

Together for Children Customer Feedback Annual Report 2021-2022



HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY 2021/22

What are our key achievements?

- We have received 231 compliments this year from children, young people, families, and professionals.
- We successfully helped 229 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 22.8%.
- The timeliness of complaints at all stages is improving.
- The number of complaint elements has reduced by 31% at stage one and 84% at stage two.
- Our refreshed complaint process is improving the customer experience and resolving concerns more quickly.

What are our areas of focus for 2022/23?

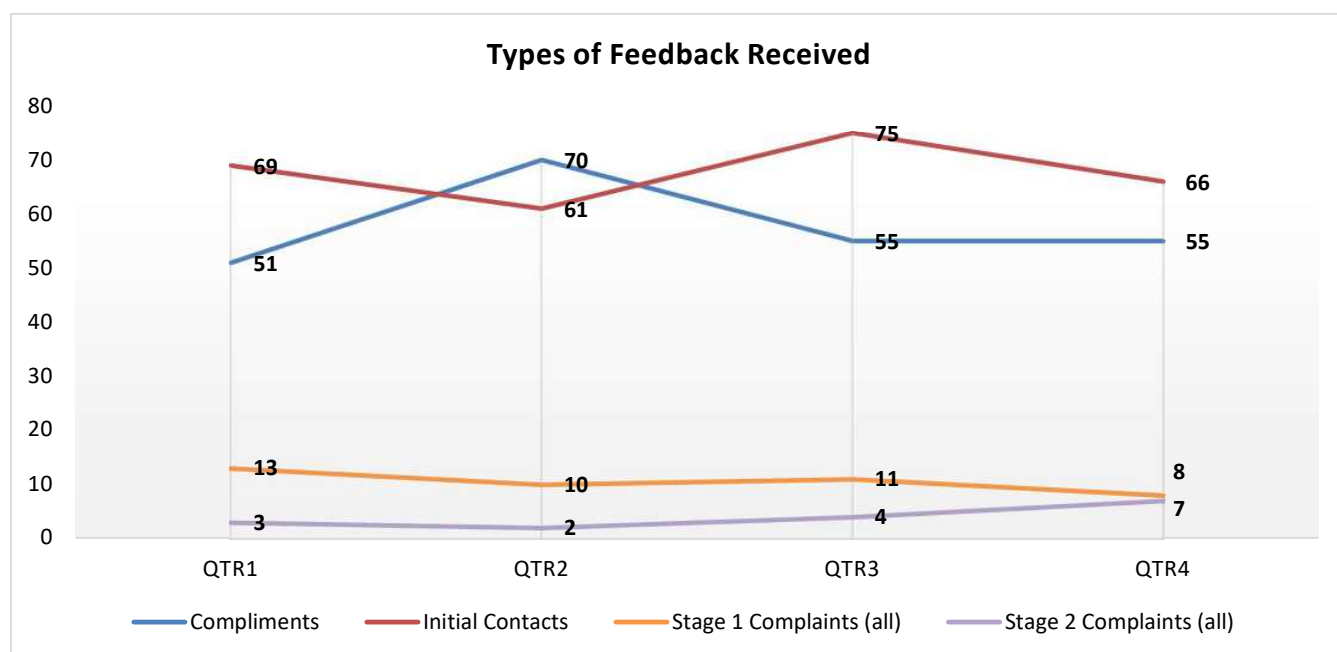
- Continue to focus on the timeliness and quality of complaints.
- Implement a regional agreement for the appointment of Independent Persons for Stage two Children's Social Care Complaints to further improve the customer experience.
- Explore the potential for a complaints management system that will 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 2021 to 31st March 2022. 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 2021/22.



- 2.2. In addition to the above types of feedback, the Chief Executive, and Director of Children's Services receives Member Enquiries. In 2021/22, we received 40 enquiries of which 27 were responded to within timescale. Most enquiries were in relation to education queries, EHCPs and specialist school places as well as a smaller number of Social Care enquiries.

3. COMPLIMENTS

- 3.1. In 2021/22, we received 231 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 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 2021/22:

- **Adoption**
'X went 'above and beyond', particularly in taking Y to meet baby Z on a bank holiday, the day after she was born.

- **Assessment Teams**

'Thank you for all of the brilliant work you did with my family. You came into our lives at a very tough time and I honestly couldn't see a way forward, with so many barriers standing in our way I never saw how my kids' lives would ever being the same again. You were always very friendly and approachable and had time to listen which is extremely important. You took on board all of our needs and were amazing with my kids and for that I am forever thankful. You were able to make numerous safety plans making sure you took everyone's feelings and needs into consideration. You put us all at ease and it's been lovely working with you. I wish you all the luck in your future career. Continue what you're doing and you'll be amazing!!'

- **Children's Homes**

'I want to take the opportunity to tell you that X is the very best communicator in a children's home. He is exceptional at letting other professionals know what is happening to Y which is invaluable.'

- **Children with Disabilities Team**

'Your support over the last two years has been invaluable for us as carers of a disabled child. The trust that you established so quickly with X and ourselves meant that we have been confident in openly confiding our difficulties to you in what has been a really challenging time for our family. Your responses to us have always been prompt, appropriate, insightful, professional, compassionate, and empathic. We have had lots of involvement with children's services spanning over a quarter of a decade and the combination of personal and professional qualities you bring are unique and special and, in our experience, rare. For some parent/ carers of disabled children, we think that having access to Child and Family Workers like yourself, would be an effective support, even without the short-breaks and respite package.'

- **Connexions**

'I know you feel you haven't done much, but I promise you, you have. This home education has been such a heavy burden with absolutely nothing academic to show for it. The objective was always to have X survive his teenage years. He wouldn't have survived secondary school, but I think college is a better fit than school. Just remember X, a few weeks ago - college was not at all on the cards. You introduced that idea and did the groundwork; it opened a door for us. It certainly gave me a glimmer of hope. Just having someone else thinking of X's future has certainly lightened the load. You have done more than anyone else has in six years, I really can't thank you enough.'

- **Child Protection Teams**

'Thank you for taking such good care of our granddaughter X. Although the case has presented some difficulties you have shown such strength and integrity throughout. You listened with care and were able to communicate some difficult messages, when required. We felt supported throughout as you were dependable and trustworthy by just being available for us to talk to. It has been very easy to see that the care of X has been your main priority and that is all we could have asked for. You demonstrated professionalism as well as being empathic at times of great emotional distress. You have given us faith in Together for Children and shown real commitment in your role as X's Social Worker. We can't thank you enough for your help and support, but once again thank you.'

- **Customer Feedback Team**

'Right from the beginning she 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 she was extremely compassionate but also totally professional. She actually helped me restore my faith in Together for Children and I feel she is a complete asset to your organisation.'

- **Early Help Team**

'I was distressed, distraught and felt lost for 3 years and ready to give up before a member of this team became involved in my son's care to get his EHCP. This lady was and is still involved and went above and

beyond to help me and my son. The bond she has with my son is amazing. I don't know where I would be without her, thank you.

- **ICRT**

'I would like to highlight the fantastic assistance that X has afforded me today. X has gone beyond what I asked of her and used her initiative to obtain key details that have proven vital to our investigation. She was helpful and has a lovely manner. Relationships and partnerships such as this make everything much easier.'

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

'X's professional conduct, organisation and communication was outstanding. I have attended many conferences over the years and I would say that this was a difficult conference in that there was a large amount of professionals and many interruptions throughout. X remained calm, clear and kept the focus of the conference on the child throughout. Whenever there was an interruption X made clear instructions as to how the conference would move forward and brought the conference back to a child focused approach repeatedly. X also asked for the input of the Core Group whenever their professional input would secure a better outcome for the child and all in all X represented herself and Together for Children in a highly professional way.'

- **Next Steps**

'I wanted to take this opportunity to thank both you and your team for your support in navigating the recent challenges and complexities presented to us as a care team. We feel this close collaborative approach was fundamental in safeguarding X and ensuring that as her care provider, we were able to continue to provide the highest quality of care. It's been a pleasure to work in partnership with you and Together for Children.'

- **Participation and Engagement**

'A big thank you to yourself and the team for coming into school over the past 4 Wednesdays. Many of our pupils and staff have been extremely positive of their experience on the bus - they felt it was very useful and worthwhile.'

- **Youth Offending Service**

'We cannot thank you enough for what you have done for X and the family. You have helped make us a family again. I have got my boy back. You are an angel; you are amazing at your job. We will be sad when this support stops as you really make a big difference to X and I know he will miss you very much. Thank you for advising and guiding him with what's right and wrong. He listens and takes on board what you have said. Keep up your amazing work. Thank you isn't enough for what you have done for us.'

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, 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 2021/22	
Number Received	69	61	75	66	271	
Number Escalated to Stage 1	13	10	11	8	42	15.5%

- 4.2. In 2021/22 we received 271 initial contacts. Through responding to issues or concerns at the outset, we have helped 229 of our customers to receive satisfactory resolutions informally with just 42 (15.5%) initial contacts escalating 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 will be appointed to investigate the complaint and it 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. Any complaints that do not relate to Statutory Children's Services, are handled under the corporate complaints procedure which consists of two formal stages. These corporate complaint figures are included in this report.

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 2020/21	
	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate	Social Care	Corporate		
Stage 1	11	2	7	3	10	1	6	2	42	-16
Stage 2	3	0	1	1	3	1	5	2	16	+1
Stage 3	1	N/A	0	N/A	1	N/A	1	N/A	3	-3
Totals	15	2	8	4	14	2	12	4	61	-18
	-6	-4	-6	-5	+4	+2	+1	+2		

- 6.2. **Overall total** - in 2021/22 we received 61 complaints compared with 79 in 2020/21 which shows a decrease of 22.8%. The largest reductions can be seen in Q1 and Q2 where we received 21 fewer complaints when compared with the previous year. We did however see an increase of 9 in the last 6 months of the year.
- 6.3. **Stage one complaints** - in 2021/22 we received 16 fewer stage one complaints. Of those there was a reduction of 22.7% relating to children's social complaints and 42.8% reduction relating to corporate complaints.
- 6.4. **Stage two complaints** - We received 12 children's social care stage two complaints compared with 8 in the previous year, of which 3 progressed to stage three (compared with 6 in 2020/21). Only 4 of the corporate complaints progressed to stage two compared with 7 the year before.

Number of Complaints by Young People:

- 6.5. 2 complaints were received by young people which is a decrease of 1 compared to the previous year. Both complaints were successfully responded to at stage one of the complaints process.

7. STAGE ONE COMPLAINTS

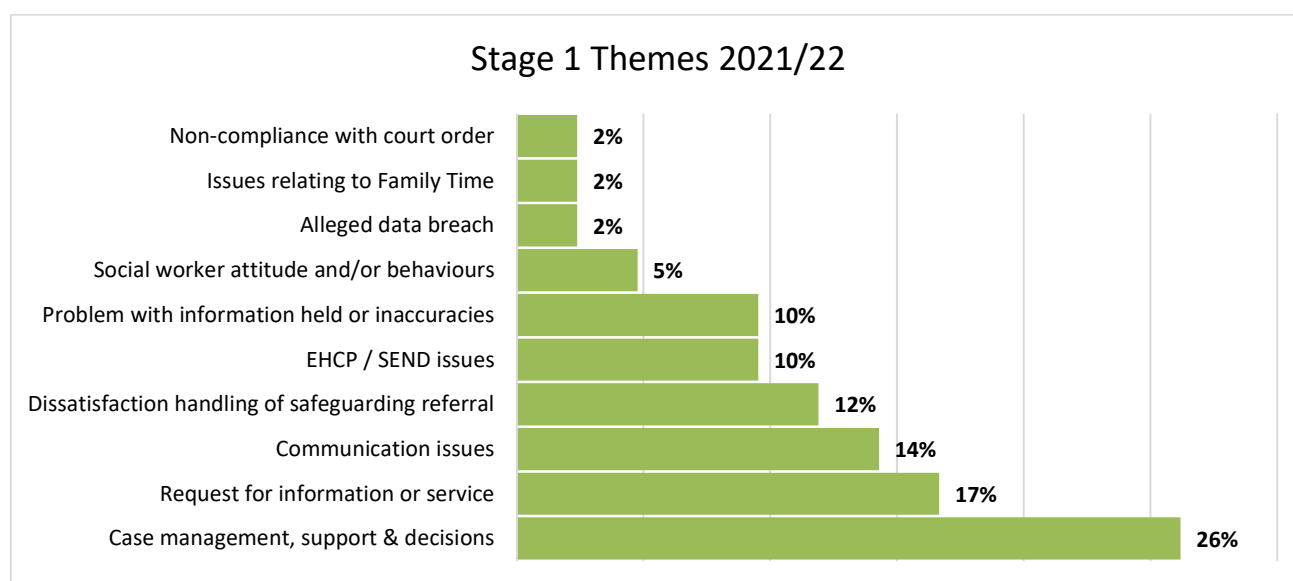
- 7.1. The table below shows the percentage of stage one complaints received by service area.

TEAM	Total 2021/22
Adoption/Fostering	2.4%
Assessment Teams	35.7%
Children with Disabilities Team	7.1%
Child Protection Teams	23.8%
Early Help Team	2.4%
Education	2.4%
ICRT Service	7.1%
Cared for Teams	7.1%
SEND Team	9.5%
Supported Lodgings	2.4%
TOTAL	100%

- 7.2. 35.7% of stage one complaints received in 2021/22 relate to the Assessment Teams and 23.8% relate to the Child Protection Teams. Whilst there has been a decrease in the number of complaints relating to the Child Protection Teams from 18 to 10 when compared with the previous year, there has been a small increase in numbers of complaints for the Assessment Teams to 15 compared with 13.

Themes:

7.3. The main themes of the complaints completed at Stage One in 2021/22 are shown in the chart below:



7.4. Complaints relating to case management, sufficiency of support and decision making is the top theme in 2021/22. This together with complaints linked to requests for information or services and communication issues (where communication has been below customer expectations in terms of contact, updates, and explanations) make up the top three themes.

7.5. In 2020/21 the top themes related to social worker actions, family time and inaccuracies in information. The chart above shows how these have slipped out of the top three themes this year and now make up 9% of the complaint themes. This demonstrates the positive impact of learning from complaints and proactively addressing emerging themes.

Timeliness of Response to Stage One Complaints:

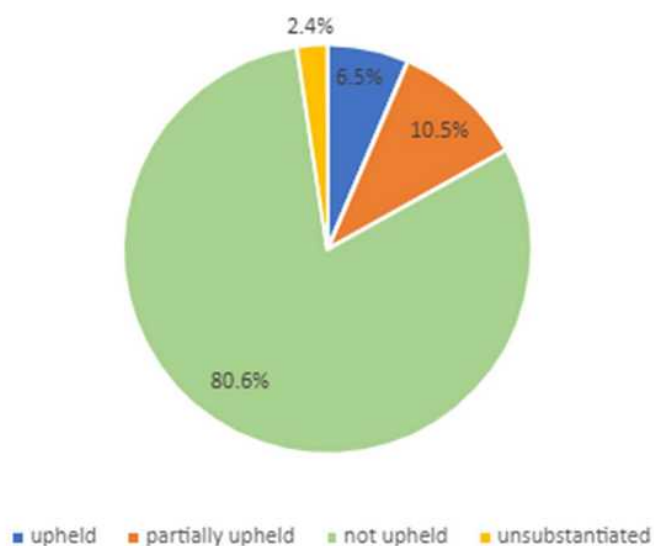
7.6. In the first six months of 2021/22 the timeliness of all stage one complaints fluctuated as we moved to the refreshed complaints process. The main changes to the process have included managing all stage one complaints within the Customer Feedback Team with a greater focus on customer conciliation, 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).

7.7. Whilst this change in process increased customer satisfaction by resolving issues at an earlier stage, it did consequently take some stage one complaints (in Q2) out of timescale which has impacted the year-to-date figure. There was a clear focus in Q3 and Q4 to achieve the same result but within the 10 or 20 working day timescales and the timeliness did improve. Overall, the year to date is 71% which is an improvement from 66% in the previous year. Timeliness of stage one complaints will remain a focus for the Customer Feedback Team this year.

% Of all stage 1 complaints responded to in timescale	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
	73%	33%	83%	89%	71%

Stage One Complaint Outcomes:

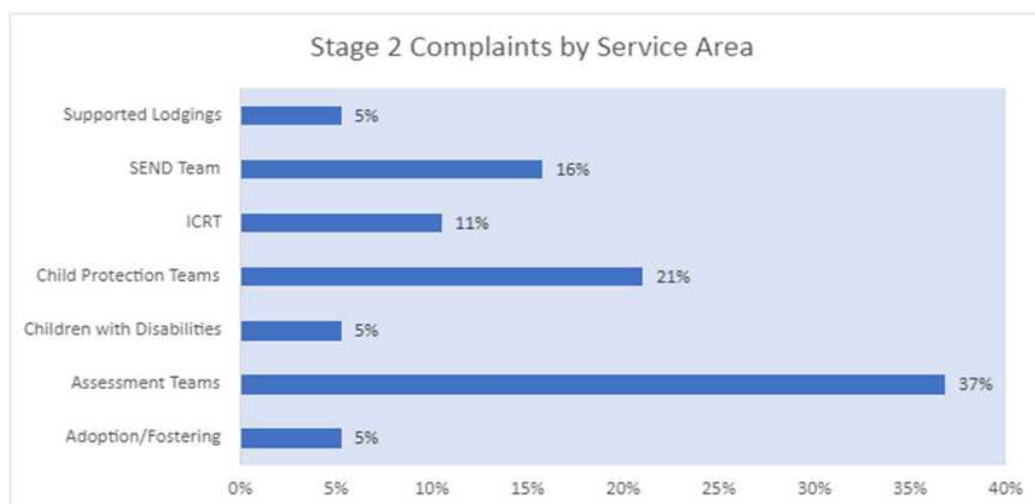
- 7.8. There were 124 elements of complaint identified within stage one complaints that concluded in 2021/22, compared with 179 elements of complaint in 2020/21. The outcomes of all stage one complaint elements for the year are shown below.



- 7.9. Most complaint elements (equating to 80.6%) were not upheld and a further 2.4% were unsubstantiated or not investigated. This is significantly higher than the same period last year where 51% of elements were not upheld.
- 7.10. Of the 124 elements of complaint, only 8 elements (6.5%) 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 10.5% of elements were partially upheld.

8. STAGE TWO COMPLAINTS AND STAGE THREE REVIEWS

- 8.1. Overall, the number of stage two complaints has increased by 1 when compared to last year, however the number of stage two elements investigated this year has significantly reduced by 84% suggesting learning and improvement actions are having a positive impact for our customers.
- 8.2. The slight increase in stage two complaint numbers is reflective of the increase in 'not upheld' complaint elements at stage one of the process, (equating to 80.6%) as a customer can choose to escalate their complaint if they do not agree with the outcome or would like further investigation into their concerns.
- 8.3. The chart below shows the number of all stage two complaints received by service area.



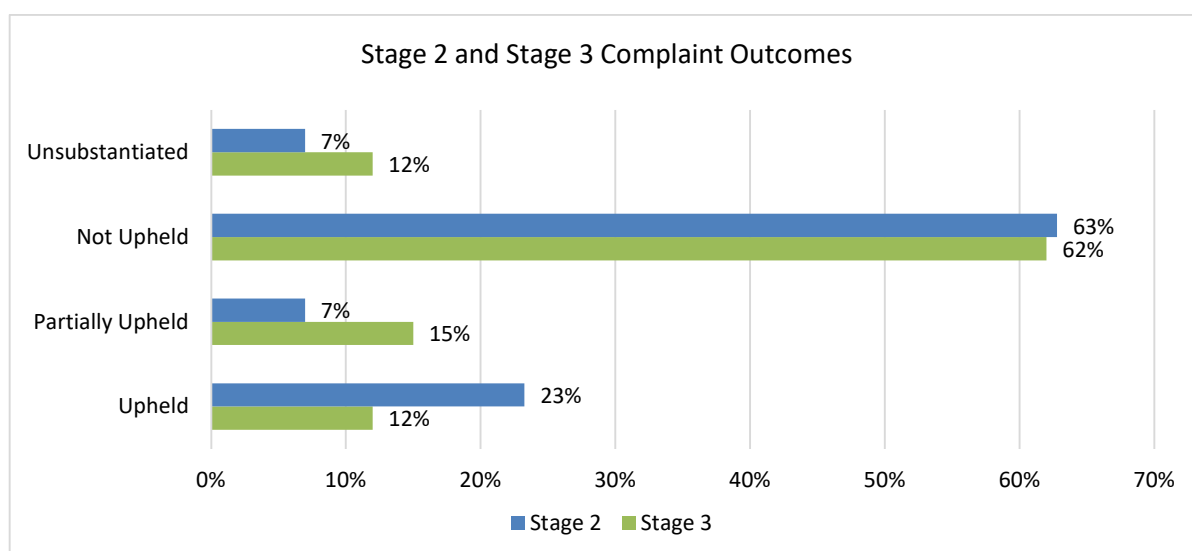
- 8.4. Of the 16 stage two complaints received, 37% related to the Assessment Teams, 21% to Child Protection Team and 16% to SEND Teams.
- 8.5. The top themes for stage two complaints related to lack of support, case management and decision making which reflects the increase at stage one but there has also been an increase in complaints relating to EHCP/SEND issues this year.

Timeliness of Response to Stage Two Complaints:

- 8.6. In 2021/22, 14 complaints 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*). 10 of the stage two complaints related to children's social care and 4 were corporate complaints. 9 of the stage two complaints were completed within the 65 working-day timescale (64%). This is a significant improvement compared with 2020/21 where only 2 (12%) of stage 2 complaints were completed in timescale.
- 8.7. The average days taken for investigation and adjudication of the complaints was 61 working days: down from an average of 111 working days in 2020/21. 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. This will continue to be an area of focus for the Customer Feedback Team in 2022/23.

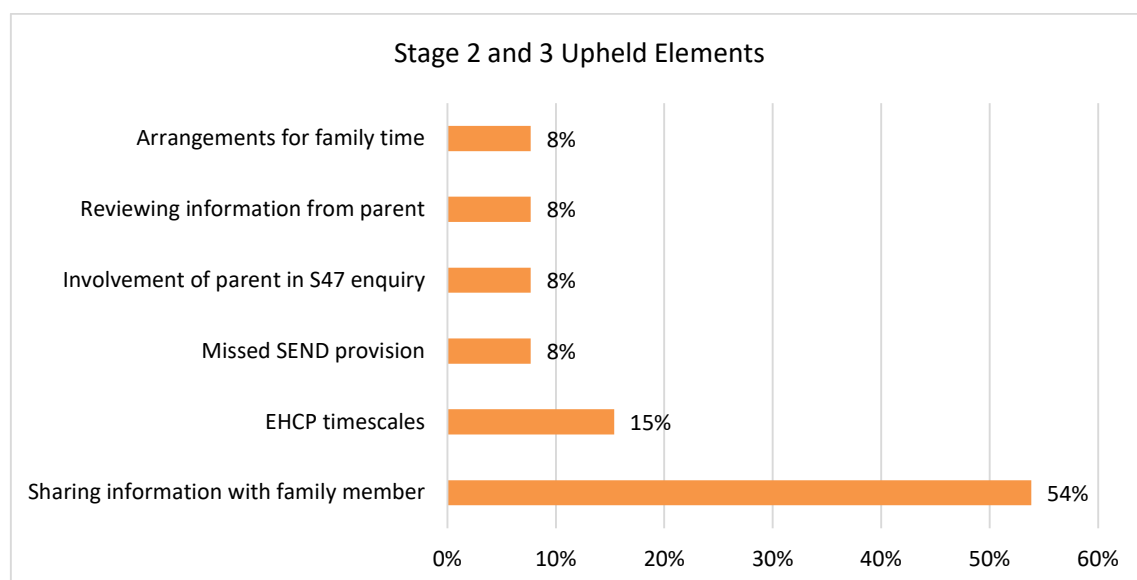
Stage Two and Three Complaint Outcomes

- 8.8. There were 48 elements of complaint identified within all stage two complaints that concluded in 2021/22 and 34 elements concluded at stage three. Two of Stage three Review Panels related to complaints from our previous complaints processes before they were refreshed in February 2021. The outcomes of stage two and three complaint elements for the year are shown below.



- 8.9. At stage two, most complaint elements equating to 63% were not upheld and a further 7% were unsubstantiated. 7% of elements were partially upheld and 23% were upheld.
- 8.10. At stage three upheld elements equated to 12% with a further 15% partially upheld. 62% were not upheld and 12% were unsubstantiated.
- 8.11. Since April 2021, of the 34 elements that went to Stage three panels, only six outcomes changed; two changed from not upheld to partially upheld, two changed from partially upheld to upheld, one changed from not upheld to unable to prove or disprove and one changed from partially upheld to upheld.

8.12. The main subject areas of elements upheld at stages two and three are as follows:



8.13. In comparison to previous years, there are fewer subject areas at stages two and three due to the significant reduction in complaint elements this year. The above chart shows that most upheld elements at stages two and three related to sharing information with family members. Although this equated to 54% of the upheld complaints, the numbers are smaller, equating to 7 elements. 15% of upheld elements related to EHCP plan timeliness at stage two of the complaints process.

8.14. 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.

9. OMBUDSMAN REFERRALS

9.1. Ten complaints were highlighted to the Customer Feedback Team in 2021/22 by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. The outcomes are summarised below:

3 - rejected by the LGO

1 - investigation not required

1 - not upheld

1 - investigation ongoing

4 – were upheld in agreement with TfC complaint outcomes however 2 received a small additional payment for time, trouble, or distress and 2 received additional compensation payments. The compensation related to missed SEND respite provision, one dating back to 2017.

10. COST OF COMPLAINTS

10.1. The total cost of investigating claims this year was £16,415 compared to £80,073 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 £28,415. As described in the 6-monthly report, this is significantly higher than previous years due to a complaint dating back to 2017 whereby a large payment of £19,300 was made to remedy lost care provision of 3.5 years dating back to 2017.

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.
- 12.2. We have seen positive impacts from implementing recommendations identified following Stage two complaints and Stage three Review Panels 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 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 training arranged for 2022 includes 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. A new Customer Feedback Officer joins 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.