

Housing Directorate Compliments & Complaints Annual Review Report

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member for Housing.

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1.Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

The report is to update the Tenants' Strategic Group on complaints received in the Housing Directorate during 1/4/2021-31/03/2022.

2.Recommendations

The Tenants' Strategic Group is asked to note this report and are invited to ask questions.

3.Full details of the Report

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Complaints and compliments data is reported monthly for the performance scorecard. It is analysed and reported to Housing Senior Management Team (HSMT) and Housing Briefing on a quarterly and annual basis. Regular performance updates are included in our tenant and staff newsletters.
- 1.2 The Housing Ombudsman launched its new Complaint Handling Code in January 2021, with an update in April 2022. The Government also launched its Social Housing White Paper.
- 1.3 The Housing Ombudsman have identified an increase in complaint numbers across the sector during 2021/22, reporting a 104% increase in the number of enquiries and complaints made to them, and an 88% increase in customers requesting formal investigations.
- 1.4 The Council reviewed its Complaints Policy in March 2021, introducing a new two stage complaints process.
- 1.5 At the same time, the Housing Performance team started to oversee, coordinate, respond to and monitor all complaints received by the directorate.
- 1.6 The Housing directorate introduced its own Redress Policy in June 2021 to sit alongside the Council's Complaints Policy. A designated Senior Case

Manager position was put in place in November 2021 to drive complaint performance forward.

- 1.7 A designated Senior Case Manager position was put in place in November 2021 to drive complaint performance forward. The Senior Case Manager is working on several projects designed to further the directorate's complaint performance, in line with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code and the White Paper. Work that is currently underway includes:
 - 1.7.1 Exploration of a possible IT software migration across to the new Open Housing system for HRA complaints, to improve efficiency and response times.
 - 1.7.2 A new, housing centric Complaints Policy to align with the Complaint Handling Code, incorporating an improved Stage 2 process which would include a tenant review panel.
 - 1.7.3 Creation of an unofficial 'put things right' stage which will resolve issues for residents quicker and reduce the number of formal complaints raised.
 - 1.7.4 A focus on what we can learn from our complaints and a commitment to action trends that arise.
 - 1.7.5 Creating a comprehensive staff training package to improve complaint management across the directorate.
 - 1.7.6 Recording customer satisfaction through surveys and tenant engagement. Learning from what respondents tell us about how we manage their complaint.
- 1.8 Data in this report is in its infancy, as changes to both the Council Complaints Policy and the way in which complaints are monitored by the Housing team have meant that comparable year on year data is not yet available.

2.0 Compliments

- 2.1 It is important to report on the positive feedback that we receive from our residents, as well as the not so positive. It is a good way of measuring what we are doing really well.
- 2.2 In 2021/22, the directorate received 90 compliments. Most of these were where a member of staff had excelled in the service they have provided to our residents. Some feedback examples received include:

"I'd just like for Nicole recognised for all the hard work she does. She goes above and beyond to help her tenants the best she can, and always does as she says she going to. She also goes to great lengths to make sure the issue is resolved the best it can be."

"I would like to extend my thanks for the work the fencing team have done. The new fence looks lovely and they did a brilliant job as well as being very polite".

“Pippa has been working with us continuously with the most understanding and empathy I have experienced from someone in her position. She has answered my messages in her own time and has checked in on us on her way home after no doubt a long day. I just wanted to let you know that she is doing a wonderful job and I'm so pleased to have dealt with a sympathetic yet professional person”.

2.3 Compliments across each service area can be seen in the following chart:

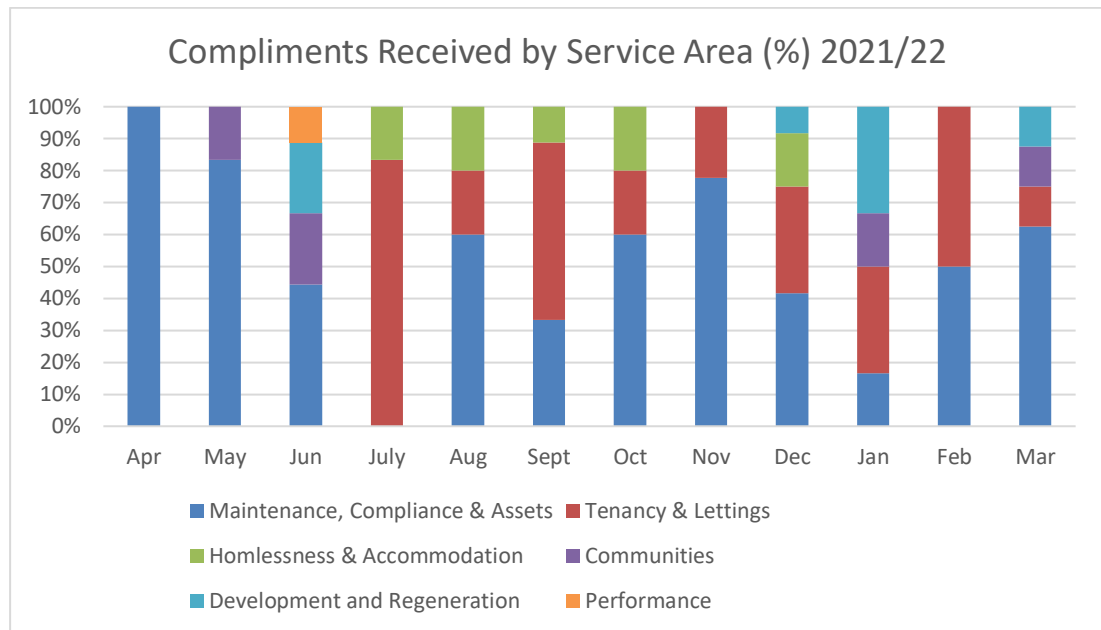


Figure 1: Number of compliments received in 2021/22

- 2.4 Properties (Maintenance, Compliance and Repairs) received the most compliments across the directorate during the financial year.
- 2.5 We are actively encouraging service areas to make sure that we record the great feedback we get from our residents, so that we can report accurate figures going forward.

3.0 Stage 1: Volumes and Response Times

- 3.1 There were 365 complaints closed in total during 2021/22, as follows:
- 331 complaints received at stage 1
 - 34 complaints escalated to stage 2
- 3.2 For stage 1 complaints, this is an increase of just under 10% from the previous year (301 stage 1 complaints closed in 2020/21). Considering the unprecedented numbers recognised by the Housing Ombudsman, this is a reassuring figure although we seek to reduce the number of complaints we receive over the course of the next twelve months.

- 3.3 The chart below shows the pattern of complaints received each month across 2021/22:

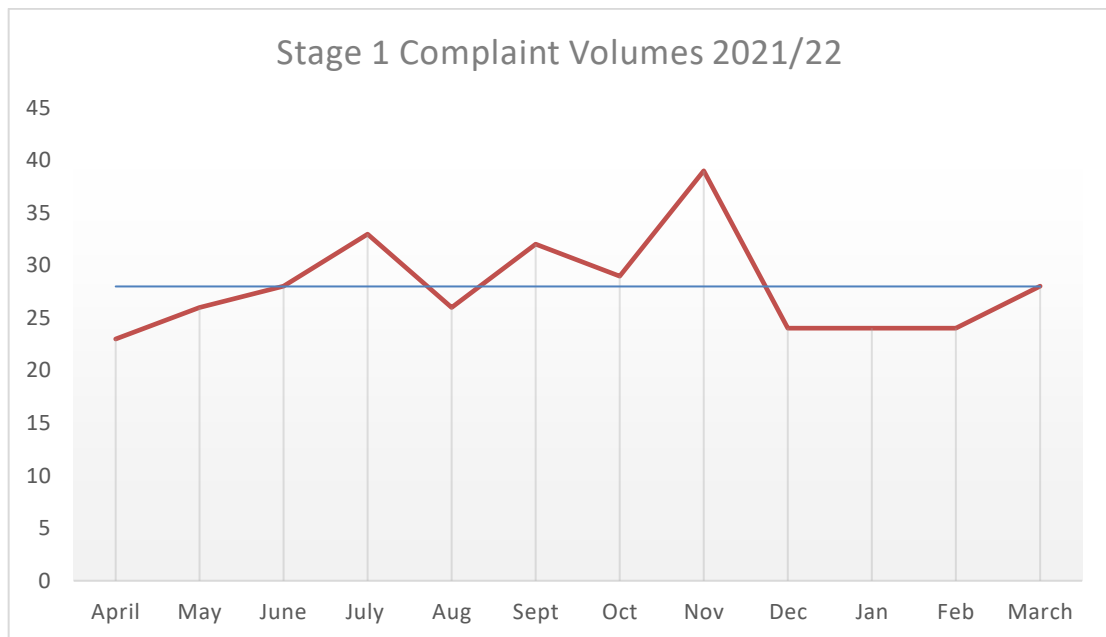


Figure 2: Stage 1 Complaint Volumes 2021/22

- 3.4 The average number of stage 1 complaints received was 28 per month. November saw an unusual peak of complaints, as we received 39 stage 1 complaints in just one month.
- 3.5 23 of the complaints received in November 2021 were to the Properties team. The majority (65%) of these complaints were about responsive repairs.
- 3.6 This spike in figures in November 2021 showed that we had failed to adequately respond to requests for service or repairs. This data confirms what we already knew at that point; that we were managing and working through a backlog of non-emergency repairs brought about by Covid restrictions. We had already taken steps to work with a contractor to clear the backlog of repairs, which in turn reduced the number of complaints in this area.
- 3.7 As a directorate, for the entire year we responded to 68% of stage 1 complaints within the agreed timeframe. Although this figure is lower than we would like, it is reassuring that this has improved since 2020/21 when we responded to just over half (51%) of our stage 1 complaints within standard. We are optimistic that this figure will continue to rise with the hard work that the Housing Performance team and each service area are doing to engage with our residents and improve our complaints handling.
- 3.8 Looking at each service area of the directorate, the Housing team (Tenancy and Estates, ASB, Lettings, Sheltered/Extra Care, Rents) experienced a reduction in the number of complaints made during 2021/22, demonstrated by the trend line on the chart below:

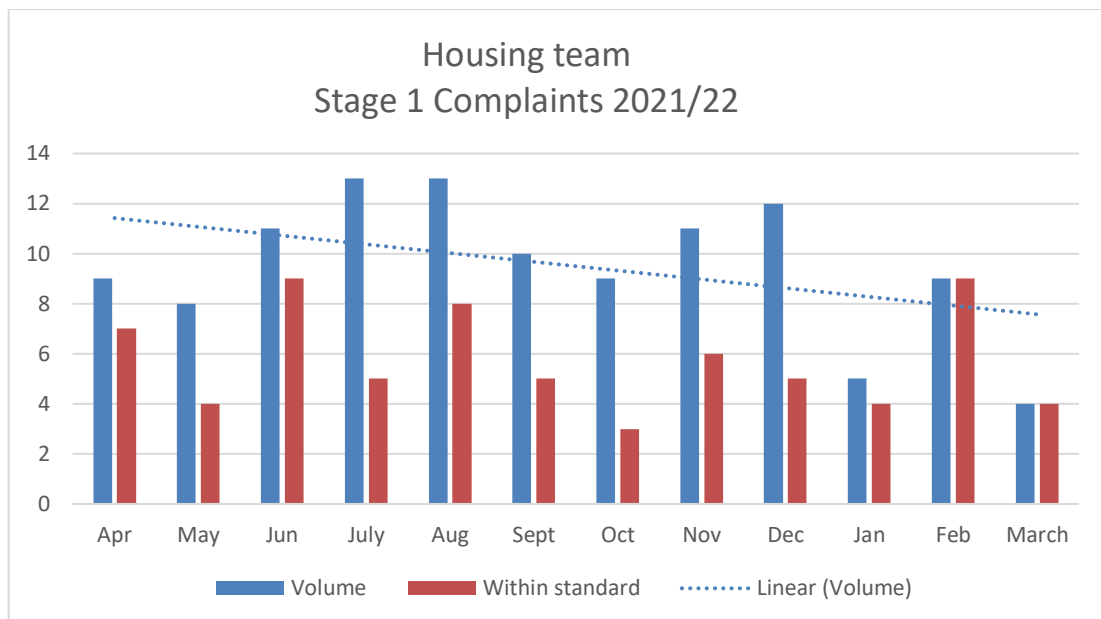


Figure 2: Volume and Response times of Housing team at stage 1, 2021/22

- 3.9 In the Housing team, 61% of stage 1 complaints were responded to within 10 working days in 2021/22. It is however pleasing to note that response times to complaints against this service area have improved over the course of the year, with 100% of stage 1 complaints responded to on time in February and March. It is hoped that this trend will continue, and it is recognised that the recruitment of a Senior Case Manager has helped to prioritise complaints and bring about improvements in the Tenancy, Estates and ASB teams.
- 3.10 In line with the national figures produced by the Housing Ombudsman, most complaints received by the directorate were made against our Properties team (Maintenance, Compliance and Assets). Complaint numbers in this service area have increased across 2021/22 as demonstrated by the trendline below:

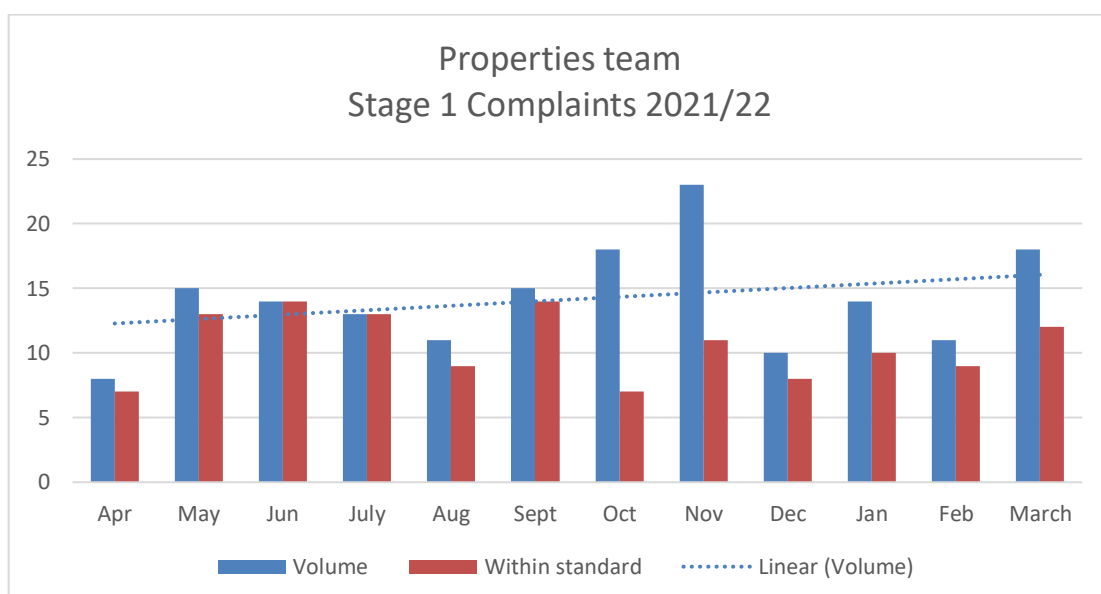


Figure 3: Volume and Response times of Properties team at stage 1, 2021/22

- 3.11 Despite managing the highest number of complaints across the directorate at stage 1, the Properties team successfully responded to 74% of these complaints within the agreed 10 working days across 2021/22.
- 3.12 In more recent months the team has been stretched due to two vacant posts (Responsive Repair Manager and Capital Programme Manager). These managers would ordinarily drive complaint responses in their areas and had previously been responsible for investigating and responding to stage 2 complaints. This lack of resource has inevitably caused a temporary pressure on other housing staff. We recognise that this is an area of vulnerability which we are confident will improve once these roles have been filled.
- 3.13 In the Homelessness and Accommodation team, complaint volumes have also increased over the course of 2021/22, although the volumes in general are lower than other areas of the directorate:

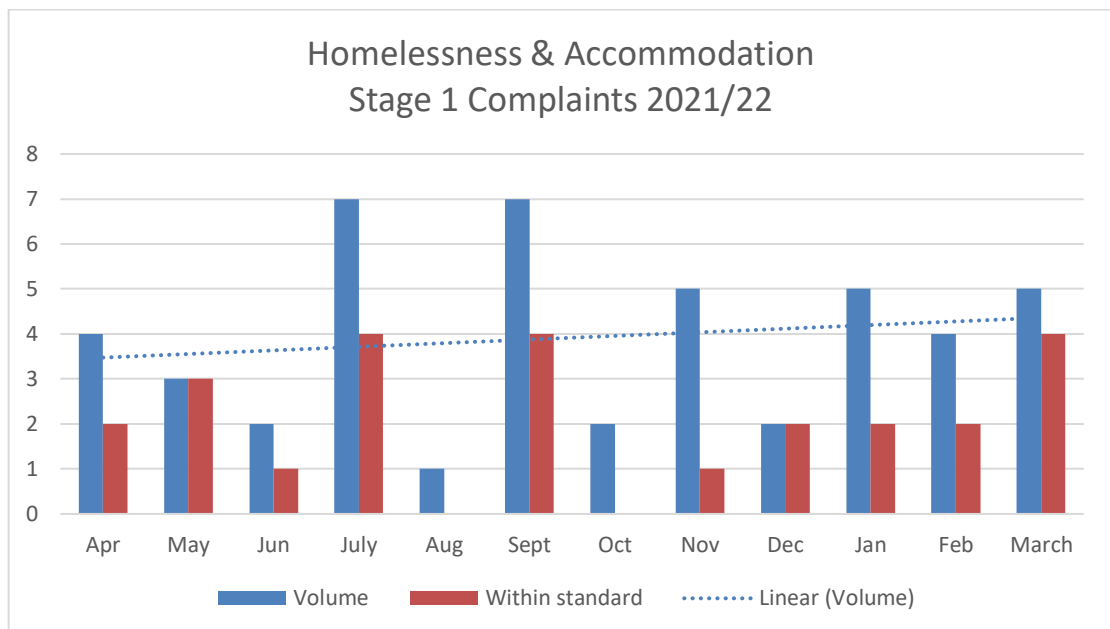


Figure 4: Volume and Response times of Homelessness & Accommodation team at stage 1, 2021/22

- 3.14 The Homelessness and Accommodation team have struggled to achieve a strong response rate (53% within standard) at stage 1. The past few months has seen significant staff changes in the Homelessness and Accommodation team, including a new senior member of staff (Homeless Commissioning and Support Lead) to support the service area. We are optimistic that this will have a positive effect on the team's performance and the response to complaints, as we enter the new financial year.

4.0 Stage 2: Volumes and Response Times

- 4.1 Of the 331 stage 1 complaints closed in 2021/22, 34 moved to the second stage of our Complaints Policy. This indicates that 90% of our customers were satisfied with the action taken and the response they received at stage 1 of the complaints process. We will be looking at recording customer satisfaction

more formally with our residents during 2022/23 to align with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code.

- 4.2 Over 2021/22, the Housing team received the most stage 2 complaints across the directorate. We recognise that Tenancy, Estates and ASB complaints are often the most complex and emotive, which inevitably gives rise to more challenging complaints; in comparison to repair issues for example which can often be fixed easily. The chart below shows the number of stage 2 complaints received by each service area, by quarter:

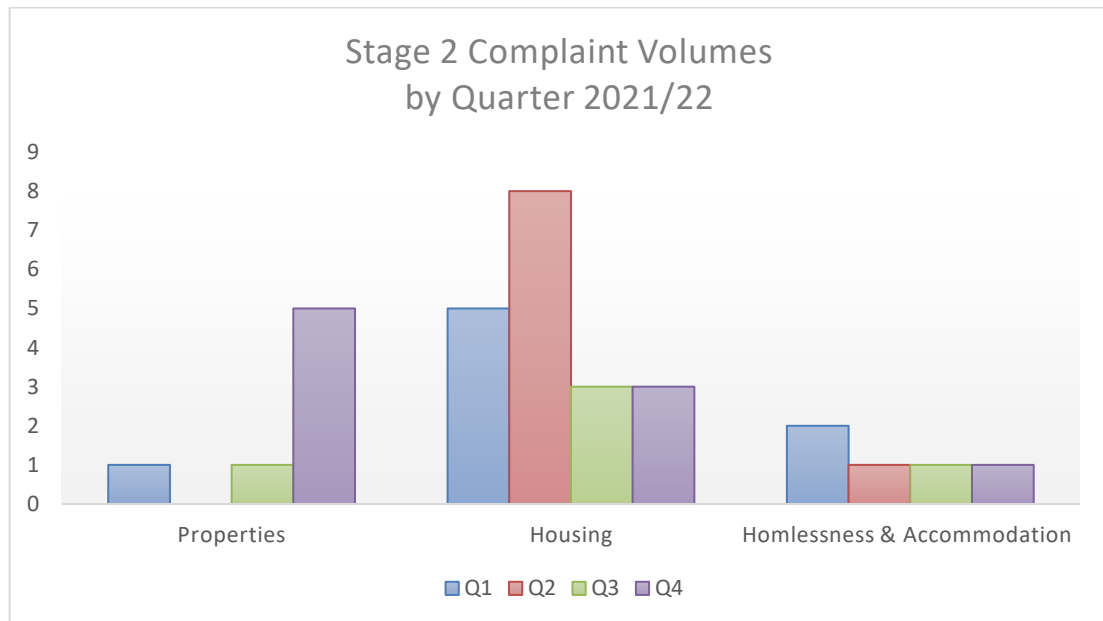


Figure 5: Number of stage 2 complaints received by quarter 2021/22

- 4.3 Note that Properties (Maintenance, Compliance and Assets) received more stage 2 complaints in the final quarter of 2021/22 than any other team. A contributory factor may be the pinch point of staffing issues highlighted above in 3.11. We will dig deeper into stage 2 complaints in the coming months.
- 4.4 Across the directorate, 59% of stage 2 complaints were closed within the agreed policy timeframe of 20 working days. The chart below shows how response rates were split by each service area:

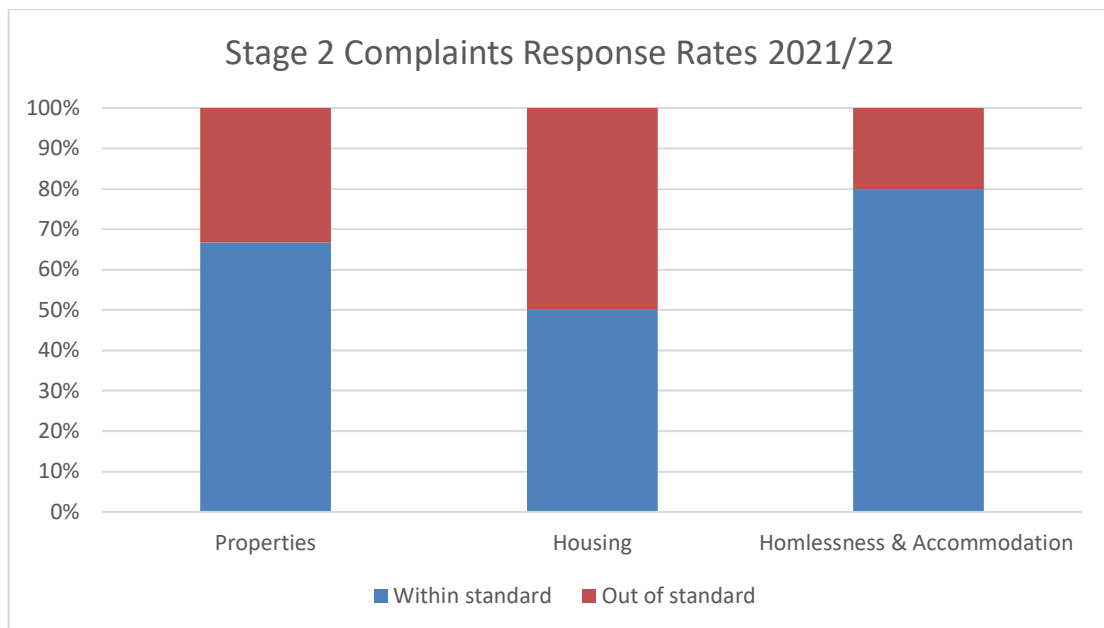


Figure 6: Response times at stage 2 by service area, 2021/22

- 4.5 It is recognised again that the complexity and sensitivity of complaints received by the Tenancy, Estates and ASB teams will often impact on the amount of investigation and actions required at stage 2, to put things right. However, 20 working days (in line with Housing Ombudsman guidance) should allow adequate time for investigation and response to the complaint.
- 4.6 The Performance team have therefore been looking at how this figure can be improved in the short term. The team have increased the one-to-one support given to managers in coordinating and drafting a stage 2 response.
- 4.7 As we are planning to review how stage 2 complaints are approached, (to include a tenant panel in accordance with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code), this data will be an important consideration in assessing the most effective way of responding to stage 2 complaints going forward.

5.0 Stage 1: Complaint Outcomes

- 5.1 The chart below shows the percentage of stage 1 complaints that were upheld, not upheld or were partly upheld across the directorate, over the course of 2021/22:

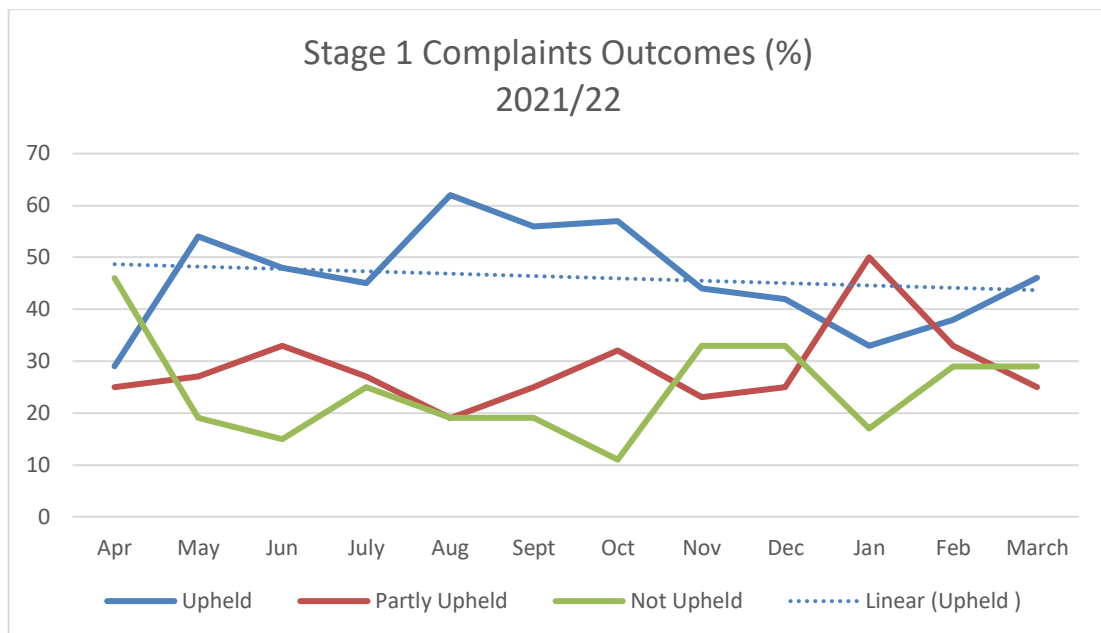


Figure 7: Complaint outcomes by percentage at stage 1, 2021/22

- 5.2 Although the upheld rate is higher than we would like, it is pleasing to note that the trendline for upheld complaints has decreased slightly over the course of the year.
- 5.3 Overall, the Housing directorate upheld almost half of all stage 1 complaints received in 2021/22:

Stage 1 Complaint Outcomes (%)	
Upheld	47%
Partly Upheld	29%
Not Upheld	24%

Table 1: Percentage of complaint outcomes at stage 1, 2021/22

- 5.4 The Properties team upheld 61% of all stage 1 complaints received during 2021/22, compared with 13% in the Homelessness and Accommodation service area:

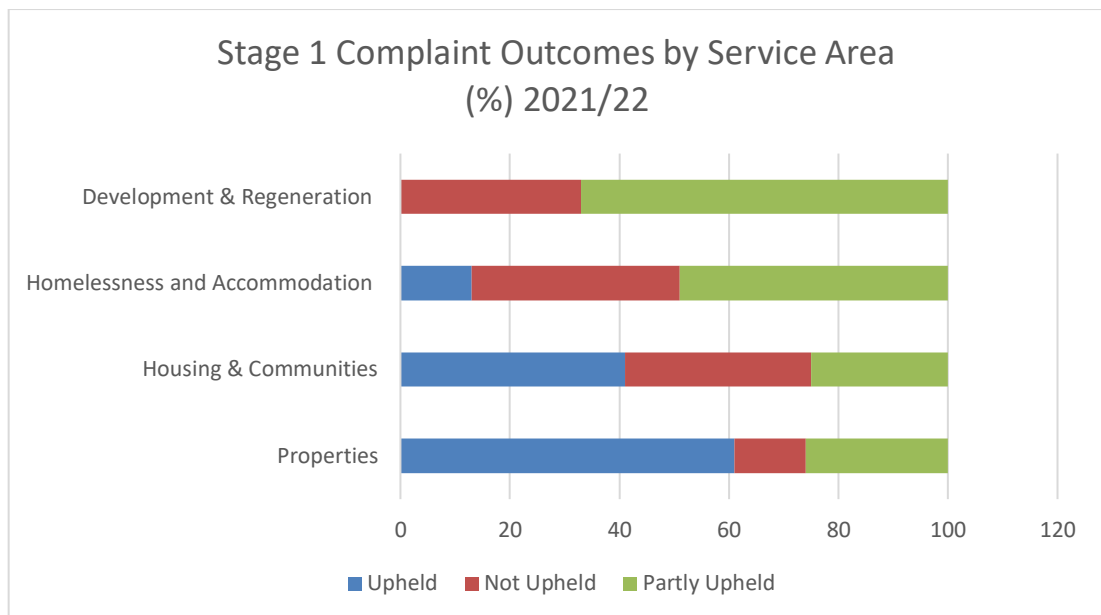


Figure 8: Complaint outcomes by service area at stage 1, 2021/22

5.5 As our data matures, we will consider any trends that demonstrate why a high percentage of complaints at stage 1 have either been upheld or partly upheld during this year. Our initial analysis suggests that both complaints handling and service delivery needs to be improved across the directorate, particularly within Maintenance, Compliance and Assets.

6.0 Stage 2: Complaint Outcomes

6.1 Of the 34 complaints that were escalated to stage 2, almost half were upheld:

Stage 2 Complaint Outcomes (%)	
Upheld	41%
Partly Upheld	32%
Not Upheld	26%

Table 2: Percentage of complaint outcomes at stage 2, 2021/22

6.2 This suggests that it is likely that some stage 1 complaints have been poorly investigated and been closed with the wrong outcome, prompting the complainant to challenge the decision. We recognise that failure to handle a complaint effectively leads to further dissatisfaction and a loss of trust in the service we provide to our residents.

6.3 Some initial analysis indicates that in some cases, our stage 1 response did not address all issues raised by the complainant; or that we had closed the complaint at stage 1 before outstanding issues had been resolved.

6.4 From April 2022, we have started to record where stage 1 decisions have been overturned or partly overturned at stage 2. For future reporting this will provide us with an insight into whether we are getting our responses right at stage 1 and identify areas where this will need improvement.

7.0 Stage 1: Complaint Types and Trends

7.1 The pie chart below shows a breakdown of the complaint types that were received by the Housing directorate in 2021/22:

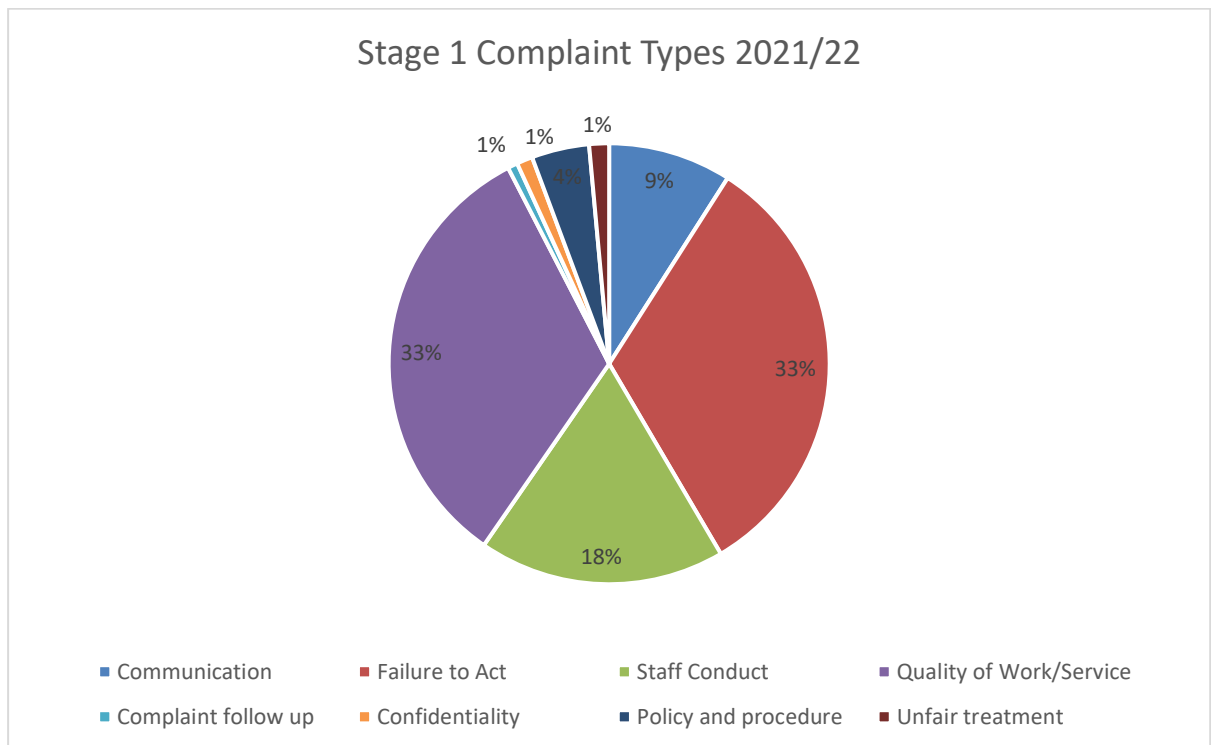


Figure 9: Overall complaint types at stage 1, 2021/22

7.2 When we look at the same data by quarter, the backlog of repairs caused by Covid seems to feature up to the end of quarter 3 in the 'failure to act' category. Complaints about slow service or delays tailed off into quarter 4, which may reflect how the repairs team have managed to catch up and clear the non-emergency repairs backlog. However, there has been an increase in complaints made about the quality of work or service in quarter 4:

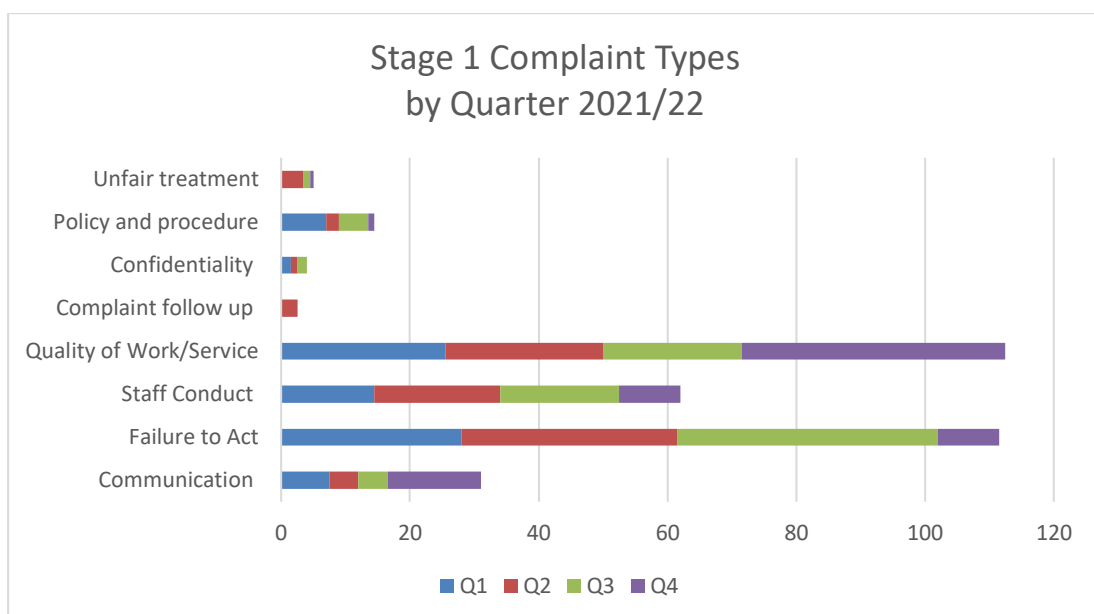


Figure 10: Types of complaints received at stage 1 by quarter, 2021/22

7.3 Failure to act:

The data shows that our residents feel that we don't always respond to their requests for service in a timely manner. A third of all stage 1 complaints received in 2021/22 reported frustrations from our residents in not being able to speak to the person they needed to; not receiving call backs and having to chase repeatedly; or that appointments had been missed more than once.

It may be that the backlog of repairs that were still being felt due to Covid restrictions has had an impact on the directorate's overall figures in this category. Without historic data for comparison, it is difficult to tell at this point. However, the data shows that complaint numbers have tailed off into quarter 4 in this category which is reassuring.

The directorate recently identified that there were a number of open cases in our computer system that had 'slipped through the net' and hadn't been responded to by staff. The Housing Performance team have been working with service areas within the directorate to resolve any outstanding requests or complaints and are taking steps to ensure that contact received by our residents in future is not missed. We are optimistic that this will reduce the number of contacts that a resident needs to make in order for us to address their concern.

7.4 Quality of work or service:

Another third of complainants reported that they were not happy with the standard of work completed (predominantly repairs or planned works) or the standard of the service or advice we had provided across the directorate.

For 2022/23, this figure will be broken down further to identify whether dissatisfaction is greater in the quality of the work we provide, or the customer service we provide.

7.5 Staff conduct:

18% of all stage 1 complaints were concerns about a member of staff or a team's conduct.

A number of these complaints related specifically to driving incidents or inconsiderate parking by Housing operatives when visiting our tenants' homes.

Some complaints reported were when a customer felt like a particular member of staff had been rude, dismissive or hadn't listened to their point of view. In Autumn 2021, the Housing directorate undertook customer care training provide by HQN, and all staff undertook training on how to use unconditional, positive regard.

8.0 Stage 2: Complaint Trends

- 8.1 As mentioned in 5.2, analysis of stage 2 data is in its early form at present. Early indications have highlighted that complaints have been escalated to stage 2 when a complainant has felt that we have failed in our handling of the complaint at stage 1. Notably, that we have not followed through on actions promised in the first complaint response, or that the complaint has been closed prematurely.
- 8.2 Commonly, complaints have escalated to stage 2 because complainants report that we haven't fully addressed all points that had been raised at stage 1.
- 8.3 Complaint handling failures should be an easy issue to resolve with the increasing support that is now being provided by the Housing Performance team through a growing, dedicated Customer Resolution section. The Senior Case Manager is (as mentioned previously) working much closer with staff members tasked with responding to a stage 2 complaint, to ensure all issues are addressed and action plans put in place and then carried out.

9.0 Ombudsman Complaints

- 9.1 During 2022/23, the Housing directorate received and investigated five complaints from the Housing Ombudsman (HO) and one complaint from the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO).
- 9.2 The Ombudsman cases are shown in the table below:

Ombudsman Complaints		
Ombudsman	Area	Determination
HO	Properties (repairs)	Partial maladministration
	Development & Regeneration	
HO	Antisocial Behaviour (ASB)	Maladministration
HO	Tenancy & Lettings	Reasonable redress offered
HO	Tenancy & Lettings	Reasonable redress offered
HO	Properties (repairs)	Reasonable redress offered
LGO	Homelessness & Accommodation	Partial maladministration

Table 3: Ombudsman determinations in 2021/22

- 9.3 The Housing Ombudsman have published information on their website so that residents can see how their landlord is performing:
- [Landlords Archive - Housing Ombudsman \(housing-ombudsman.org.uk\)](https://housing-ombudsman.org.uk/)
- 9.4 Housing Ombudsman performance figures for Somerset West & Taunton Council can be viewed on the right-hand side of the above linked page, under 'National landlord report 2020-21'. Because the directorate had fewer than

five determinations in 2020/21, there is not an individual report for our Council.

- 9.5 As mentioned in the introduction, the Housing Ombudsman have reported an increase in the number of investigations carried out during 2021/22. It will be interesting to see if the five Housing Ombudsman complaints we have investigated in 2021/22 aligns with the increase in numbers of escalated complaints that they have reported across the sector for this financial year.

10.0 Conclusion

- 10.1 There have already been definite improvements in the way the Housing directorate has managed complaints in 2021/22. It has been difficult to benchmark how we are performing as the data we have collected so far is immature.
- 10.2 It is encouraging to see that the volume of complaints we have received might not be increasing at the rate the Housing Ombudsman has predicted, and in fact we have started to reduce the number of complaints received in some service areas.
- 10.3 We are beginning to identify trends in our complaints, and from here we recognise some work that we have been doing or can do within the directorate to put changes in place to improve our service delivery. Next steps for the Housing Performance team is to understand the types of complaints received, and work with service areas to embed change, so that we really learn from the feedback we receive from our residents.
- 10.4 It is an exciting time as we start to report on the changes and improvements we are seeing already, and as we start to build a robust approach to Housing complaints.

11. Risk Assessment (if appropriate)

A risk assessment is not required to accompany this report.

12: Are there any Finance / Resource, Legal implications directly to do with this report?

There are no financial implications directly to do with the recommendations in this report

13: Are there any Equality and Diversity Implications?

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

14: Are there any Data Protection Implications?

There are no equality implications directly to do with this report

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