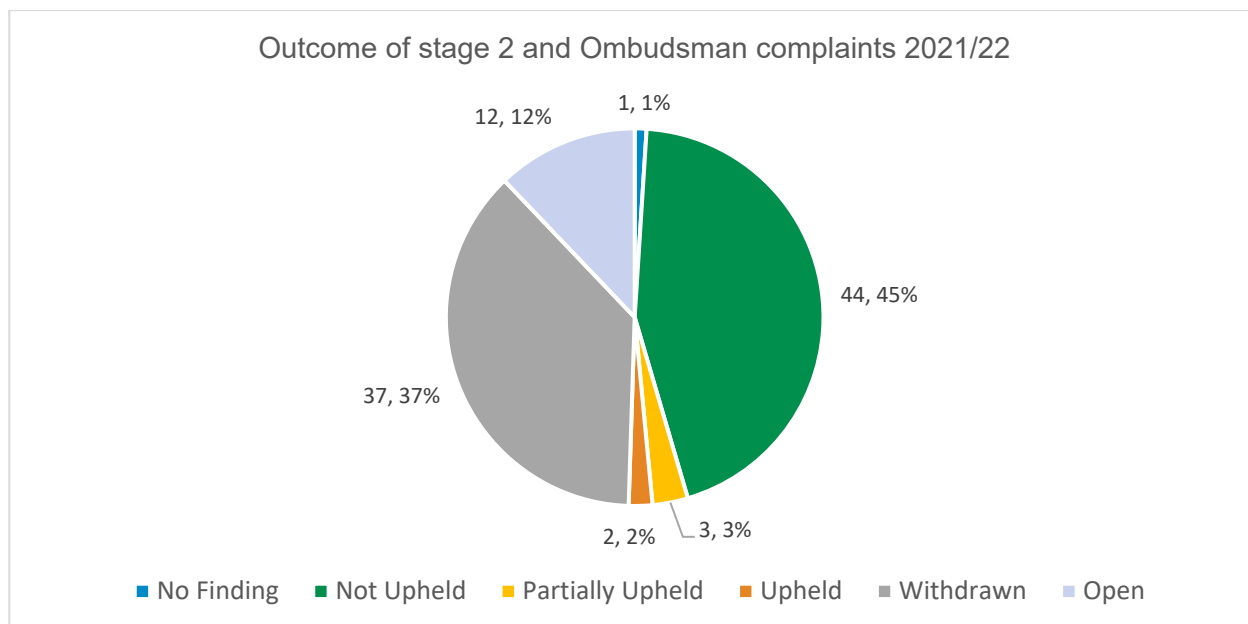


4. Progression of Complaints

Effective stage 1 complaint handling can reduce the number of stage 2 complaints. It is important to understand how many complaints progress beyond stage 1 and this is a measure included within regular performance reporting. During 2021/22 only a small proportion of all the complaints Shropshire Council received progressed beyond stage 1 but despite numbers remaining low, the number of cases progressing beyond stage 1 has increased compared to previous years. There were 47 investigations beyond stage 1 in 2019/20 (82 in 2020/21 and 99 in 2021/22).

In total, 99 complaint investigations were at stage 2 or with the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) in 2021/22. Occasionally some complaints may progress prematurely to the Ombudsman without a stage 2 investigation and these will be referred back where appropriate. The table below shows the number of complaints investigations beyond stage 1 and the chart below highlights the outcome of those complaints.

Stage 2	Ombudsman	Total investigations beyond stage 1
50	49	99



The Shropshire annual report from the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) highlighted that 77 complaints were received by the Ombudsman for Shropshire Council in 2021/22 and 79 cases were considered/decided. This total will include complaints received by Shropshire Council in previous financial years, so the data is not comparable with local data covered in this report (looking at cases received within the financial year).

Of the 79 cases decided, 11 were not upheld, 8 were upheld and the remainder resulted in other actions such as referring back for local resolution, offering advice, or closure after initial enquiries. The LGO reports Shropshire Council's upheld rate at 42%. The LGO upheld rate for similar local authorities is reported as 64%. Available data from the Ombudsman is used within a separate, performance report to track annual performance over the years and for benchmarking with the local authority family group.

Ombudsman Complaints and Enquiries Decided

Category	Number received
Adult Care Services	12
Benefits & Tax	6
Corporate & Other Services	10
Education & Children's Services	14
Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation	4
Highways & Transport	13
Planning & Development	20
Grand Total	79

Outcome of Decisions Made

Advice given	Closed after initial enquiries	Incomplete/ Invalid	Referred back for local resolution	Detailed Investigations			Grand Total
				Not Upheld	Upheld	Upheld rate (%)	
1	31	3	25	11	8	42	79

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on complaints numbers in 2020/21 and there may have been a slight impact in 2021/22 but there was a requirement to continue to deliver a complaints service through the pandemic so the impact will have had very little influence over the data for 2021/22. Within the Ombudsman's annual complaints letter and report for Shropshire Council 2021/22 the Ombudsman has repeated concerns highlighted in 2020/21 concerning the application of local authority complaints functions. The letter reads *"It is my continued view that complaint functions have been under-resourced in recent years, a trend only exacerbated by the challenges of the pandemic. Through the lens of this recent upheaval and adjustment, I urge you to consider how your organisation prioritises complaints, particularly in terms of capacity and visibility. Properly resourced complaint functions that are well-connected and valued by service areas, management teams and elected members are capable of providing valuable insight about an organisation's performance, detecting early warning signs of problems and offering opportunities to improve service delivery."* This request is referenced in the recommendations towards the end of the report. Appendix 2 highlights findings and recommendations made by the Ombudsman within 2020/21. All recommendations are monitored and actioned by the Shropshire Council service area responsible for the complaint, and in most cases overseen by the service area's Director.

Linked to the issue of complaint progression, Shropshire Council is experiencing an increase in unreasonable customer behaviour and the number of complainants and customers who may be categorised as persistent and/or vexatious. Shropshire Council has a separate procedure (the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure) for the management of such cases. Unreasonably persistent and vexatious customers are those individuals who, because of the nature or frequency of their contacts with the Council, hinder our ability to effectively deliver services to other customers. For example behaviours may include making unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to respond to issues and seeking to have them replaced; raising numerous questions and insisting they are all answered; submitting repeat requests with minor additions/variations and insisting these are 'new' issues; refusing to accept a decision or outcome of a case; adopting an aggressive or threatening demeanour towards staff. Restrictions to customer contact can be applied where necessary but all cases (whether restrictions, under the procedure are applied or not) do lead to an increased draw on staff time (often impacting multiple teams and services over a long period and negatively impact staff morale. Due to separate data systems it is not easily possible to accurately monitor persistent customer behaviour. An indication is that 7% of all customers with customer feedback investigations have requested 3 or more investigations in the last 2 years (customers may also initiate other processes such as MP Enquiries, Information Governance processes, insurance claims etc). The number of restrictions applied per year has more than tripled compared to previous years.

Annual Comparisons 2019/20 to 2021/22

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
<p>Number of compliments – reduced</p> <p>In 2021/22 Shropshire Council received 614 compliments. This was a significant increase on previous years and many compliments were directly linked to the actions taken by Shropshire Council to respond to the pandemic. Compliments have now returned to more average numbers. The average number of compliments over the last 7 years was 511 but compliments remain above the 2019/20 total.</p>	405	614	454
	Performance is in line with expected numbers.		
<p>Complaints investigations – in line with expected number</p> <p>The number of complaint investigations recorded by Shropshire Council totalled 1,190 in 2021/22. This is an increase on the previous year but a decrease on the year before. Overall, there is a clear upward trend shown in the last 5 years of data, but increases have slowed over the last 2 years. Work has been taking place to triage cases and ensure service requests are not taken forward as complaints prematurely.</p>	1,883	1,091	1,190
	Over the last 7 years complaint investigation numbers have increased by an average of 6% a year (with significant variations).		
<p>Days to close – Average days to close increased</p> <p>The average number of working days taken to respond to a stage 1 complaint during 2019/20 was 22 working days. That average has increased to 32 working days in 2021/22. Performance data shows that too many complaints investigations are exceeding the 30 working days total for stage 1 corporate complaints. Complaints investigators increasingly report concerns about their ability to meet complaint timescales as a result of workload and other pressures.</p>	22 working days	23 working days	32 working days
	Days to close is the performance indicator of most concern due to increases. Too many complaints investigators are exceeding timescales.		
<p>Outcome of complaints – Similar proportion upheld</p> <p>When considering the proportion of complaints upheld, performance overall is relatively steady and suggests that standards are being maintained. It would be a concern if performance monitoring highlighted too few cases being upheld (it is important that Shropshire Council accepts where things have gone wrong and strives for improvement). The slight increase from 12% in 2020/21 to 14% in 2021/22 is not a concern and in line with the 2019/20 proportion.</p>	14%	12%	14%
	Performance has remained steady. Close monitoring of upheld and partially upheld complaint numbers has taken place through the year and that suggests performance remains in line with expected values.		
<p>Complaints progressing beyond Stage 1 – increased</p> <p>In 2019/20 2.7% of cases progressed to stage 2 or the Local Government Ombudsman (47). In 2020/21 82 cases progressed beyond stage 1 and in 2021/22 the total was 99 (8.3%). This is a slight concern in terms of staff time and resources, but to add context the Ombudsman upheld rate decreased from 50% in 2020/21 to 42% in 2021/22 so increased numbers of complaints are not impacting overall council complaint performance.</p>	2.7%	7.5%	8.3%
	More complaints are progressing beyond stage 1. Numbers remain small (99 in 2021/22) but cases can be complex and time consuming.		

5. Example Compliments

Shropshire Council received 454 compliments during 2021/22. Example compliments are included below to illustrate the range of compliments received by different services. Receiving a compliment can make a big difference to a member of staff working hard to provide support for others and deliver services as effectively as possible. Although compliments are not given the same attention as complaints, they are used within the Council to understand where things are working well and to recognise the additional efforts made by individual members of staff.

Compliment for Customer Services: *"I was helped by a very lovely lady today, with free school meals. Whenever I ring Shropshire Council the staff are always very happy and helpful. Thank you for making things easier for someone who is not very good on the internet. Keep up the good work."*

Compliment for Handyperson Service: *"My son was so excited as soon as he saw the stair rail and was eager to try walking up and down the stairs using it immediately. He now walks more confidently and faster using it and can also walk down the stairs stood up instead of on his bottom. Thank you so much to everyone"*.

Compliment received for Registrars: *"I am just writing to say a huge thank you to the registrars who performed our ceremony on Saturday, unfortunately with the emotion of the day the lady and gentleman's names have slipped me. They were so professional and managed to put myself and [name removed] at ease through the whole ceremony with a kind and supportive manner, think I was the more emotional wreck to be honest. They explained everything to us and made the ceremony really special as it was relaxed and calm throughout."*

Compliment for Highways: The customer asked to pass on a commendation to two men who are currently filling in potholes on Bynd Lane, Billingsley. He would like to commend them for doing a *"fantastic job"*. He said that they have *"really worked hard and done a brilliant job"*.

Compliment for Waste Management: *"I would like to say a huge "Thank You" to the staff at Bridgnorth Recycling Centre where I had dropped my wallet earlier today after dropping off waste from a building project. The staff concerned who dealt with this matter were extremely efficient in all regards. I'm very grateful for their efforts to reunite me with the missing wallet and can't praise them highly enough. Please pass on my grateful thanks to the always helpful team, who are a credit to your organisation. Thank you."*

Compliment for Street Scene: The customer reported broken glass outside her property yesterday and a man has been to clean it all up and *"made a lovely job"*. She would like to pass on her compliments for a job well done.

Compliment for Housing Options and Homelessness Team: *"This year, when I became homeless, I was allocated [name removed] as my Housing Options Officer. She listened, her natural ability to be understanding really is fantastic, her incredible combination of being kind, caring and knowledgeable along with brilliant professionalism and insight has made this difficult time so much easier..... I now have lots of support from different service providers. I really cannot express my gratitude or my thanks enough..."*



6. Example Complaints

Shropshire Council received 1,442 complaints during the year 2021/22 and carried out 1,190 investigations. Some example complaints have been included below to highlight the type of feedback Shropshire Council receives. These examples were not all upheld. 14% of closed stage 1 complaints were upheld and 17% partially upheld. Some complaints arise from a lack of understanding of the service Shropshire Council can provide. Where necessary wording within complaints has been removed within the examples to ensure anonymity. The next section of this report looks more closely at learning and the actions taken following complaint investigations.

"I made a complaint last year about the lack of footpaths in the area and my complaint hasn't been effectively dealt with. Over the holidays another child was nearly run over because of a lack of footpaths in the area. We have what looks like planned footpaths, but they are grassed over and used as car parks for run down cars. This is beginning to be a problem with us all in the cul-de-sac."

The customer is reporting an ongoing issue with a large overgrown hedge. They report it has been an issue for the last 4 years and it is now 13ft tall. The work was allocated but the customer says it has still not been completed. *"People cannot get their mobility scooters past the hedge and cars get scratched using the road alongside it."*

The customers complaint is in respect of the PCN she has received. The customer said they informed the council at the time of parking that the machine was not working, and the complaint is that they are now being chased for payment of the fine.

The customers complaint is in respect of flooding. *"We have contacted you by telephone on numerous occasions in relation to a blocked drain....The blockage is causing large amounts of surface water ...We have spoken to your officers who, on numerous occasions, who has assured us that the blockage will be dealt with. It has not been resolved! ...This matter needs to be dealt with ASAP or I shall be seeking reimbursement of costs caused by the damage."*

The customer wishes to report that a road recently repaired has *"returned to its previous state"* and that the road is so bad now, he says *"I cannot leave my street and my home without massive damage to my car."*

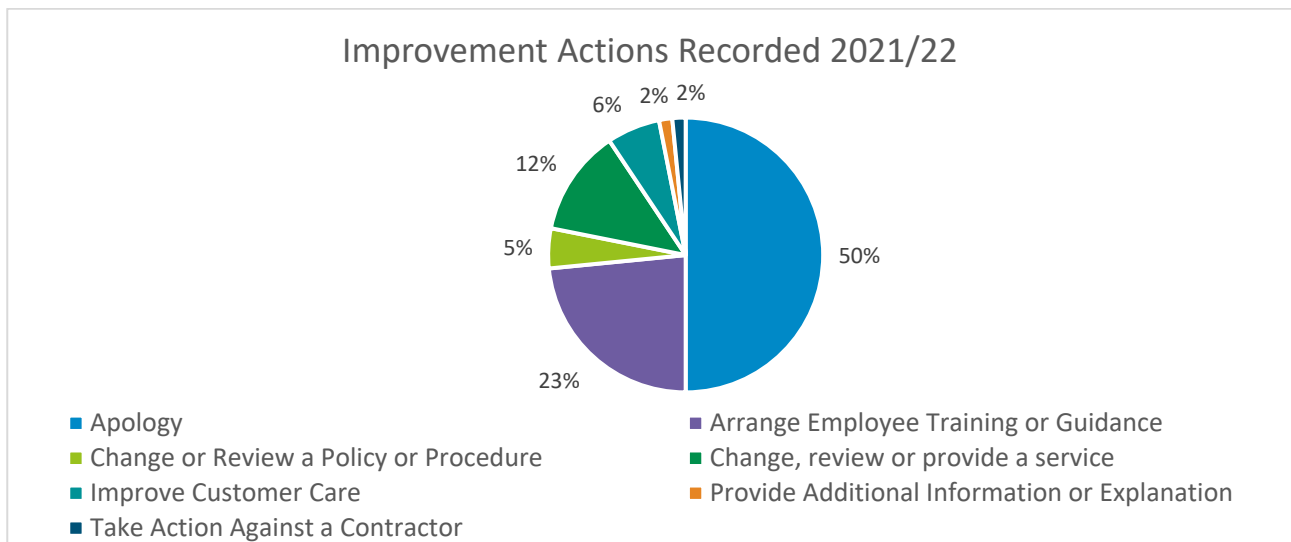
The customer wanted to provide feedback about problems with parking in Bridgnorth. She described how she had arrived early on Saturday morning so the car park wasn't too busy, but on arrival the queue at the pay machine was long. She parked and tried to pay for the parking on her phone but *"after several attempts gave up"*. She reports that there were people walking away saying the machine wasn't working, she *"decided to persevere and wait to see if she could figure it out"*. Working together, five people in the queue *"eventually managed to get tickets but it took 30 minutes"*. The complainant would like to see the issue fixed and the machine updated or improved to address the issue.

The customer has reported that they have had *"a very difficult experience with the taxi renewal licence"* for her husband and the customer says this has led to her husband being out of work because the licence is delayed.

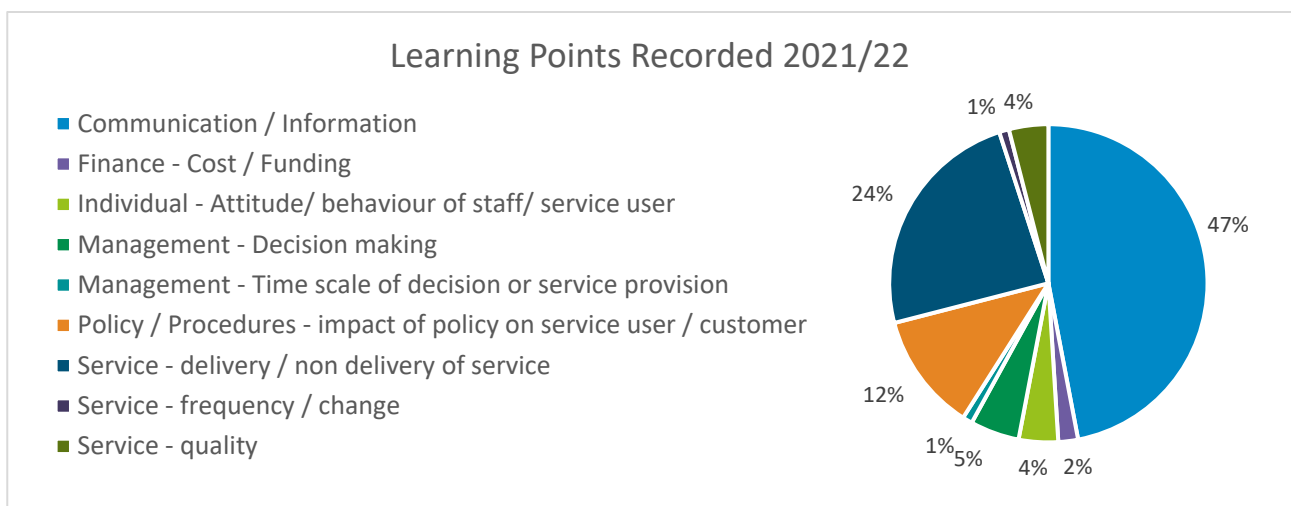


7. Learning and Actions

Shropshire Council recorded learning and/or actions against 863 complaints in 2021/22 (and 105 of those included detailed actions or lessons). Actions and lessons are usually made when complaints are upheld or partly upheld. If only a small proportion of complaint investigations result in a finding of fault there will be fewer remedial actions or learning. However, this recording of learning and actions should be an area for ongoing improvement (currently around 30% of all partly upheld or upheld closed cases). This is referred to in the recommendations in section 12. The charts below highlight the primary action and learning point recorded.



Of the actions that were recorded against complaints closed in 2021/22 50% were to provide an apology and 23% to arrange employee training or guidance.



47% of learning related to communication or provision of information (similar to the previous year). Communication is consistently a common and dominant theme within complaints. Complainants often highlight their disappointment that they were not contacted efficiently, were not communicated with enough, or information was not shared effectively. Some complaints cases emphasise that more effective communication at an earlier stage could have led to a better understanding of the issues or the processes council staff work to and prevented the development of a formal complaint. Similarly, a lack of communication and response is commonly the cause of escalation within the complaints process.

8. Example Learning and Actions

The recording of learning is strongly encouraged following the completion of a complaint investigation. Acknowledging and acting on learning from complaints can avoid any mistakes from being repeated and lead to ongoing improvement. Examples are shown below to highlight the type of learning and action recorded. This is one element of wider work undertaken to focus on quality, and ensure customers receive a good standard of service. Wording within the examples has been altered slightly for simplicity and to ensure confidentiality.

There was evidence of confusion over “who was doing what” and this meant that partnership working with external services was not effective, particularly assessment and referrals. Work will take place with colleagues from the external service to clarify arrangements, roles and responsibilities and process.

The service area made a commitment to ensure that their complaint handling processes are improved, and responses are provided in a timely manner within the deadlines set.

Training and support will be provided to staff members to ensure that the team are following up all alternative avenues of enquiry, and preferred methods of communication, and investigating accounts thoroughly to determine why balances remain outstanding before reissuing cases back to the solicitors.

The investigation highlighted that although the email was intended to clarify the situation, it wasn't based on the correct information. Learning is to ensure all details are available and checked to avoid gaps in information before issuing communications to customers.

The response included an apology that payments officer did not include sufficient information of Shropshire Council's position, clarity on the amount payable and the timeframe of the consequences of not responding to the letter.

Following the complaint, the importance of being accurate and checking documents before sending to service users and their families has been reiterated. The member of staff has committed to making checks with her work and has taken on board the points raised with regards to the complaint.

The member of staff the complaint was made about has spent some time with her manager discussing how other people may interpret her approach. She has been asked to reflect on how she can adjust her style so unintended offence is not felt by those she is communicating with.

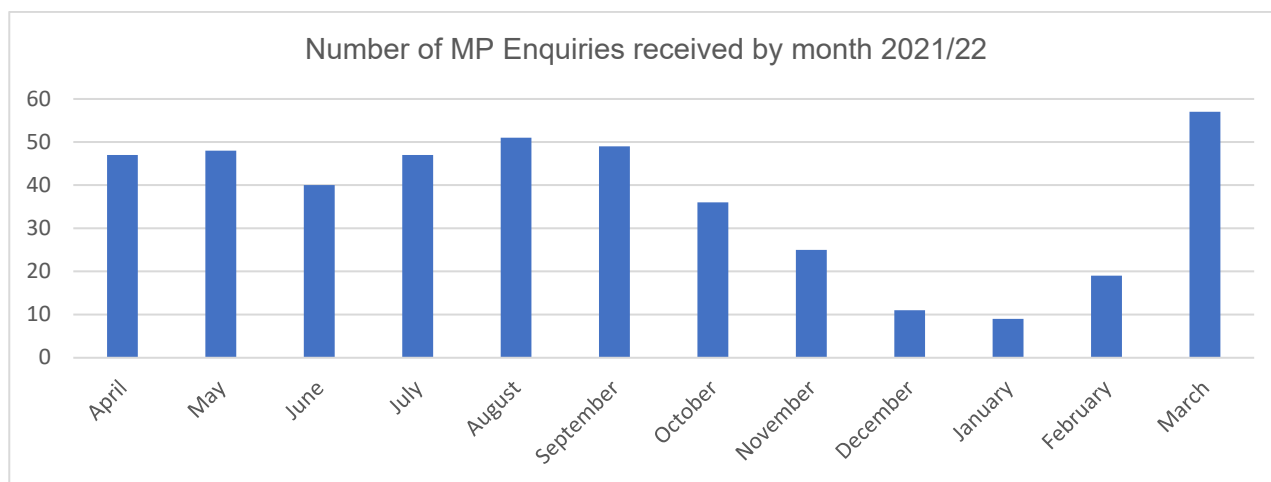
An apology was provided. The finding of the complaint was that the service provided had fallen short of expected standards and created a period of uncertainty for the complainant and their family. Shropshire Council managers have agreed to action a review of current processes across the service to ensure that this situation does not arise again.

The complaint investigation found that there was a delay between assessment and support commencing for the complainant. There was some lack of joint understanding within the communications prior to the complaint and this can be considered learning for future cases.

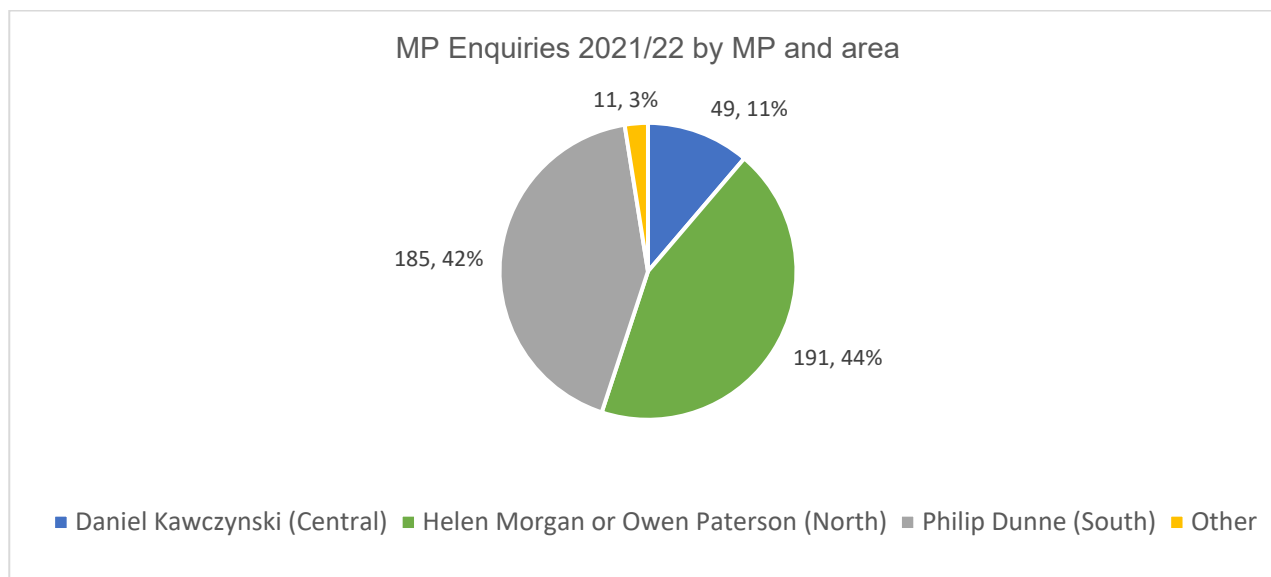
9. MP Enquiries

MP enquiries can be made in addition to a complaint and can duplicate cases received by Shropshire Council. Often a complainant will choose to make their local Elected Member, MP, Shropshire Council and sometimes the Local Government Ombudsman aware of a complaint at an early stage. For this reason, data concerning MP enquiries is considered and reported separately. Wherever possible Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team will work closely with the Directors' support staff and complaint investigators/service managers to coordinate complaint and MP enquiry responses to minimise duplication.

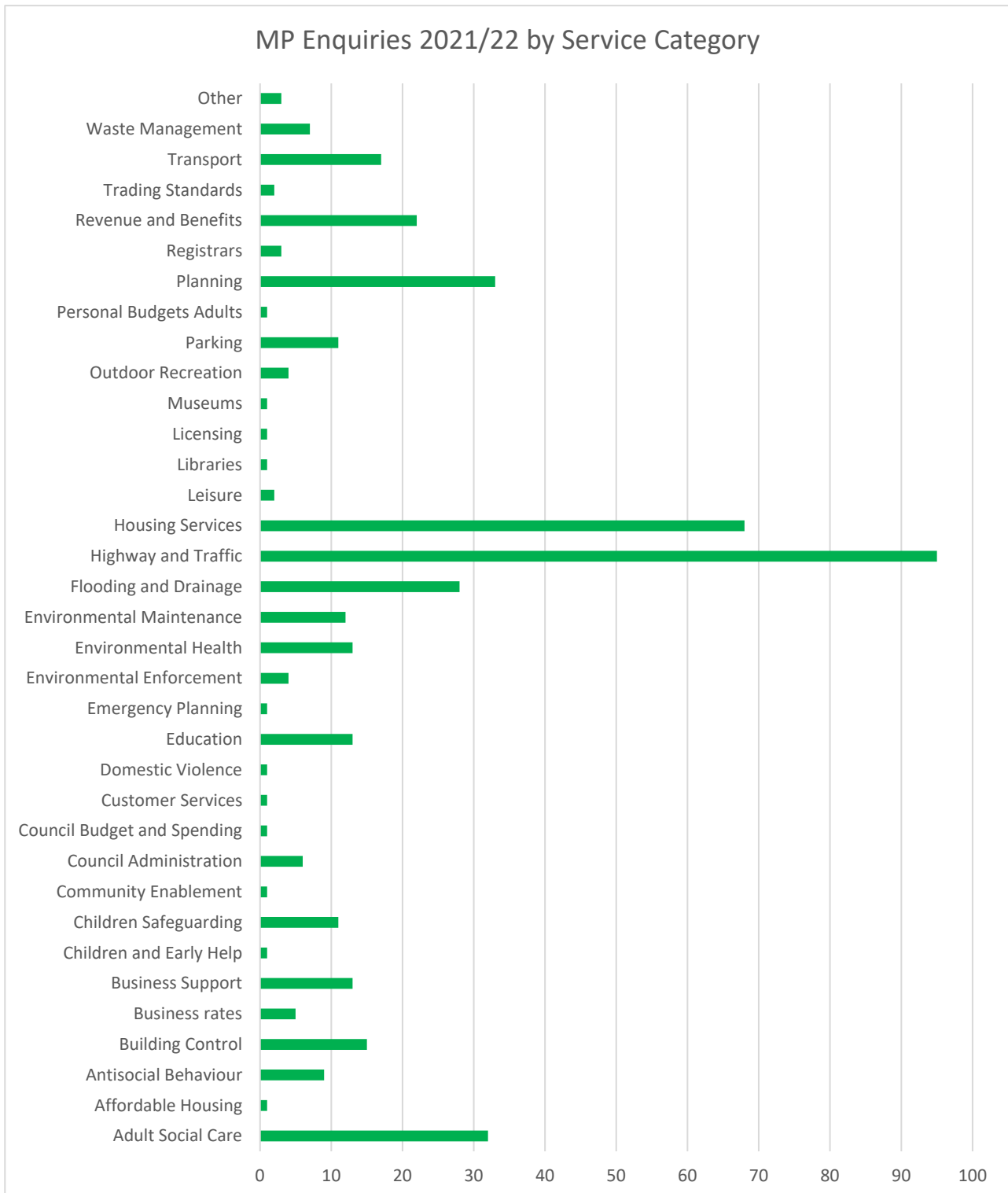
During 2021/22 439 MP Enquiries were received compared to 397 in 2020/21 and 291 in 2019/20. The pattern suggests an increase in MP enquiries. In 2021/22 an average of 37 MR enquiries were received a month compared to 33 the year before (and 24 a month the year before that). In the same way as complaints, there can be seasonal fluctuations caused by seasonal issues such as the impact of winter conditions on the roads or waste collections. April 2021 and March 2022 saw the greatest number of enquiries.



MP enquiries are received from Shropshire's three MPs, Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham), Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) and Philip Dunne (Ludlow constituency, South Shropshire). The chart below highlights that 45% of all MP enquiries received by Shropshire Council relate to the South of the county and 44% to the North of the county.



A consideration of MP enquiries by service category suggests that there are 2 big clusters of topics. 22% of all MP enquiries cover highway and traffic issues, 15% relate to housing issues and 8% relate to Planning issues.



The average number of days taken to respond to MP enquiries during 2021/22 was 20 working days (an increase from 16 working days in 2020/21). Although this response performance is shorter than the average for stage 1 corporate complaints, it remains longer than the target timescale of 10 working days. 38% of MP Enquiries with a close date (many did not have close dates) were responded to within timescale (compared to 71% in 2021/22). Managers report increasingly challenging workloads.

10. Conclusions

The 2021/22 customer feedback data has highlighted a continued growth in the volumes of formal customer feedback received by Shropshire Council (5% increase since 2020/21). Over the year, the monthly average for new customer feedback cases was 228 (on average 10 more per month compared to the previous year). Complaints investigations increased by 9% compared to the previous year and MP Enquiries increased by 11%.

The nature of complaints remains similar with the allocation of cases across service areas showing similar patterns to previous years. Although a small proportion of complaints progress to Stage 2 the number of cases progressing beyond stage 1 has increased. This may be partly due to the number of cases exceeding timescale. Overdue cases are more likely to result in complainants keen to progress to the next stage of the process.

Despite a lack of timely response in a growing proportion of cases, it should also be noted that only a relatively small proportion of complaints are upheld at stage 1 (14%) or partially upheld (17%). These proportions remain similar to previous years. Reading complaints case summaries highlights that complaints are often generated due to a lack of clear communication, provision of information and delays rather than any fault in process or service quality. Feedback from complaints investigators suggests that pressures exist within service areas.

A close analysis of complaints by service area highlights the main themes for services receiving the greatest number of corporate complaints. Please note that these are reported issues and not necessarily upheld complaints:

- Highways & Transport – Highways and Transport continues to receive a significantly larger number of complaints than any other area of service (27%). However, this has reduced from 30% the previous year (and 34% the year before). 22% of MP Enquiries relate to Highways and traffic issues.
- Waste & Recycling – 8% of complaints relate to Waste Management services (the same proportion as the previous year). These complaints are handled efficiently by the department. Themes include repeated missed collections, mess caused by rubbish not contained by bins, not returning bins or recycling containers to properties after emptying. The service is responsive to feedback and seeks to apply remedies efficiently. In many cases customers make a formal complaint prematurely (using online forms/portal methods). If these complaints were received by other methods, e.g. telephone it could be explained that the request is for a service (e.g. collect the missed bin). MP Enquiries rarely focus on waste as a theme and there are relatively small numbers considering that waste services are used by all households.
- Planning Services – 7% of complaints relate to Planning Services. These cases are usually complex in nature, linked to planning processes, and are not easily remedied. Planning complaints feature significantly in the cases progressing to stage 2 and the Ombudsman. 8% of MP Enquiries relate to Planning Services.

Overall, the LGO made 79 decisions relating to Shropshire Council in 2021/22. 8 complaints were upheld and 11 were not upheld (uphold rate 42%). A large proportion were not progressed or were referred back to the Council for local resolution (e.g. premature complaints). Due to the relatively small numbers of cases the upheld rate can fluctuate significantly each year and comparison is difficult, however, performance is better than the average upheld rate for similar local authorities (64%).

11. Progress Update

Key actions and achievements over the last 12 months are summarised against the summary recommendations made in 2021/21 below. Some of the recommendations require continued ongoing action and longer-term focus.

	Action 2020/2021	Progress Made
1	To remind teams of the importance of reporting compliments for central recording as well as complaints.	Some targeted work has addressed under reporting in some teams. Ongoing reminders have been issued and future reminders will be needed. Under reporting of compliments is no longer a significant concern.
2	To take action (where possible depending on the method of reporting) to ensure service requests are not recorded as complaints.	Analysis of complaints suggests that this has been effective, but it will require continued effort over the long-term. Online reporting methods can reduce the ability to assess and prevent complaints by reducing the opportunity to explain the difference between a service request and a complaint. Changes have taken place in year to update webpages and other communications to reinforce the need to give the council an opportunity to understand and respond to an issue before raising a complaint.
3	It was recommended that 'days to close' performance was a focus for performance monitoring and reporting in 2021/22.	Days to close has been a top priority within quarterly reporting and additional complaints performance reporting through the year. Additional analysis was undertaken to produce a report highlighting the detail of the issue and senior managers encouraged to speak to staff members to better understand pressures and challenges responding to timescales. Despite this work performance has not improved but continues to become an increasing concern. Ongoing work will be needed in 2021/22.
4	It was recommended that work take place to reduce the number of complaints with a 'no finding' outcomes.	Analysis of 'no finding' responses was undertaken, and targeted work undertaken with services. The result of this is a significant reduction and improved performance. Data suggests this is no longer a performance concern, but it will be included in performance reporting to ensure the issue does not reoccur.
5	Work to increase the identification of 'lessons learnt' outcomes (follow up actions and recommendations) for upheld and partially upheld investigations.	Although the reporting of learning and actions has been effective for statutory complaints it has been difficult to produce improvement in corporate complaints responses. Too few corporate complaints are being responded to comprehensively and in a formal way. Brief responses rarely include learning. It is a performance issue that will need to remain a focus (and is built into complaints reporting, training and presentations).
6	It was recommended that attention be given to the 2020/21 concern by the Ombudsman that local authority complaint handling functions were not being well resourced to respond to increases in demand.	This issue was raised by the Ombudsman in the 2021/22 annual complaint letter and has not been addressed in the last 12 months. See recommendations below.

12. Recommendations

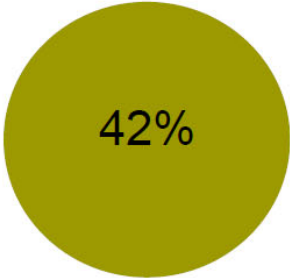
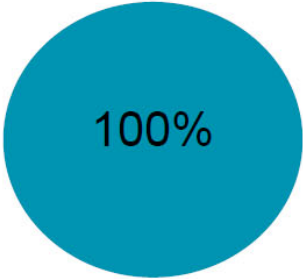
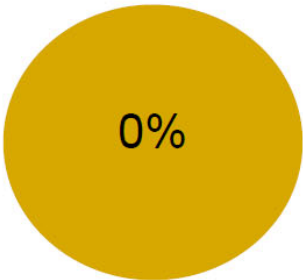
The following recommendations for 2021/22 are designed to allow for ongoing improvement in the application of Shropshire Council's complaints procedures and in the work undertaken to obtain and respond to customer feedback.

1. Shropshire Council has seen overall increases in customer feedback and complaints (with some variations year to year). Customer feedback cases, complaints and MP Enquiries are likely to continue to increase as a 'complaint culture' becomes more established in the UK. People are more used to expressing their views and have more tools to enable them to share any concerns. This can be very positive; helping to identify what works well or needs improving. However, managing increasing volumes of feedback is challenging as available staff resources have not increased in the same way as customer demand. Joint working will be required across service areas to try to manage enquiries early, and effectively (applying early resolution where possible) to reduce the proportion of contacts turning into formal complaints. Given the complexity of many Ombudsman cases, the Council is in a similar position to many other authorities and may need to take difficult decisions including whether it should prioritise LGSCO complaints over other services issues. The creation of a new Head of Governance expected in 2023 role may also create opportunities for synergies which may help address some of the capacity and system issues.
2. The Ombudsman has identified concern at the national level, and within its annual letter to Shropshire Council, that local authority complaint handling functions are not being well resourced and are not effectively responding to increases in demand. This is difficult to address without additional budgets, but with support from Directors and Senior Managers it may be possible to highlight areas of pressure and performance issues. This increased understanding will help identify risks early and allow for a more informed management view of how complaints are being handled.
3. A growing, but small, number of customers take up a disproportionate amount of staff time because they are persistent or vexatious in their behaviour. Staff members are increasingly subject to verbal and written abuse, personal comments and other unacceptable behaviours (some of which are more serious and present significant risk). There are few tools available to manage this notable increase, other than application of restrictions under the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure. It is recommended that more rapid identification of cases and faster decision making, combined with better visibility among services of the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure could reduce the time and emotional burden on staff and free up resources to handle other work.
4. In-year attention and focus by the Feedback and Insight Team saw increased case follow-ups and recording of actions (compliance) against Ombudsman recommendations (and other recommendations, such as those made at stage 2 of the children's statutory process). It is recommended that this new way of working becomes more established through 2022/23 and continues due to the positive impact it has started to have. Action should be extended to include additional quarterly checks where possible (linked to quarterly performance reporting).
5. It is recommended that 'days to close' remains the top area of focus within complaints handling for 2021/22. Many cases are responded to very effectively and within timescales but too many cases are exceeding timescales and impacting overall performance. The impact of overdue responses often means complainants remain dissatisfied and cases are more likely to escalate (as evidenced by increases in the number of investigations beyond stage 1). Ineffective stage 1 complaint handling increases work across multiple teams/services. Days to close performance will remain a focus of performance reporting and concerns will be reported through management structures. Service pressures may mean this action does not generate improvement, but it will demonstrate robust application of the complaints process.

6. Considerable additional reporting has taken place through 2021/22 at team and service level to ensure managers are aware of open cases and required timescales. Reporting timescales vary due to requests and priority level (for example services with statutory complaints processes and greater volumes are prioritised). Some teams have weekly, fortnightly or monthly reports (in addition to quarterly reporting). It is recommended that the Feedback and Insight regularly reports on performance and highlights any areas failing to meet target response times to senior management to ensure that appropriate action can be taken.
7. An ongoing recommendation is to communicate the importance of quality within complaints responses and to clearly identify learning and actions from complaints. Complaints investigators will be encouraged to report these to the Feedback and Insight Team's complaint officers for recording. Understanding and reflecting on learning is critical to ongoing service improvement.
8. It is recommended that Directors and Senior Managers ensure staff in their areas understand the importance of covering complaints processes and requirements within team leader and manager induction processes (this is a message that could be communicated through the regular directorate or service meetings). Support can be provided by the Feedback and Insight Team on request, but all new members of staff need to understand their responsibilities for investigating and responding to complaints (and understand that this is an integral part of management duties).

Appendix 1 Ombudsman Cases 2021/22

Shropshire Council
For the period ending: 31/03/22

Complaints upheld		
	<p>42% of complaints we investigated were upheld.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 64% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>8 upheld decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 19 investigations for the period between 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022</p>
Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations		
	<p>In 100% of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 99% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>Statistics are based on a total of 5 compliance outcomes for the period between 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Failure to comply with our recommendations is rare. An organisation with a compliance rate below 100% should scrutinise those complaints where it failed to comply and identify any learning.		
Satisfactory remedy provided by the organisation		
	<p>In 0% of upheld cases we found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 12% in similar organisations.</p>	<p>0 satisfactory remedy decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 8 upheld decisions for the period between 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022</p>

Appendix 2 Ombudsman Recommendations 2021/22

This table covers complaints that were **upheld** by the Ombudsman during 2021/22.

Category	Decided date	Ombudsman recommendation	Action	Recommendation achieved date
Education & Children's Services	15 th April 2021	No injustice (remedy not applicable)	No action required	NA
Adult Care Services	5 th November 2021	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Financial Redress: Quantifiable Loss, New appeal/review or reconsidered decision, Procedure or policy change/review, Provide training and/or guidance	Apology provided for delay and lack of clarity concerning discharge and the care provider's record keeping. Action to pay a financial remedy (based on the fees charged for care) and consider learning related to recording changes in circumstances.	22 nd December 2021
Adult Care Services	9 th April 2021	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Provide training and/or guidance	Shropshire Council provided an apology, made a payment for 'time and trouble', and reminded staff of the information to provide at the time of decision regarding direct payments.	24 th May 2021
Education & Children's Services	23 rd July 2021	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble	An apology and financial payment for 'time and trouble' have been awarded. Learning points and actions have been recorded and action will be ongoing.	26 th August 2021
Education & Children's Services	12 th October 2021	No injustice (remedy not applicable)	No fault was found but learning was recorded concerning adequate opportunity to make verbal representations within the appeal process.	NA
Adult Care Services	14 th October 2021	Apology	The council has provided an apology for its communication during discharge planning.	3 rd November 2021
Planning & Development	17 th January 2022	Apology, Procedure or policy change/review	An apology was provided concerning lack of clarity in how reports are provided. Staff members were reminded of the need to report complaints so they can be addressed under the complaint procedure.	10 th March 2022
Adult Care Services	10 th January 2022	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Provide information/advice to person affected, New appeal/review or reconsidered decision	An apology was provided with symbolic payment for 'time and trouble'. An independent valuation by the Valuation Office was initiated.	7 th March 2022