

# Customer Feedback Annual Report

## Adult Services

### 2022/23

Feedback and Insight Team, Shropshire Council  
August 2023



# 1. Introduction

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This report considers the customer feedback Shropshire Council's Adult Services received between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023. The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009 require local authorities with Social Services responsibilities to produce an Annual Report on the operation of their Complaints Procedure. Shropshire Council's Cabinet is due to consider the Shropshire Council annual report in September 2023.

This report focuses more specifically on Adult Services linked to social care, with a breakdown of statutory and corporate complaint types, to allow more focused understanding of performance and any key issues requiring attention. A similar report is prepared for Children's Services.

In addition to the annual reports, Shropshire Council prepares quarterly customer feedback reports. These are designed for internal use in order to develop a clear understanding of customer experience and support Shropshire Council in its work to address concerns and implement service improvement. More regular reports are available for Adult Services managers to assist with day to day work to respond to complaints, and other reports are available on request.

Complaints containing an element of social care fall under the statutory guidelines. Some complaints we receive for adult services do not relate to social care services and these are handled as corporate complaints. Those complaints are included in this report in order to provide a comprehensive overview. This annual report describes the compliments, comments and complaints Adult Services received in the year (note that previous years included Public Health and Housing services and due to organisational restructures, these are no longer included).

Shropshire Council is responsible for customer feedback and complaints relating to its own services and those provided on behalf of the Council. This report includes provider complaints where they are reported to, and considered/handled by, Shropshire Council. (Separate information is considered through contract monitoring and performance). People who are paying for their own social care (self-funders) may complain to the local authority, (for example about assessments) but services people have arranged or purchased themselves are not covered by the local authority. To assist commissioned services Shropshire Council has made guidance on the effective handling of complaints available on its website.

## **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 customer experience; a question about whether something could be changed; an idea for delivering a service differently.

## 2. Adult Statutory Complaints Process

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Adult statutory complaints follow a one stage complaints process. Statutory complaints are complaints relating to social care. Some complaints made to Adult Services are corporate complaints and these are handled under Shropshire Council's corporate complaints procedure (a two-stage process: 1) investigation 2) review then referral to the Ombudsman as a final stage.

### 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:** [customerfeedback@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:customerfeedback@shropshire.gov.uk)

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



### Acknowledgment

Complaints will be acknowledged within 3 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 65 working days. We aim to respond within 25 working days but for complex cases we may need the full timescale. 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.

Corporate complaints may progress to Stage 2 (a review) undertaken by Shropshire Council.



**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.

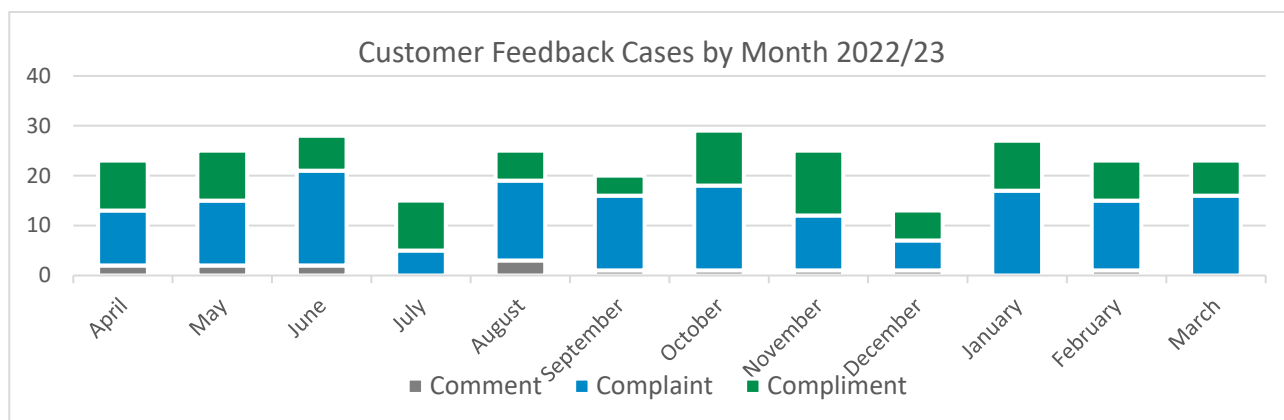
We cannot promise to get the result complainants want, but we do make sure that complaints are dealt with as quickly and as thoroughly as possible and we work to keep customers informed of what is happening and the progress being made.

### 3. Customer Feedback 2022/23

In 2022/23 Shropshire Council’s Adult Services (social care) received 276 cases of customer feedback:

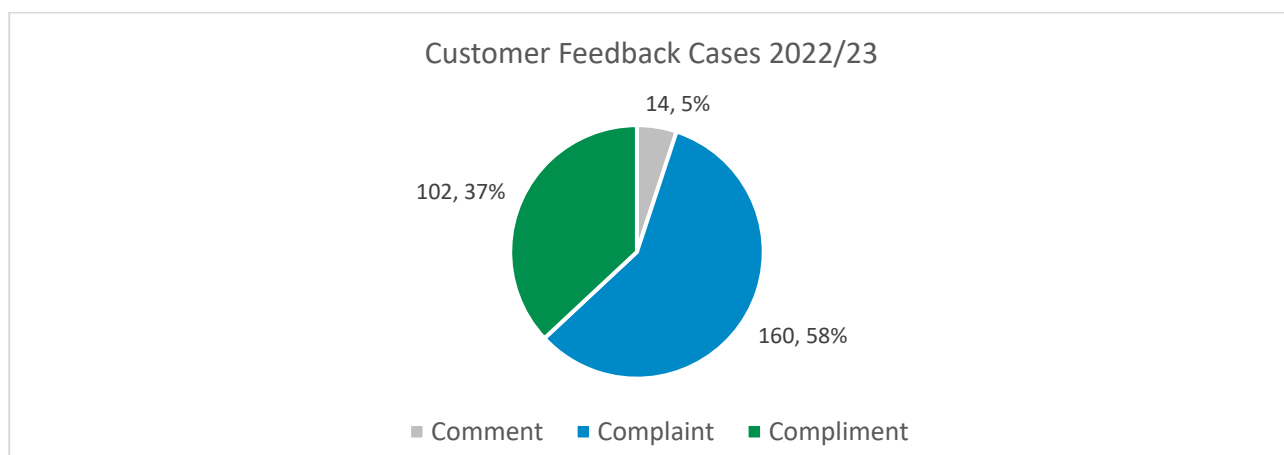
- 14 comments
- 102 compliments
- 160 complaint cases:
  - 92 statutory adult complaint investigations
  - 21 statutory provider complaint investigations
  - 47 corporate complaint investigations

It should be noted that there were 150 adult statutory cases managed by Shropshire Council over the year (see whole council corporate report) including those led by other departments but this report focuses on Adult Services feedback. Later within this report change over time is considered but it should be noted that changes in structures mean some services previously included are no longer part of Adult Services (for example Public Health and Housing Services).

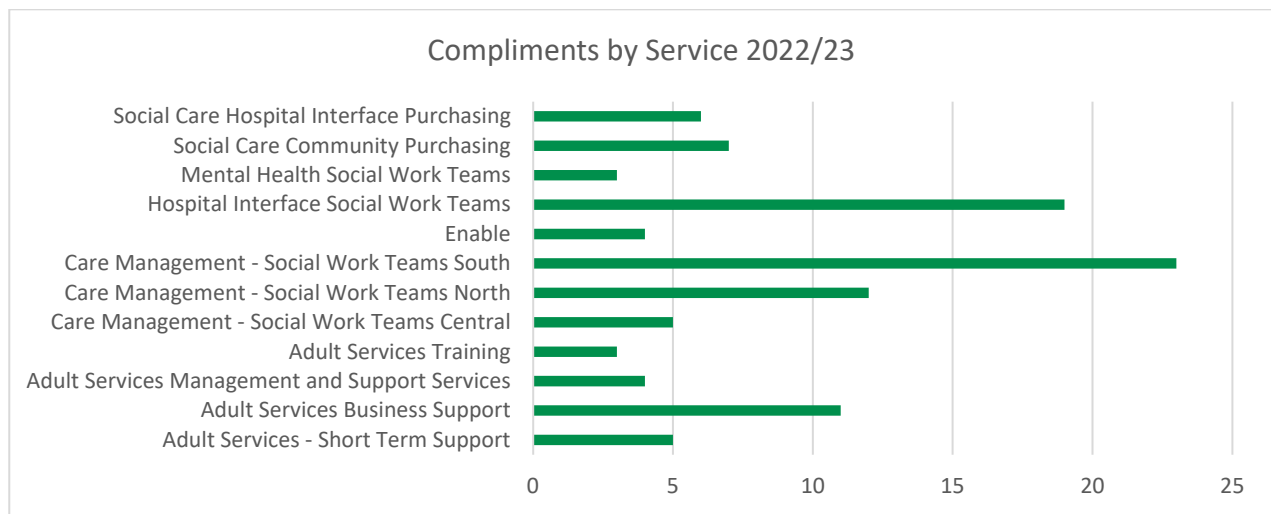


The average number of customer feedback cases recorded per month during 2022/23 was 23 (the same as last year). October and June were the busiest months, with December and July seeing fewer cases. The patterns by month were quite different compared to the previous year and suggest there aren't any seasonal variations in data (with the exception that December is usually a month with fewer cases received). Quarters 1 and 4 saw the greatest number of customer feedback cases.

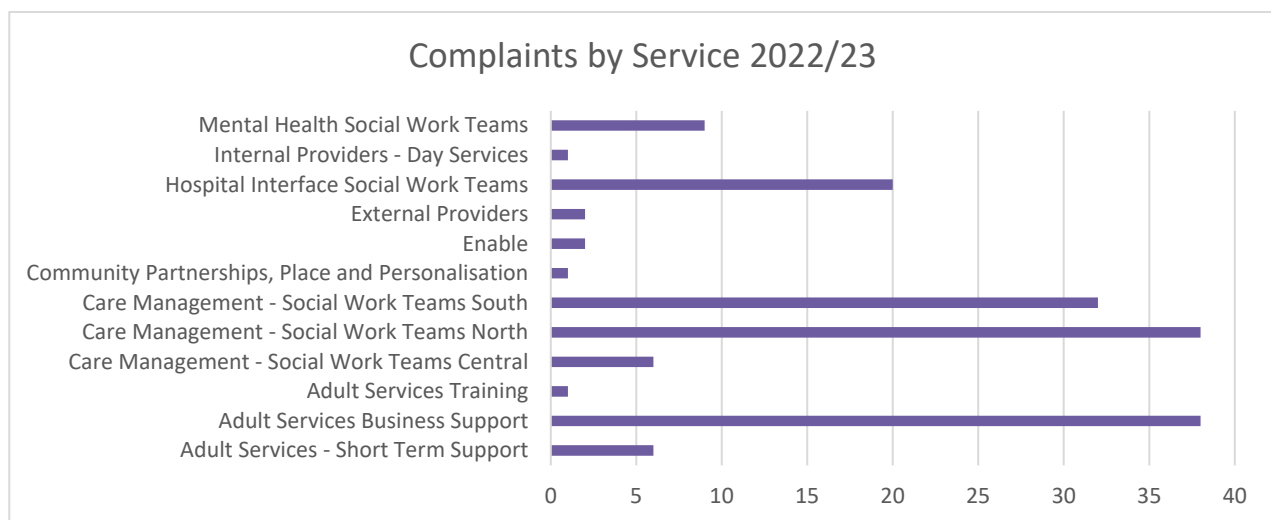
Complaints cases currently account for 58% of the customer feedback received and compliments 37%. This is a similar pattern when compared to the previous year where complaints formed 50%. This pattern reflects feedback patterns in other areas of service with complaints forming a slightly greater proportion of all formal feedback recorded.



Compliments are spread across teams and services with compliments for services shown in the chart below. Social Work Teams receive the largest number of compliments with also higher numbers of compliments for the Hospital Interface Social Work Teams.

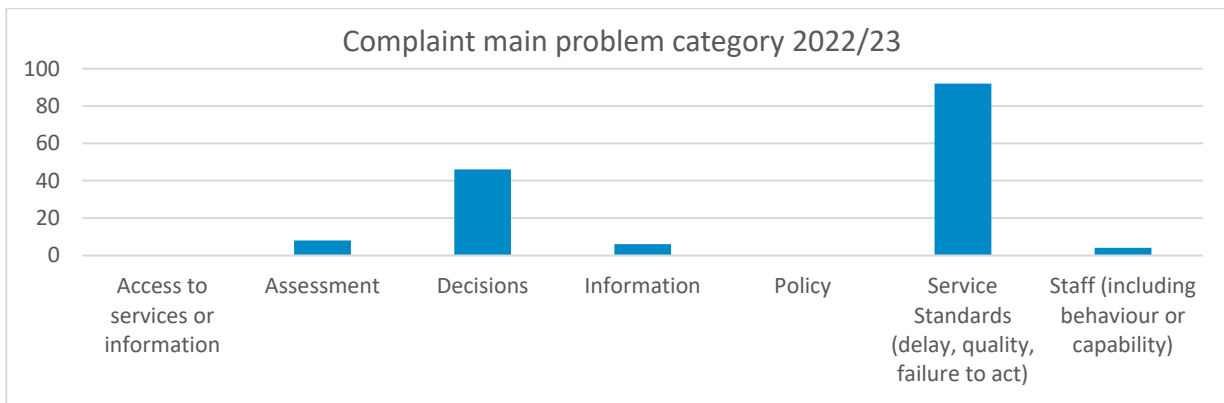


The 160 complaint cases led to 156 complaint investigations, 76 were received for the community Social Work Teams. The data shows a greater number of complaints for Adult Services Business Support and this will reflect the fact that provider complaints and more overarching performance concerns are managed by that area of service (rather than complaints about that service itself).

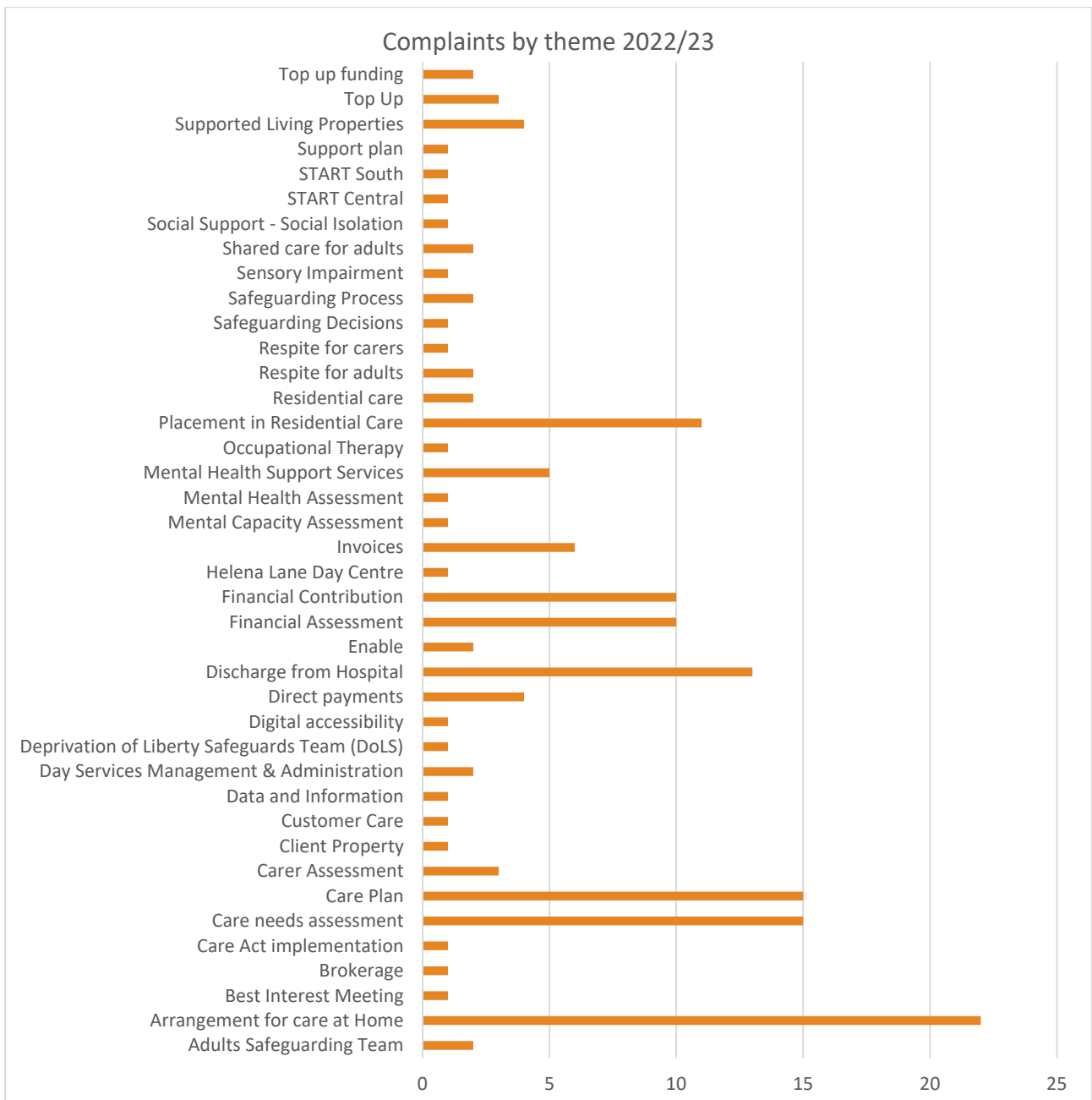


Analysis of complaints by team highlights that 24% of all complaints were for the Social Work Team- North, 21% were for the Social Work Team – South and 4% for Social Work Team – Central. 24% were for Adult Services Business Support (including commissioning for Residential, Nursing, Domiciliary Care). Some services and teams are more likely to receive complaints than others. Back office teams are less likely than customer facing teams to receive customer feedback. Shropshire Council monitors the distribution of complaints frequently to understand whether there are changes in feedback, common concerns and issues needing attention.

Provider complaints accounted for 12% of all complaints. Shropshire Council is responsible for complaints made against the services it commissions and records these in a very similar way as complaints for its own services. Provider complaints information can be a useful part of contract management and there is a close working relationship in place between contract leads, commissioners and the Council’s Feedback and Insight Team in the way provider complaints are managed and reported. Analysis of provider complaints highlights that ‘service standards – poor quality of work/service’ forms the main category of complaints received.

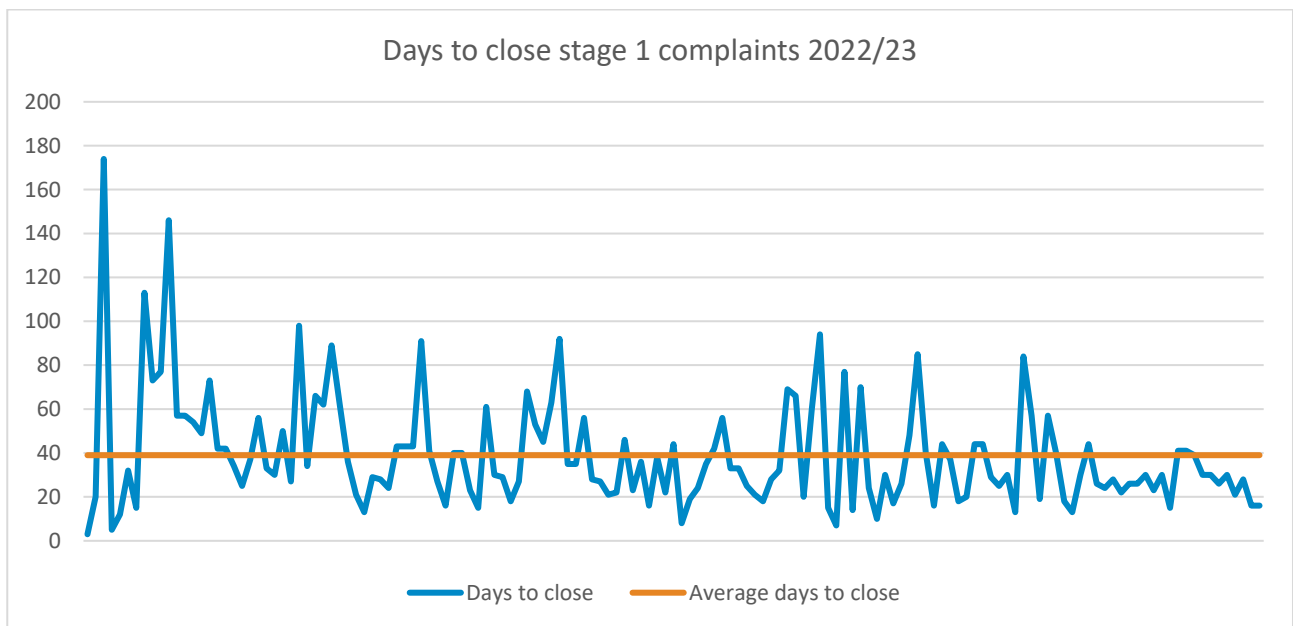


'Service Standards' is the main category under which complaints were made within the year (92 of the 156 investigations, 59%). Dominant sub-categories within 'Service Standards' were 'poor quality of work/service' and 'failure to provide a service/take action'. The second most dominant category was 'Decisions – Incorrect Decision' at 29%. The chart below shows the themes recorded for each of the complaints made.

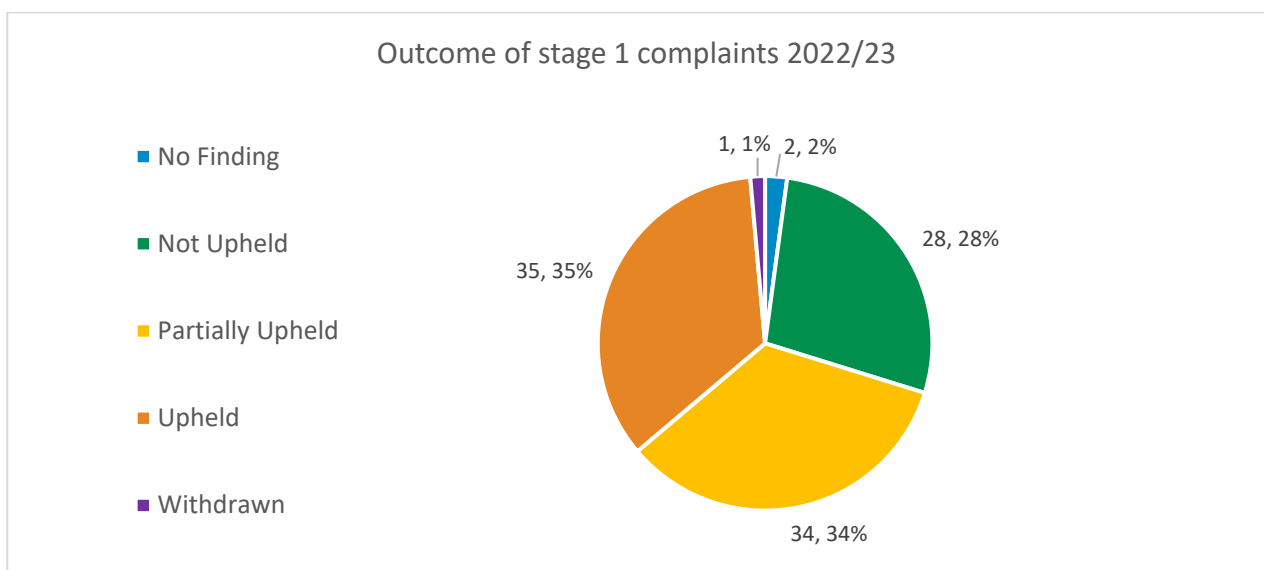


Arrangement for care at home is now the top theme within complaints at 14% (this was third top in 2021/22). Care needs assessment and care plans are the next most commonly recorded complaint themes (10% each). Other more commonly recorded themes are discharge from hospital and placement in residential care.

During 2022/23 Adult Services took an average of 41 working days to close stage 1 statutory complaints and 31.5 working days to close corporate complaints. 65 working days is the maximum available for statutory complaints, with the initial timescale aimed for at 25 working days. Corporate stage 1 complaints must be responded to within 30 working days. Some complaint cases can be complex, requiring additional communication with external professionals or more comprehensive action to investigate issues in full. However, performance has fallen in the last year. In 2021/22 statutory responses were completed within an average of 37 working days and corporate responses took at average of 22 working days. Although some complaints are responded to efficiently and within timescales, too many cases are exceeding the response dates set.



141 complaints received within the year had an outcome recorded at stage 1 (14 complaints remained open). 35% of stage 1 complaints were upheld (compared to 21% in 2022/23). 34% were partly upheld and 28% were not upheld (the remainder were withdrawn or had no finding).



Stage 1 complaint responses include information to ensure complainants understand how they can raise concerns if they do not feel their complaint has been adequately addressed and options for progressing their complaint to the next stage. Complainants can request to go to the Ombudsman after the Council's response to a statutory complaint (the corporate complaints process has a second stage in the form of a review).

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman data for 2022/23 (this can include cases Shropshire Council considered the previous year) highlighted that the Ombudsman decided 61 cases for Shropshire Council as a whole. There were 17 Adult Social Care cases (compared to 12 the year before). Of the 17, 9 were upheld. 4 cases were referred back to Shropshire Council for local resolution, 1 was closed after initial enquiries, 1 was incomplete/invalid, 1 had advice and 1 was not upheld.

Within the Ombudsman's annual complaints letter and report for Shropshire Council 2022/23 the Ombudsman repeated concerns highlighted over the last 2 years concerning the resourcing and application of local authority complaints functions. *"In last year's letter, concerns were highlighted about your Council's timeliness responding to our enquiries. Unfortunately, the issue has persisted during the year with delays."* The Ombudsman suggested a meeting with Shropshire Council to discuss this further and that is planned through the Chief Executive. The annual letter also emphasises a future consultation on a new code. It will be important to ensure Adult Services complaints are responded to within timescales, that learning and actions are clearly recorded and acted on and that expected complaints practice is communicated with all commissioned providers on a regular basis. The Ombudsman comments that: *"I know that complaints offer organisations a rich source of intelligence and insight that has the potential to be transformational."*

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman also publishes an Annual Review of Adult Social Care Complaints in addition to its reporting by local authority. The review is usually published in October, some months following the local authority reporting.



## 4. Annual Comparisons

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
<p><b>Number of compliments – decreased</b></p> <p>In 2020/1 Adult Services received 235 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. Numbers of compliments have decreased since then with 113 in 2021/22 and 102 in the last year.</p>	235	113	102
	Numbers of compliments are similar to last year but show a drop since 2020/21 (appreciation of the work of local authorities increased during the pandemic).		
<p><b>Number of complaints investigations – the same</b></p> <p>There were 156 complaint investigations for Adult Services in both 2021/22 and 2022/23. The data suggests complaint numbers have remained steady for Adult Services (Housing complaints were included in 2020/21).</p>	179	156	156
	Numbers remain steady.		
<p><b>Days to close – Average days to close increased</b></p> <p>The average number of working days taken to respond to a stage 1 complaint during 2022/23 was 39 working days, over 10 days more than in 2020/21. Although this is an average, the average for corporate complaints is 31.5 days, slightly above the 30 working day timescale. Too many cases are overdue, impacting on average performance. Complaint investigators report competing priorities and service pressures.</p>	26 working days	34 working days	39 working days
	Days to close is an important performance indicator and the data illustrates complaints are taking longer to close.		
<p><b>Outcome of complaints – Greater proportion upheld</b></p> <p>Although it would be a concern if performance monitoring highlighted too few cases being upheld (that could indicate some bias in investigation and it is important that Shropshire Council accepts where things have gone wrong and strives for improvement) there has been an increase in the proportion of upheld and partially upheld complaints. This may be a sign of service pressures.</p>	14%	21%	35%
	More complaints are being upheld as a proportion of those with outcomes compared to previous years (partially upheld complaints data also supports this conclusion).		
<p><b>Complaints progressing to the Ombudsman – increased</b></p> <p>The year 2020/21 saw 7 cases progress to the Ombudsman, but this included a 3-month suspension of case work by the Ombudsman as a result of the pandemic. Data for 2022/23 shows a big increase but this is a return to numbers seen pre-pandemic and similar to 2018/19 and 2019/20.</p>	7	12	17
	More Adult Services and provider complaints are progressing to the Ombudsman, but this is a return to pre-pandemic average numbers.		

## 5. Example Compliments

Shropshire Council's Adult Services social care services received 102 compliments in 2022/23. Compliments are a valuable source of information and combined with complaints provide a better understanding of what customers believe works well and areas for attention and action. The compliments below include some change of wording to ensure individuals cannot be identified.

Compliment for Occupational Therapist, Central Team from a Health Colleague - *"I would like to express my thanks to you all for your hard work and involvement in this case. The client now has access to a wet room and new through floor lift and a ceiling track hoist system in order to reach these facilities, naturally enhancing her life. Your support and efficiency were superb, and I feel the result achieved is testament to great multiagency working. Thank you"*.

Compliment for Senior Key Worker, Enable - *"I would like to thank you for all of the work you have done with [name removed], it is an excellent outcome for him to progress into employment. It is great that job coach support has been arranged and I am sure he will do well."*

Compliment for Senior Practitioner, North West ASC Team - *"I would like to take this opportunity to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your help, you effectively saved my life. I don't have the words to express my gratitude. With Love."*

Compliment for Social Worker in Preparing for Adulthood and Community Social Work Central Team: *"We are so grateful to you for all the help and support that you've given to us as a family over the years, but especially for the help and understanding that you've shown to [name removed] during your time with her. You've been our anchor during some very difficult times, and we are all going to miss you. You always had such positive answers and suggestions when we were at our lowest ebb."*

Compliment for Rehabilitation Officer, Visual Impairment: *"My wife who is severely sight impaired has been on the waiting list a long time for someone to visit her. But the wait was worth it on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October we had a visit from [name removed]. It was a great pleasure to speak to [name removed] who was very good and spoke to my wife with very clear instructions and information about things to do. Would you please pass our thanks on for the excellent work she done on her visit to us."*

Compliment for Best Interests Assessor, Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (Adult Social Care) - *"I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank you for undertaking my Aunt's DoLS assessment at X Care Home in person and also the compassionate way in which you conducted the interview given her susceptibility to anxiety."*

Compliment for Rapid Response, Adult Social Care - *"Thank you for the kind and outstanding care you gave my mum. We could not have gotten through this without you all."*

Compliment for Financial Assessment Officer - Financial Assessments Team - *"I wanted to thank you for explaining the charges to us. I think we are fortunate to have had our queries and issues dealt with by yourself, we genuinely appreciate all your help. Thank you."*



## 6. Example Complaints

Shropshire Council's Adult Services undertook 156 complaint investigations during 2021/22. The analysis earlier in this report highlights the types of complaints received and how they were handled. The examples below have been reworded slightly to maintain confidentiality and anonymity and steps have been taken to ensure the meaning is not altered. It should be noted that perception of fault does not always lead to an upheld outcome once more information is available, and the issues better understood.

*"I am making a complaint against your adult care services. You are dealing with a vulnerable man who lives alone and hasn't got close family around him. His care package had been dropped and he has been left with no care and being told he's on the waiting list. I know for a fact you have care services who can provide for this man. You ...will not pay their rates and would rather someone to suffer on their own. It's disgusting and it needs to be dealt with. I understand the high demand of care but you can't leave people without care simply because you don't want to pay higher rates."*

As a representative, the complainant details failure of the individual's social worker to progress an opportunity for them to return to their hometown. "This is a plea for urgent action on behalf of [name removed]. We would like this to be taken forward by a senior social worker....the opportunity is in the process of being lost. We want to retrieve this situation before it's too late for them. If we fail, we will endeavour to hold the local authority to account."

The customer reports that their father has been left in hospital "for an unnecessary amount of time due to ASC not finding the appropriate care agency for him to return home". When a care provider was located, they report "the case was closed to the social worker and no follow up action taken to ascertain if the care would meet her father's needs or even a discussion around long term plans for him."

The customer states that his desired outcome is that the authority "communicates clearly and directly and transparently with me as my father's deputy, responding to the issues I raised last autumn and which they promised to investigate and get back to me". He asked that "the authorities present a credible set of transparent invoices in relation to my father's care. The authority do not make use of Bristow or other debt recovery agency". He also has concerns about a failure to respond to reasonable enquiries.

A customer wishes to complain about the lack of care and urgency in getting night-time care back in place for her Mum, after a long hospital stay. She says: "I can't express my disappointment, disgust, and dismay at the lack of urgency to find night-time carers for Mum who is currently bed bound.... being cared for by my 84-year-old dad who is completely exhausted."

*"For 2 years I have informed your Social Services team that my Auntie's money was below the threshold for paying for her care. But both [names removed] have chosen to ignore my emails and phone calls. I believe my late Auntie's estate is, or should be, refunded back to her. I will await before I pass my complaint on through her solicitors to the Ombudsman."*

The customer phoned and spoke with Financial Assessments to say that they have had a reminder invoice for care from 21/07/22, in relation to [details removed]. She is very concerned because she believed that this was non-chargeable.



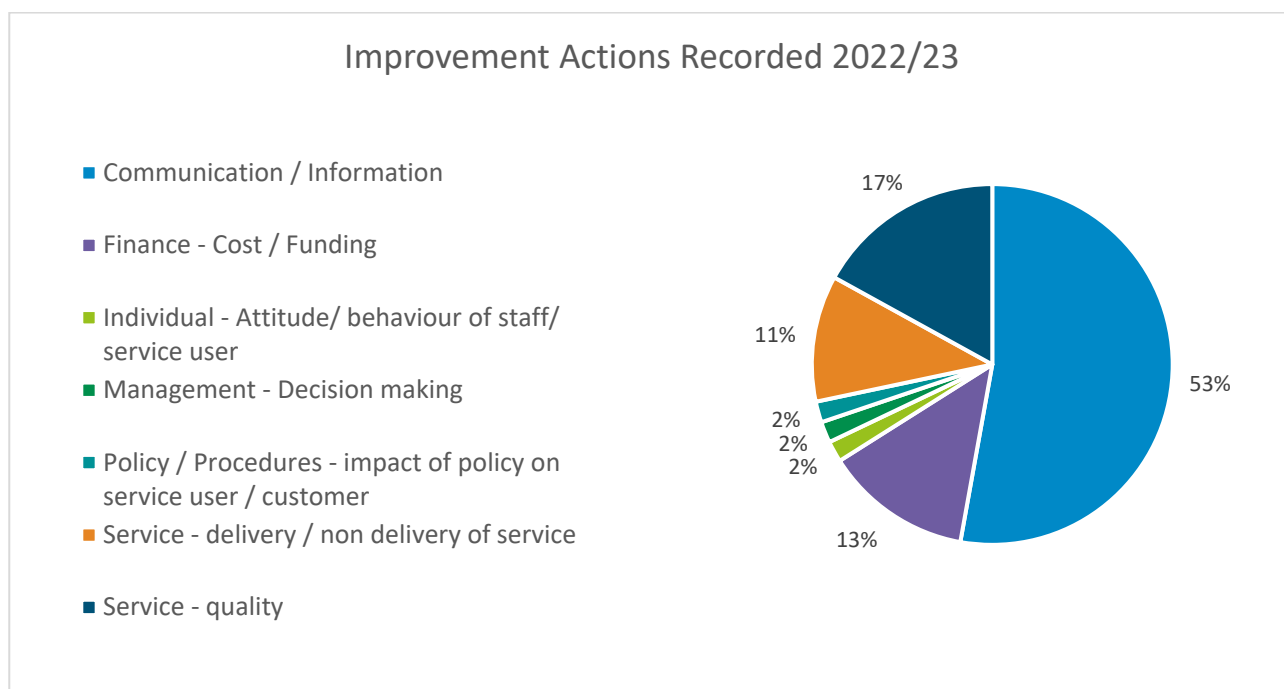
## 7. Learning and Actions

Shropshire Council's Adult Services, social care services, recorded learning and/or actions against 22% of all complaints (54% of upheld or partially upheld complaints). This learning was recorded predominantly for cases where the outcome was partly upheld or upheld. For cases that are not upheld, learning or any action points may not be applicable.

Shropshire Council records the outcome of complaints alongside any learning points and follow up actions. Follow up actions may include an apology, work to amend a policy or procedure and work to arrange training or guidance for members of staff.

Learning points recorded during 2022/23 highlight the following:

- 53% of learning relates to communication. This is commonly a reflection that communication may have been inadequate, and that increased communication could have prevented a complaint from being made. Sometimes the learning is around increased communication with the service user and sometimes the family members. Occasionally learning about communication may be related to multi-agency working and the need to increase communication with other agencies and services.
- 17% of learning was around the service quality.
- 13% related to finance (the cost of care or arrangements related to funding).
- 11% related to delivery or non-delivery of a service. This may be because an action was not taken that should have been.



Financial contributions and charging for care, has emerged as a slightly more significant issue this year. Another theme relates to waiting for care to be arranged at home, or the level of care available. These themes seem linked to the nationally recognised pressures facing social care and the cost of living increases and national economic challenges.

Examples of learning are included in the following section.

## 8. Example Learning and Actions

Learning and actions can be recorded on any case where they can lead to an improvement and they can help avoid the risk of similar complaints in the future. The examples shown below may have been slightly re-worded to best illustrate the learning and actions agreed (learning and actions are often included in more detailed descriptions). Names and other details have been removed to ensure people and cases cannot be identified. The examples include some very robust responses to try to avoid potential problems and improve service experience in the future.

The complaint investigator found that assessments and review documentation should have been sent to service users. Shropshire Council apologised that this was not done at the time of the re-assessment. The outcome of re-assessment should have been shared in a timely manner and this has been a learning point for the worker.

The complaint investigation led to a recognition that there had been a lack of communication in this case. There was also learning that additional sharing of information and forward planning would have assisted the hospital discharge and prevented the subsequent distress reported by the family.

The complaint investigator examined the case and all the actions taken by the service. The findings highlighted that although process was followed there had been a lack of communication to explain progress to the customer. They had not been kept informed at each stage and that had resulted in the complaint. Learning was taken from the case and an apology issued.

The complaint investigation found that at the point the assessment was completed, the support plan should have been completed and support needs identified in the plan should have been commissioned. The action should have been completed in August. A carers assessment should then have been completed at the earliest opportunity. The complaint was necessary to highlight the outstanding actions. An apology has been provided and the outstanding actions now actioned or planned.

The complaint investigator found that the social work team responsible for the starting and stopping of care provision did not act in a timely manner to end the chargeable care. This was the principal cause of the overcharging and later the issue of credit notes. If care had been ended at the right time, the customer would have been correctly and more transparently charged. An apology has been provided in addition to remedial action.

The complaint findings highlighted a gap in communication. The worker was off work for an extended period of time and their case was not temporarily allocated to another staff member. This was an error. Learning has been recorded to ensure that staff absences are acted on and cases re-allocated in a timely way. An apology was provided to the customer.

The customer felt that there had been a “*complete lack of empathy*” shown in their case. They felt the approach taken lacked understanding. Reassurances have been provided that it was not the workers intention to appear that way. Learning will be taken away from this case in the form of additional worker support and reflective supervision.

## 9. Conclusions

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The 2022/23 customer feedback data for adult social care services demonstrates that overall compliment numbers have reduced slightly but the total number of complaints remain very similar to the last 2 years. Complaints cases currently account for 58% of the customer feedback received and compliments 37%. This is a similar pattern to the previous year.

Statutory complaint numbers have shown an increase in recent years following a reduction in 2019/20 and 2020/21. This may have been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and it is likely that numbers are returning to expected levels rather than increasing overall. Provider complaint numbers have increased very slightly (12% of all complaints) but this is not a concern and could be the result of improved reporting. Numbers remain small overall.

The main problem category in 2022/23 was 'Service Standards' (59%). Dominant sub-categories within 'Service Standards' were 'poor quality of work/service' and 'failure to provide a service/take action'. The second most dominant category was 'Decisions – Incorrect Decision' at 29%. The number of complaints about decisions appears to have increased slightly (a pattern seen across the whole local authority). This may be something to monitor through the year to ensure any possible patterns related to process can be identified and addressed.

The complaint themes for 2022/23 remain fairly similar to last year, with 'Arrangement for care at home' now the top theme (14%) followed by 'Care needs assessment' and 'care plans' a (10% each). Other more commonly recorded themes are discharge from hospital and placement in residential care.

The average number of working days taken to respond to a stage 1 complaint during 2022/23 was 39 working days, 10 days more than in 2020/21. During 2022/23 Adult Services took an average of 41 working days to close stage 1 statutory complaints and 31.5 working days to close corporate complaints. This remains the top priority for performance monitoring. Although the statutory complaints process allows 65 working days it should not be necessary to take this length of time in the majority of cases (some complex cases may need this maximum). It is recommended that action take place to work to reduce the statutory and corporate averages. The average for corporate complaints is 31.5 days, slightly above the 30 working day timescale. Too many cases are going overdue.

The number of complaints upheld and partially upheld has increased. 35% of cases were upheld in 2022/23 significantly above the performance of previous years. It is important to acknowledge when there has been fault but this increase suggests that service pressures are leading to reductions in quality (see recommendations).

The number of cases progressing to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has increased but to the same levels seen pre-pandemic. It will be important to ensure this does not represent an upward trend and to take action locally to ensure quality and robust responses at stage 1.

## 10. Progress Update

Progress over the last 12 months is summarised below:

	Action	Progress Made
1	It was recommended that data should be provided to report overdue complaints in detail.	A new report in PowerBI has been established with details of complaint investigators and complaints by team, service and directorate. This allows for the monitoring of pressures in the complaints process and to understand when complaint responses are delayed. Additional information has also been added to the quarterly performance reports. Greater understanding of challenges should enable a response to focus on improvement.
2	It was recommended that 'days to close' was a priority for the year.	Days to close complaints performance was monitored closely throughout the year and reported within quarterly performance reports. The more frequent service reports added additional information to help managers understand which complaints were open, when they were due and any that were overdue. Performance improved each quarter for statutory complaints from quarter 1 to quarter 3 but in quarter 4 average days to close increased again. For corporate adult complaints performance varied dramatically. Overall progress was achieved but may not continue without ongoing focus so this remains a priority for the year ahead.
3	It is recommended that the themes from the 2021/22 data form a focus for the next year.	Over the year care assessments, charging for care (often relating to communication) and arrangement for care at home were an area of focus. Reporting helped to show variations in the themes each quarter and it became evident that there are increases at different points in the year. Quarter 3 saw a significant fall in the issues listed with care planning forming the top theme. Joint working with teams across Adult Social Care remains effective and as themes emerge this is shared to assess any possible preventative action to reduce future complaints.
4	Following concerns raised by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman it was recommended that compliance form a priority.	The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman reported national complaints themes as care assessments, care planning and charging for care. This matched well with local data. The Ombudsman asked for a focus on compliance and efficient and robust action following recommendations. The Feedback and Insight Team's complaints and customer feedback officers have worked to closely monitor all actions and recommendations and track progress. Compliance was 100% at year end.
5	The Ombudsman highlighted a concern that people may have lost confidence in the complaints reporting process. It was recommended as an issue to explore.	During the year Healthwatch Shropshire undertook a project to explore complaints processes across health and social care. This independent investigation has not yet highlighted any concerns within adult social care complaints and Shropshire Council's own data doesn't support the Ombudsman's national concern. Shropshire Council has maintained choice in the methods used to report complaints: to social workers, online, by telephone, letter and email. Clear communication is in place and few people have reported any barriers. Nevertheless, this will be monitored again in 2023/24.
6	To provide more support for staff dealing with very complex cases and challenging customer behaviour.	The Feedback and Insight Team has worked with the Principal Social Worker in Adult Services on a council task force considering improvement in process and support when staff members face threats and abuse (often linked to complaints). The council's unreasonably persistent and vexatious customers procedure has been updated, strengthened, and additional support put in place to ensure action is taken more swiftly when cases in need of attention arise.

# 11. Recommendations

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The following recommendations are designed to prevent any downturn in performance and make further improvement where possible.

1. There has been a growth in the number of teams raising concerns about customer behaviour and making enquiries related to the persistent or vexatious customers procedure. It is known that this is a particular concern for Adult Social Care. Ongoing work will be needed (building on the work over the last 12 months) to communicate expectations to staff and customers concerning acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and the actions Shropshire Council may take when incidents or ongoing issues are identified.
2. A priority aim must be to improve customer experience to reduce the proportion of contacts turning into formal complaints. Improvement could include a focus on customer communications, robust assessment of enquiries to direct the right cases to the right processes quickly and without delay, a focus on meeting expected response timescales and using information channels to manage customer expectations. It is recommended that issues and evidence is shared with Shropshire Council's transformation project referred to as 'Accelerating channel shift, managing demand better and improving our customer journey' or the 'Best Customer Experience Programme'.
3. Although the work undertaken through the year did not find evidence of barriers to making complaints (see progress update), it is recommended that a slightly different focus is taken for the year ahead. Data suggests that more people would like to complain online but the process is slightly confusing so many people are choosing to raise an anonymous complaint (when they really wish for their details to be known and their complaint investigated). As a result, it is recommended that the online process of raising a complaint is raised and improvements made to simplify steps and improve the customer experience.
4. The average number of days to close stage 1 complaints is a concern and too many cases are exceeding deadlines. Overdue complaints are more likely to escalate and lead to greater costs and time for complaints management and response. It is recommended that this issue is addressed as a priority for 2023/24.
5. More complaints for adult social care are being upheld and partially upheld. As a new performance concern, it is recommended that this is monitored closely over the year and, where possible joint work takes place to better understand the cause of this change and any improvement action that may be taken to address it. It is recommended that this is linked into the work being undertaken by the Council's Head of Improvement and the Assistant Director for Transformation.
6. It is recommended that the identification and recording of learning and actions should be an area for ongoing attention. A target will be to increase the proportion of upheld cases with learning and improvement actions identified. Use of learning and recommendations will be increasingly important to evidence the council's improvement work.
7. Quality of complaints responses is a growing concern as teams and services report conflicting demands and increasing work pressures. This is a difficult issue to address because it does not clearly link to teams or services but to individuals and can be influenced by a range of different circumstances. This may indirectly link to the increase in Ombudsman cases seen in 2022/23 (although this brings numbers back to pre-pandemic levels). It is recommended that careful consideration and sensitive approaches will be required over the year to work towards improvement.



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