

**Together for Children  
Customer Feedback Six Month Summary Report  
April 2021- September 2021**



## HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

### What are our key achievements?

- We have refreshed our complaint processes with the aim to improve customer experience and resolve concerns more quickly.
- We have received 121 compliments so far this year from children, young people, families, and professionals.
- We have successfully helped 107 customers to receive satisfactory resolutions to their queries, issues or concerns informally, without having to initiate a complaint.
- Overall, the number of complaints received so far this year has reduced by 42% with many of our services seeing a decrease in the number of complaints.
- The timeliness of stage two complaints is improving, and fewer complaints are escalating.

### What are our areas of focus?

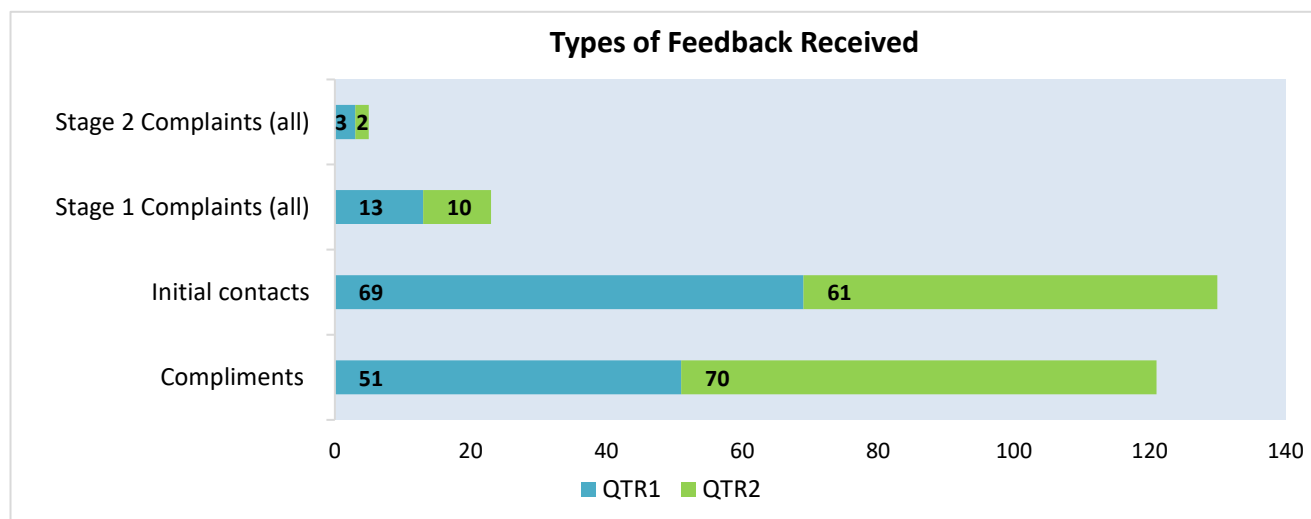
- Continued focus on improving the timeliness of stage 1 responses.
- Continuing to improve stage 2 investigation and adjudication timescales.
- Reviewing how we record complaints so that emerging themes can be analysed easier and, in more detail, where needed.

## 1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1. This report covers the period 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021. Together for Children (TfC) welcomes all forms of feedback as a way of improving service delivery to children, young people and families. The report provides an overview of customer feedback received in the last six months, identifying topics and trends in relation to complaints information and areas of organisational learning that have taken place in response to feedback received.

## 2. SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

- 2.1. The Customer Feedback Team are responsible for receiving, recording, and responding to feedback received from children, young people and families regarding services delivered by Together for Children. The following graph shows the different types of feedback received in quarters one and two.



## 3. COMPLIMENTS

- 3.1. We have received 121 compliments in the last six months from children and young people, parents and other family members, foster carers, external professionals, and staff within TfC. Compliments are communicated to workers and management structures of the relevant teams and they are used to congratulate workers and teams and to inform service developments and best practice. Compliments are also shared more widely with the Senior Management Team and the TfC Communications Manager, so all staff can be recognised for their dedication and hard work. Below are some examples of the compliments we have received in the last six months:

### Business Support, Social Care

"I know I have mentioned this previously but just wanted to again highlight what a credit XXX is to Business Support. The quality of her minute taking and all work she completes in general, her attention to detail and her willingness to go over and above always stands out as exemplary to me".

### Cared for Children Service

"I just wanted to share with you that I just had a catch up with XXX and she is absolutely loving it within Permanence. She said that XXX and the team have made her feel so welcome and she is excited every day to come to work and feels confident knowing that there are so many people who are there to help her if she needs it. I have never seen her so happy!"

### Child Protection Service

"I just wanted to take the time to express how impressed I have been with the work of XXX on the XXX case. This wasn't an easy case to be assigned to with many complicating factors which have spanned across almost a decade. However, XXX came in and has been tenacious in unpicking the chronology and getting to the crux of the situation for the children and family. She took the time to speak to all professionals and has got to the know

the children extremely well. For children who have been through so much, she listened to them and recognised when they needed further support; highlighting the professionals to provide it and checking in to make sure that the support had made a difference. She has kept everyone informed of situations that have arisen and has also given us the heads-up when she believed the children would have a difficult day. Her chairing of meetings has always been firm and fair - giving everyone the opportunity to share their views and her paperwork has been detailed and accurate. She works with compassion, confidentiality and integrity. I absolutely cannot fault her case management or the support she has given us as a school. XXX is one of the stars in your service and I felt that I needed to take the time to make you aware of all that she has done to make the difference to the lives of the children she is there to protect. I take my hat off to her for the way she has managed this case and given the children the opportunity to thrive”.

### **Fostering Service**

“XXX is always contactable by phone, mobile, email or What’s App in case we have any queries or issues. XXX is great at setting the next supervision date before she leaves each month and arrives on time, every time. I always feel listened to in my supervisions (even if it’s just a case of containment) and XXX will work with me to find acceptable solutions to any issues which have arisen. She keeps me grounded when I might otherwise be going off on a tangent, not an easy thing! I am always prepared with a list of any things I want to discuss or anything I need to update XXX about. She is happy to answer my questions and is very knowledgeable in all social work issues and will seek answers elsewhere if she is unsure”.

### **Children’s Independent Reviewing Team**

“I just wanted to get in touch following a review conference I was involved in yesterday. We always hear at the start of meetings how we can complain or compliment and I wanted to take the time to compliment XXX on her professionalism and conduct yesterday. I always feel as though we are in safe hands when XXX is chairing our meetings. She conducts her meetings in a lovely calm and controlled manner and leaves no stone unturned. Our core groups leading up to yesterday’s conference have at times been challenging however, the review conference was managed so well by XXX that it went without issue and I feel that we came away with a robust plan in place to move forward”.

### **Assessment Team**

“I would like to give you some feedback regarding working with your social worker XXX. I feel that her professional, responsive, reactive, and supportive approach to working with the XX family should be shared. This is a very diverse and challenging family, and it has not been easy to keep a level head and balance throughout, however I feel that XXX has achieved this, a calm approach but not afraid to challenge when necessary. It is easy to complain and criticise and people always find time for that, however, praise and recognition should be highlighted too, and I feel XXX deserves this, a kind considerate and caring professional, and a pleasure to work with”.

### **Early Help**

“Thank you for everything you have done for myself and XXX, most of all thank you so much for always having his back and believing he’s a good kid underneath it all! Thank you for fighting for him and believing in him when others didn’t. You have been the only one I can count on for support so thank you again”.

### **Children’s Homes**

“I want to take the opportunity to tell you that XXX is the very best communicator in a children’s home I have come across since returning as an IRO in December 2016. He is exceptional at letting other professionals know what is happening to XXX which is invaluable to an IRO. I would like this compliment to be placed on his supervision file”.

### **Anti-Social Behaviour Service**

“Loved all the activities, group work and sweets”. “We are more aware of what behaviours are anti-social and raised awareness. Gave strategies for support”. “Wear Kids staff were lovely and felt confident to ask questions and played an active part”.

### Connexions Service

"I went to see XXX yesterday and I just wanted to pass on again some really positive comments she has given me. XXX told me that college hadn't got her email and you have been in contact with her and have sorted all of this out for her and XXX couldn't have been more thankful highlighting she wouldn't have been going to college if it hadn't been for your help. XXX hasn't always felt supported by school staff so I just wanted to say thank you because at this time in XXX life and the pressure she feels from school it would have been easy for her to have lost interest and motivation in accessing additional education despite her clear capabilities".

### Children with Disabilities Service

"To everyone at the office who has helped me over the years. You have all helped me make my childhood a lot better by being there and supporting me through the difficult times, so thank you"

### Customer Feedback Service

"Right from the beginning XXX took a significant amount of time to get to know me and understand my complaint, she was extremely patient when I went back to her with amends regarding the complaint outline, she kept me updated throughout and was extremely compassionate but also totally professional. She actually helped me restore my faith in TFC as an organisation and I feel she is a complete asset to your organisation. I just wanted to pass on my feedback as I know it's important for appraisals and reviews to understand how clients find the service received from your department's representatives."

## 4. INITIAL CONTACTS

- 4.1. Following the refresh of the complaints process in 2020/21, we replaced 'pre-complaints' with 'initial contacts', expanding our definition so that we could log and account for every customer contact received via the Customer Feedback Team. Initial contacts presented by customers can be queries, concerns, information requests or issues that require a resolution. Whilst customers are provided with information about the complaints process and their rights to complain, we aim to achieve informal resolution at the earliest opportunity so that the customer receives a quick resolution and has a better experience. The table below shows the initial contacts data for quarters one and two:

Initial Contacts	Q1 (Apr – Jun)	Q2 (Jul – Sep)	Total
Number Received	69	61	130
Percentage resolved as Initial Contact	81%	85%	82%
Percentage progressed to Stage 1	19%	15%	18%

- 4.2. We have received 130 initial contacts in the last six months. Through responding to contacts at the outset, we have helped 107 of our customers to receive satisfactory responses and resolutions informally with only 23 contacts (18%) progressing to a formal stage one complaint.

## 5. COMPLAINTS PROCESS

- 5.1. The Complaints Process for Statutory Children's Services follows the statutory guidance. This is a 3-stage process as follows:
- **Stage One** – the initial stage of the process is investigated by an Officer in the Customer Feedback Team. It is hoped a local resolution can be achieved within 10 working days, however an extension of up to 20 working days can be requested for more complex cases.
  - **Stage Two** – on receipt of the response to their stage one complaint, customers have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage two if they are unhappy with the initial outcome. At this

stage, an Investigating Officer and an Independent Person will be appointed to investigate the complaint and it can take up to 65 working days to complete.

- **Stage Three** – if the customer remains unhappy with the outcome of the stage two complaint, they have 20 working days to request their complaint is progressed to stage three. The review should take place within 30 days of the request. At stage three, a review panel will be appointed to review the complaint. This will consist of three independent people who will make recommendations to the Director of Children’s Services.

5.2. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government Ombudsman.

5.3. Any complaints that do not relate to Statutory Children’s Services, are handled under the Corporate Complaints Procedure which consists of two formal stages. Corporate complaint figures are included in this report.

## 6. COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

6.1. The table below shows the number of complaints we received across each stage of the complaints process:

Children’s Social Care Complaints:	Q1	Q2	Total	
Stage One	11	7	18	↓
Stage Two	3	1	4	↓
Stage Three	1	0	1	↓
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>	↓

Corporate Complaints	Q1	Q2	Total	
Stage One	2	3	5	↓
Stage Two	0	1	1	↓
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	↓

<b>Overall Totals</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>29</b>	↓
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6.2. **Overall Total (all stages)** - In the first six months of the year we received 29 complaints compared with 50 in the first six months of 2020/21 which is an overall decrease of 42%. Broken down further this shows Children’s Social Care complaints have reduced by 41% and Corporate complaints by 60%.

6.3. **Stage One Complaints** – we have received 18 children’s social care stage one complaints compared with 28 for the same period in 2020/21. We also saw a decrease in the number of corporate stage one complaints, receiving 5 compared with 11 in the same period last year.

6.4. **Stage two Complaints** – we have received 4 children’s social care stage two complaints of which 1 has progressed to a stage 3. Only 1 of the corporate complaints progressed to stage two, compared to 4 last year.

6.5. The number of stage two complaints has reduced from Q1 to Q2 this year suggesting that as we continue to implement the new complaint processes, customers are having their concerns addressed earlier, at stage one.

### Number of Complaints by Young People:

6.6. There were 0 complaints received by young people in the first six months of the year which is a decrease of 3 when compared to the same period last year.

## 7. STAGE ONE COMPLAINTS

7.1. The table below shows the number of stage one complaints received by service area.

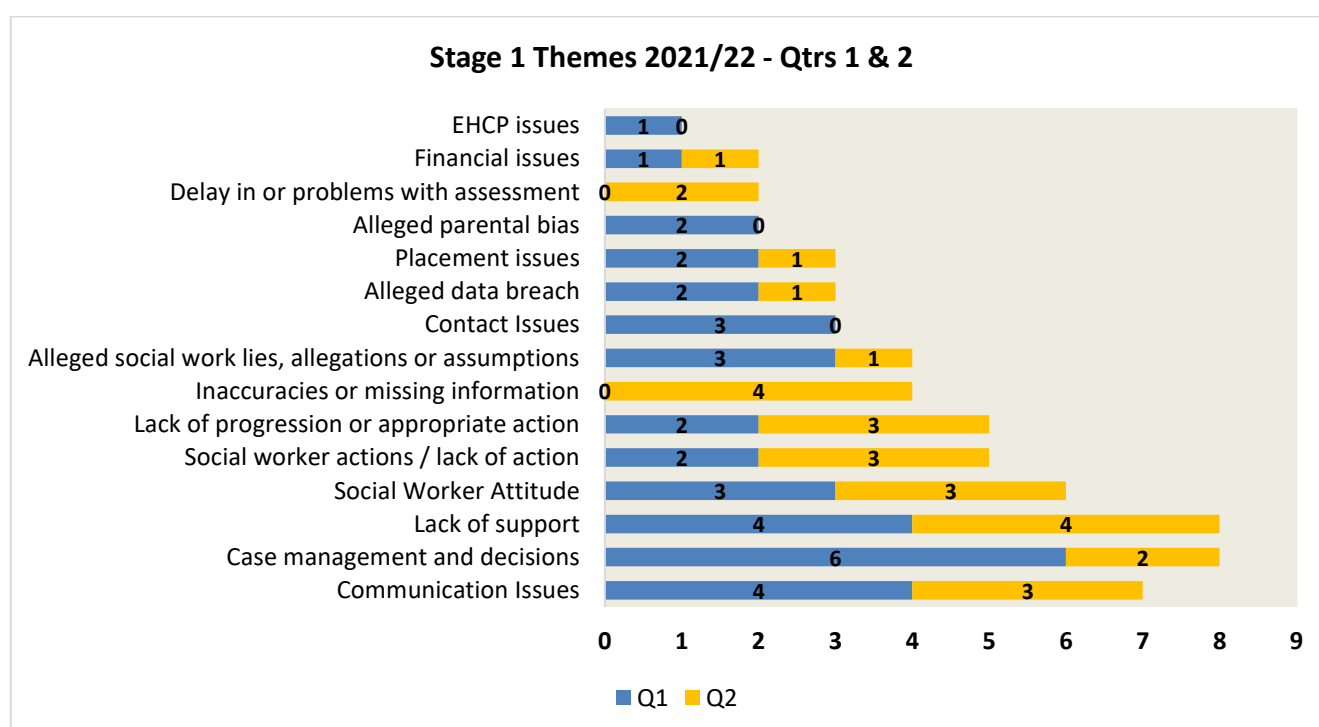
TEAM	% of Stage 1 Complaints Received
Adoption Service	2%
Assessment Service	33%
Child Protection Service	24%
Early Help Service	4%
Education	4%
ICRT Service	4%
Cared for and Permanence Service	4%
SEND Service	9%
Children with Disabilities Service	13%
Fostering Service	2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

7.2. 33% of complaints received in the first six months relate to the assessment service however there has been a 20% decrease in the number for complaints relating to this service when compared with the previous year. 24% of stage one complaints received in the first six months relate to the child protection services but again there has been a 50% decrease in the number of complaints relating to this service when compared with the same period in the previous year.

7.3. Overall, the number of stage one complaints have decreased across most services other than the Children with Disabilities service who saw a slight increase of 3 when compared with the previous year.

### Themes:

7.4. The main themes of the complaints received at Stage one in 2020-21 are shown in the table below:



7.5. Complaints relating to lack of support have almost doubled when compared with the same period in 2020/21 and is now one of the top three themes together with case management decisions and communication. This



shows a difference when compared to the top three themes in the previous year (social worker action /lack of action, contact issues/Family Time and inaccuracies or missing information).

- 7.6. Complaints regarding social worker actions/lack of action has significantly reduced when compared to last year and has moved from being the top theme in 2020/21 to the fifth in the first six months of this year. Although complaints regarding communication and case management decisions are now in the top three themes, the numbers of complaints have not increased when compared to the same period last year.
- 7.7. The reduction in the number of complaints overall together with a shift in the top three themes demonstrates the positive impact of learning from complaints and proactivity addressing emerging themes. The refresh of the complaints process has strengthened the initial contact stage which is contributing to an overall reduction in complaint numbers.

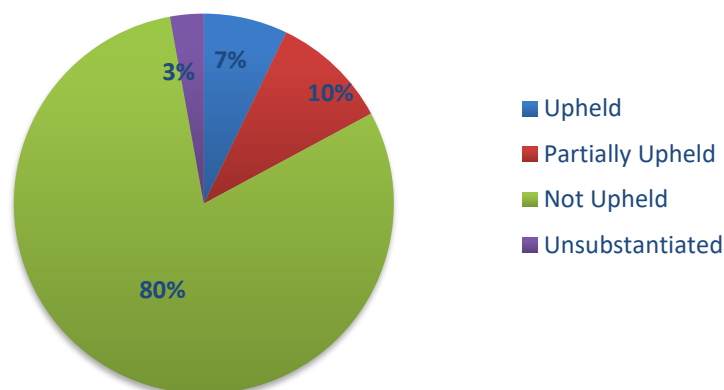
#### Timeliness of Response to Stage One Complaints:

- 7.8. In the first six months of 2021/22 the timeliness of all stage one complaints has fluctuated as we have moved to the refreshed complaints process. The main changes to the process have included managing all stage one complaints within the Customer Feedback Team with a greater focus on customer conciliation, mediation, and speedier resolution e.g., offering opportunities for customers to meet with workers and managers so they can listen, discuss, and resolve their issues rather than moving to the lengthier stage two process (where this is possible). Whilst this change in process has increased customer satisfaction by resolving issues at this stage, it has consequently taken some stage one complaints (in Q2) out of timescale which has impacted the year-to-date figure. Moving forward we will be focussing on how to achieve the same result but within the 10 or 20 working day timescales.

% of all stage 1 complaints responded to in timescale	Q1	Q2	YTD
	73%	33%	52%

#### Stage One Complaint Outcomes:

- 7.9. There were 70 elements of complaint identified within stage one complaints that have concluded in the first six months of 2021-22. The outcomes of those stage one complaint elements are shown below.



- 7.10. Most complaint elements (equating to 80%) were not upheld and a further 3% were unsubstantiated or not investigated. This is significantly higher than the same period last year where 49% of elements were not upheld.
- 7.11. 10% of elements were partially upheld and 7% were upheld. The five upheld complaint elements related to poor communication, a missed visit, inaccurate information and impact of TFC involvement.

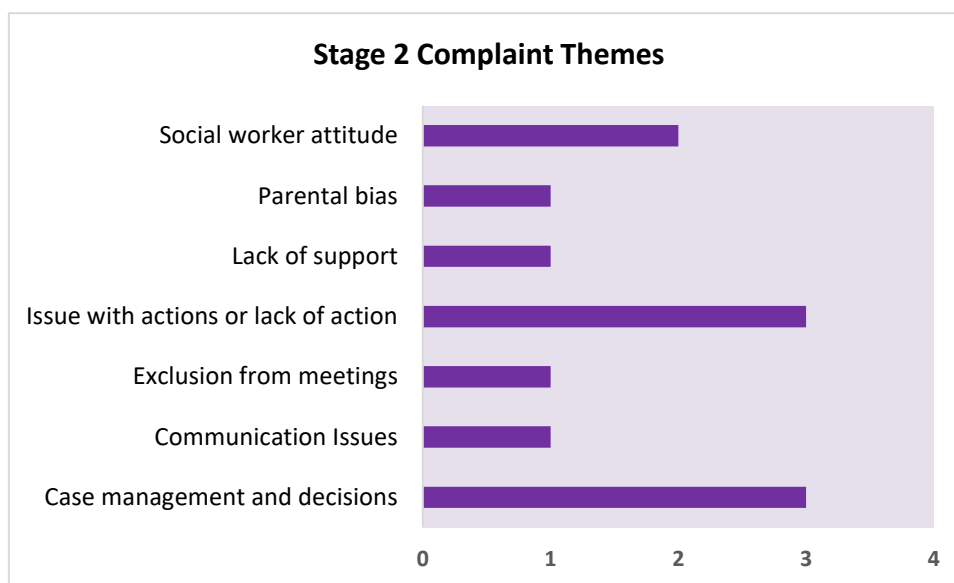
## 8. STAGE TWO COMPLAINTS AND STAGE THREE REVIEWS

- 8.1. In total 5 stage two complaints have been received in Q1 and Q2. 4 of the stage two complaints relate to the Children with Disabilities Team, Assessment Team and Child Protection Team. The 1 corporate complaint relates to the SEND team. Overall, we have received 37.5% fewer stage two complaints when compared with the same period in the previous year.



### Themes:

- 8.2. The number of themes relating to stage two complaints have reduced this year in line with a decrease in the number of complaints and a decrease in the number of elements within each complaint. The main themes for 2021-22 are shown in the table below (*note one complaint can have multiple themes*):



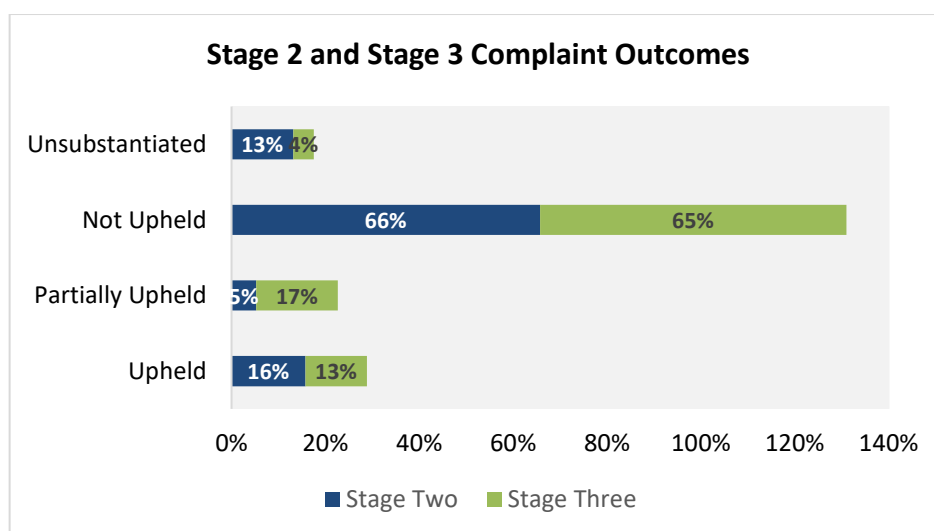
- 8.3. Most stage two themes relate to case management and decisions, issues with action/lack of action and social worker attitude. The increase of themes relating to case management and decisions aligns with the increase at stage one.
- 8.4. When compared to 2020/21, lack of action remains a top theme however themes around communication issues have reduced and assessment reports is no longer identified as a theme, suggesting learning and improvement actions are having a positive impact for our customers.

### Timeliness of Response to Stage Two Complaints:

- 8.5. In the first six months of 2021-22, 8 stage two complaints were concluded (*figures differ to numbers received, as there were complaints open at the start of the year from 2020/21 and complaints that remain open moving into 2021-22*). Four of the stage two complaints were completed within the 65-day timescale (50%). This is a significant improvement compared with the same period in 2020/21 where only 8% of stage 2 complaints were completed in timescale. The average number of working days taken to complete stage 2 complaints in the first six months of this year is 71.6 days compared with 129 for the same period last year.
- 8.6. This improvement is due to the changes that were made to the complaints process. The changes streamlined the process to improve the customer journey and realigned timescales and resources for the adjudication task. Although these changes are having a positive impact on the timeliness, further improvement is required which remains an area of focus for the Customer Feedback service.

### Stage Two and Three Complaint Outcomes

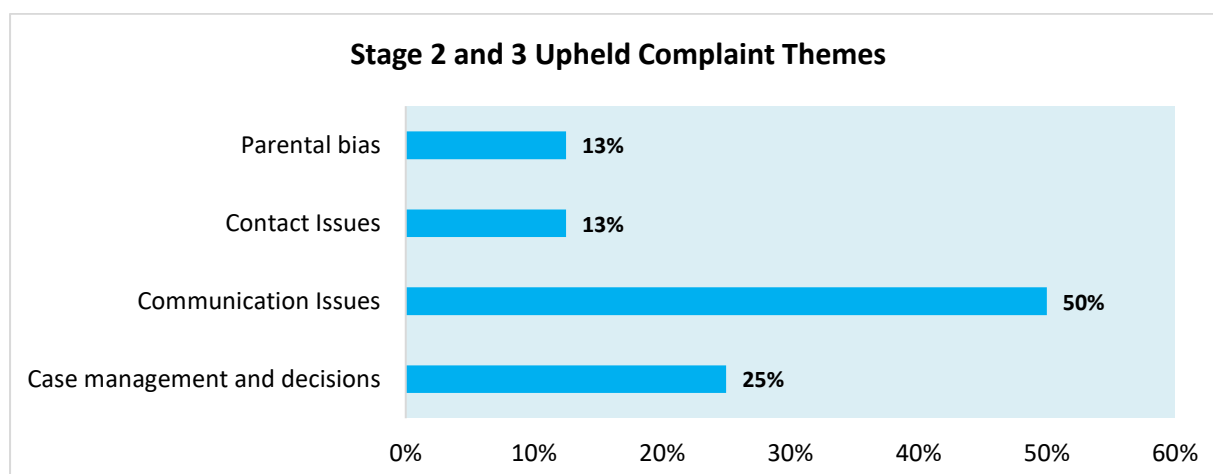
- 8.7. There were 38 elements of complaint identified within all stage two complaints that concluded in the first six months of 2021/22 and 23 elements concluded at stage three (Children's Social Care). This is a significant reduction when compared to 202 stage 2 elements in the same period last year together with 35 elements at stage 3. The outcomes of those stage two and three complaint elements are shown below.



8.8. At stage two, the majority of complaint elements equating to 66% were not upheld and a further 13% were unsubstantiated or withdrawn. 5% of elements were partially upheld and 16% were upheld.

8.9. At stage three 13% were upheld, with a further 17% partially upheld. 65% were not upheld and 4% were unsubstantiated or withdrawn.

8.10. Since April 2021, of the 23 elements that went to Stage Three Panel, no outcome was changed by Panel. The main subject areas of elements upheld at stage two and three are as follows:



8.11. Comparing upheld elements with the same period in the previous year, communication is a recurring upheld theme at stages two and three. However due to the individualised nature of complaints it is difficult to say if the reasons for this is due to a limited impact of recommendations or if it is due to other reasons. Parental bias and case management and decisions are emerging themes when compared with the previous year. To assist with the analysis of themes, the upheld elements identified in both stage two investigations and stage three panels are reviewed regularly by the Children's Social Care Senior Management Team. The Customer Feedback Team identifies any reoccurring complaint elements and feeds this back to the relevant services.

## 9. OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

9.1. There have been 4 complaints highlighted to the Customer Feedback Team by the Local Government Ombudsman so far this year; 1 was escalated to Stage 2, 1 was closed with no further action, and 2 remain in progress (at investigation stage).

9.2. At the start of this year there were 4 LGO still being investigated that have now been concluded. 3 of the investigations were upheld and 1 was not upheld.

## **10. COST OF COMPLAINTS**

- 10.1. The total cost of investigating claims in the first two quarters of 2021/22 is £12,039 compared with £41,182 for the same period in 2020/21. This reduction is due to all new complaints (since the introduction of the refreshed complaints process) being managed internally by the Customer Feedback Team with no external allocations.
- 10.2. So far this year the compensation costs paid in relation to upheld complaints has totalled £27,315.52. This is significantly higher than previous years due to one complaint dating back to 2017 whereby a large payment was made to remedy lost care provision of 3.5 years dating back to 2017.

## **11. ABUSIVE, UNREASONABLE PERSISTENT OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINANTS**

- 11.1. There have been no recorded Abusive, Unreasonable Persistent or Vexatious Complainants in the first six months of 2021/22.

## **12. LEARNING & IMPROVEMENT**

- 12.1. Together for Children are committed to getting it right for the families in Sunderland. To do this we continue to drive improvement from learning from the complaints and compliments raised. An action plan is maintained by the Customer Feedback Team which includes actions and recommendations from stage two investigations and stage three panels. The action plan is closely monitored by the team. Reminders are sent to managers with responsibility for the recommendations each month and reported into Senior Management Team meetings to ensure that the learning is shared across the whole service.
- 12.2. In the last six months we have been making progress to address the recommendations in the 2020/21 Annual Customer Feedback Report. We have already seen positive impacts from this work through continued reductions in complaint numbers, a significant reduction in the number of complaint elements and a reduction in the reoccurring themes from last year.
- 12.3. We have been working with services to implement the refreshed complaints processes with a view to improving timeliness and responding more proactively to customer concerns. Although there is still work to do to improve timeliness, particularly at stage one, it is evident that fewer complaints are escalating through the stages. This together with positive feedback received from customers is suggesting that concerns are being resolved at an earlier stage and therefore customers are not having to proceed through the lengthier stages unnecessarily. The Customer Feedback Team have already held a 3-month review of the refreshed process to check that the expected benefits are being realised and have the 6-month review planned for October 2021.
- 12.4. We will continue to work through the remaining recommendations set out in the Annual Report to identify further improvement activity and to explore more possibilities. From analysing the themes in the first six months of this year, it is apparent that some new themes are emerging. The Customer Feedback Service will proactively work with services to analyse these themes to identify learning and improvement opportunities. The Customer Feedback Service is also focused on developing skills with its team and has attended refresher training on the LGO Remedy Guidance and is looking to attend Complaints Handling and Investigations training to achieve a BTEC Level 5 qualification.