

Together for Children Customer Feedback Annual Report 2022-2023



HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY 2022/23

What are our key achievements?

- We have received 189 compliments this year from children, young people, families, and professionals.
- We successfully helped 169 customers to receive satisfactory resolutions to their issues or concerns informally, without having to initiate a complaint.
- Overall, the number of complaints received has reduced by 14.8%.
- The number of complaint elements has reduced by 10% at stage one.
- Our refreshed complaint process is improving the customer experience and resolving concerns more quickly.

What are our areas of focus for 2022/23?

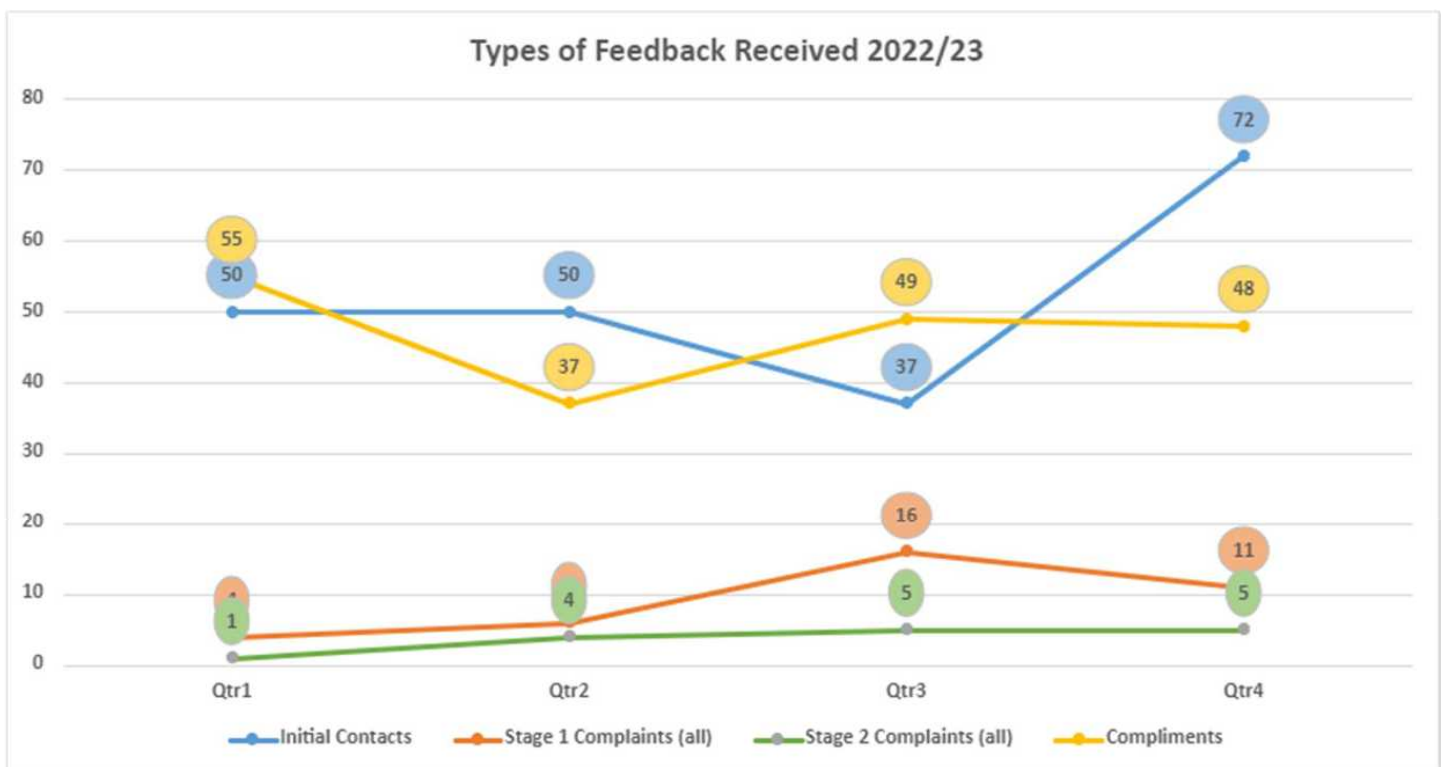
- Continue to focus on the timeliness and quality of complaints.
- Train and embed the small group of appointed TfC Independent Persons for Stage two Children's Social Care Complaints to work with Gateshead and South Tyneside Local Authorities in our regional arrangement.
- Implement the Apteon Respond complaints management system from May 2023 that will improve recording and provide greater analysis and insight through reporting.

1. PURPOSE OF THE ANNUAL REPORT

1.1. This report covers the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023. 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 throughout the year, 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 each quarter in 2022/23.



2.2. In addition to the above types of feedback, the Chief Executive, and Director of Children’s Services receives Member Enquiries. In 2022/23, we received 53 enquiries of which 40 were responded to within timescale. Most enquiries were in relation to education queries.

3. COMPLIMENTS

3.1. In 2022/23, we received 189 compliments 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 is 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 Communications Lead, so all staff can be recognised for their dedication and hard work. Below are some examples of the compliments we have received in 2022/23:

- **Adoption**
‘I just wanted to share feedback from Adoptive parents. They told me how amazing, brilliant and supportive X was during introductions and after. They wanted to let you both know how without her

support; they would have struggled during introductions and after Y was placed. They both sang X's praises and wanted to thank her for her ongoing support.'

- **Assessment Teams**

'I just wanted to say a big thank with all your support with X throughout your time working with us. There is still a long road ahead but hopefully all will fall into place.'

- **Careers and NEET**

'Thanks for all your amazing hard work with all our students, I haven't come across anyone who is more tenacious and hardworking when it comes to ensuring all young people in your care have a positive destination.'

- **Children's Homes**

'I would just like to say thank you for yesterday, X was terrified, and you made her feel relaxed and wanted. She was extremely grateful that you are going to move her in on Saturday and she couldn't believe how lovely Burlington Close was and that the flat was "going to be all hers". It must be a horrible feeling when nobody wants you, but she left your office yesterday happy and no longer worried.'

- **Children with Disabilities Team**

'A huge thank you from a parent for very well written assessment - in his feedback Dad has stated he was brought to tears in how 'beautifully written' X assessment was and said that in his job role as a teacher, he reads and writes but has never come across anything like this before.'

- **Child Protection Teams**

'I would like to thank social worker X for the invaluable help given to my precious daughter. Fortunately, despite a traumatic journey, it has concluded as a positive outcome. I firmly believe, it may have been a different outcome if X had not been allocated. Through her expertise and her belief in myself and my family, Y's mental health would have deteriorated further. Her approach from day one was so supportive. She listened to Y and always put her needs first. If other professionals became heavy handed, she was Y's advocate and stood firm with them. As time went by Y became trusting of professionals again and opened up to being helped. This was the turning point for her, and she became her happy self. I have my daughter back, for this, I am eternally grateful. Thank you for making a difference.'

- **Customer Feedback Team**

'I have found your organisation to be fantastic at dealing with complaints so professionally.'

- **Early Help Team**

'Just a massive thank you to X for being there from day one, all the calls when I needed a cry, fighting my corner with everyone and all the advice even if I went back a million times. I always knew I'd leave, just didn't know how or if I was ready to. It meant so much knowing she was always there when I felt like I had nowhere to turn.'

- **Fostering**

'It was agreed at panel today that I should write regarding the foster carers in the matching matter. Panel were in agreement that the foster carers report was one of the best we have read. It painted a wonderful picture as to how the children have developed while in their care from when they were first placed with them. It was much appreciated that X attended the panel to give more information about the children and her support for the couple as proposed adopters was of great assistance. Panel and myself express our thanks to X for the help she gave to us.'

'Mockingbird has helped me so much with my confidence and trust. X and Y made me feel really welcome from the 1st day I met them. Due to my past experience with Social Services down south I was always looked upon as being nothing but everyone in Mockingbird made me realise that I was something. They

made me feel part of a family, they didn't judge my past mistakes, they have given me a chance that nobody else did and from this my relationship with my son and his foster parents is the best it's ever been.'

- **ICRT**

'I would like to give positive feedback about X and her manager. They have gone out of their way to help and support me the past few days. I want them to know that I am grateful and that they are doing a lot to help me and I want them to be recognised for this.'

- **Children's Independent Reviewing Team (CIRT)**

'I just wanted to share with you long overdue praise for X. I was on a visit last night and observed a lovely relationship between the young people and X. She was warm, respectful and gave her full attention to the needs of the children. I have also worked on a couple of other cases with X and find her very approachable and lovely to work with, always being professional with the professionals, carers and children alike. I hope to continue to have many more cases with her.'

- **Next Steps**

'I just wanted to say thanks for the time you have spent with X one of our NQSWs from Coalfields. She spoke about how much she has learnt about the age assessment process and how kind you have been to her, it was lovely to hear her speak so positively about the experience and support of colleagues outside of her team.'

- **Performance**

'What a fantastic support X has and continues to be to me. What she doesn't know about spreadsheets is not worth knowing! Her approachable and kind manner has been so helpful to me and it is much appreciated.'

- **Permanence Teams**

'I would love to thank my social worker X as she has been so amazing and supportive. I couldn't ask for a better social worker. Thank you so much from me, Y and the kids, you have supported us so much.'

- **Pre-Birth Team**

'X and Y spoke at length about what a positive experience they have had with Together for Children and the support they have received from ATM and SW has been 'incredible!' They shared that they have been made to feel at ease, always kept in the loop and they even commented on how progressive, and child focused TfC's language and approach is overall. They said they completed their assessment and training with Cumbria and they have given written feedback to Cumbria in that they should model their practice on TfC's! X and Y have felt so supported and assured by the care planning for Z that if they were to ever adopt again, they would wish for this to be with TfC.'

- **SEND Team**

'I want X to know that I appreciate how challenging it was for her to find a suitable alternative provision regarding Y's education. I would like her to know that her tenacity and thinking outside of the box is noted and highly valued by myself. Y is thriving in his attendance with 'Outdoor Ambition.' He loves it and the staff are excellent in the way they manage and support him. This has led to Y's improved engagement with TFC and in him making steady progress in his day-to-day life skills.'

- **Targeted Youth Services**

'I just want to pass on my thanks to X and Y. I feel the joint operation went really well and feel the staff fully engaged with the local youths and offered advice around Wear Kids and the summer activities that are available. The patrols were carried out around the main ASB hotspot areas and a number of residents said they saw us during these patrols. The local youths fully engaged with all of us and wanted to ask us questions which was brilliant to see. I personally feel this would be something to maybe look at exploring again in the future.'

4. INITIAL CONTACTS

- 4.1. 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, in the best interests of customers for an improved customer experience. The table below shows the initial contact data for each quarter:

Initial Contacts	Q1 (Apr – Jun)	Q2 (Jul – Sep)	Q3 (Oct – Dec)	Q4 (Jan – Mar)	Total 2022/23	
Number Received	50	50	37	72	209	
Number Escalated to Stage 1	4	6	16	11	37	17.7%

- 4.2. In 2022/23 we received 209 initial contacts. Through responding to issues or concerns at the outset, we have helped 169 of our customers to receive satisfactory resolutions informally with just 37 (17.7%) initial contacts escalating to a formal stage one complaint.

An example of an initial contact:

A mother was unhappy with the level of communication and updates received regarding her child's EHCP plan and was wanting to the service to confirm the name of the school that her child would be attending. The case worker and manager from the SEND service arranged a time to speak to the parent and explained the reason for the delay and confirmed the school that her child would be attending. The manager apologised for the delay and any upset caused. The parent accepted the response and did not wish to pursue a formal complaint.

5. COMPLAINTS PROCESS

- 5.1. **Children's Social Care Complaints** - follows statutory guidance and 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 will be appointed to investigate the complaint and an Independent Person who will be involved in all aspects of consideration of the complaint. The investigation can take between 25-65 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 and Social Care Ombudsman.

- 5.3. **Corporate Complaints** - any complaints that do not relate to Statutory Children's Services, are handled under the corporate complaints procedure which consists of the following two formal stages.

- **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 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 will be appointed to investigate the complaint within 25 working days; however, an extension can be requested for more complex cases.

5.4. If the customer remains unhappy, they can raise their complaint with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

6. COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

6.1. The table below shows the number of complaints we received under the Children’s Social Care and Corporate Complaints Policies, at each stage of the process.

	Q1 (Apr-Jun)		Q2 (Jul-Sep)		Q3 (Oct-Dec)		Q4 (Jan-Mar)		Totals	
	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate	2022/23	
Stage 1	1	3	5	1	6	10	4	7	37	-5
Stage 2	0	1	2	2	3	2	1	4	15	-1
Stage 3	0	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A	0	-3
Totals	1	4	7	3	9	12	5	11	52	-9
	-14	+2	-1	-1	-5	+10	-7	+7		

6.2. **Overall total** - in 2022/23 we received 52 complaints compared with 61 in 2021/22 which shows a decrease of 14.8%.

6.3. **Stage one complaints** - in 2022/23 we received 5 fewer stage one complaints. Of those there was a reduction of 52.9% relating to children’s social complaints and 162.5% increase relating to corporate complaints.

6.4. **Stage two complaints** - We received 6 children’s social care stage two complaints compared with 12 in the previous year, of which none progressed to stage three (compared with 3 in 2021/22). 9 of the corporate complaints progressed to stage two compared with 4 the year before.

Number of Complaints by Young People:

6.5. 1 complaint was received by a young person which is a decrease of 1 compared to the previous year.

6.6. Whilst we do not receive many formal complaints from children and young people, TfC collects regular feedback from children, young people, and their families about the services they are accessing. In addition, the Mind of My Own One and Express Tools allows young people accessing assessment, planning and intervention to share their views or concerns. In 2023/24 the Customer Feedback Team will provide an overview of this feedback within the Annual Report. All feedback is considered by the relevant services.

7. STAGE ONE COMPLAINTS

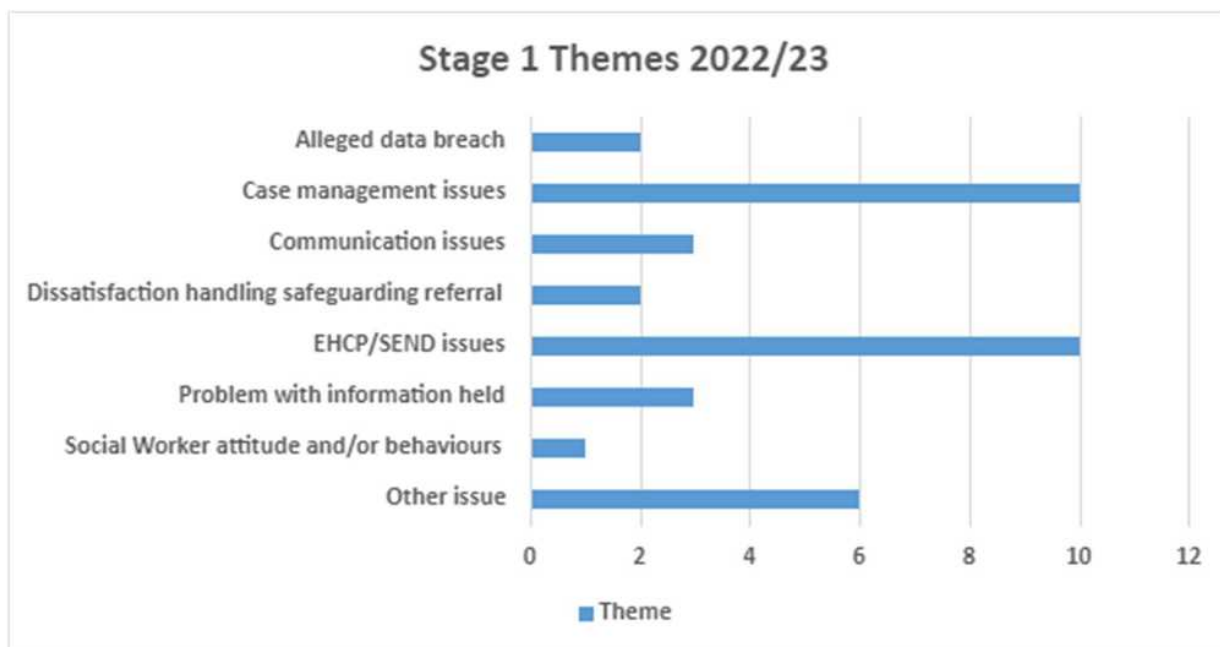
7.1. The table below shows the percentage of stage one complaints received by service area.

Team	Total 22/23	Total 22/23
SEND Team	12	32.4%
Child Protection Teams	6	16.2%
Assessment Teams	4	10.8%
Connected Carers	4	10.8%
Children with Disabilities Team	3	8.1%
Permanence Teams	3	8.1%
Next Steps	2	5.4%
Pre-Birth Team	1	2.7%
CIRT	1	2.7%
Supported Lodgings	1	2.7%
TOTAL	37	100.0%

7.2. 32.4% of stage one complaints received in 2022/23 relate to the SEND Team. This equates to increase from 4 in the previous year to 12 in 2022/23. 16.2% of stage one complaints received relate to the Child Protection Teams but there has been a decrease in the number of complaints from 10 to 6 when compared with the previous year.

Themes:

7.3. The main themes of the complaints completed at Stage One in 2022/23 are shown in the chart below:



7.4. Complaints relating to case management (sufficiency of support and decision making) together with complaints linked to EHCP/SEND issues make up the top two themes in 2022/23.

Timeliness of Response to Stage One Complaints:

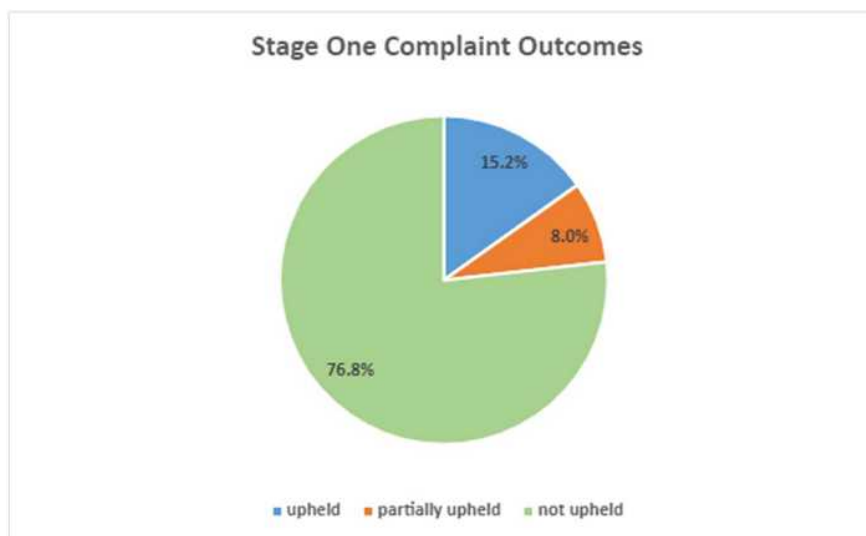
7.5. The timeliness of stage one complaints has fluctuated over the year but overall there has been a slight increase from 71% in the previous year to 75% in 2022/23. The Customer Feedback Team aim to resolve concerns at the

earliest stage for customers by providing a greater focus on customer conciliation and mediation, 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 increases customer satisfaction, consequently it can take some complaints at stage one out of timescale.

% Of all stage 1 complaints responded to in timescale	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
	25%	100%	87.5%	60%	75%

Stage One Complaint Outcomes:

- 7.6. There were 112 elements of complaint identified within stage one complaints that concluded in 2022/23, compared with 124 elements of complaint in the previous year. The outcomes of all stage one complaint elements for the year are shown below.



- 7.7. Most complaint elements (equating to 76.8%) were not upheld.
- 7.8. Of the 112 elements of complaint, only 17 elements (15.2%) were upheld, and those elements related to case management, requests for information or services, a missed visit, inaccurate information, impact of TfC involvement and poor communication. A further 8.0% of elements were partially upheld.

An example of a stage one social care (statutory) complaint:

A complaint was received regarding an SGO payment not being made following an annual review of payments. The payment was stopped as the relevant paperwork had not been returned by the customer by the required timescale. The stage 1 complaint investigation did not find TfC at fault as reminders were sent however the manager and investigator did recognise that the postal strikes could have impacted the timeliness of paperwork. For this reason, the Manager contacted the customer to confirm the paperwork had been received and explained the next steps whereby the payments would be backdated, and a letter would be sent to confirm the payments. The customer was satisfied with the response and did not wish to escalate their complaint to stage two.

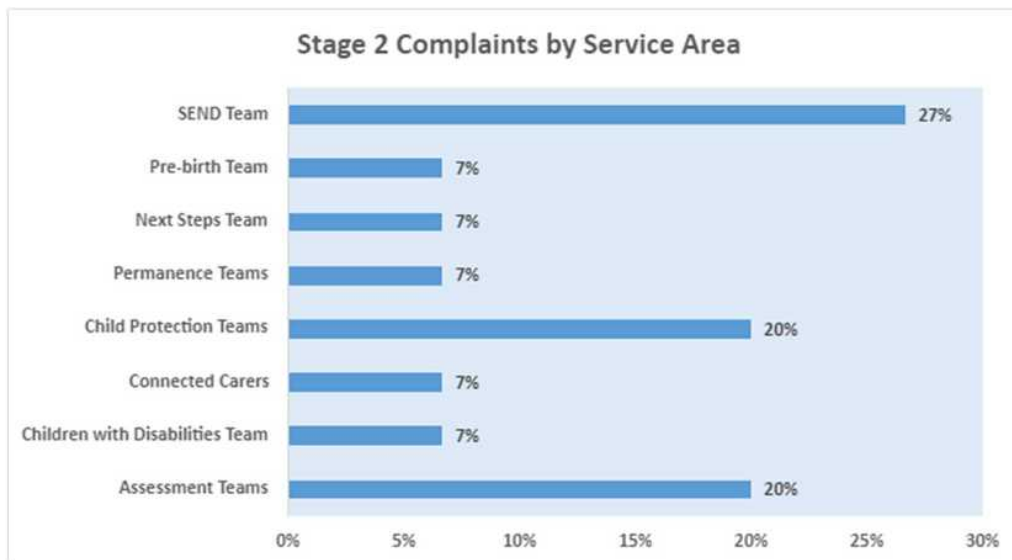
A second example of a stage one social care (statutory) complaint:

A complaint was received from a parent regarding inaccuracies in a report that described worries about their behaviours. The investigator found the complaint to be partially upheld as whilst it was essential that worries regarding the behaviours were documented and discussed, it was not 100% clear in the document that the behaviours related to allegations only. As a remedy, the Service Manager spoke with the parent and agreed to upload an email encompassing their views to the case management system and agreed to reinforce the message and learning within her teams about the importance of recording accurate reflections around allegations.

8. STAGE TWO COMPLAINTS

8.1. Overall, the number of stage two complaints completed has decreased by 1 when compared to last year, however the number of stage two elements investigated this year has significantly reduced by 54% suggesting learning and improvement actions are having a positive impact for our customers.

8.2. The chart below shows the number of all stage two complaints received by service area.



8.3. Of the 15 stage two complaints received, 27% related to the SEND Team, 20% to the Assessment Teams, and 20% to Child Protection Teams.

8.4. The top themes for stage two complaints related to case management and decision making and EHCP/SEND issues. For example, how information has been shared, timeliness of EHCP plans, accuracy of information, provision of education provision identified in EHCP, disagreement with alleged accusations, timeliness of assessments, decisions not to return child to parents, not agreeing with social worker involvement etc.

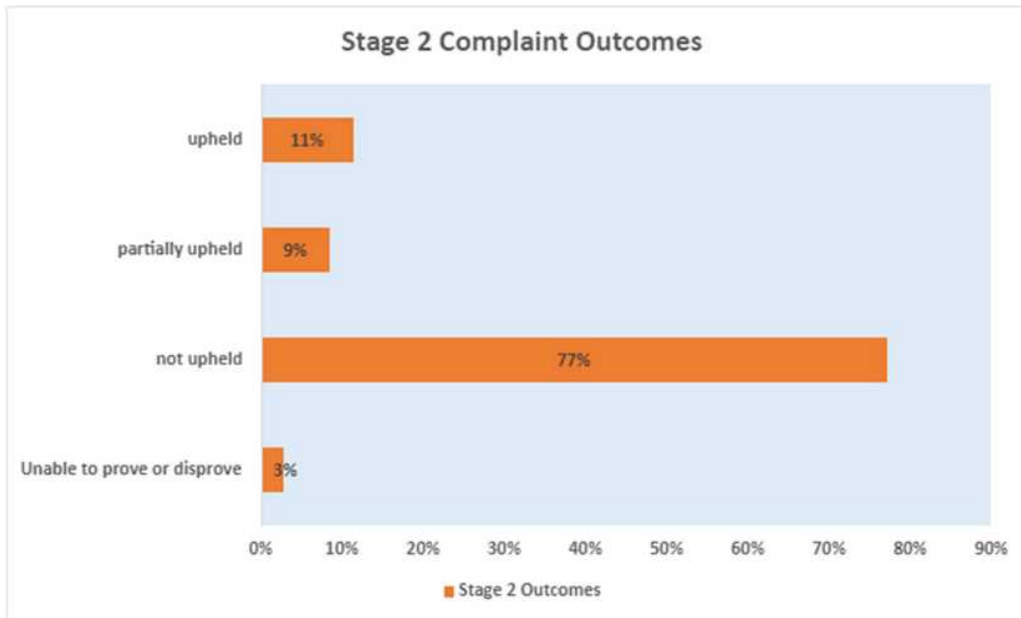
Timeliness of Response to Stage Two Complaints:

8.5. In 2022/23, 18 complaints concluded (*figures differ to numbers received, as there were complaints open at the start of the year from 2021/22 and complaints that remain open moving into 2022-23*). 11 of the stage two complaints related to children's social care and 7 were corporate complaints. 14 of the stage two complaints were completed within the 65 working-day timescale (78%). This is a significant improvement compared with 2021/22 where 9 (64%) of stage 2 complaints were completed in timescale.

8.6. The average days taken for investigation and adjudication of the complaints was 67 working days: down from an average of 87 working days in 2021/22. Whilst progress has been made, this will continue to be an area of focus for the Customer Feedback Team in 2023/24.

Stage Two Complaint Outcomes

8.7. There were 70 elements of complaint identified within all stage two complaints that concluded in 2022/23. The outcomes of stage two complaint elements for the year are shown below.



8.8. At stage two, most complaint elements equating to 77% were not upheld and a further 3% were unable to prove or disprove. 9% of elements were partially upheld and 11% were upheld. The main subject areas of elements upheld at stages two are as follows:

- Confidentiality linked to sharing information with young person
- Social worker speaking inappropriately about a parent
- Not providing a final EHCP within timescale
- Actions taken following a safeguarding concern
- Not processing Parent Carer Assessment within timescale
- Not adequately preparing Foster Carers
- Not advising parents of child missing from foster home
- Inadequate support during foster to adopt process

8.9. In comparison to previous years, there are fewer subject areas at stages two due to the significant reduction in complaint elements this year. Although the numbers are much lower to draw out definitive themes for improvement, the upheld elements are reviewed by relevant senior management teams. The Customer Feedback Team identifies any reoccurring complaint elements and feeds this back to managers through regular reporting.

An example of a stage two corporate complaint:

A parent complained about the delays to the completion of her child’s EHCP plan which she felt led to a delay in providing an appropriate level of education for her child. The Investigating Officer upheld the complaint relating to the timeliness of the EHCP as the delay was extensive, partly due to the school holidays. Whilst this delay did impact the timescale for alternative education provision, the Investigator found that appropriate temporary provision was provided in the current school setting whilst a change in school was being arranged. Therefore, the second element of complaint was not upheld. The Service Manager apologised to the parent for the delays to the EHCP plan and offered a payment of £500 for the time and trouble in raising her complaint.

9. OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

9.1. There have been 14 complaints highlighted to the Customer Feedback Team by the Local Government Ombudsman so far this year; 1 was upheld, 11 were closed after initial enquiries, and 2 are in progress at the investigation stage.

10. COST OF COMPLAINTS

- 10.1. The total cost of investigating claims this year was £7,197.50 compared to £16,415 in the previous year. As per the new complaints process, all stage two investigations (where possible) are undertaken by TfC Investigating Officers rather than using external allocations, resulting in a significant saving. The costs therefore relate to the external recruitment of Independent Persons who work alongside the Investigating Officers in line with statutory guidance.
- 10.2. The compensation costs paid in relation to upheld complaints this year is £1,200 compared with £28,415 last year. The £1,200 relates to a SEND complaint.

11. PERSISTENT & UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT BEHAVIOUR

- 11.1. The Customer Feedback Manager wrote to three customers this year regarding the content and frequency of their communications to our services. The matters did not escalate further.

12. LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT

- 12.1. 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. Below are some examples of the recommendations undertaken this year:
- The importance of workers being transparent about the process in Foster to Adopt arrangements was reinforced across relevant teams.
 - Practice standards were updated to include workers seeking agreement with families regarding the best way to communicate sensitive information recognising this will be different for each family.
 - A reminder was sent to workers regarding the method of recording telephone calls within the case management system, and it was reinforced in the all-staff communications meeting and within the standard case management training.
 - Further training was arranged on the assessment guidelines, exploring strengths and safety within a family to manage and reduce harm.
 - Team Manager of EDT provided reminders to the team about contacting those with Parental Responsibility of any changes, should those changes occur during the times that EDT have responsibility for the child or young person.
 - A review was undertaken between the Fostering Team and Children's Social Care Teams, regarding the standards of information required to ensure that Foster Carers have all the relevant information to provide care from the start of the child or young person being in their care. The findings and recommendations were reported and implemented.
 - The Principal Social Worker, shared with staff, information from Community Care Inform about alienating behaviours. Training was also provided by colleagues within Legal Services in relation to this issue in the context of Private Law Proceedings.
 - A programme of mandatory training, regarding GDPR, was rolled out to all staff within TfC. Staff will be required to undertake GDPR training on an annual basis which will be monitored by Senior Management Teams.
 - A meeting was arranged with a young person to discuss who he wanted at his Cared for Meeting going forward and a process was put in place to ensure his advocate was provided with dates and times of meetings as early as possible to ensure attendance.
 - All recommendations from stage two adjudications are shared with all staff during monthly face-to-face meetings. Written notes are also taken by a minute taker and circulated across the service, so that those who cannot attend are also updated.

- 12.2. We have seen positive impacts from implementing recommendations identified following Stage two complaints through continued reductions in complaint numbers at stage one, a significant reduction in the number of complaint elements at all stages and a reduction in the reoccurring themes from last year.
- 12.3. We have continued to work with services to improve timeliness and responding more proactively to customer concerns. Although there is still work to do to continue to improve timeliness, we have received positive feedback from customers confirming that concerns are being resolved at an earlier stage and therefore customers are not having to proceed through the lengthier stages unnecessarily.
- 12.4. The Customer Feedback Team will continue to proactively work with services to analyse arising themes to identify learning and improvement opportunities. The Customer Feedback Team is also focused on developing skills with its team and each member of the team has attended training in 2022 including the LGO Effective Complaints Handling training in July and a 3-day Complaints Handling and Investigations training to achieve a BTEC Level 5 qualification in June 2022.
- 12.5. We continue to be part of a local arrangement for the recruitment of Independent Persons (IPs) for Stage two Children's Social Care complaints, working with Gateshead and South Tyneside local authorities. As a result of this arrangement, we are seeing a reduced delay in instigating the investigation process through a quicker appointment process. We have recruited our own small pool of IPs who can undertake the IP role in Gateshead and South Tyneside authorities where workers will be able to see practice in neighbouring authorities and add to their experience, learning and knowledge.
- 12.6. The Customer Feedback Team will be implementing the Apteon Respond complaints handling management system in May 2023. This will ensure our complaints data is more accessible, can be reported more easily and will assist with workflow management within the team. The system will provide greater insight into the identification of themes and areas for learning and improvement.
- 12.7. Two new Customer Feedback Officers joined the team in May 2022 to further strengthen our resources dedicated in the early initial contact stage and to ensure our Stage 1 complaint responses are robust and as timely as possible, to offer our customers the best possible service to resolve their concerns. Both Officers have thriving in their role and have brought fresh skills and knowledge to the team.