

Children's Services Annual Complaints Report

April 2021 - March 2022

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1. Introduction

This report examines complaints received about our Children's Social Care Services from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. It does not include complaints made about our Education and Children Services. All complaints detailed in this report were dealt with through our corporate complaints process and through the social care statutory complaints procedure as set out in the Children Act 1989.

Complaints help us to better understand the experience our residents have of our services. They also help us to identify areas where we could improve and where there is good practice. This report shows what our residents complained about, how we dealt with these complaints and how we used them to improve our Children's Social Care Services.

1.1 Key points of the report

Fewer complaints were received in 2021/22 compared with the two previous years and there was a 17% drop in the number of Stage 1 complaints compared with 2020/21. Five fewer Stage 2 complaints were also received compared with the previous year and there was a 2% drop in the number of Stage 1 complaints that were escalated to Stage 2 of the process compared with 2020/21.

All but three complaints received this year were about the service areas, 'Looked after Children, Permanence and Specialist Services' and 'Mash, Referral and Assessment, Family Support and Child Protection'. Most complaints occurred because individuals believed that a poor service had been provided such as, there was a lack of knowledge about the service we provided to them or that we held inadequate records about them, which meant that historic decisions could not always be explained to the complainant's satisfaction.

We upheld or partly upheld 43% of all investigated Stage 1 complaints. and 70% of all complaints that were escalated to Stage 2 were either partly or completely upheld. Despite this the Ombudsman only agreed to investigate three complaints during the year, and he did not find us at fault in any of these.

The number of Stage 1 complaints closed on time dropped from 74% in 2020/21 to 58% in 2021/22, which is below our target of 90% and the lowest performance in the last four years, Stage 2 performance was also below our performance target.

This year we received twelve compliments and a selection of these are provided at the end of this report.

1.2 Dealing with complaints

Under the Children Act 1989, we are legally required to have a procedure to deal with complaints relating to our key social care responsibilities, which are defined in the Act.

The children's statutory complaints procedure has three stages (see below). If a complainant remains dissatisfied after they have exhausted these stages, they can escalate their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), who they are also free to approach at any time during the complaints process.

Complaints about our Children's Social Care Services can be complex and time consuming. Whilst every effort is made to deal with them on time, sometimes responses are delayed due to the investigation time

that is required to answer them or because more information becomes available which changes the nature of the initial complaint.

Our Children's Social Care Services attempt to contact every complainant by telephone or face to face before they begin investigating their complaint. Sometimes this causes a complaint response to be delayed and/or for the nature of the complaint to change. However, by taking this approach we are often able to resolve a complaint more quickly, prevent it from escalating unnecessarily and ensure all the relevant aspects of the complaint are dealt with correctly. Although naturally, this does not always prevent some complainant's from escalating their complaint.

Stage 1: The relevant Service Manager or Head of Service investigates the complaint and attempts to resolve the issues raised by the complainant. We have 10 working days to resolve the complaint, but this can be extended to 20 working days in exceptional cases.

Stage 2: If the complainant remains dissatisfied with the Stage 1 outcome, they can escalate their complaint to Stage 2 where an Independent Investigating Officer (IO) investigates their complaint, whose work is overseen by an Independent Person (IP). The IP makes sure the investigation is fair, transparent and lawful.

The IO can be a council employee, or someone appointed externally specifically for this piece of work. We always appoint an investigator from outside the Council to ensure the process is as fair as possible. The IP must be an independent external appointment.

The IO and IP work with the complainant to investigate the issues the complainant feels were not adequately resolved at Stage 1. After they have finished investigating the complaint the IO produces a report making recommendations about how we can provide a better and/or improve the service to the complainant. This may include proposals on how we can rectify any faults that have been identified. The IP also produces a report advising if they agree with the findings of the IO.

Our Deputy Director of Children's Services considers the reports from the IO and IP in their role as an Adjudicating Officer. They can agree, partially agree, or reject the findings of the IO and IP. The Deputy Director writes to the complainant setting out their findings within 25 working days of the IO and IP's reports. The time can be extended depending on the complexity of the investigation.

Stage 3: If the complainant remains dissatisfied at the end of Stage 2, they can escalate their complaint to a Review Panel. The panel consists of three independent people who do not work for the Council. The panel considers the reasons why the complainant was unhappy with the outcome of the Stage 2 complaint and submits recommendations about how the complaint might be resolved to the Director of Children's Services. The Director of the service reviews the recommendations and writes to the complainant advising if they agree, partly agree or reject the recommendation, which completes the process.

There are various timescales at Stage 3 of the complaints process:

- we have 30 working days to organise the panel upon receipt of the complainant's request
- the Panel Chair has five working days after the hearing has occurred to produce a report with its recommendations

- following receipt of the Panel's report, the Director of Children's Services has 15 working days to send their response to the complainant

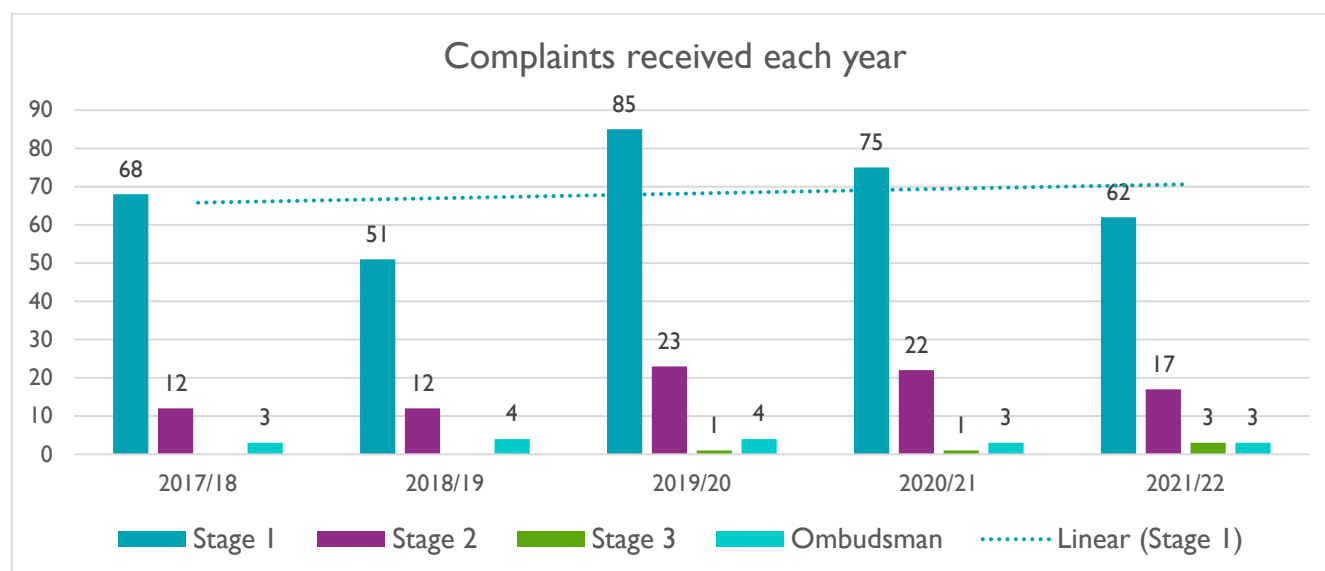
Following the conclusion of the Stage 3 process, the complainant can escalate their concerns to the LGSCO if they remain dissatisfied.

2. Complaints received

The table below provides a breakdown of the total number of complaints received from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Ombudsman	Total
Corporate complaints	33	10	n/a	1	44
Statutory complaints	29	7	3	2	41
Total	62	17	3	3	85

The chart below shows how this compares with the number of complaints we have received over the last five years.



Analysis

The number of complaints has been reducing steadily over the last three years. We received 62 Stage 1 complaints this year, 17% fewer than last year. The proportion of complaints that were escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2 was 27% which was a slight drop from the year before where 29% of complaints were escalated to Stage 2. Three complaints were escalated to Stage 3 of the statutory complaints process which taking account of the relatively small number of Stage 2 complaints received this year, is higher than in the previous four years.

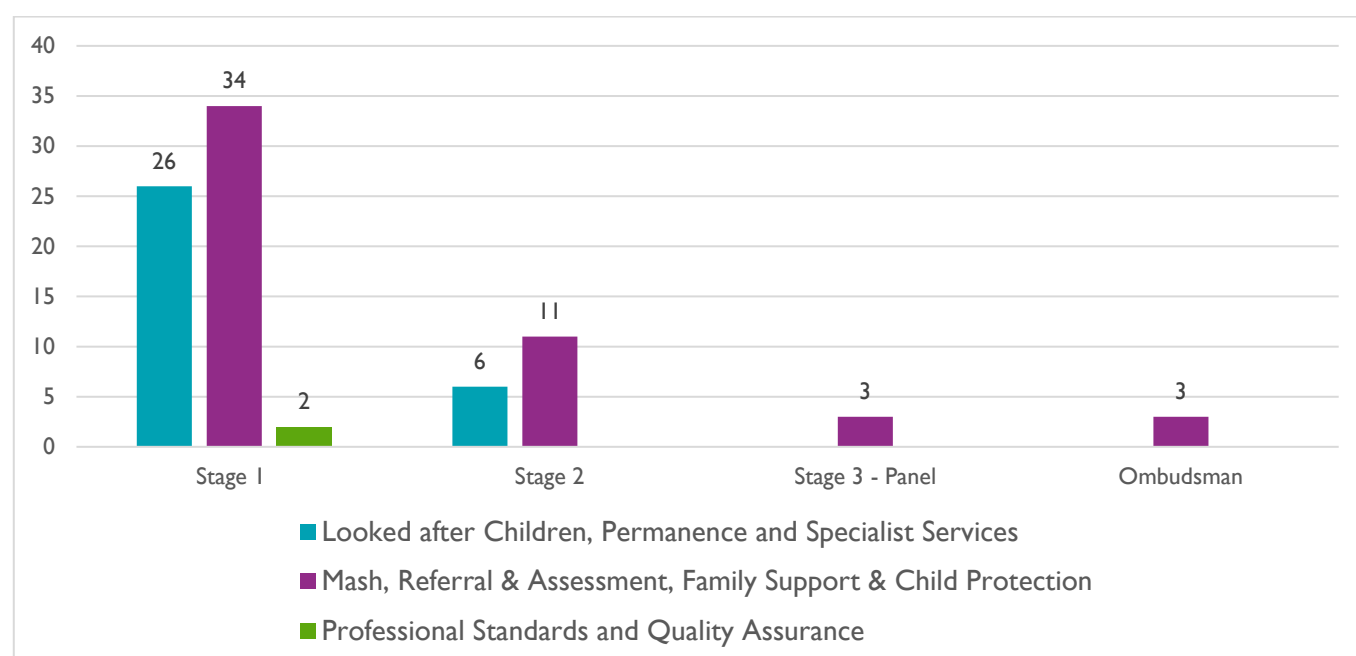
Only three complaints were investigated by the Ombudsman, which is consistent with previous years and demonstrates that we were able to resolve more than 96% of all complaints locally in 2021/22.

2.1 Complaints by service area

This year we received complaints about the following service areas:

- Looked after Children, Permanence and Specialist Services
- Mash, Referral and Assessment, Family Support and Child Protection
- Professional Standards and Quality Assurance

Complaints by service area broken down by the different stages of the complaints process



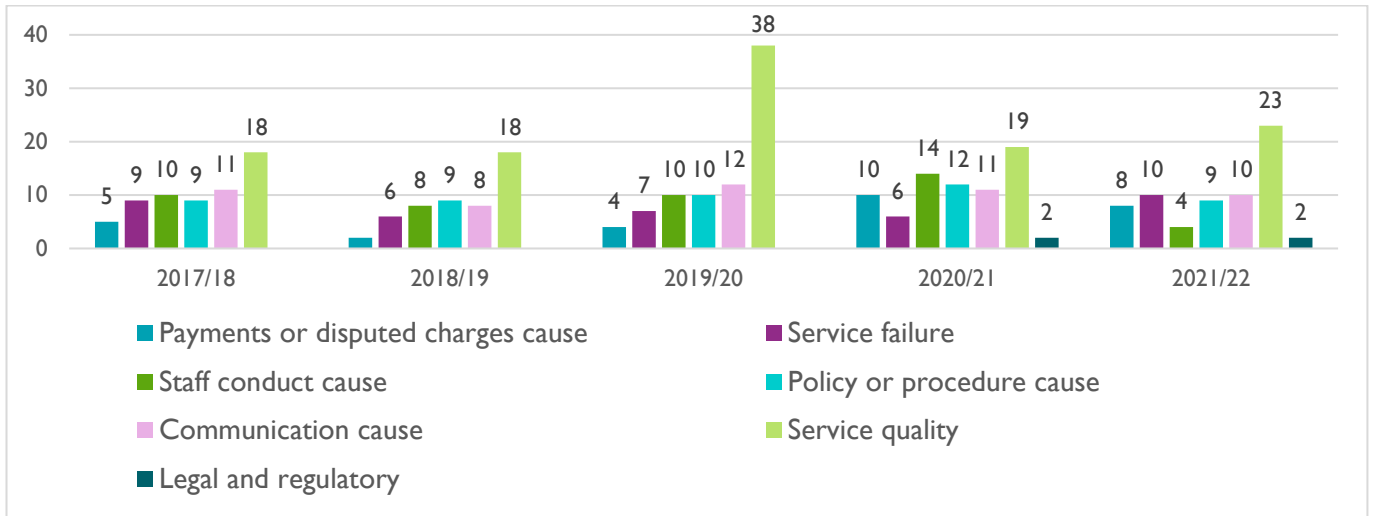
Analysis

All but two complaints involved 'Looked after Children' and 'Mash, Referral and Assessment'. These services receive the most complaints because they carry out assessments on individuals who are sometimes unhappy with the outcome.

The number of Stage 2 complaints continued to decline for the third year running. However nearly one third of all complaints about Mash, Referral and Assessment were escalated to Stage 2. Our aim is that fewer complaints are escalated, and we hope that the service changes covered under the section 'learning and improving from complaints' will help us to achieve this goal.

2.2 Causes of complaints

The table below shows the reasons why people complained over a five-year period.



Analysis

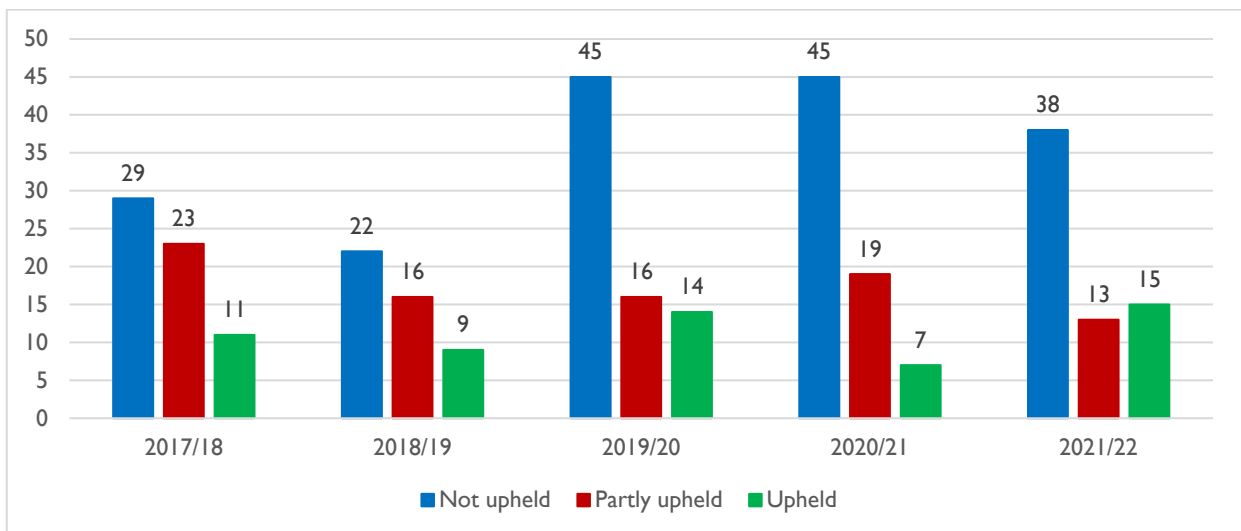
Although the cause of complaints was spread more evenly across a range of issues this year, the main reason people complained was again due to the poor 'quality of service' they received. This covers a broad area of issues such as allegations of 'insufficient service knowledge', 'poor record keeping' and where 'service delivery was not of the quality expected'.

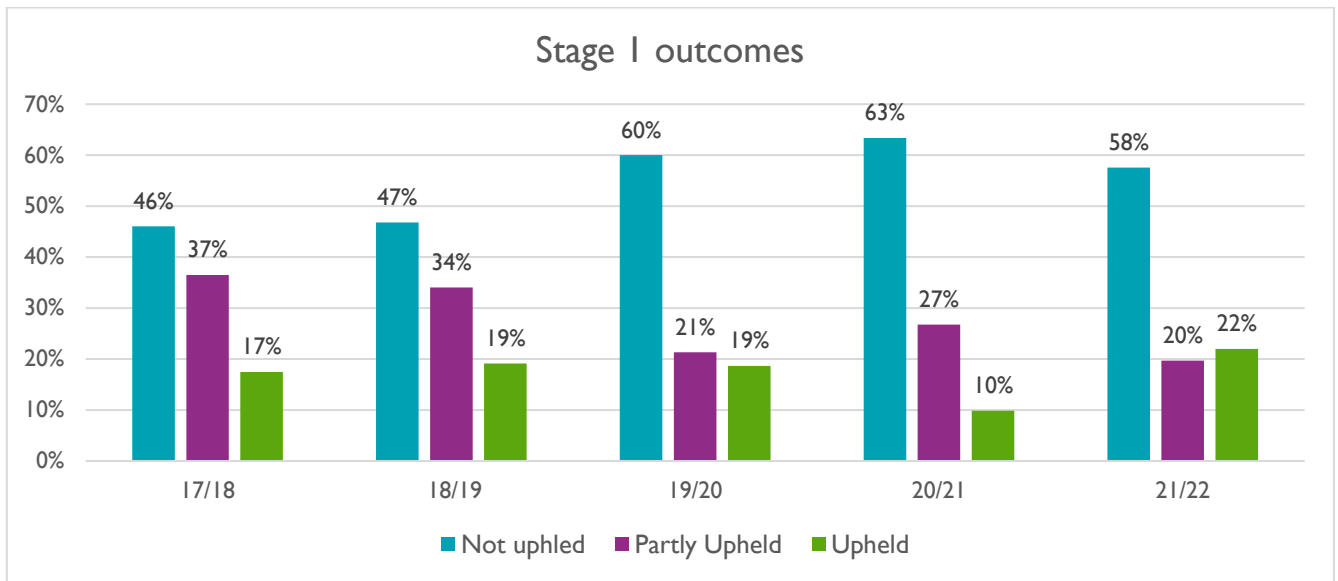
There was a significant and welcome drop in the number of complaints about staff conduct this year, which was at its lowest level in five years.

2.3 Complaint performance

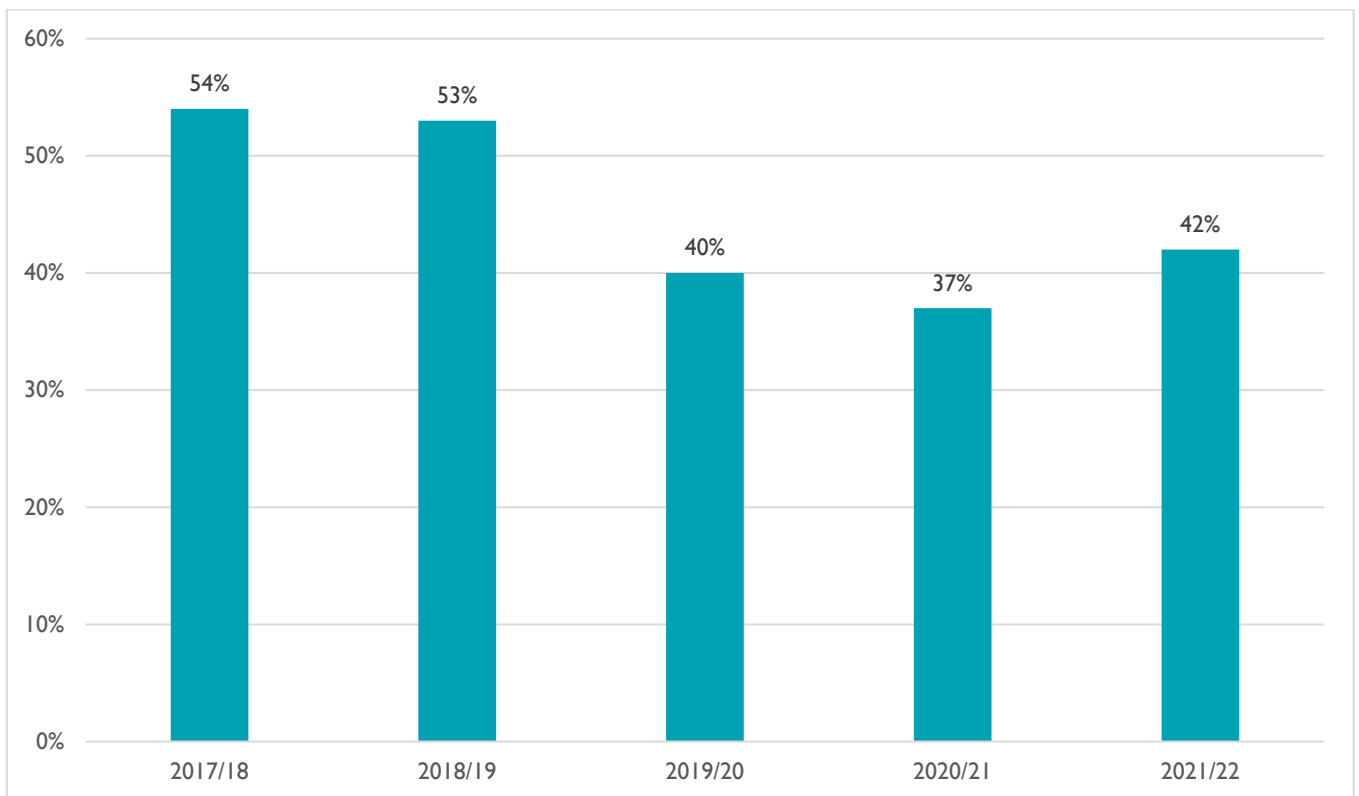
The tables below show the breakdown of our complaint decisions over the last five years.

Stage 1 complaint outcomes

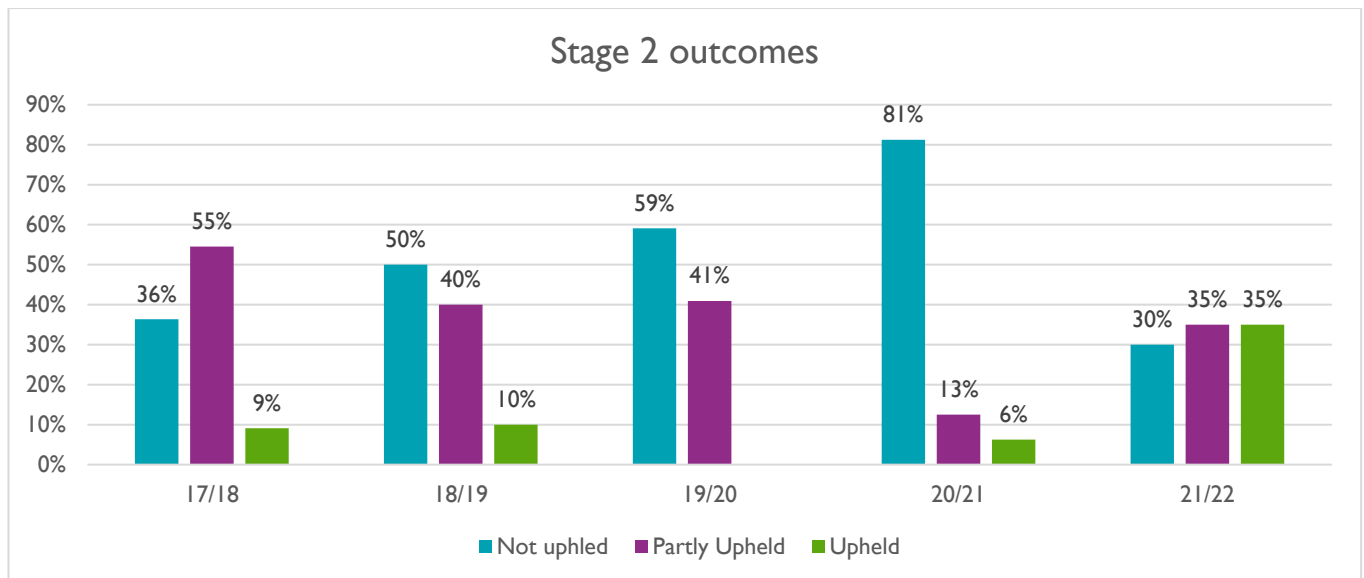
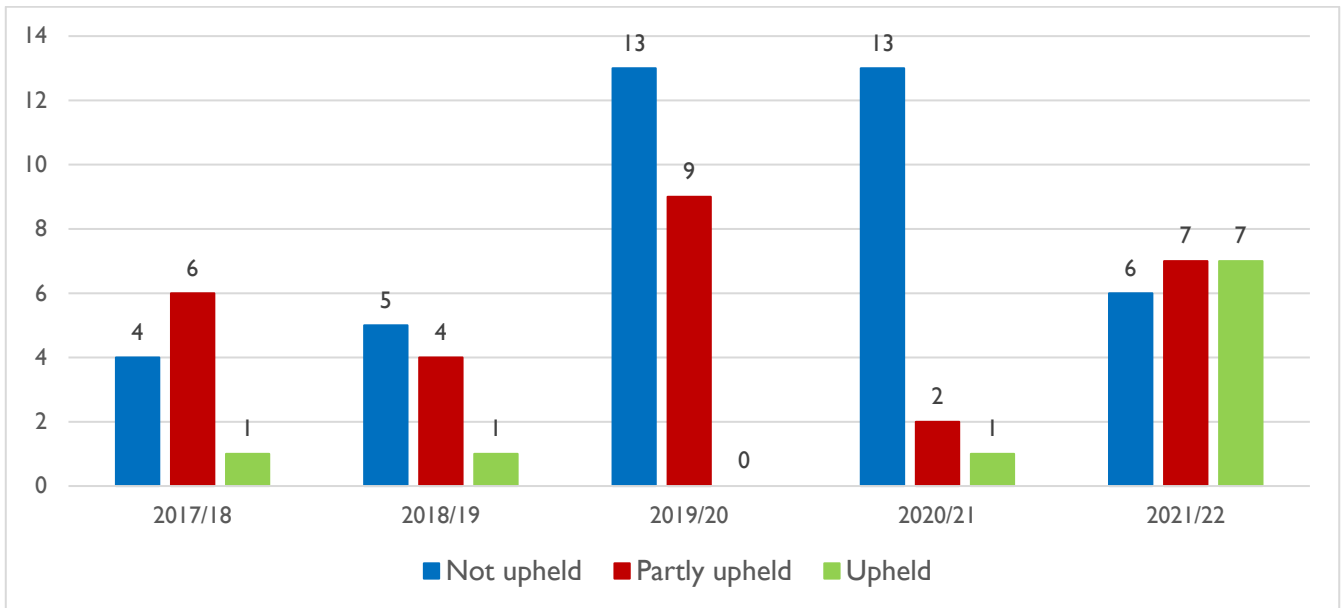




Percentage of Stage 1 complaints where a fault of some kind was found with a service over the last five years



Stage 2 complaint outcomes over the last five years



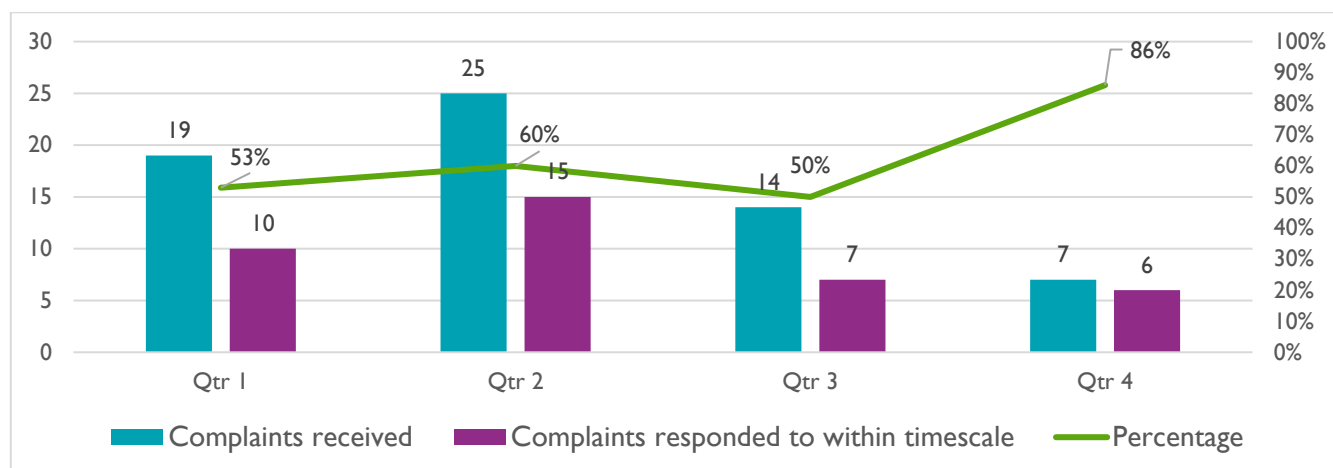
Analysis

We found fault in 42% of all Stage 1 complaints, which was the highest than in two previous years. The percentage of complaints that were upheld at Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the complaints process was also higher than in the previous four years and we found some degree of fault in 70% of the complaints escalated to Stage 2.

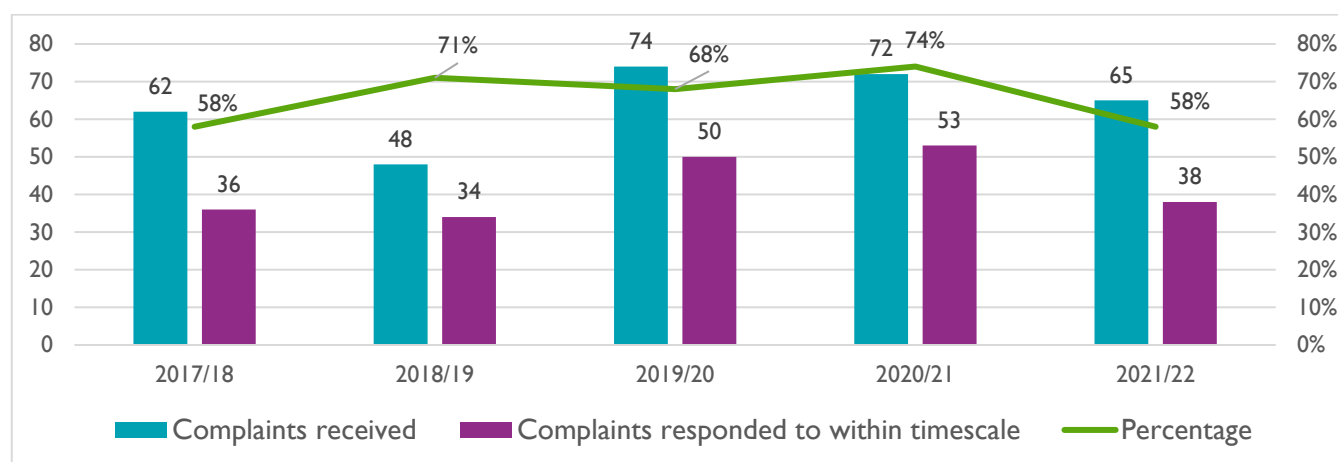
Our Stage 1 investigations need to be more robust and thorough in future to ensure individuals get a more balanced and fairer outcome earlier in the complaints process without having to escalate their complaints. Services also need to reflect on why a relatively high number of complaints were upheld and take steps to reduce service shortcomings.

2.4 Complaint performance

The table below shows the total number of complaints received in 2021/22 and the percentage of Stage 1 complaints dealt with on time.



Complaints dealt with on time over the last five years



The table below shows the Stage 2 and Stage 3 complaint performance (timeliness) in 2021/22.

Type	Stage 2	Stage 3
Statutory complaints	62% (8/13) *	50% (1/2)
Corporate complaints	55% (6/11)	N/A

*(8/13) means 13 complaints were received and eight were responded to on time.

Analysis

We dealt with 58% of Stage 1 complaints on time, which was a 16% drop from last year and the lowest performance for the last four years. The drop in performance ends several years of steady performance

improvement and comes in a period where we received a relatively low volume of complaints compared to previous years. Children Services complaints are often complex, time consuming and resource intensive which can result in some being responded to after they are due. However, this level of performance is below our target and requires significant improvement.

2.5 Improving and learning from complaints

We use complaints to help improve the service we provide to our residents. By analysing individual complaints, identifying what went wrong and considering how we could improve in the future we can reduce repeat service failure and provide a better level of service.

By closely monitoring complaints, we can identify common themes and recurring problems within our Children Social Care Services that need attention. Complaints are regularly discussed at team meetings, during officer supervisions and at one-to-ones. Complaint reports are produced each month and discussed with senior managers, the Deputy Director and Director of the service. The Complaints Team works closely with officers to help them respond to difficult complaints more effectively. They also manage the administration of all statutory complaints and all enquiries from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

Improvements identified in 2020/21

Through investigating and upholding complaints in this period, we identified four key themes that required improvement to the service

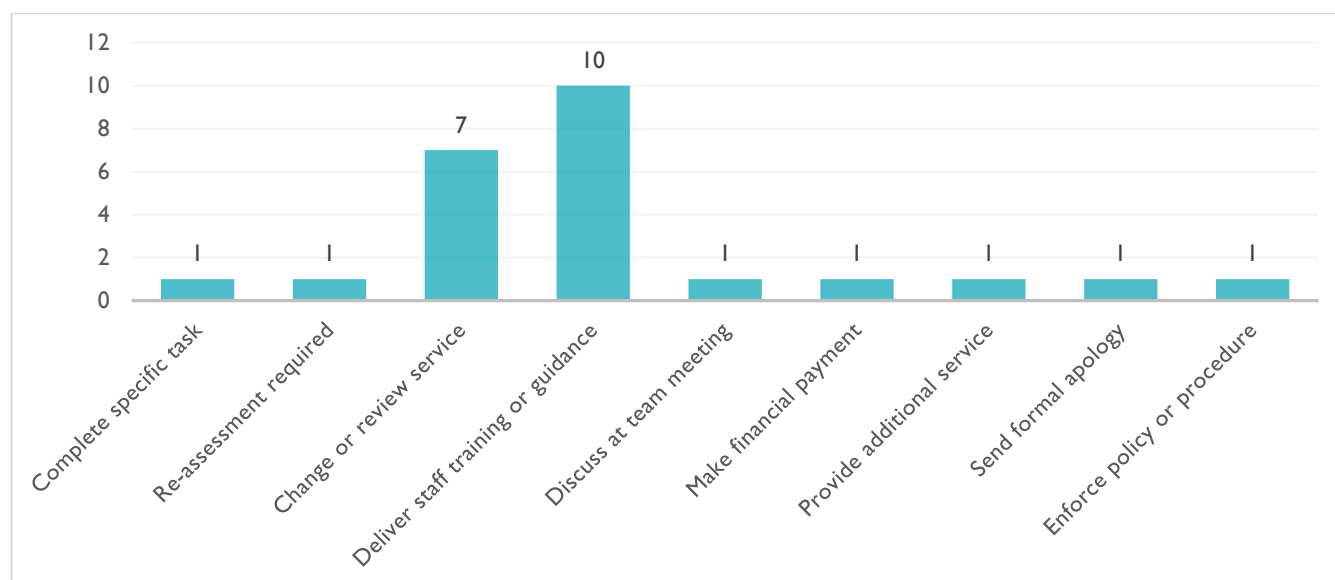
1. Some examples of insufficient record keeping which sometimes made it difficult to adequately understand historic decisions
2. Some examples of insufficient maintenance of data privacy
3. Instances where Social Workers failed to properly explain the purposes of their visits to vulnerable families
4. Parental rights were sometimes not maintained properly

We implemented the following measures to address these shortcomings and other issues identified during the year

- Some officers were given data protection refresher training
- All Social Workers were reminded to clarify whether statements were professional fact or opinion in reports sent to families
- Some staff briefed on the importance of gaining parental consent and the need to obtain family collaboration
- A MASH employee was installed to help relocate parents who had been evicted from their property and to find them support in their local community
- A commitment was made to share reports for the initial Child Protection Conference at least three days prior to it taking place

Learning from complaints in 2021/22

The chart below shows the various actions we took after a complaint was either partially upheld or upheld during this period.



In 2021/22 the following issues were identified through responding to, and upholding or partially upholding complaints, which required service improvement.

- Some lack of continuity with supporting families due to the changing of Social Workers
- The statutory rights of a non-custodial parent were sometimes overlooked and inappropriately considered
- Some payment assessments were not kept up to date and new assessments resulted in payments being withdrawn unexpectedly
- Instances of insufficient support of care leavers and foster carers

Service improvements

- Financial reviews now take place annually and there is better record keeping of payment agreements.
- A new Special Guardianship Team has been created, to support Special Guardians in their work.
- Families better supported by back-office staff and not just Social Workers to better maintain continuity of care and support
- More time and care taken to record the opinion of a non-custodial parent on a child's records. Particularly, when key decisions about the welfare of a child are taken that are not supported by that parent.

Analysis

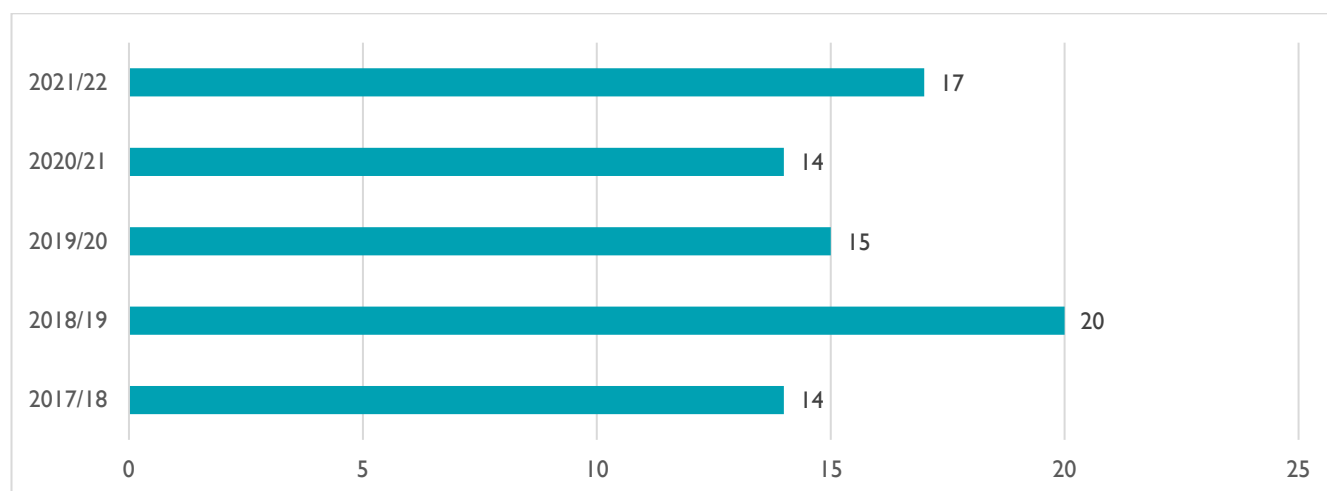
Unfortunately, the rights of a non-custodial parent and supporting care leavers and foster carers was a recurring issue in 2021/22. The number of complaints upheld or partly upheld at Stage 1 and Stage 2 of

the complaints process was also higher than it has been in the previous two years. Whilst we would expect to find service faults in a sizeable portion of complaints, the percentage of Stage 2 complaints that were upheld was disproportionately high.

As detailed above, steps have been taken during the year to improve problems identified with our services. Improvements in the way we investigate complaints and our decision making during this process to ensure that the right decision is made at the first time of asking remains an ongoing challenge. Fortunately, we were able to resolve most complaints through our complaints process during the year. Further, the few individuals that decided to escalate their complaint to the Ombudsman were not successful in improving the settlement we had already offered to them.

2.6 Ombudsman complaints

The Ombudsman advised us that they received 17 enquiries about our Education and Children's Social Services in 2021/22. Although this annual report only covers complaints about our Children's Social Care service. We have included both in this report because the Ombudsman does not separate their data by each of these service areas.



Ombudsman complaints received

In 2021/22 the Ombudsman agreed to review only three of the 17 enquiries they received about both services mentioned above. They found no fault in two of these cases and decided that upon further review, it was not worth investigating the other complaint to its conclusion.

3. Compliments received

Last year we received 12 compliments from the public, a selection of these is listed below:

Service area: Looked after Children, Permanence and Specialist Services

'We are emailing to share some positive feedback on our child's social worker, Aminat. We've only worked with Aminat for around 2 months now, but her excellent work has felt like we have worked with

her for so much longer and made a significant difference in providing care to AHD. She is always responsive and actions everything we or AHD asks of her as quickly as possible. This is hugely appreciated considering we have worked with different child social workers since being foster carers at Bexley Council. Due to this, we would like to strongly ask if moving forward, when we have new placements that the child's social worker can be Aminat'.

Service area: Mash, Referral & Assessment, Family Support & Child Protection

'I wanted to give you some feedback regarding our experience with Amy Turner.

From the beginning Amy was very warm and welcoming. She was professional at all times and very 'on the ball' with communication and getting things complete.

Amy was a huge help to our family during a very challenging time. Amy was a good listener and engaged positively in all conversations we had and meetings she attended'.

Service area: Youth Offending Service

'I would like to thank you and your Team for the excellent service that my son and I received.

I feel privileged that my son and I have had such tremendous help and support from Ashley Manning.

Were as for some people a job is just a job, I saw, that for Ashley, being a Social Worker is far more than just a job. Ashley's caring compassionate demeanour and his professionalism has not just helped my son, he has also helped me, in which I am well and truly very grateful.

If there is a survey form based on one's interaction with their Social Worker, please forward me the form, as I would like to tick every box ten out of ten.

If there is anything in this report which requires further clarification, please contact the Complaints and FOI Team at Complaints@bexley.gov.uk.