

Customer Feedback Annual Report

Shropshire Council

2020/21

Feedback and Insight Team, Shropshire Council
July 2021



1. Introduction

Shropshire Council's annual customer feedback report presents an annual overview of the formal feedback received and responded to by Shropshire Council between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

The report includes key performance data for complaints, compliments and comments. The annual customer feedback report is made available to members of the public, councillors and council staff. The report complements the quarterly reporting and regular monitoring reporting that takes place within the Council during the year. This more regular reporting is used to gain an understanding of customer experiences and the identification of any patterns in feedback. It supports the work that takes place to identify learning and actions designed to prevent further complaints and generate improvement.

Complaints containing an element of social care fall under the statutory guidelines. These are classed as statutory complaints for either adult or children's services and are handled in line with the statutory complaint procedures. The remainder of complaints are corporate complaints. Corporate complaints relate to a support service or services that do not provide social care and these are handled under the Council's corporate complaints procedure. You can find out more on Shropshire Council's website.

This report covers all complaints, providing a whole council view of formal customer feedback. Annual reports are also prepared for Adult Services and Children's Services allowing for a more detailed consideration of feedback for those service areas.

Complaint

We aim to make it as easy as possible to make a complaint. A complaint is a written or verbal expression of dissatisfaction about a service provided. Family members and advocates may also make a complaint on behalf of one of our customers. We will ask for consent to ensure that the complaint is not being made against the customer's wishes.

Compliment

Many people get in touch with a compliment when the information or support they have received has exceeded their expectations. It is helpful to learn when a service has been provided well or when a member of staff has done a great job. We like to recognise compliments alongside any complaints. It is good for us to say 'thank you' to our teams and staff members too.

Comment

Feedback about a service could be:

- a suggestion to improve it.
- a question as to whether something could be done differently.
- an idea for delivering a service differently.

2. The Complaints Process

Feedback Received

Shropshire Council encourages users of our services, their family members and carers to give feedback and highlight any concerns so that they may be addressed as quickly as possible. If problems cannot be resolved and the customer wishes to make a complaint, staff members can offer advice on how to make a complaint. Support is also available from complaints officers based within Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team.

Telephone: 0345 678 9000

Email: customer.feedback@shropshire.gov.uk

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

Online: Log into the My Shropshire portal

Acknowledgment

Complaints will be acknowledged within 5 working days of being received and we let the complainant know how their complaint will be handled.

STAGE 1

An appropriate Investigating Officer will be allocated to the case and asked to investigate the complaint. This is usually a manager within the service area the complaint relates to. The complainant will be provided with a written response within approximately 6 weeks (12 weeks is the timescale for stage 1 and stage 2 responses and 6 weeks is usually allocated to each). In some complex cases it may take longer than 6 weeks at stage 1 but we let the customer know if this extra time is needed and why. The Investigating Officer will write to explain the outcome of their investigation, any learning or actions and information outlining how to progress the complaint if the customer is not satisfied with the outcome.

STAGE 2 - Review

The complaint will be reviewed by a more senior manager, commissioner, or in most cases, the Complaints Monitoring Officer. They will review the Stage 1 complaint and decide if there is more the service can do to address the concerns raised. If the reviewing officer believes the service has done all they can reasonably do, the customer will be written to and advised of this. They will also be given information about the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

Ombudsman If a complaint cannot be resolved locally it can be investigated by the Ombudsman. The Council has a timescale of 28 calendar days to provide a response to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO). Responses are often complex, lengthy and require a large volume of appendices to be collated, catalogued and returned to the LGO. Complainants can request to go to the Ombudsman without a review if they choose to.

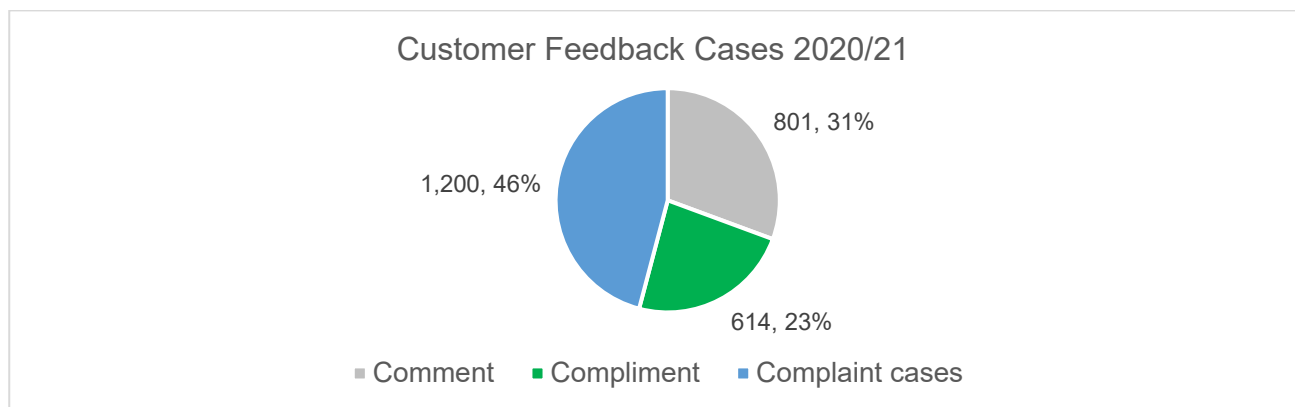
We cannot promise to get the result complainants want, but we do make sure that complaints are dealt with as quickly and as thoroughly as possible and we work to keep customers informed of what is happening and the progress being made.

2. Customer Feedback 2020/21

In 2020/21 Shropshire Council received and recorded 2,615 cases of formal feedback. There were:

- 1,200 complaint cases
- 801 comments
- 614 compliments

In addition, there were also 398 MP enquiries recorded between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. MP enquiries are covered separately later in the report since MP enquiries often relate to complaints and inclusion in the figures for feedback would result in double counting and the over reporting of cases.

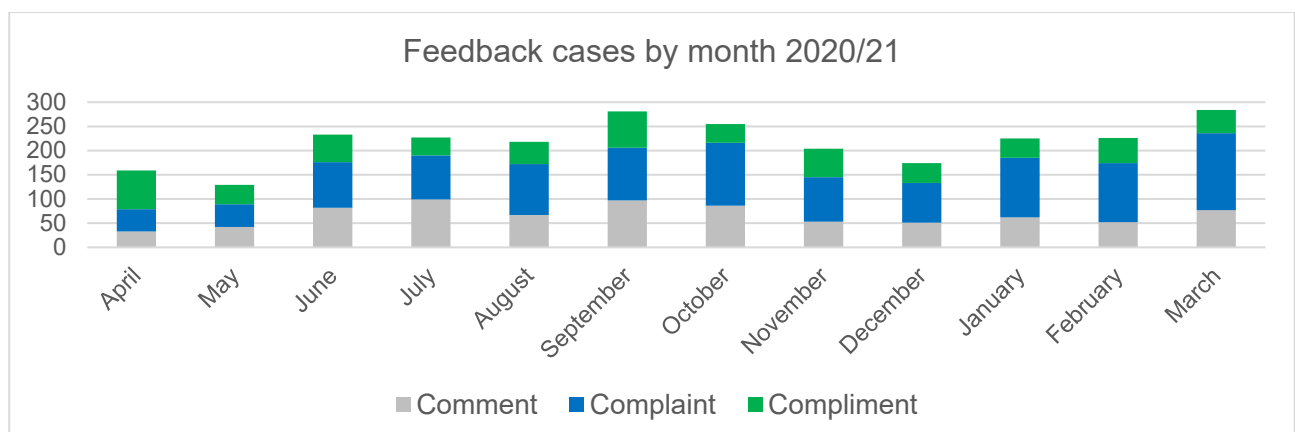


Comments and other enquiries formed 31% of all feedback cases and 23% of all customer feedback cases were compliments. The 1,200 complaint cases formed 46% of all formal feedback and resulted in 1,091 complaint investigations.

The 1,091 complaint investigations were handled under the different statutory and corporate complaints processes. There were:

- 959 Corporate complaints
- 72 Adult Services statutory complaints (including provider complaints and multi-agency complaints)
- 60 Children’s Services statutory complaints

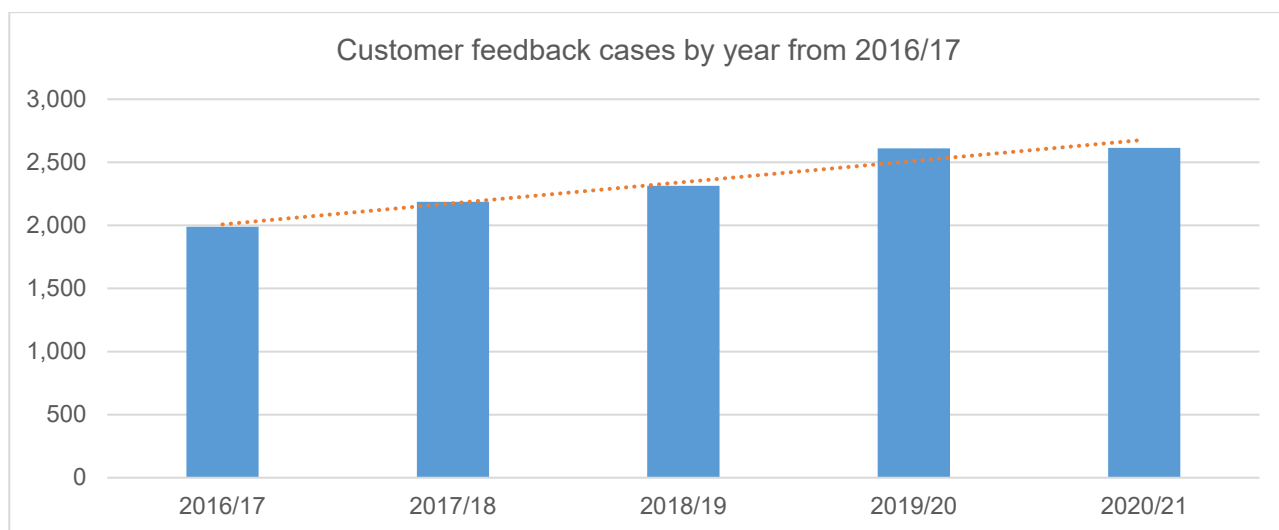
Feedback levels can vary over the year with slight fluctuations influenced by changes in weather conditions (e.g. heavy rain or snow and ice can lead to place-based complaints) or other factors. The pandemic generated some changes in feedback with an influx of compliments in the early months of the pandemic but overall feedback returned to usual levels fairly quickly as people adjusted to new methods of service delivery and social restrictions. The chart below displays feedback by month.



Over the year, the monthly average was 218 customer feedback cases (the same as the previous year). September (281) and March (284) saw the greatest number of feedback cases, a very different pattern to the previous year where January and February 2020 saw the greatest number of cases. May and December had the lowest numbers of feedback and this appears to be a pattern in the data coinciding in slight reductions in feedback over Winter/Christmas and Spring/Easter holiday periods.

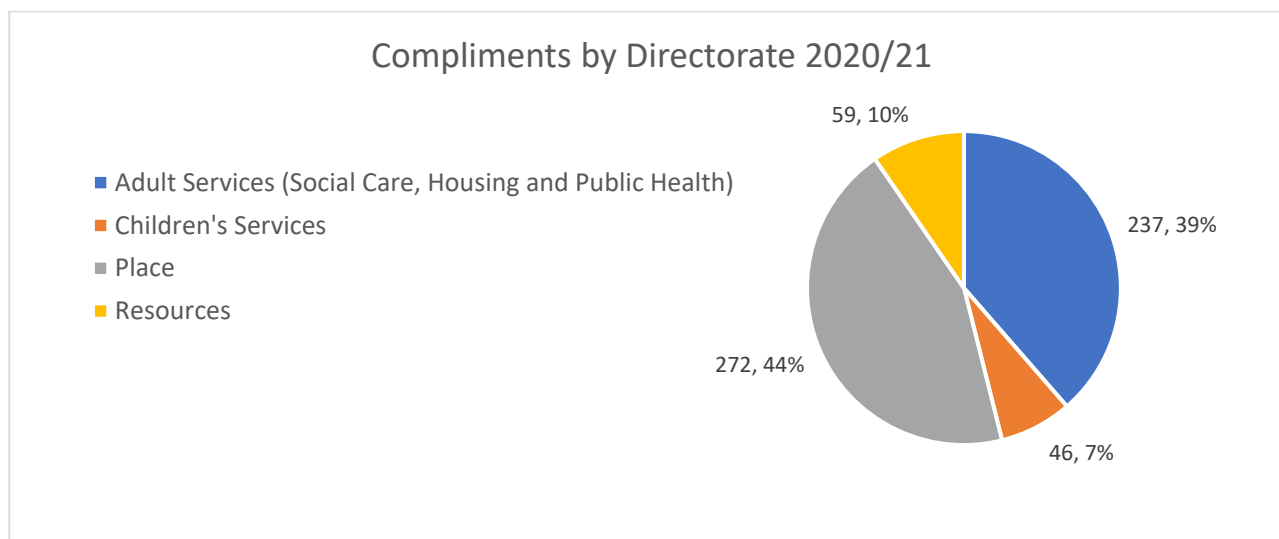
Performance data is considered by quarter and quarter 2 (July to September) and quarter 4 (January to March) both saw increases with over 725 cases in these quarters compared to 521 in quarter 1 (April to June) and 633 in quarter 3 (October to December).

Overall customer feedback case volumes have increased over recent years. There has been a 31.5% increase in customer feedback since 2016/17 and the number of cases has more than doubled since 2014/15.



Work takes place to monitor the proportion of complaints within annual customer feedback totals. There is some fluctuation each year but overall, the total has remained steady and in 2020/21 the proportion of feedback cases that were complaints was in line with the average.

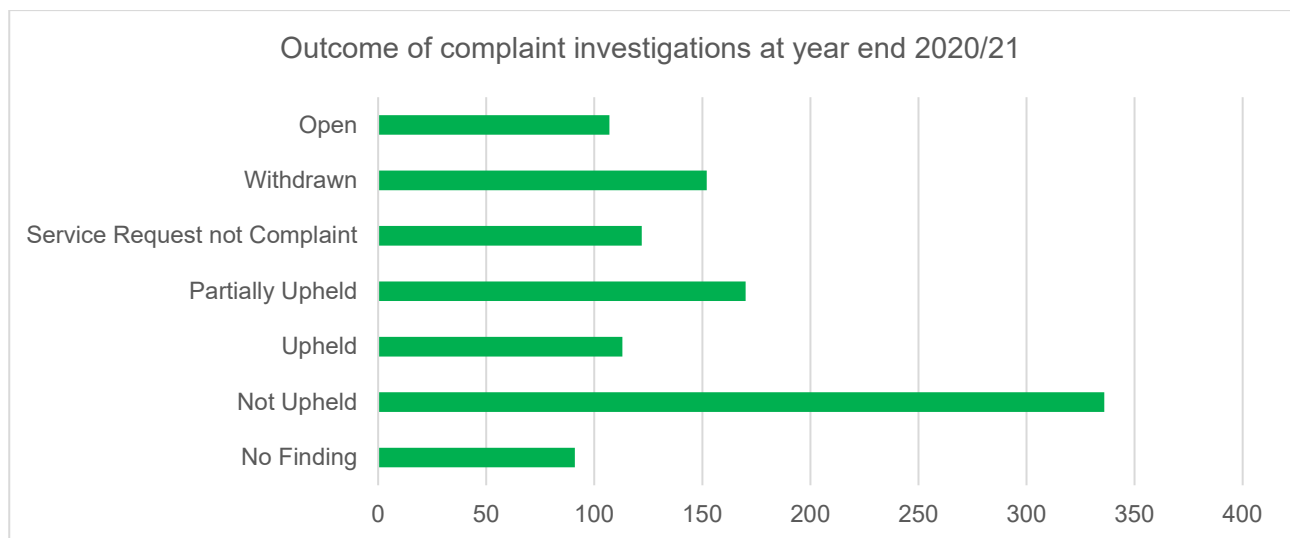
A closer look at compliments shows that the Place directorate received the largest number of compliments (272 compliments in 2020/21) followed by Adult Services (237).



It is important to look at complaints cases in more detail to gain an understanding of customer feedback and any areas of dissatisfaction. Complaints (and some comments) are explored at greater depth than other types of feedback and result in investigations. There may be multiple investigations for each complaints case, or a complaint case may be closed before it reaches investigation stage (for example it may be outside of the council’s jurisdiction or the complainant may decide to withdraw their complaint). A complaint may refer to the services provided by more than one council department, in which case there will be more than one investigation. Investigations are led by officers (usually team or service managers) with a detailed knowledge of the service area. In 2020/21 there were 1,200 complaints cases and 1,091 complaints investigations.

Complaints investigations do not always result in a complete investigation and outcome. Once a complaints case is explored in more detail, it is possible that a different course of action is required (e.g. an insurance claim or appeals process), or once the complaint is more fully understood it may be concluded that the complainant is merely asking for a simple remedial action to resolve a concern rather than wishing to proceed through a formal complaint investigation (a request for a service). Of the 1,200 complaints investigations, 152 were withdrawn and 122 were closed and a service request was initiated as an alternative course of action. 91 investigations resulted in a finding or no finding. This is explored in more detail at the end of this section.

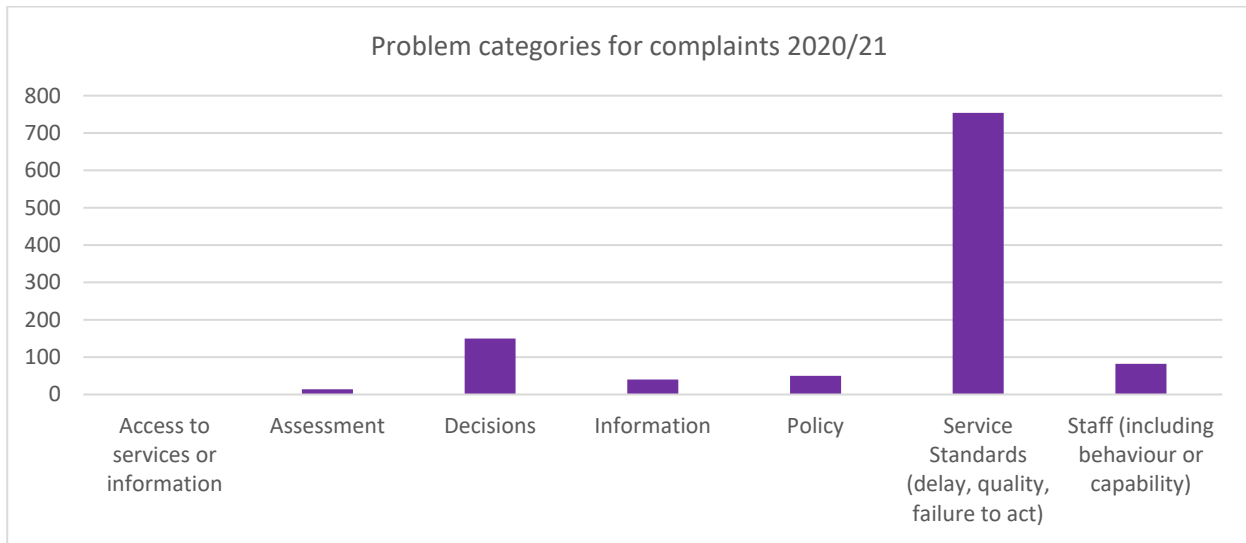
The following paragraphs are based on complaints investigations against which more detailed information is captured. The performance measures Shropshire Council uses to monitor complaints are largely based on complaints investigations.



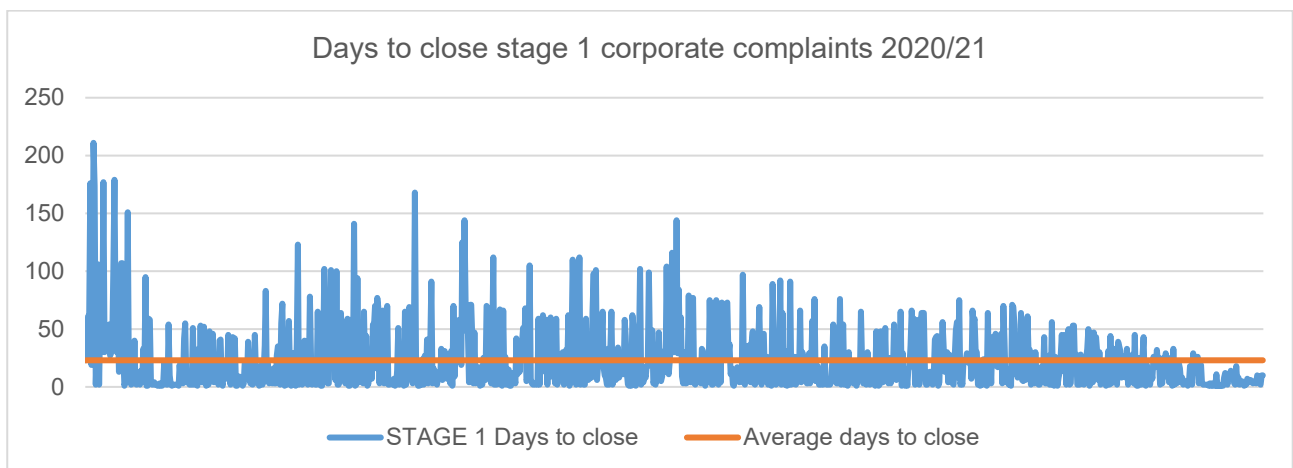
Over previous years there have been steady increase in numbers of complaints investigations (with an increase between 14% and 16% each year). Within the last year considerable effort has been made to fully assess and ‘triage’ feedback (where the process of incoming feedback makes that possible) prior to implementing the complaints process. This has avoided certain issues becoming complaints when they are a request for a service or can be remedied quickly, such as a missed bin collection or a request to cut back foliage. Complaints should be made when there are concerns about the quality of service or other action taken by the council and not before services have had the opportunity to respond. This additional assessment has resulted in complaints numbers remaining similar to the previous year and not a reduction, suggesting that if this work had not been undertaken numbers would have increased. It will be important to measure change during the year and at year end.

‘Service standards’ was the main category under which complaints were made. Within ‘service standards’ there are a number of sub-categories and analysis highlights that ‘service standards – failure to provide a service/take action’, ‘service standards – poor customer care’ and ‘service standards – communication (failure/poor)’ were the dominant sub-categories. ‘Decisions’ was the

second main category under which complaints were recorded. Complaints under the category decisions are usually made because someone is dissatisfied with a decision made.



During 2020/21 Shropshire Council took an average of 23 working days to respond to stage 1 corporate complaints (an increase on the 14 working days average in 2018/19). The average is within the 30 day timescale Shropshire Council works to for its corporate complaints process. However, it should be noted that there is significant variation around the average and some cases, particularly complex complaints, can take longer than the 30 days allocated to respond. The Council has 60 working days in total to respond to corporate complaints, 30 working days for each stage (stage 1 and stage 2). Days to close is a key measure within ongoing performance monitoring. Feedback and Insight Team officers report increasing complexity within complaints cases and this, alongside service pressures, is considered to be a contributing factor to longer-running cases.

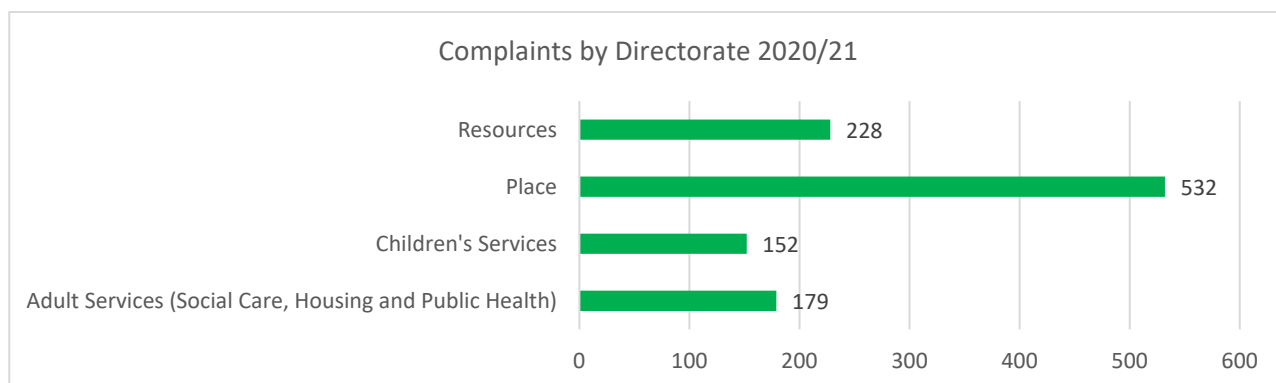


Some types of service are more likely to result in complaints than others and the chart below highlights complaints by directorate. Shropshire Council's Place Directorate handles the largest proportion of complaints compared to other directorates within Shropshire Council (49% of all complaints) followed by Resources (21%) and Adult Services (17%).

Taking a closer look at the breakdown of complaints by service highlights that, within the Place Directorate, Highways and Transport received 30% of all Shropshire Council's complaints in 2020/21 (a slight reduction on the previous year). Waste services accounted for 8% of all the complaints in 2019/20 (another slight reduction).

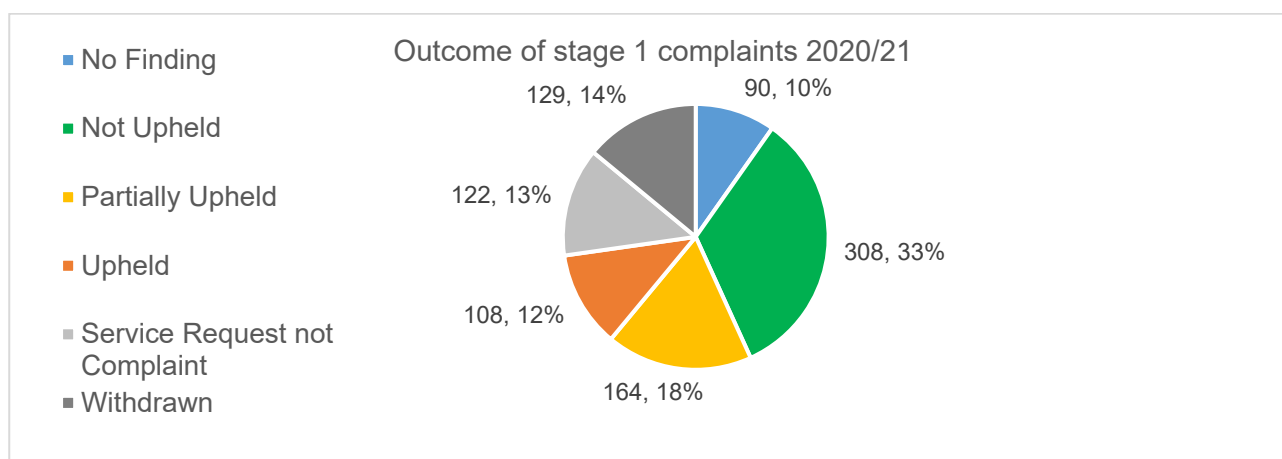
Complaints relating to Adult Services form 17% of all complaints and complaints relating to Children’s Services form 7% of all complaints. The number of Adult Services complaints is very similar to the previous year but there were fewer Children’s Services complaints in 2019/20 (forming 7% of complaints compared to 12% in 2018/19). Data for Adult Services and Children’s services is explored in more detail throughout the year.

The Resources directorate includes a smaller number of customer-facing services (many providing services to other council departments). For this reason, a significant proportion of the complaints allocated to Resources are not related to its own services but to those of other departments. An example of this is that the finance department may deal with a complaint relating to the financial arrangements in a different service or, for example a complaint may be made in order to highlight intention to progress an insurance claim.



When considering complaints performance, it is very important to understand the outcome of the complaints that are made against Shropshire Council. The data for 2020/21 shows that:

- At the end of the 12-month period 2020/21, there were 921 closed stage 1 complaints.
- Of the closed stage 1 complaints 12% were upheld (108 complaints), 18% were partially upheld and 33% were not upheld.
- Considering the complaints that were upheld, 33% were with Highways and Transport and 13% were with Waste Management.



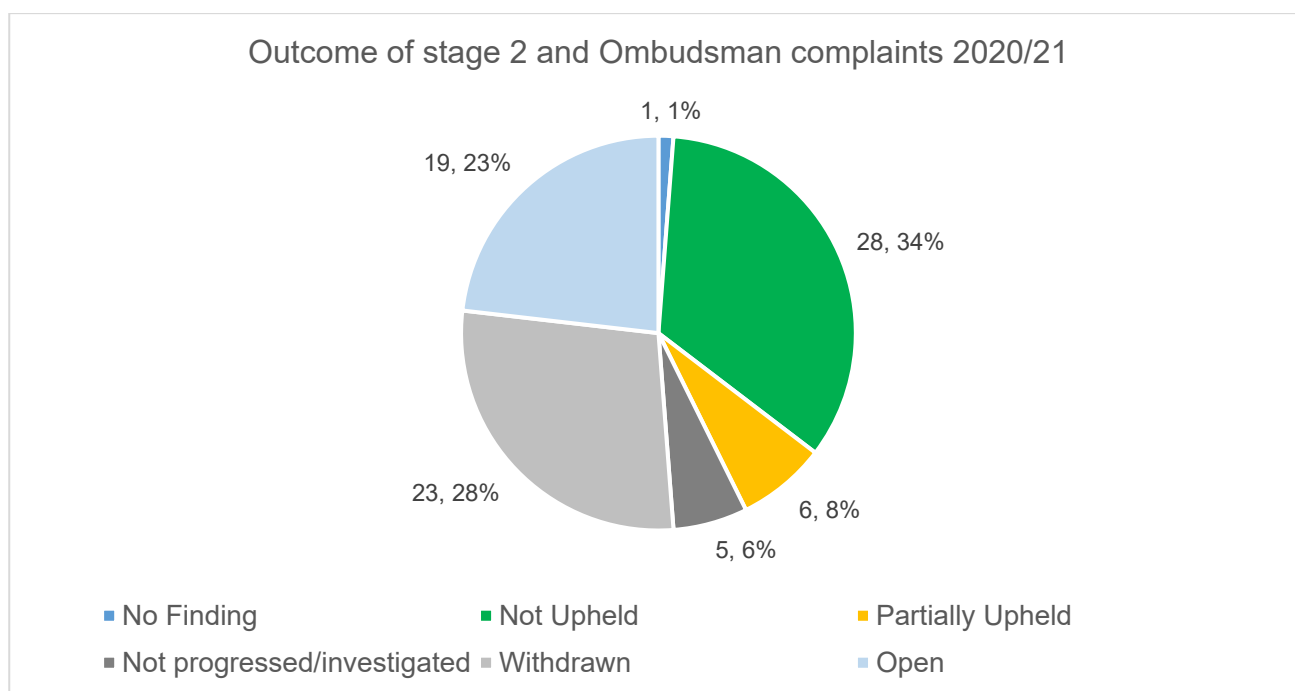
In 2019/20 there was a concern that 16% of complaints investigations resulted in no finding. In some circumstances, there is a genuine reason for recording a ‘no finding’ outcome. A complaints investigator may find that not enough evidence or information is available to draw a conclusion, or they may be unable to obtain enough information from the complainant to fully complete the investigation. However, the large number of ‘no finding’ outcomes in 2019/20 appeared to be largely a result of a failure to investigate allocated complaints. Performance has improved in 2020/21 and the proportion has reduced to 10% but this remains an area of concern and will continue to be closely monitored.

3. Progression of Complaints

Effective stage 1 complaint handling can reduce the number of stage 2 complaints. It is important to understand how many complaints progress beyond stage 1 and this is a measure included within regular performance reporting. During 2020/21 only a small proportion of all the complaints Shropshire Council received progressed beyond stage 1 but despite numbers remaining low, the number of cases progressing beyond stage 1 has increased compared to previous years (47 in 2019/20 increasing to 82 in 2020/21).

In total, 82 complaints received within the year progressed to a stage 2 complaint case or to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). Occasionally some complaints may progress prematurely to the Ombudsman without a stage 2 investigation. The table below shows the number of complaints within the year that progressed beyond stage 1 and the chart below highlights the outcome of those complaints

Stage 2	Ombudsman	Total investigations beyond stage 1
38	44	82



The Shropshire annual report from the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) highlighted that 46 complaints were received by the Ombudsman for Shropshire Council in 2020/21 and 50 cases were considered/decided. This total will include complaints received by Shropshire Council in previous financial years' so the data is not comparable with local data covered in this report (looking at cases received within the financial year).

Of the 50 cases, 8 were not upheld, 8 were upheld and the remainder resulted in other actions such as referring back for local resolution, offering advice, or closure after initial enquiries. The LGO reports Shropshire Council's upheld rate at 50%. The LGO upheld rate for similar local authorities is reported as 63%.

Ombudsman Complaints and Enquiries Decided

Category	Number received
Adult Care Services	7
Benefits & Tax	2
Corporate & Other Services	7
Education & Children's Services	8
Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation	3
Highways & Transport	10
Housing	2
Planning & Development	10
Other	1
Grand Total	50

Outcome of Decisions Made

Advice given	Closed after initial enquiries	Incomplete/Invalid	Referred back for local resolution	Detailed Investigations			Grand Total
				Not Upheld	Upheld	Upheld rate (%)	
0	15	3	16	8	8	50	50

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on complaints numbers to some degree but within Shropshire Council (and all local authorities) there was a requirement to continue to deliver a complaints service through the pandemic so the impact was not significant overall (after initial impact feedback levels returned to average levels). The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman made a decision to pause casework and did not accept new complaints for three months between March and June 2020. This has meant that the 2020/21 year should not be considered a 'full year' and the reduction in overall numbers for Shropshire Council does not indicate improved performance. It is possible that there could be an increase in 2021/22 data. However, some of our findings, such as the increase in the uphold rate, are not out of keeping with trends from previous years.

The Ombudsman has described that the impact and response by councils to the pandemic is only beginning to play out in the Ombudsman casework. The Ombudsman has also expressed concerns at the national level about the pressures on complaint handling functions in councils expressing concerns "about the general erosion to the visibility, capacity, and status of complaint functions within councils" and commented "These concerns are not new and cannot be wholly attributed to the trials of the pandemic".

Appendix 2 highlights findings and recommendations made by the Ombudsman within 2020/21. All recommendations are monitored and actioned by the Shropshire Council service area responsible for the complaint, and in most cases overseen by the service area's Director.

4. Annual Comparisons 2018/19 to 2020/21

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
<p>Number of compliments – increased</p> <p>In the last financial year (2020/1) Shropshire Council received 614 compliments. This marks a significant increase on previous years and many compliments were directly linked to the actions taken by Shropshire Council to respond to the pandemic. In previous years, the data suggested a steady decline in the number of compliments received, so it has been encouraging to see that trend reversed. Compliments average at 51 a month.</p>	460	405	614
	Performance has improved against this measure in 2020/21.		
<p>Number of complaints investigations – reduced</p> <p>The number of complaint investigations instigated by Shropshire Council totalled 1,091 in 2020/21, this is a reduction on the previous year. The reduction has been influenced by multiple factors and may not be continued again in the next financial year (there is a clear upward trend shown in the last 5 years of data). The pandemic has had some impact (but not significantly) and work has been taking place to triage cases and ensure service requests are not taken forward as complaints prematurely.</p>	1,281	1,487	1,091
	Performance has improved and there were fewer complaints investigations in 2020/21. However, it should be noted that over the longer-term complaint numbers show an upward trend.		
<p>Days to close – Average days to close increased</p> <p>The average number of working days taken to respond to a stage 1 complaint during 2019/20 was 22 working days. That average increased in 2020/21 to 23 working days and the data suggests that too many complaints investigations are exceeding the 30 working days total for stage 1 corporate complaints. Complaints investigators increasingly report concerns about their ability to meet complaint timescales as a result of workload and other pressures/ priorities.</p>	14 working days	22 working days	23 working days
	Days to close is the performance indicator of most concern due to increases. Too many complaints investigators are exceeding timescales.		
<p>Outcome of complaints – Fewer complaints upheld</p> <p>Fewer stage 1 complaints were upheld in 2020/21 (12%) compared to previous years (14% of complaints were upheld in 2019/20 and 19% the year before). In 2020/21 18% of complaints were partially upheld (compared to 12% last year). This performance overall is relatively steady and suggests that standards are being maintained. It would be a concern if performance monitoring highlighted too few cases being upheld. It is important that Shropshire Council accepts where things have gone wrong and strives for improvement.</p>	19%	14%	12%
	Performance has improved slightly. Considering the proportion of partially upheld complaints then performance is similar to the previous year.		
<p>Complaints progressing beyond Stage 1 – increased</p> <p>In 2018/19 3.9% (50) of all cases progressed beyond stage 1. In 2019/20 2.7% of cases progressed to stage 2 or the Local Government Ombudsman (47). In the last year (2020/21) 82 cases progressed beyond stage 1. This is a slight concern but needs monitoring over time against other indicators since the upheld rate locally has not increased and the upheld rate with the Ombudsman is 50% (compared to 41% in 2019/20 and 61% in 2018/19).</p>	3.9%	2.7%	7.5%
	More complaints are progressing beyond stage 1. Although this is a concern, (increasing time/resources required for complaints) the numbers upheld have not increased so a longer-term view is needed.		

5. Example Compliments

Shropshire Council received 614 compliments during 2020/21. Example compliments are included below to illustrate the range of compliments received by different services. Receiving a compliment can make a big difference to a member of staff working hard to provide support for others and deliver services as effectively as possible. Although compliments are not given the same attention as complaints, they are used within the Council to understand where things are working well and to recognise the additional efforts made by individual members of staff.

Compliment for Highways South West Division: “The customer would like to pass on their thanks to all Shropshire Council and WSP for their continued work repairing the roads in the Bridgnorth area and throughout Shropshire during these unprecedented times. When out for their 'essentials shop' they saw the much deserved thank you to the NHS rainbow road marking. A very meaningful and thoughtful message.”

“I would like to thank the Benefits Team for their superb service. Thank you for taking an empathetic and caring approach. Understanding one’s situation, being professional and knowledgeable and assisting and answering my questions. I just wanted to say thank you. Much appreciated. Stay safe and healthy.”

“Customers would like to pass on their heartfelt thanks to the registrars at their wedding on Saturday. The couple were not sure what to expect with all the current rules and were a bit nervous that it might all feel a bit clinical. They made sure all rules were adhered to, but they were also warm and kind and really put us at ease. Thank you both for helping to make our ceremony such a joyful occasion.”

Compliment for Planning Services: “I just wanted to drop you a quick note to express our gratitude for the speed and diligence in which you have managed the above application, it is very much appreciated.”

Housing options and Homelessness Team, “Customer would like to compliment the Handyperson Service, for installing the grab rail it’s absolutely perfect as usual. Thank you for your kindness, really do appreciate it.”

“Just like to bring to your attention of the brilliant job your refuse collectors do. The guys came Friday morning to collect the recycling bags and boxes. A terrible rainy and very windy day, I noticed that the guys were doing their job and also putting the residents boxes, bags that they had emptied behind the dust bins so they didn’t blow down the road plus picking up plastic that had blown out of residents containers. I just had to inform you what a brilliant job they do....”

Compliment for the Shropshire Council Rough Sleeper Team – “A member of the public rang to say she wished to thank the team for the work done for the homeless in Shropshire ... she has herself worked tirelessly with homeless people following a very long time ago being homeless herself ... she said that Housing, the Ark and the Prince Rupert have worked diligently together and she wanted to ring and say thank you.”

For Street Scene Central Division, “Thank you to SC for dealing with the overgrown footpath along The Mount that I reported in September”

“It is really wonderful to have Church Stretton swimming pool open again.... I feel very safe swimming there and the staff are always responsive and supportive. This is a much-valued local resource and I welcome its re-opening.”



6. Example Complaints

Shropshire Council received 1,200 complaints during the year 2020/21 and carried out 1,091 investigations. Some example complaints have been included below to highlight the type of feedback Shropshire Council receives. These examples were not all upheld. 27% of closed cases (at all stages of complaints processes) were upheld or partly upheld. Some complaints arise from a lack of understanding of the service Shropshire Council is able to provide. Where necessary wording within complaints has been removed within the examples to ensure anonymity. The next section of this report looks more closely at learning and the actions taken following complaint investigations.

"I am sorry to be making a complaint at a time like this; but as an owner of a small business affected by the current pandemic, I need the council's help and I have been unable to receive it so far.... On 6/4/20 I filled in the online application for Retail Rates Relief and the Covid-19 business grant.... On the 22nd I called the Business Rates team again....I have called twice since.... a month seems like a long time to process these applications..."

"I contacted highways in early February in regards to a road closure that would cause financial hardship to my business. I did not receive a reply. My business was severely impacted for 2 weeks I then sent emails to four members of the council requesting compensation and an explanation why road signs were placed in surrounding villages saying that business are open up to the road closure which obviously means the businesses after that point are closed; I have a photo of this sign to prove it. I never received one reply to my email from four different email addresses...."

Customer stated that over the last 2 years he has... "reported approx. 12 times issues with potholes, surface issues and the general terrible state of the road where he lives. Still nothing has been done regarding proper repairs. The occasional pothole has been temporary filled, but most remain. Customer stated the road would be resurfaced 12 months ago and this has still not happened."

"I have just been to (business name removed) and I was disgusted and shocked at the lack of social distancing controls...You need to look into this as a matter of urgency."

"Ms Z says that she wishes to make a formal complaint and requests an investigation into the lack of care delivered by (name of third party provide removed) during two incidents."

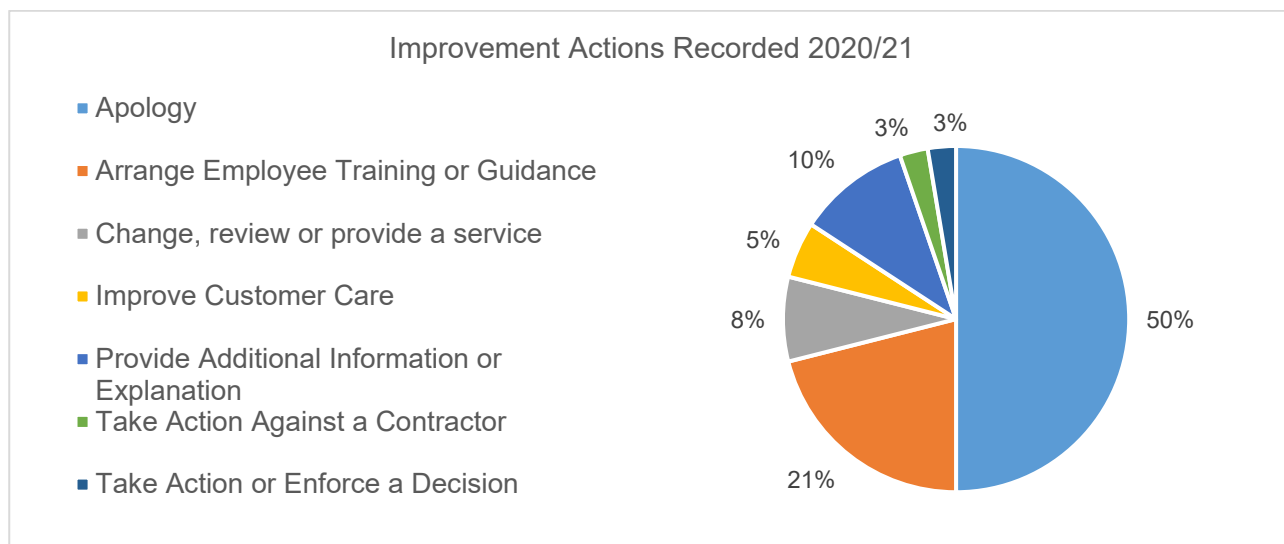
"..As people are now back outside enjoying the park, saddened to see the return of plastic bottles, food litter etc. returning too. Why is it, the council can facilitate an extensive poster campaign with Government guidelines printed all around the Quarry for the last 3 months, complete with taped benches etc. yet nothing is done to ask people to throw rubbish in the bin or take it home? Why are there no plastic bottle / paper recycling bins in the Quarry? The council needs to do something - a poster campaign, local news, fines, look after Shrewsbury, etc. But why do nothing?"

Customer is reporting their green bin was not emptied. It was full of gardening waste. The customer "had to struggle to get it down their path and then struggle to get it back up their path with their bad back, only to find it had not been emptied at all." The customer is not happy at all, and asks "What am I paying council tax for if I am not getting the service I have paid for."

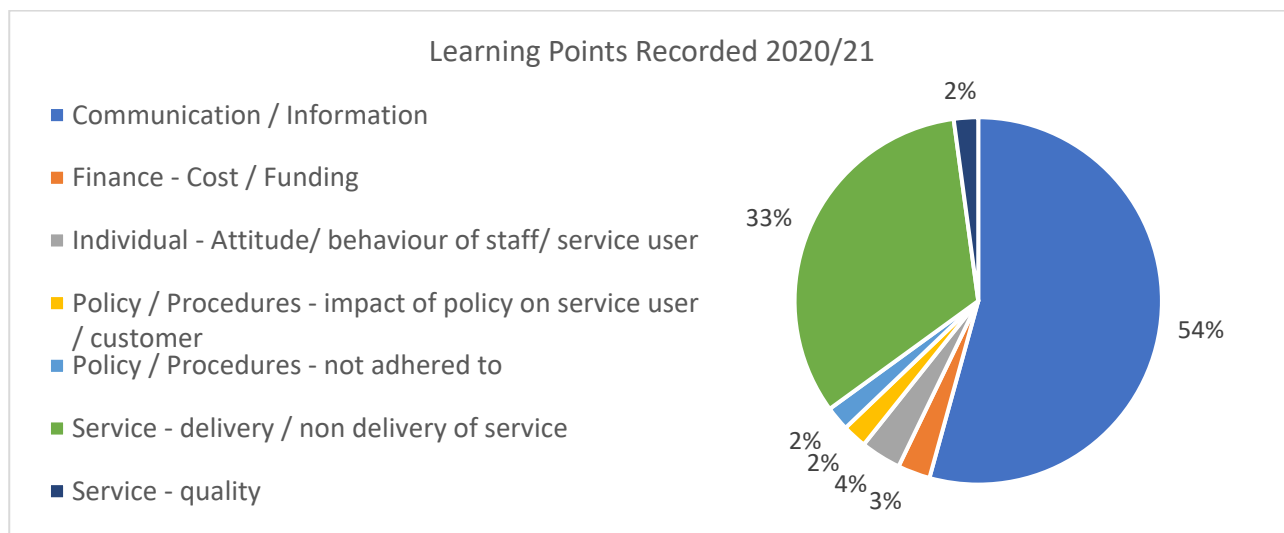


7. Learning and Actions

Shropshire Council recorded learning and/or actions against 152 complaints investigations in 2020/21. Actions and lessons are usually made when complaints are upheld or partly upheld. If small proportions of complaint investigations find fault there will be fewer remedial actions or learning. However, this recording of learning and actions is a reduction from previous years and out of line with the proportion of upheld and partially upheld cases (11% at all stages of the complaints procedures, 283 investigations). This is referred to in the recommendations in section 12. The charts below highlight the primary action and learning point recorded.



Of the actions that were recorded against complaints closed in 2020/21 19% were to provide an apology and 21% to arrange employee training or guidance. Very few resulted in the need to take more formal action to enforce a decision or take action against a contractor.



54% of learning related to communication or provision of information. Communication is consistently a common and dominant theme within complaints. Complainants often highlight their disappointment that they were not contacted efficiently, were not communicated with enough, or information was not shared effectively. Some complaints cases emphasise that more effective communication at an earlier stage could have led to a better understanding of the issues or the processes council staff work to and prevented the development of a formal complaint. Similarly, a lack of communication and response is commonly the cause of escalation within the complaints process.

8. Example Learning and Actions

The recording of learning is strongly encouraged following the completion of a complaint investigation. Acknowledging, and acting on, learning from complaints can avoid any mistakes from being repeated and lead to ongoing improvement. Examples are shown below to highlight the type of learning and action recorded. This is one element of wider work undertaken to focus on quality, and ensure customers receive a good standard of service. Wording within the examples has been altered slightly for simplicity and to ensure confidentiality.

“As a result of the complaint (regarding the way in which the customer was spoken to and interrupted on the telephone call) follow up action has included arranging employee training and guidance.”

“The reason for only half the pool being accessible was explained to the customer and an apology that there should have been posters put up the week before notifying customers of the change. In the future the website will also be kept updated. Apologies were provided.”

“In response to the customers complaint, regarding late collections of recycling, they were informed Waste services are currently experiencing more and more recycling being presented by residents thus causing delays to some collections which can take place between 7am and 5pm. Extra vehicles are being used and there is the possibility of re-rounding to ensure these collections are done efficiently. Introduction of wheelie bins was put to Elected Members as an option. Extra boxes can be provided free of charge to avoid overfilling.”

“The customer was given an apology. The cause was the advisor was unable to find a case and this was human error. The initial call was sent to the wrong team, the second advisor spoken to didn't realise this, so it looked as if the call hadn't been logged. A learning log has now been completed with both advisors that details the learning points and areas for improvement. We apologised that our service fell below the level expected.”

“The teams are taking steps to ensure that they communicate in a more effective manner and social workers caseloads are monitored during periods of long term or unexpected absences. An apology was provided.”

“Following the customer's complaint regarding Shropshire Council's online reporting system, the Transformation Team are working closely with colleagues within the council and reviewing the functionality of the MyShropshire portal to identify where improvements can be made. The option to incorporate photographs has been captured and will be included in our discussions.”

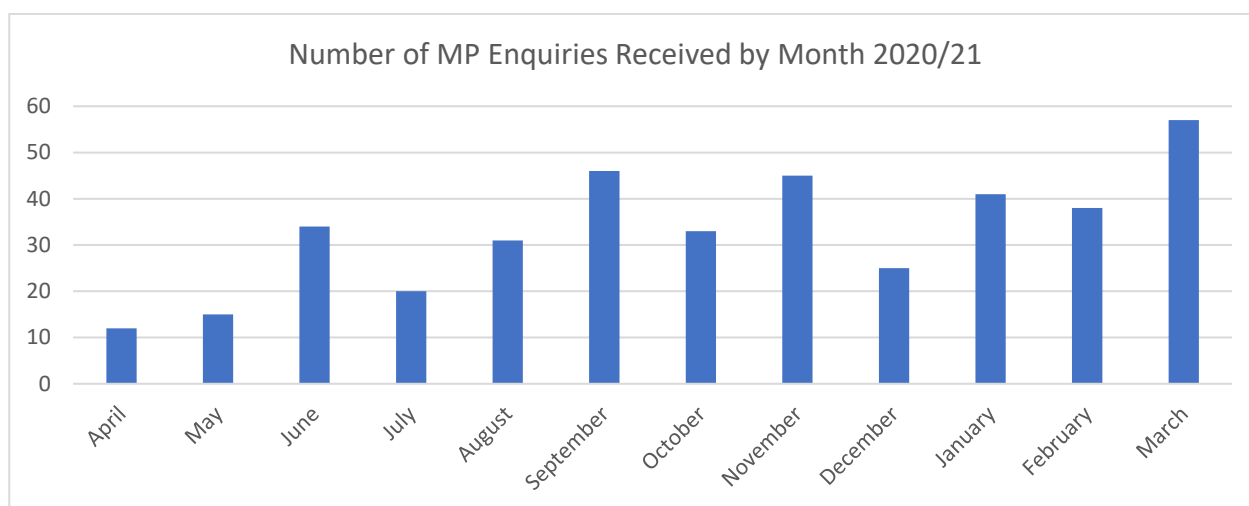
“Apology provided. The customer was informed they were correct the PCN was incorrectly served and that it ought to have been cancelled on receipt of the challenge. I have arranged for the PCN to be cancelled with immediate effect and have discussed this matter with the officers concerned. I am satisfied that they are now fully aware that their actions were incorrect and that there will not be a repetition of this incident.”

“We will clear the area and will speak with the crew to ensure that they clear any spillages when they are there in future. Action will be taken to ensure that the streets are left with no spillages.”

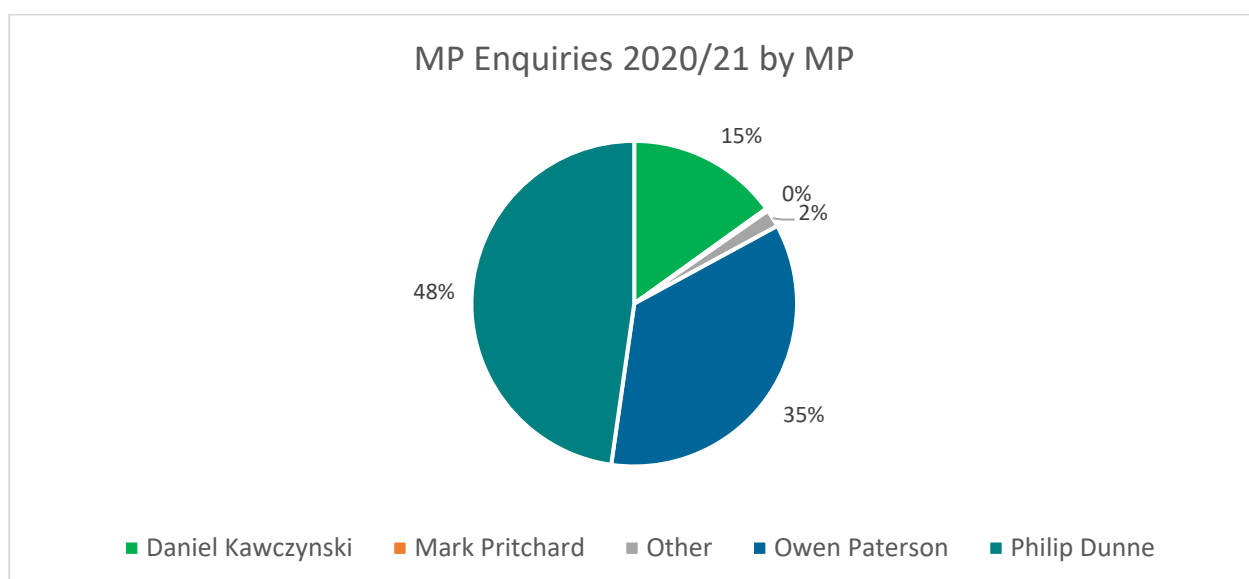
9. MP Enquiries

MP enquiries can commonly duplicate complaints received by Shropshire Council. Often a complainant will choose to make their local Elected Member, MP, Shropshire Council and sometimes the Local Government Ombudsman aware of a complaint at an early stage. For this reason, data concerning MP enquiries is considered and reported separately. Wherever possible Shropshire Council's Feedback and Insight Team will work closely with the Directors' support staff and complaint investigators/service managers to coordinate complaint and MP enquiry responses to minimise duplication.

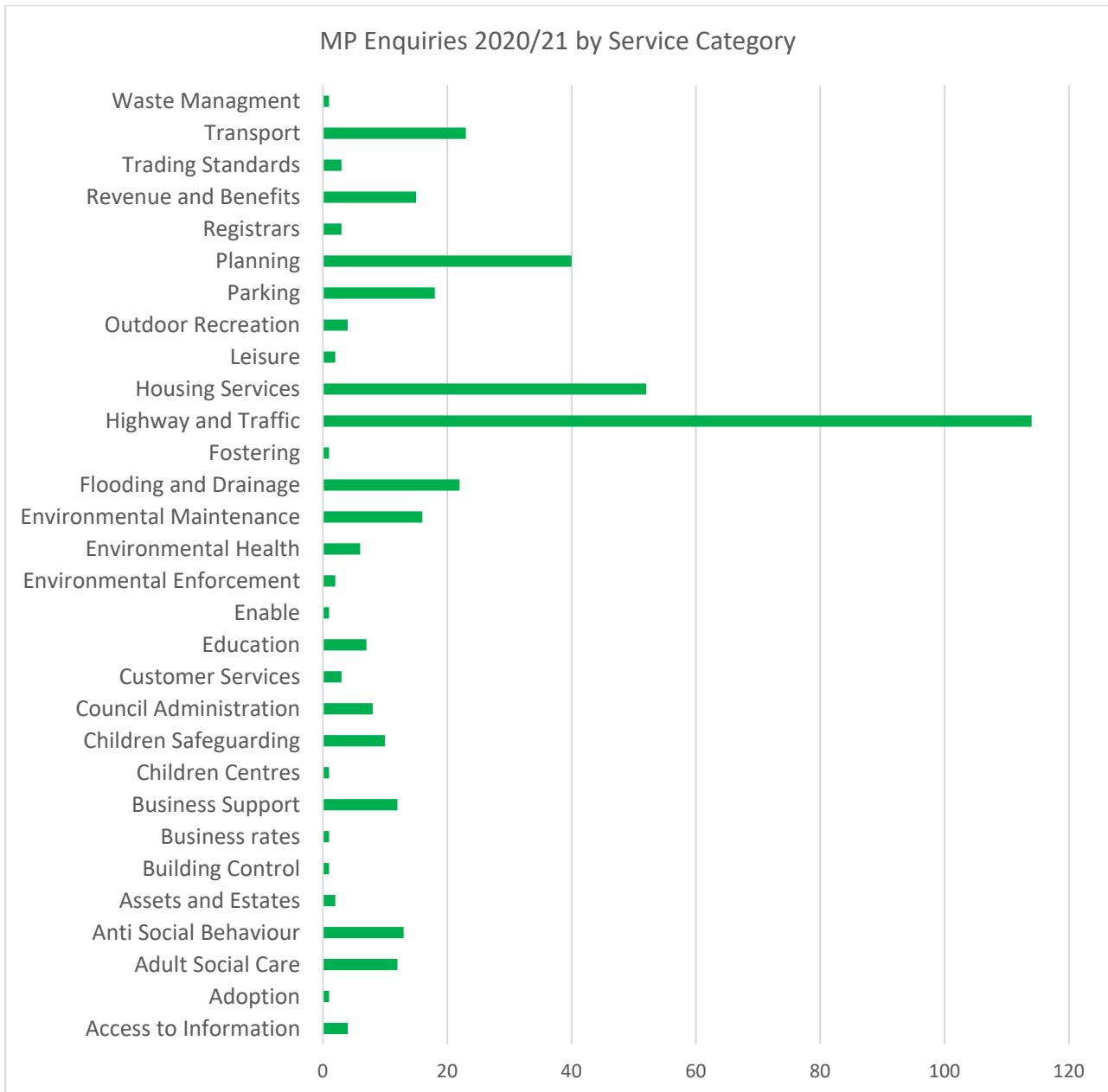
During 2020/21 397 MP Enquiries were received compared to 291 in 2019/20 and 322 the previous year. The overall pattern suggests an increase in MP enquiries. In 2020/21 an average of 33 enquiries were received a month compared to an average of 24 a month the year before. In the same way as complaints, there can be seasonal fluctuations caused by seasonal issues such as the impact of winter conditions on the roads or waste collections. January is often a busy month for MP enquiries but in 2020/21 March saw the greatest number of enquiries.



MP enquiries are received from Shropshire's three MPs, Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham), Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) and Philip Dunne (Ludlow constituency, South Shropshire). The chart below highlights that 48% of all MP enquiries received by Shropshire Council relate to the south of the county.



A consideration of MP enquiries by service category suggests that there are 2 big clusters of topics. 29% of all MP enquiries cover Highways services, 13% relate to housing issues and 10% relate to Planning issues.



The average number of days taken to respond to MP enquiries during 2020/21 was 16 days. Although this response performance is shorter than the average for stage 1 corporate complaints, it remains longer than the target timescale of 10 working days. 71% of MP Enquiries were responded to within timescale. Many managers report challenges responding to the number of formal enquiries received and the time involved in thoroughly investigating an issue before compiling a response.

10. Conclusions

The 2019/20 customer feedback data highlighted a continued growth in the volumes of formal customer feedback received by Shropshire Council, but that trend has not continued into 2020/21. This is due to a number of factors including an unusual year with some fluctuations caused by the impact of the pandemic, and a focused effort to ensure feedback is triaged as much as possible and progressed in the correct way (for example service requests not progressing to complaints prematurely). The number of complaints investigations has reduced slightly, and the number of compliments has increased.

The nature of complaints remains similar with the allocation of cases across service areas showing similar patterns to previous years. Although a small proportion of complaints progress to Stage 2 the number of cases progressing beyond stage 1 has increased. This may be partly due to the number of cases exceeding timescale and overdue cases are more likely to result in complainants keen to progress to the next stage of the process.

Despite a lack of timely response in some cases, it should also be noted that only a relatively small proportion of complaints are upheld at stage 1 (12%) or partially upheld (18%). Reading complaints case summaries highlights that complaints are often generated due to a lack of clear communication, provision of information and delays rather than any fault in following process or service quality when provided. Feedback from complaints investigators suggests that pressures exist due to public sector budget pressures and limited staff resources within service areas.

A close analysis of complaints by service area highlights the main themes for services receiving the greatest number of corporate complaints. Please note that these are reported issues and not necessarily upheld complaints:

- Highways & Transport – Highways and Transport continues to receive a significantly larger number of complaints than any other area of service (30%). However, this has reduced from 34% the previous year and officers have been focused on making improvements in process and response (the results of this were clearer in the later part of the year). Complaints refer to a lack of response/communication, lack of action or delays, complaints about condition of highways such as potholes, road closures/road works and flooding/drainage.
- Waste & Recycling – 8% of complaints relate to Waste Management services (compared to 9% the previous year). These complaints are handled efficiently by the department. Themes include repeated missed collections, mess caused by rubbish not contained by bins, not returning bins or recycling containers to properties after emptying, attitude and behaviour of individuals collecting waste. The service is responsive to feedback and seeks to apply remedies as efficiently as possible.
- Planning Services – 6% of complaints relate to Planning Services. These cases are usually complex in nature and are not easily remedied. Planning complaints feature significantly in the cases progressing to stage 2 and the Ombudsman. The coordination of complaints cases is working well but responses rely on manager time/capacity.

Overall the LGO made 50 decisions relating to Shropshire Council in 2020/21 compared to 85 enquiries from Shropshire in 2019/20 and 91 in 2018/19. 2020/21 was not a usual year for the Ombudsman and the impact of the pandemic lead casework to be suspended for three months. It is likely that the impact of this will be seen in the data for 2021/22. The LGO annual data includes upheld rates as key measures of performance. Due to the relatively small numbers of cases the upheld rate can fluctuate. In 2018/19 the upheld rate was 61%, in 2019/20 41% and in the last year (2020/21) 50%. Performance is slightly better than the average upheld rate for similar local authorities (63%).

11. Progress Update

Key actions and achievements over the last 12 months are summarised against the summary recommendations made in 2019/20 below. Some of the recommendations require continued ongoing action and longer-term focus.

	Action 2019/20	Progress Made
1	Seek to address the significant increase in numbers of complaints investigations, with specific emphasis on Highways complaints.	A working group has been in place throughout 2020/21 to focus on a range of factors that have contributed to a downturn in highways complaints performance over the last few years. Highways managers have been actively working with the Feedback and Insight Team to better understand both themes in customer feedback and the barriers to processes that were preventing complaints from being handled most effectively. Issues have included inefficiencies in IT systems and challenges in process, as well as lack of budget to put remedial action in place to address complaints. Complaints performance has been improving over the latter part of the year. System changes and new ways of working should see this improvement continue in 2021/22.
2	Monitor the proportion of complaints outcomes recorded as 'no finding' and seek to reduce the proportion over the year.	Close monitoring has been taking place over the course of the year. The overall proportion of cases recorded as 'no finding' has reduced and further improvement is anticipated in 2021/22. Although progress has been achieved this will continue to be a consideration. An ambitious target is to reduce the proportion of 'no finding' outcomes to less than 4%.
3	Undertake more detailed review of complaint timescales and 'days to close' performance by service area.	More detailed information on 'days to close' performance has been built into quarterly customer feedback performance reporting. Where issues have arisen within the year these have been highlighted to managers. Despite a commitment to improve, progress has fluctuated due to the pressures of the pandemic. Children's statutory complaint 'days to close performance' has been the most challenging due to the much shorter timeframes in place. Additional support has been provided by the Feedback and Insight Team and close working and monitoring will continue into 2021/22.
4	Seek to address a reduction in the overall quality of complaints responses and compliance with the standards and expectations set out by the Feedback and Insight Team.	Quality varies significantly between complaint investigators and as a result some service areas can see significant variations in quality. Additional staff information and guidance has been produced. Quarterly performance reports have included reminders to ensure staff know what is expected of them and how to seek support if it is needed. It is a difficult issue to address but senior managers are encouraged to promote a focus on ensuring complaint investigators understand that responses must be formal and written to a high standard since they may be subject to external consideration by the Ombudsman.
5	Increase the recording of learning and actions against upheld and partially upheld complaints.	Performance has remained relatively stable despite a reduction in staff capacity for the recording of complaints for a significant part of the year. That gap has now been filled and continued effort will be made through 2021/22. Maintaining performance with a reduction in staff time is considered an achievement.

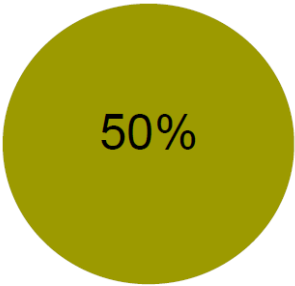
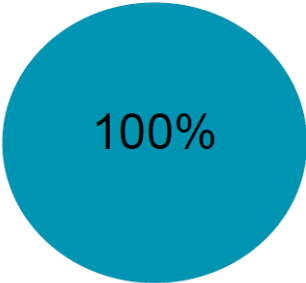
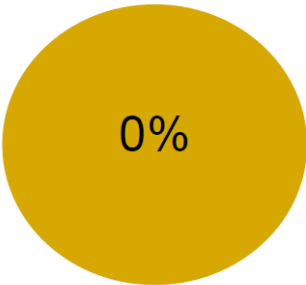
	Action 2019/20	Progress Made
6	In 2019/20The Ombudsman requested Shropshire Council look at its performance in relation to delays (time taken to respond and to implement recommendations).	The feedback in 2019/20 was not reflective of any team performance, delivering recommendations requires responsiveness from across the organisation. In 2020/21 the Ombudsman highlighted concern nationally that complaints systems are not being well resourced but there is no repeat of concerns over timely responses from Shropshire Council. Available data suggests recommendations have been responded to.
7	Deliver staff training on complaints.	Face to face and MS Teams training continues to be delivered. In 2020/21 training workshops have been held/planned for Children's Services and Adult Services staff due to the demands of statutory processes. Plans to develop online training have had to be put on hold due to staff vacancies and pressures faced by the Feedback and Insight Team. It is an ongoing ambition to implement online complaints training for staff and it remains part of the recommendations below.
8	Use the Unusually Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure to manage the significant numbers of people making repeat complaints and submitting feedback to Shropshire Council using multiple processes (e.g. MP enquiry, Information Governance requests etc.)	The Unusually Persistent and Vexatious Customers Procedure has been better promoted through complaints reporting and through discussions with investigating officers. However, awareness and application of the procedure has not delivered the anticipated results. In part, this was due to an increase in persistent complainants contacting the council during the pandemic, but also a recognition that the procedure is not effective in all circumstances. It provides a short-term solution to long-term challenges. This has been discussed with the Chief Executive and Director of Place and additional research suggested to identify whether there are other approaches being taken and learning from other local authorities.
9	Increase use of quarterly performance reports.	There has been some improvement in the use of performance reports. Adult Services Managers have been accessing the Adult Services quarterly report over recent quarters and this has coincided with a noticeable reduction in Adult Services complaints and improved performance against key performance measures. Children's Service managers have been using a monthly report containing the details of cases and due dates. Use of the council-wide quarterly report has improved slightly but the extension of its use would be beneficial across a wider range of departments.

12. Recommendations

The following recommendations for 2020/21 are designed to allow for ongoing improvement in the application of Shropshire Council's complaints procedures and in the work undertaken to obtain and respond to customer feedback.

1. The number of compliments received by Shropshire Council increased in 2020/21. It was encouraging to see recognition of the services and support delivered across a wide range of service areas during the pandemic. However, not all services appear to consistently report compliments. It is recommended that all teams are reminded of the importance of reporting compliments for central recording as well as complaints.
2. Complaint numbers didn't increase in 2020/21. This was partly influenced by the pandemic but also by a focus on triage of feedback. Despite improvements, the data suggests too many cases are developing into complaints when they should be resolved earlier, at the stage of service request. Joint working will be required across service areas to address customer feedback processing. It is also recommended that the focused project work undertaken with Highways Services continues due to the positive impact it had during the latter part of 2020/21
3. It is recommended that 'days to close' and 'no finding' performance remain a focus in 2021/22. Too many cases are exceeding timescales (with some complaints not adequately responded to resulting in 'no finding') and the impact of this often means complainants remain dissatisfied and cases are more likely to escalate.
4. It is recommended that communication work is undertaken within the year to try to increase the identification of 'lessons learnt' outcomes (follow up actions and recommendations) for upheld and partially upheld complaints investigations. Complaints investigators will be encouraged to report these to the Feedback and Insight Team's complaint officers for recording.
5. It is anticipated that the longer term trend of rising complaint numbers and increased escalations is likely to continue (customers seem much more aware of their rights to complain and to use other processes such as Information Governance requests to draw attention to the issues they wish to raise). The Ombudsman has identified concern at the national level that local authority complaint handling functions are not well resourced to respond to increases in demand. These concerns are reflected locally, and it is recommended that options are considered for how resources may be best allocated to respond to longer-term challenges.
6. It is recommended that research takes place into techniques used by local authorities to manage repeat and unusually persistent and vexatious customers. The current approaches do not feel effective over a longer term. The widespread impact and cost generated by small numbers of customers is significant.
7. Staff vacancies and pressures within the Feedback and Insight Team have meant that ambitions for delivering new online complaints training have not yet been achieved. It is recommended that this remain an area of focus, and that if possible, this development is pursued alongside the more traditional training provided. It is also recommended that internal communications are delivered in 2021/22 to support complaints investigators understand the expected standards and quality Shropshire Council aims to deliver.
8. It is recommended that more senior managers are encouraged to ensure the responsibilities for complaints investigations are included within all manager job descriptions. This is a core role required across the organisation and it should be considered an intrinsic part of management responsibilities. It is recommended that the way to progress this is to share information with HR Business Partners, well placed to provide advice and recommend this action when job descriptions are being reviewed and new posts created.

Appendix 1 Ombudsman Cases 2020/21

Complaints upheld		
	<p>50% of complaints we investigated were upheld.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 63% in similar authorities.</p>	<p>8 upheld decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 16 detailed investigations for the period between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021</p>
Compliance with Ombudsman recommendations		
	<p>In 100% of cases we were satisfied the authority had successfully implemented our recommendations.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 99% in similar authorities.</p>	<p>Statistics are based on a total of 9 compliance outcomes for the period between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Failure to comply with our recommendations is rare. An authority with a compliance rate below 100% should scrutinise those complaints where it failed to comply and identify any learning.		
Satisfactory remedy provided by the authority		
	<p>In 0% of upheld cases we found the authority had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.</p> <p>This compares to an average of 10% in similar authorities.</p>	<p>0 satisfactory remedy decisions</p> <p>Statistics are based on a total of 16 detailed investigations for the period between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021</p>

Appendix 2 Ombudsman Recommendations 2020/21

This table covers complaints that were **upheld** by the Ombudsman during 2020/21

Category	Decided date	Remedy	Ombudsman recommendation	Recommendation achieved date
Adult Care Services	24 Aug 2020	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Provide training and/or guidance	The Council will send a memo to the officers involved in carrying out Care Act assessments in this case to remind them of the need to involve the service user and any family members in the assessment, share the completed assessment with the service user and any family members and ensure the service user is involved in drawing up a support plan.	22 September 2020
Education & Children's Services	09 Sep 2020	Apology, New appeal/review or reconsidered decision, Procedure or policy change/review	The Council will also review its school transport appeal procedure to ensure it meets the requirements of statutory guidance including provision for parents to attend the hearing and make verbal representations.	20 October 2020
Adult Care Services	23 Nov 2020	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble	Apology and payment made.	18 December 2020
Education & Children's Services	07 Dec 2020	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Procedure or policy change/review, Provide information/advice	The Council has already changed its annual review template to avoid similar issues occurring in future. Should the Council decide not to include in the template reference to the legal sections of the regulations and guidance about ceasing an EHCP for those who are over 18 the Council should produce some guidance for officers instead.	15 February 2021
Highways & Transport	06 Jan 2021	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble	Apology and payment made.	Initial action completed with ongoing action due to complexity of case.
Planning & Development	04 Feb 2021	Apology, New appeal/review or reconsidered decision	Apology provided.	12 March 2021
Adult Care Services	03 Feb 2021	Apology, Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble	Apology and payment made.	22 February 2021
Education & Children's Services	22 Feb 2021	Financial redress: Avoidable distress/time and trouble, Financial redress: Loss of service	Payment made.	17 March 2021