

Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service Compliments and Complaints Annual Report 2020/21

Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the compliments and complaints received by Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service (TWFRS) from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. In total 41 compliments and 27 complaints, were received the volume of both are minor in comparison to the 47,173 'official' interactions recorded with the public.

Whilst the numbers of compliments and complaints are low as a proportion of the total number of interactions, TWFRS remains committed to providing the highest quality service to the communities of Tyne and Wear and recognises feedback as an essential component of this continuous improvement journey which includes enhanced reporting and analysis, for example the introduction of this annual report.

Compliments allow TWFRS to hear the views and experiences of service users and the public and sharing these positive comments helps to boost staff morale and enhance performance in the workplace. The relatively low number of compliments received may reflect the previous absence of consistent recording and reporting, although a process has been introduced to address this. Further analysis of the compliments received is presented in section 3. The full list of compliments is available to Members on request.

Complaints also provide useful service user feedback and analysis can support the identification of potential areas for improvement. Of the 27 complaints received just under half, 48% were upheld following investigation. The highest number (eight) related to complaints about on duty staff conduct, although only two of these, 25% were upheld. Further details and analysis of complaints is offered in sections 4 -10 of the attached report, including a breakdown by department, cause and outcome.

Other developments during the year include the introduction of a designated complaints and compliments intranet page and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO) provided complaint handling training to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). A new complaints policy and procedure in draft and information on these developments can be found in section 11.

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The statutory duties undertaken by TWFRS ensure that staff regularly interact with the public and feedback is received about the service provided through a variety of channels including verbally, in person or by telephone, in writing by letter, email, text, social media or via the website. This report details the compliments and complaints received by TWFRS from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.
- 1.2 TWFRS is committed to providing the highest quality service to the communities of Tyne and Wear and recognises feedback as an essential component of its continuous improvement journey. Feedback offers critical reflection of performance against standards and may describe activities undertaken to an exceptional standard or identify areas for improvement.
- 1.1 Feedback in the form of praise highlights where staff have gone above and beyond their duty, ensuring they are recognised for their efforts. Whilst TWFRS strive for operational excellence, there may be occasions where it does not deliver to the standards expected and when this occurs, TWFRS welcomes the opportunity to investigate and correct circumstances of underperformance and learn from the outcomes, in order to improve the quality of service provided.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 As reported to the Home Office, during 2020/21, 26,555¹ calls were received to the Control Room and 15,142² incidents attended. In addition, 4,888³ home safety checks and 588³ fire safety audits were conducted in this period. In total, 47,173 'official' interactions with the public were recorded. This figure is lower than previous years due to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and Government restrictions. As a result, of the pandemic TWFRS adapted its ways of working to continue its statutory responsibilities, while minimising face-to-face contact to protect both staff and the public.
- 2.2 There were 79 contacts received to the complaints and compliments mailbox, 41 were compliments, 29 complaints and the remaining nine were classified as 'other' contacts. The other contacts were forwarded to the relevant internal department for review and response.
- 2.3 Of the 29 complaints received, two were for external organisations and were redirected to the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (NEAS) and Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS). Details of the 79 contacts can be viewed in figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Contacts received 2020/21

Contact	Count
Compliments	41
Complaints	29
TWFRS	27
External - NEAS / NFRS	2
Other contacts	9
Employment matters ⁴	3
Data information request	2
General enquiry ⁵	2
Money dispute	1
Secondary employment dispute	1
Overall Total	79

- 2.4 The scope of analysis for this report is the 27 complaints and the 41 compliments received.

3. Compliment analysis 2020-21

- 3.1 For monitoring purposes, TWFRS define compliments as '*praise given by a service user or partner for a service provided, or to thank an individual, team or department for their actions*'. Therefore, interdepartmental compliments have not been included in this report.
- 3.2 When the number of compliments received (41) is compared with the total number of interactions recorded (47,173) this figure is extremely low. It is likely that more compliments were received to TWFRS for the period however; they have not been disseminated beyond the recipient and / or their department. This may be because previously there was no consistent method of recording and reporting compliments. Steps have been put in place to

¹ Source: mobilising system for call, 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021.

² Source: IRS for incident data, 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021.

³ Source: CFRMIS for HSC data and audits, 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021.

⁴ Includes applications, grievances, pensions and employer liability claims.

⁵ Queries in relation to Covid-19 policy / or general procedural decisions.

address this matter, including a dedicated complaint and compliments email address and intranet page. Since these changes were implemented, there has been an increase in compliments being reported internally.

- 3.3 One compliment highlighted that due to the busy roles undertaken by TWFRS it is easy to forget the consistent positive contributions made:

'I understand the high demands placed upon your organisation, and during these difficult times it's easy to forget about the constant amazing job that you do. Always placing others before yourself, which displays numerous traits, selfless, commitment, courage, heroism, team work to name a few. Thank you once again for outstanding service'.

- 3.4 The 41 compliments came from a number of sources for example, service users, members of the public, blue light partners, third sector organisations, MPs and the Government. Where contact details were provided compliments were acknowledged. The full list of compliments is available to Members on request.

- 3.4.1 A large proportion of the compliments were in recognition of the work conducted by staff during the pandemic in support of blue light colleagues and partners. Written 'thank yous' referred to the additional activities undertaken by staff and volunteers to keep communities safe. Extracts of praise include:

- *'The work that firefighters and staff have done has been critical to the response to the pandemic. We have heard many amazing examples of what has been achieved'.* **Home Secretary and Minister of State for Building Safety, Fire and Communities**
- *'My Ministerial colleagues and I have been incredibly thankful for the work that everyone in the fire and rescue services across England has done to keep put communities safe'.* **Home Secretary**
- *'I am so appreciative and grateful for all you are doing in keeping our communities safe and healthy, and you have all my support in rising to the challenges you continue to face'.* **Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Tyne and Wear**
- *'They represent the best of us, with tireless commitment to public service, and a can-do attitude in dangerous, high-pressure situations, which are made even harder by the pandemic'.* **Member of Parliament for Blaydon**
- *'...I was inspired by my colleagues' desire to do the right things to protect our residents, communities, businesses and our own teams...I was a bit awestruck by the combination of creativity, commitment and sheer hard graft which delivered the work of the SCG'.* **Northumbria Local Resilience Forum Chair**
- *'I would like to thank you personally for the genuine and proactive wiliness you demonstrate towards joined-up activities, as replicated by those other senior leaders of TWFRS'.* **Northumbria Police Chief Constable**

- 3.4.2 Feedback was also received from third sector organisations, which staff interacted with during the pandemic to support the most vulnerable in society, which included the coordination and transportation of food parcels and essential goods; which without that additional support, the reach of many of these organisations would not have been as wide. The 'thank yous' show the contribution TWFRS made to local communities and how much this was valued:

- *'Your team went the extra mile in order to assist us with the logistics of getting food supplies to our local Corps for them in turn to distribute to the most needy'.* **Salvation Army**
- *'...many of our clients live alone and due to shielding were also feeling very isolated and some had started to experience a decline in their mental health and wellbeing. Clients commented that the Firefighters who visited to drop off shopping always made time for a quick socially distant chat, impacting positively on how they were feeling'.* **Mental Health Concern**
- *'TWFRS saved the day on a number of occasions providing volunteers and a vehicle to help deliver food and activity packs to the community. The guys were always on hand and happy to help'.* **Byker Children and Young People's Partnership**
- *'Without your support we would have struggled to deliver 3 hot meals a week to over 80 families'.* **Gateway at Howden Hub**
- *'The resource you are providing us is invaluable as it means service users get their food at an appropriate time in the day – rather than after office hours when we used to deliver it'.* **Angelou Centre**
- *'Thank you for all of the work you do in uplifting our communities'.* **Building Futures East**

3.4.3 Compliments were received about emergency response and prevention activities and this feedback illustrates the breadth of the work undertaken by TWFRS, including safe and well visits, attendance at fires, flooding incidents, person extraction and the rescue of pets and wildlife. A number of the compliments repeated similar themes such as the professionalism and kindness of staff and the timeliness of response. Examples include:

- *'Due to your swift reaction time and professionalism, we suffered no structural damage which enabled us to remain fully operational, helping us provide a full service to the client...and its residents'.* **Service user**
- *'...assist with the extrication of a patient from an upstairs flat as they needed to be conveyed to the RVI for admission. The NEAS staff who were in attendance felt that the two Services worked together effortlessly to ensure that the patient was safe and secure at all times and all on scene ensured that everything was explained to the patient and their family throughout whilst ensuring at all times that the dignity of the patient was meticulously respected. They noted that the Fire Service staff were amazing'.* **The North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust**
- *'...we had a severe leak in our home. They arrived incredibly quickly... immediately got a plan in action to seal our roof as best they could from the heavy rain...The team all had an incredibly positive attitude, were really reassuring and made us feel safe. We are incredibly grateful for the team's help that night and cannot thank them enough for their efforts'.* **Service user**
- *'I want to say a big thank you to [name] and your night team for helping me when my cat got stuck on your fence. They were very kind and helpful'.* **Service user**
- *'...a herring gull was caught on some fishing line and hanging from a chimneystack... teams worked quickly and efficiently to get the bird down and as he was unhurt I was able to release him straight away'.* **RSPCA**

- *'Sincere thank you to [name], who came to the rescue of my toddler and newborn baby trapped in my car in Newcastle city centre...what a kind and helpful team and so much appreciated'. Service user*
- *'Can I just say a massive thank you to all the crews that attended...on Friday. You are all our heroes every single one of you need medals for saving our residents lives that were trapped. You all go above and beyond in your jobs'. Service user*

3.4.4 Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a legal obligation to comply with the general equality duty, which incorporates nine protected characteristics.⁶ To meet statutory obligations, when exercising functions, TWFRS must aim to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not;
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

3.4.5 The compliments show positive interactions with members of the public including those with protected characteristics such as the elderly or those with disabilities. Feedback about how staff 'approached a situation' and treated people fairly, with dignity and respect, demonstrating some of the 'softer skills' staff possess when interacting with the public:

- *'This is how you do access right. Doesn't make it a big deal, and sorts it out themselves without me having to ask - big thank you to @Tyne_Wear_FRS for making things so easy and stress-free #AccessMatters'. Service user*
- *'The carers and family...would like to say thank you for how you quickly responded and the absolute lovely way with total respect treat[ed] her that afternoon...she is a disabled young lady'. On behalf of a Service user*
- *'Hello, can I say a big thank you to the Firefighters who dried my flat after a flood from the flat above. You are all 4 stars. God bless you. Keep safe. Love & prayers an 85 yr old'. Service user*
- *'A crew attended to our grandmothers property...I just want to thank them for how they approached the situation and the professionalism shown. The family greatly appreciate it'. On behalf of a Service user*

3.5 Compliment statistics are reported quarterly to the Corporate Governance Board and the narrative is published monthly on the intranet for staff to review alongside running totals.

4. Complaints analysis

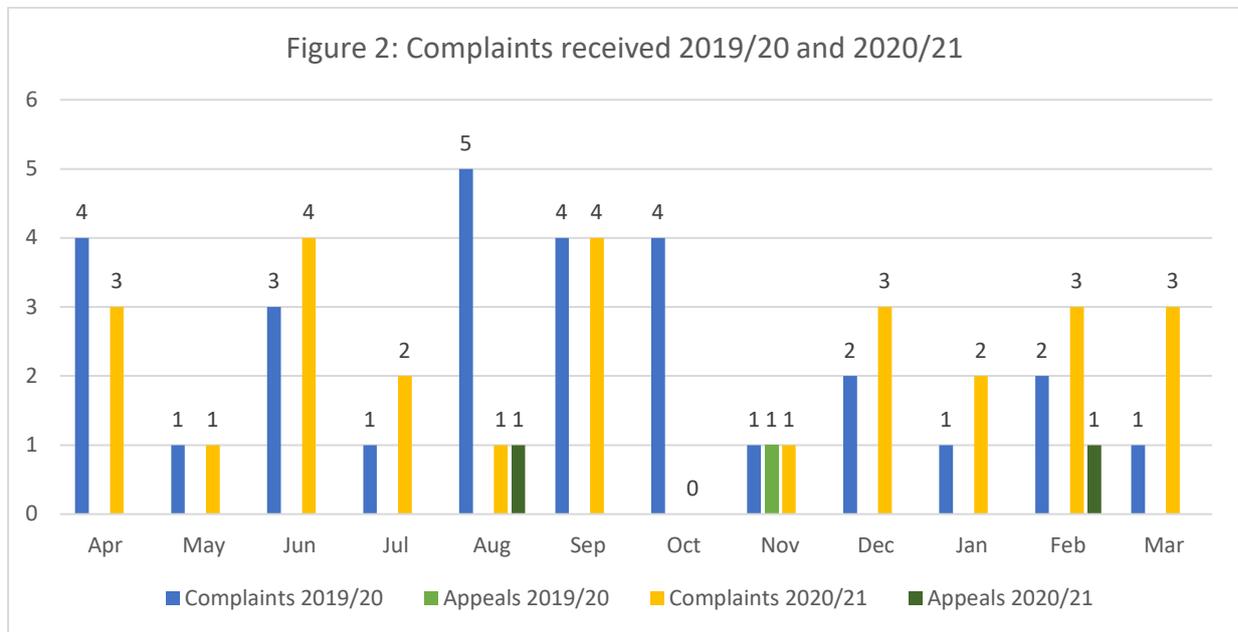
4.1 Complaints have been categorised based on the LGOs definition of a complaint:

'An expression of dissatisfaction about our action or lack of action by one or more members of the public. This may be about the standard of our service provided by us or on our behalf, or the manner in which it was provided'.

⁶ Nine protected characteristics age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation.

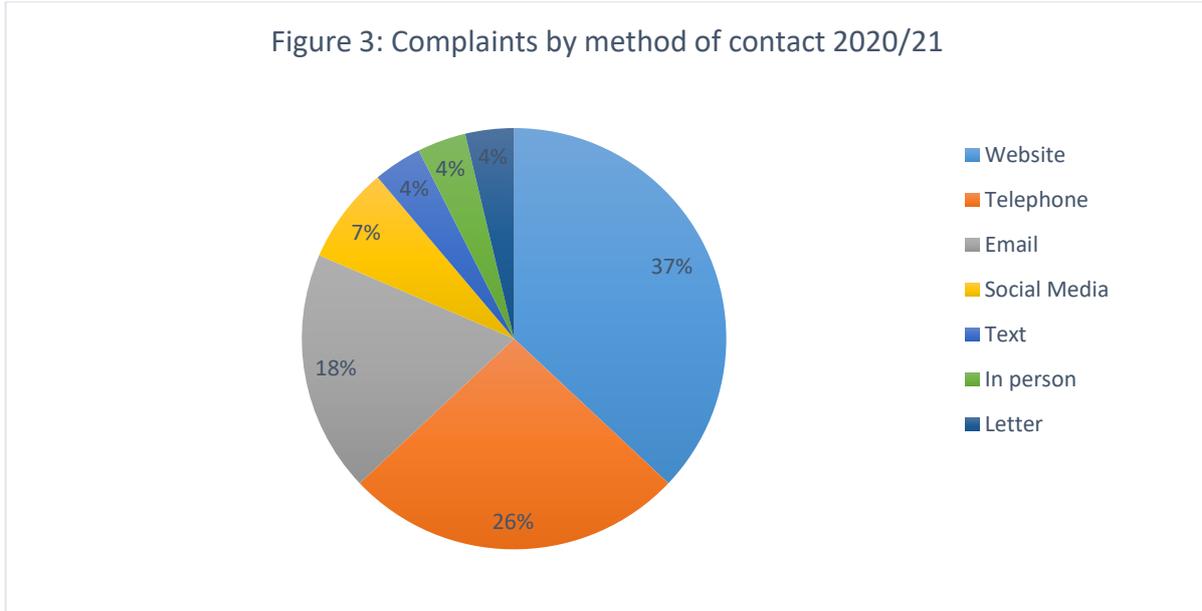
4.2 During 2020/21, 27 complaints were received, a reduction of two when compared with 2019/20. Two of the 27 complaints were anonymous, the same number as 2019/20, and enough information was provided for one of the complaints to be fully investigated. The second complaint however, was unable to be investigated due to lack of information provided by the complainant. The details of both complaints have been analysed and captured within the findings.

5. Volume of complaints received



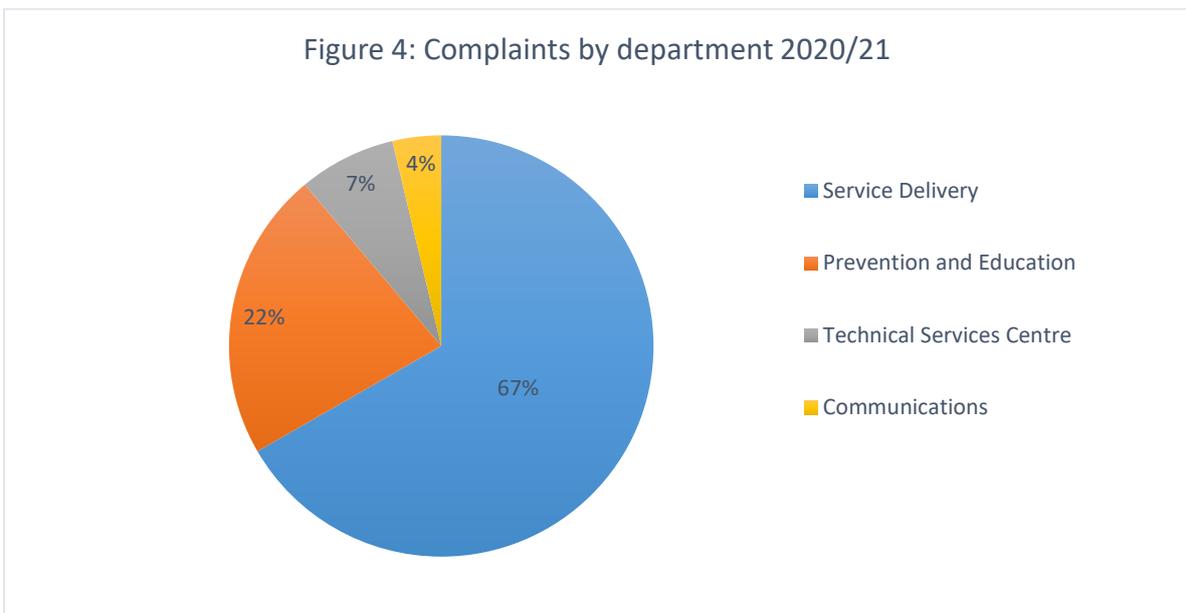
- 5.1 Figure 2 illustrates complaints received by month for 2019/20 and 2020/21 and when compared, the complaints per month are roughly consistent for each financial year with the exception of August and October, which saw a reduction for the 2020/21 period.
- 5.2 Two appeals were received during 2020/21, one in August 2020 and one in February 2021. Both complainants were dissatisfied with the outcome of their primary investigation and appealed the decision to the Chief Fire Officer. As a result, two secondary investigations were conducted and the outcome of both were to uphold the original investigation decision.
- 5.3 The appeal stage is the final stage of TWFRS' complaint process however; complainants can choose to raise their complaints with the LGO. During 2020/21, no LGO complaints were received.
- 5.4 It should be noted that there is no a data comparison for 2019/20 for the following sections of this report as the data recorded was previously not coded / categorised.

6. Complaints by method of contact



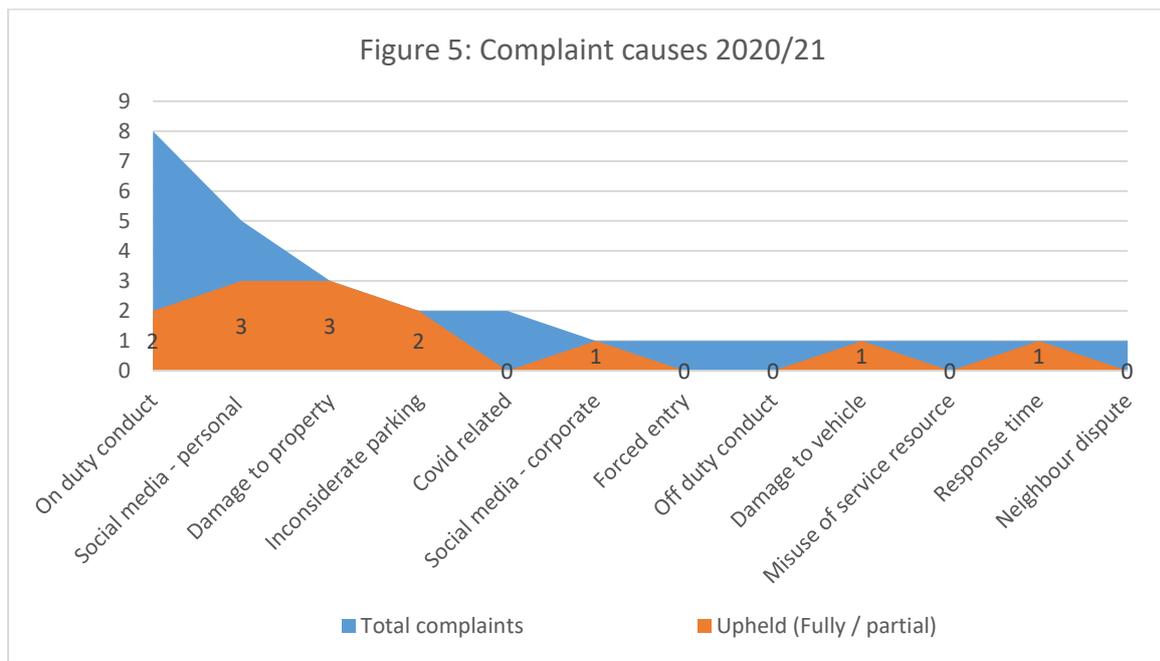
- 6.1 Figure 3 illustrates, that 37% of complaints were received via the website, closely followed by telephone at 26% and email at 8%. It can be surmised that complainants may prefer to use the website as this is a quick and easy method to submit a complaint which can be undertaken at a convenient time, particularly for those who work 9 to 5 or have busy family lives and may prefer to make contact outside of traditional ‘working hours’.
- 6.2 The data also shows that 70% of complaints were received without the complainant having to speak with a member of staff. The remaining 30% comprise of telephone or face-to-face contact. Even though the service operates 24 hours a day, the telephone complaints were reported ‘in hours’ via departmental contacts or Business Services and none were reported via the Control Room.

7. Complaints by department



- 7.1 Figure 4 shows complaints by department and as expected the largest volume of complaints were attributed to Service Delivery. The Service employs 861⁷ staff, and 58% (496) work in Service Delivery therefore this broadly correlates with this department having the largest proportion of complaints (67%) and the fact that their roles are naturally public facing.
- 7.2 Service Delivery staff attended 15,142 operational incidents in 2020/21, the largest volume of face-to-face contact recorded within the 47,173 'official' interactions. Therefore, it is foreseeable that this department would receive the highest proportion of complaints.

8. Complaint causes



- 8.1 Identifying the principal cause of a complaint is helpful to support analysis but it also provides an instructive way to understand where TWFRS may need to target improvement. Figure 5 shows the top three complaints, making up almost two-thirds of the total complaints were in relation to on duty conduct (8), personal social media accounts (5) and property damage (3).
- 8.2 48% of complaints were upheld which indicates in these instances that TWFRS or the staff involved were found to be at fault. Examples of why a complaint may be upheld could include, TWFRS or a staff member were found to have not acted accordingly, provided a poor service or that their actions or decisions may have had a negative impact on an individual. A complaint would be partly upheld if it was identified that TWFRS or a staff member had got some things wrong, but not all the issues that were complained.
- 8.3 In those instances where a complaint was upheld an apology was provided, supported by an explanation of why the occurrence happened and the action(s) taken to put this matter right to avoid it happening again. 85% of the complaints upheld were fully upheld and 15% were partly upheld.
- 8.4 Sixteen officers investigated 27 complaints, and of that figure, five were assigned multiple complaints due to their scope of responsibility. These five officers conducted between two and four investigations each, the other nine officers conducted one investigation each. 56% of investigations were conducted by a Station Manager, 26% by a Group Manager, 11% by a Department Head, 4% an Area Manager and 4% a Watch Manager.

⁷ Source: Core HR, 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021.

9. Complaint outcomes 2020/21

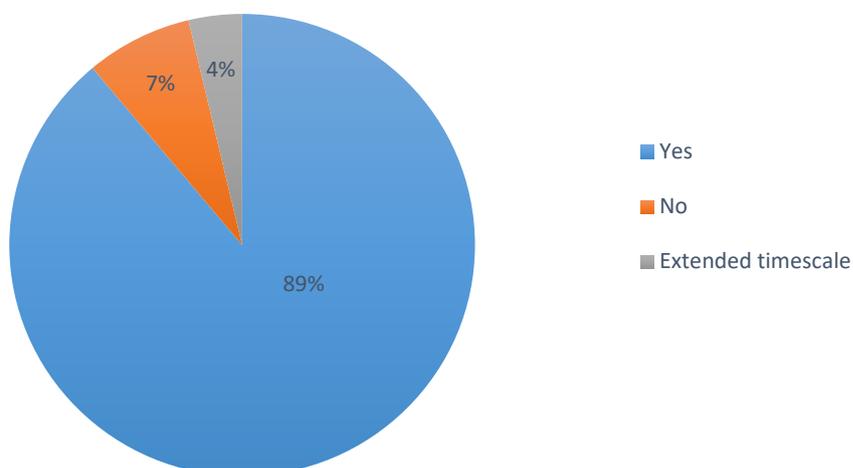
Figure 6: Complaint outcomes

Causes of complaints	Total complaints	% upheld
On duty conduct	8	25%
Social media - personal	5	60%
Damage to property	3	100%
Inconsiderate parking	2	100%
Covid related	2	0%
Social media - corporate	1	100%
Forced entry	1	0%
Off duty conduct	1	0%
Vehicle damage	1	100%
Misuse of service resource	1	0%
Response time	1	100%
Neighbour dispute	1	0%
Total	27	48%

- 9.1 Although the highest category of complaints was in relation to on duty conduct, 8/27, only 25% of these complaints were upheld.
- 9.2 Staff use of personal social media received the second highest number of complaints 5/27, the complaints were about photographs or comments made on personal accounts whilst demonstrating affiliation to TWFRS, 60% of these complaints were upheld.
- 9.3 The data shows the eight complaints received about property damage (3), inconsiderate parking (2), vehicle damage (1), response time (1) and corporate social media (1) were all upheld. Hypothetically, staff could have avoided these complaints by undertaking a different courses of action and / or behaviours.
- 9.4 Of the five complaints received in relation to covid (1), forced entry (1), off duty conduct (1), misuse of service resource (1) and a neighbour dispute (1) none were upheld.

10. Performance against timescales

Figure 7: Performance against timescales



- 10.1 The complaint procedure specifies that complaints are to be responded to within 28 days, unless the complaint is complex in nature and / or additional time is required to support the investigation process. 89% (24) of complaints were responded to within 28 days.
- 10.2 The three complaints closed outside of the 28 day timescale were because one complaint required support from Sunderland City Council legal department therefore this prolonged the investigation. The remaining two complaints were received via social media and there was a delay in receiving full information from the complainant therefore this impacted the commencement of the investigation.

11. Developments in 2020/21

- 11.1 In addition, to the introduction of this report there have been other developments including the transfer of compliments and complaints ownership from the Principal Officers Suite to the Business Improvement Team.
- 11.2 With the establishment of the Corporate Governance Board in October 2020, there has been improved internal reporting, compliments and complaints are discussed quarterly via the corporate governance scorecard and highlight report.
- 11.3 A designated intranet page has been established where staff can view the corporate governance scorecard and guidance in relation to compliments and complaints
- 11.4 The LGO conducted 'effective complaint handling' training with SLT in May 2020. This training included:
- information about defining and analysing complaints;
 - planning investigations;
 - evaluating information and making sound decisions;
 - communicating decisions effectively and;
 - resolving and learning from complaints.
- 11.5 Feedback from this training will be analysed with a view to organising training for other key staff.
- 11.6 A literature review and peer research was undertaken to analyse good practice in order to inform the new complaints policy and procedure.