

## **Annual complaints report 2020-2021**

### **Report of the Deputy Chief Executive, Corporate and Support Services**

#### **1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of complaints received by the council and the lessons learnt from complaints in 2020-21. This report includes complaints received by the local authority that are managed by the complaints service. The scope of complaints included in this report covers:

- Corporate complaints
- Schools' complaints<sup>1</sup>
- Adults social care complaints
- Children's social care complaints

1.2 This report also summarises complaints about Stockport Homes.

#### **2. COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES AND DIRECTORATES**

2.1 Complaints across the organisation follow a number of different complaint processes and stages. Each have associated policy and statutes. There is also potential for complainants to contact the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) as a final step in the complaint journey.

<b>Complaints Process</b>	<b>Accompanying Legislation</b>	<b>Directorate</b>	<b>Statutory / Non-statutory</b>	<b>Number of stages</b>
Corporate Complaints	'Corporate Complaints Policy & Procedure.'	Corporate Support Services; Services to Place	Non-statutory	Two
Adults Complaints	The Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009	Adult services	Statutory	One
Children's Social Care Complaints	The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.	Stockport Family	Statutory	Three
School Complaints	DfE statutory guidance	Maintained, Voluntary Controlled, Voluntary Aided and Academy schools	Statutory for schools	Three

#### **3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT & SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN**

3.1 The LGSCO provides the final stage for complaints about local authorities and some other organisations providing local public services. The LGSCO will only consider complaints that have already been through the Council's complaints procedures.

<sup>1</sup> This is part of the annual Headteacher Support Service Level Agreement

- 3.2 During 2020-21, the LGSCO upheld 6 complaints about the Council compared with 10 complaints during 2019-20. For all of these, the Council accepted the findings and implemented the recommendations. These are contained in the following report. In addition, there was no public reports issued against the council in 2020-21 and the last public report was issued in 2018-19.

## **4 HEADLINES FOR THE COMPLAINTS SERVICE**

### **4.1 Highlights for the year**

- 4.1.1 There were fewer formal complaints received, and a reduction in stage 1 corporate complaints upheld. There was also a marginal improvement in response times when handling stage 1 corporate complaints.
- 4.1.2 Response times when handling stage 2 corporate complaints improved.
- 4.1.3 Statutory Adult Social Care complaints fell by 50%.
- 4.1.4 The LGSCO upheld fewer complaints about the Council in 2020-21. The Housing Ombudsman did

### **4.2 Challenges faced**

- 4.2.1 2020-21 has been an unprecedented year in terms of the impact on all public sector bodies. Some of the Council's usual service delivery paused due to the pandemic and some teams diverted to entirely different activities, particularly in the first lockdown. Even officers handling complaints took on additional responsibilities that supported other areas of Citizen Focus with urgent handling of reactive pandemic activities.
- 4.2.2 The Council felt some impact in terms of delivering services in a different way as a direct result of the pandemic i.e. a reduced green waste collection service for part of the year, which resulted in an increase in enquiries and complaints.
- 4.2.3 The capacity in some council teams was affected due to the council's response to the pandemic and in some cases, we have seen a change in public behaviour. For example, requests to inspect / fell trees took longer to deal with during the pandemic and there has been an increase in planning applications received leading to some delays in handling planning applications. This is reflected in some of the complaints received.
- 4.2.4 Over half of the corporate complaints the council dealt with at Stage 1 progressed to Stage 2, suggesting we can still make improvements to the way that Stage 1 complaints are handled.

## **5 HEADLINE FIGURES**

- 5.1 A total of 253 formal complaints were received in 2020-21, compared with 386 complaints during 2019-20.

Number of formal complaints received	2019-20	2020-21
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Corporate Complaints	178	132
Adult Social Care Complaints	167	85
Children's Social Care Complaints	41	36
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>386</b>	<b>253</b>

## 5.2 Corporate complaints that escalated from stage 1 to stage 2

<b>Number of corporate complaints that escalated to stage 2</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Corporate Complaints	102 (57.3%)	75 (56.8%)

## 5.3 Statutory Schools' complaints<sup>2</sup>

<b>Number of complaints received</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Statutory Schools Complaints	35	25
Complaints that escalated to stage 2	6	2

## 5.4 Complaints that were upheld by Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) or the Housing Ombudsman for Stockport Homes

<b>Ombudsman complaints upheld</b>	<b>2019-20</b>	<b>2020-21</b>
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman	10	6
Housing Ombudsman	2	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>

# 6 ONE TEAM APPROACH TO COMPLAINTS

- 6.1 In quarter four of 2020-21, the council brought together Statutory Adult Social Care, Statutory Children's Social Care, Corporate Complaints and Schools Complaints into one complaints team within Citizen Focus (CSS).
- 6.2 By taking a one team approach, the aim is for there to be a more holistic and consistent approach to complaint handling across the Council. The focus is improving quality assurance, reporting and the measures used to help the council learn from the complaints being made. This includes ensuring complaints are handled in a timely manner and that learning from complaints is embedded into the way council services are delivered.

# 7 OVERALL HANDLING OF COMPLAINTS

- 7.1 Performance in the handling of formal complaints should be considered in the context of the number of services and support the Council provides to over 291,000 residents of Stockport<sup>3</sup>.
- 7.2 Overall, formal complaints reduced by 35% during 2020-21. Whilst it is not possible to fully know the reason for this, it is most likely to be as a direct result of the national and local lockdown measures introduced in response to the Covid

<sup>2</sup> Schools complaints are recorded within an academic year 1st September to 31st August. The figure for 2021 includes complaints only up to 31st May 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Stockport Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (2020)

pandemic; in light of the pandemic and the essential changes to services, we could have seen overall complaint numbers rise, however this was not the case. Although in the latter half of the year we have seen complaints rise again to near pre-pandemic levels.

- 7.3 The Council is keen to learn from complaints and transformation projects in order that they can improve their services. For each complaint process a selection of lessons learnt are provided further on this report. The focus remains on de-escalation and getting to the root of the issues raised by customers. This has been shown to work and helps prevent further time and resources being taken up in formally investigating and responding to complaints.

## 8 OVERVIEW OF CORPORATE COMPLAINTS

- 8.1 Corporate Complaints deals with situations where there is an expression of dissatisfaction about the Council's action, lack of action or standard of service, which a citizen wishes to be treated as a complaint. The scope of corporate complaints includes Adult Services, Children's Services, Services to Place and Corporate and Support Services. There is a two-stage process in dealing with corporate complaints.

### 8.2 Number of Corporate Complaints

Figure 1: Corporate Support Services complaints received in 2020-21 and 2019-20

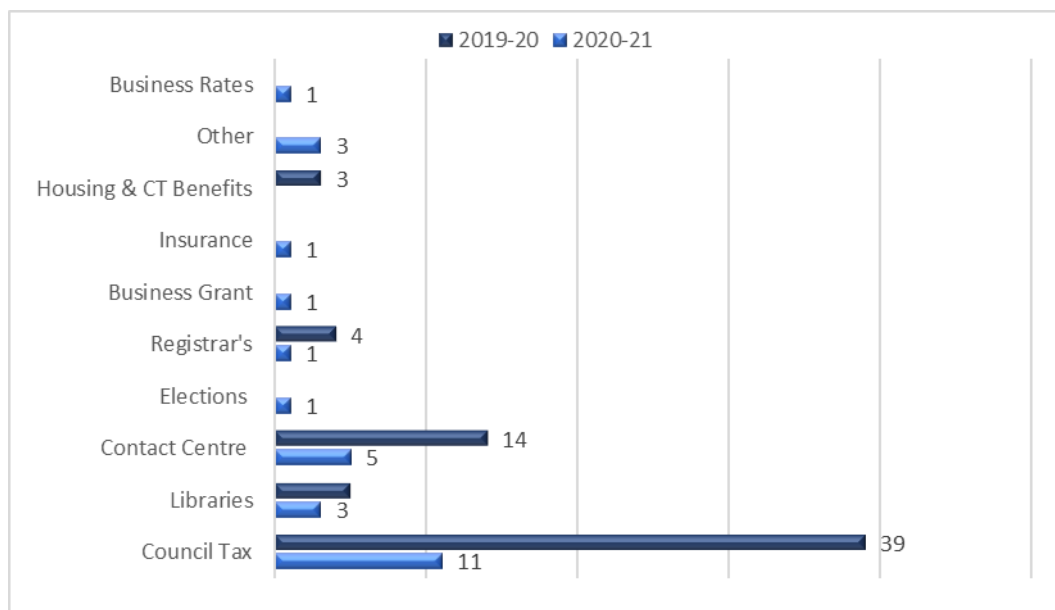
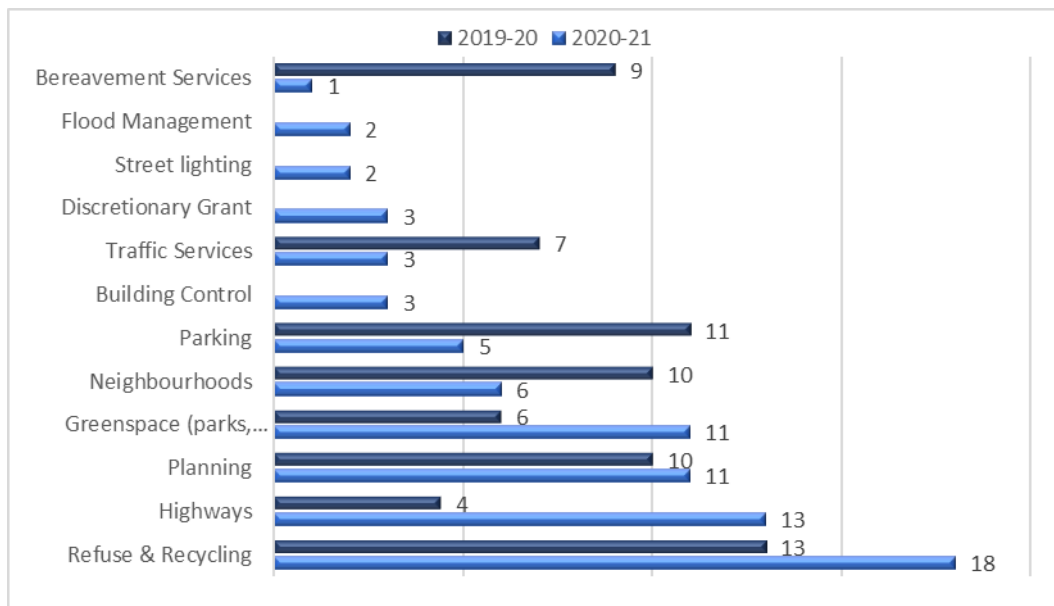


Figure 2: Services to Place complaints received in 2020-21 and 2019-20

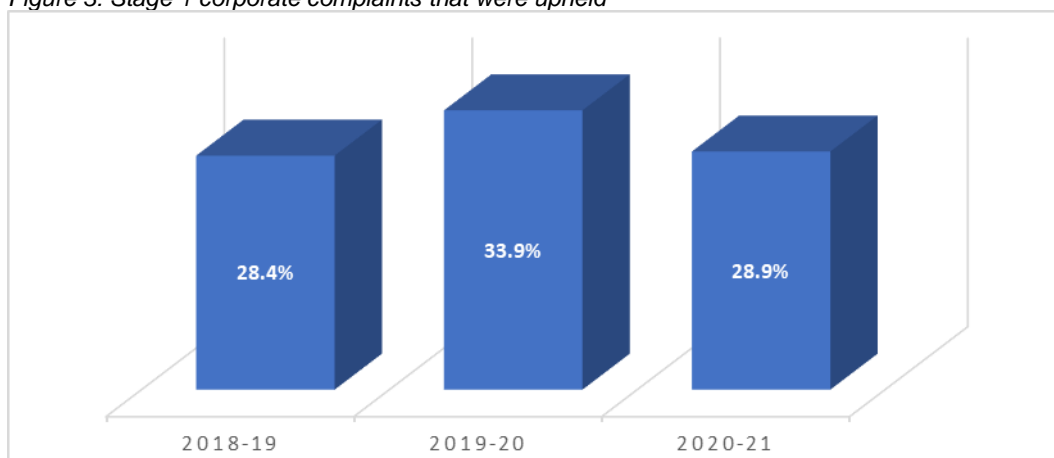


8.2.1 For Adult Services and Children's Services in 2020-21, a total of 26 corporate complaints were made, compared with 33 complaints in 2019-20.

### 8.3 Corporate Complaints upheld at Stage 1

8.3.1 Upheld complaints at stage 1 indicate the investigating officer has agreed with some of the points raised by the complainant.

Figure 3: Stage 1 corporate complaints that were upheld



8.3.2 During 2020-21 there was a reduction in the upheld complaints when compared to the previous two years. There was no evidence of systematic failure or trends identified in terms of the complaints upheld and the majority fell within the broad categories of delays, council error / inaction, quality of service, staff conduct and breach of policy/procedure.

8.3.3 In many circumstances, when investigating the cause of the complaint they can be reclassified as service request or comment because they do not fall within the scope of a complaint. An example would be when a bin is lost or stolen. When this situation arises, they are dealt with by the relevant service area as a service request to enable a timely and satisfactory outcome for the citizen.

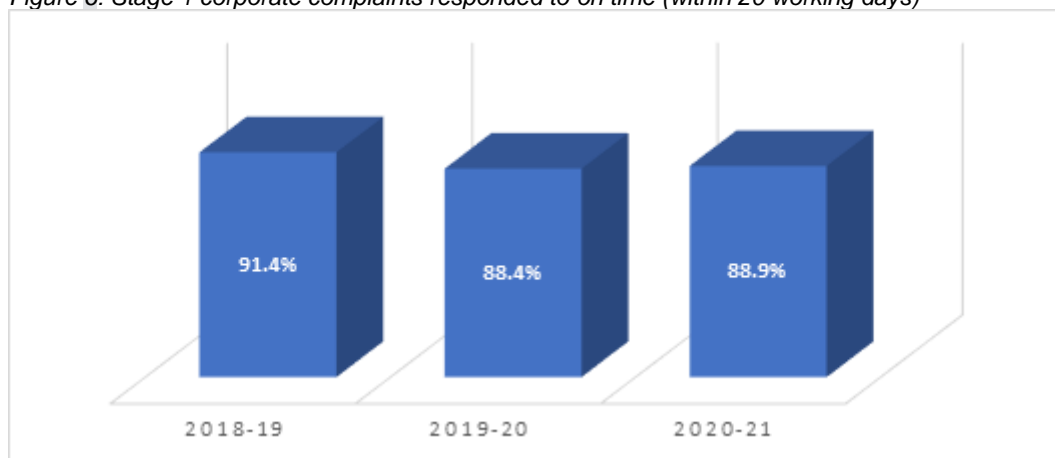
8.3.4 To put this into context, during 2020-21, the council received 1000 interactions that were submitted as complaints by citizens; after they were reviewed with the service area, 87% were reclassified as service requests. In 2019-20 the reclassification was 71%.

8.3.5 There is an opportunity to continue improving this part of the complaints process and further work will be explored in the coming year that will include training and support for managers with handling complaints.

#### **8.4 Corporate Complaints – Stage 1, Response Times**

8.4.1 As part of the Corporate Complaints Policy and Procedure, all complaints must be responded to within 20 working days

*Figure 6: Stage 1 corporate complaints responded to on time (within 20 working days)*



8.4.2 There has been a marginal improvement in response times compared with the previous year. Directorates are encouraged to keep complainants updated with progress especially where a complaint is likely to miss the response timescale.

#### **8.5 Corporate Complaints – Stage 2**

8.5.1 This escalation process is driven by the Corporate Complaints Policy and Procedure which can be found on the council's website at [www.stockport.gov.uk/make-a-formal-complaint](http://www.stockport.gov.uk/make-a-formal-complaint).

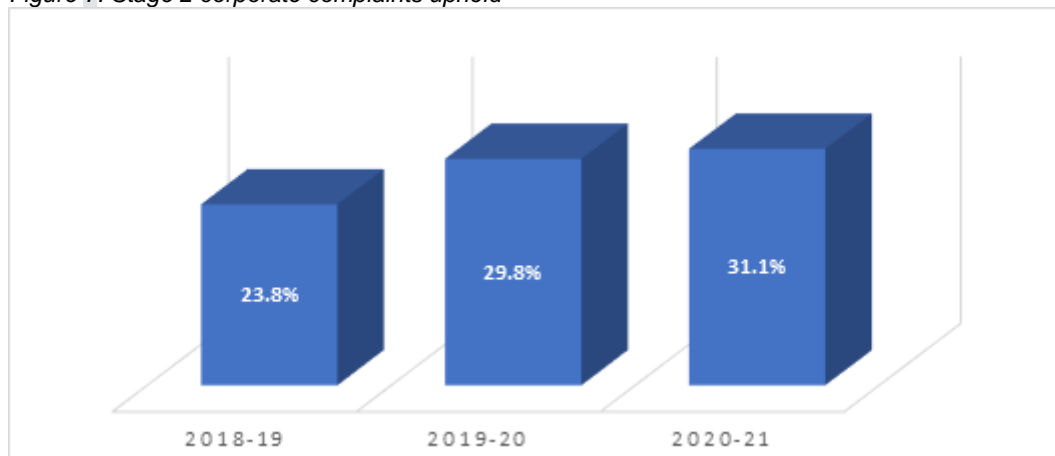
8.5.2 Some stage 2 complaints are more complex to resolve and may take longer to conclude. Where this is the case, complainants are kept updated with progress, and

the council seeks to mutually agree a reasonable timeframe for concluding the complaint.

8.5.3 During 2020-21, 75 out of the 132 corporate complaints were escalated to stage 2 (57%); this mirrors the previous year 2019-20, when 102 complaints were escalated from a total of 178 (57%). Whilst the stage 2 total for 2020-21 was lower, so too was the number of complaints received.

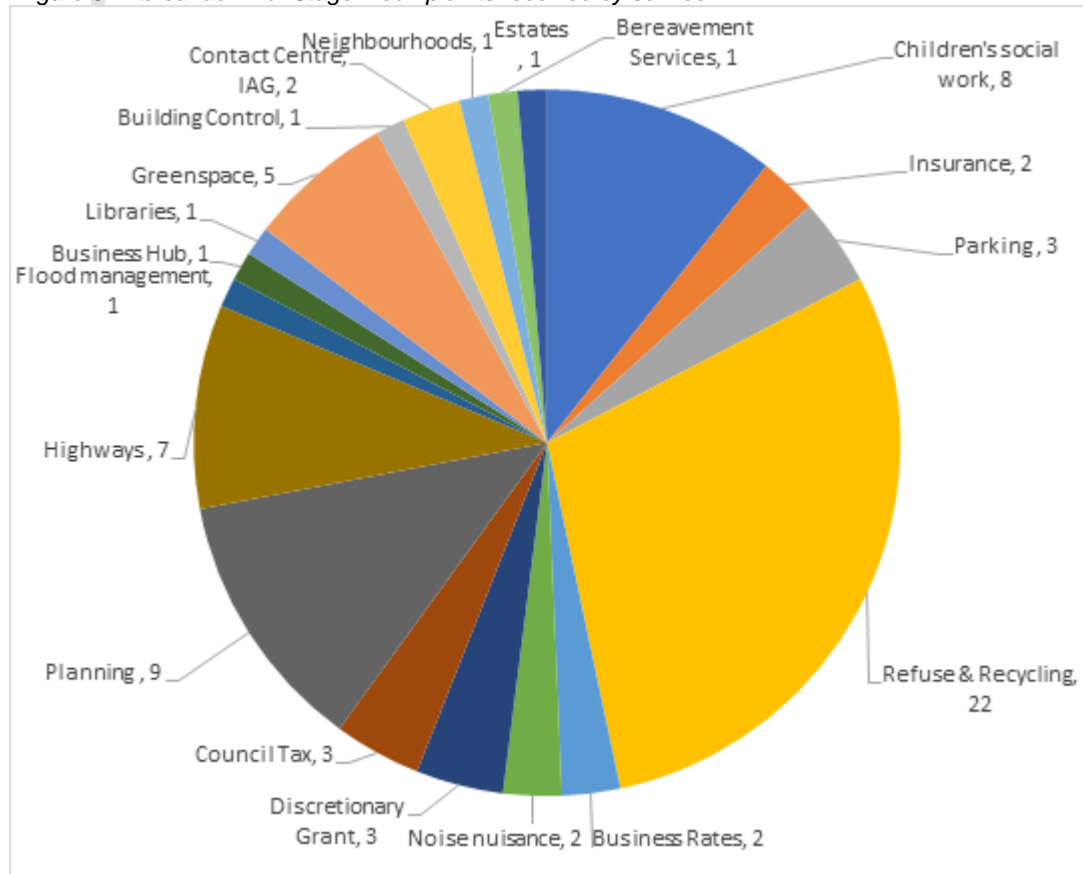
8.5.4 Complaints that were upheld at stage 2 tended to relate to issues regarding delays, perceived lack of communication and general service delivery resulting from resourcing and processes changes during the pandemic / lockdown such as Refuse & Recycling, Planning and Children's Social Work.

*Figure 7: Stage 2 corporate complaints upheld*



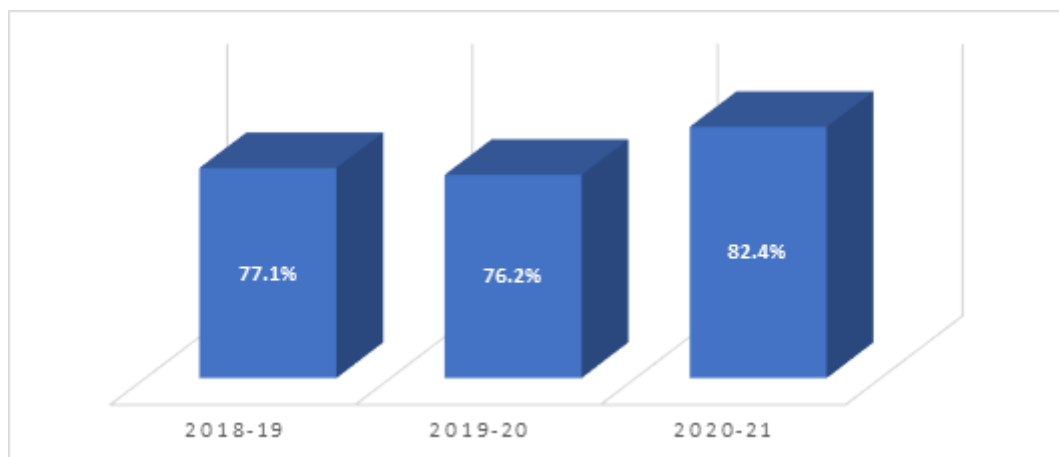
8.5.5 To provide context for the range of services that reached a stage 2 complaint, see the chart below.

Figure 8: A breakdown of Stage 2 complaints received by service



8.5.6 The following chart looks at response times for complaints at stage 2.

Figure 9: Stage 2 corporate complaints responded to on time (within 20 working days)



8.5.7 Where fault has been identified, robust remedial action was put in place to reduce the likelihood of similar complaints from arising. This is evidenced with recommendations being made in 32 cases during 2020-21, compared with recommendations made in 51 cases during 2019-20.

8.5.8 The majority of complaints considered at stage 1 and stage 2 are responded to within 12 working weeks', which is the standard the LGSCO expects from local authorities to investigate and respond to complaints locally.

## **8.6 Summary of Corporate Complaints (CSS)**

8.6.1 There has been a significant drop in complaints received in 2020-21 when compared with 2019-20. For example, complaints about Council Tax dropped by 77% compared with 2019-20. The reduction in complaints is thought to be attributed to the financial assistance provided by the government to help people who have been affected by Covid.

8.6.2 The following measures have eased financial pressure on Stockport residents and probably account for a reduction in formal complaints being raised:

- The increase in Local Housing Allowance rates so tenants have less of a shortfall between their rent charge and their Housing Benefit/Housing element within Universal Credit;
- Income Support schemes for the self-employed;
- Small business rates relief;
- 80% of wages paid to most people that have been furloughed;
- Extra hardship funding given to the Council to help people who are struggling with their Council Tax due to being financially affected by Covid-19; and
- Test & Trace Support Payments administered by the Council payable to residents who are required to self-isolate because they have tested positive for Covid-19, or been in contact with someone who has; they are employed; unable to work from home and on a low income

8.6.3 Most issues raised related to Council Tax. For context, in 2020-21, 131,425 Council Tax bills were issued and during the last quarter of 2020-21, the Council Tax team dealt with issues that included:

- Delay with postal service/ short notice on recovery documents; claims letters not received
- Struggling to pay, confusions over payments
- Summons removed or arrears returning from enforcement agency
- Wanting attachment to earnings for Council Tax arrears removed
- Not happy with premium charge for empty properties
- Online forms not available during annual billing period
- Council tax band changing
- Conduct of enforcement agents
- Increase in Council Tax
- Annual billing issues

## **8.7 Summary of Corporate Complaints (Services to Place)**

8.7.1 Although formal complaints reduced in 2020-21, conversely the number of customer service requests, comments and feedback logged online increased during this period for Services to Place<sup>4</sup>.

8.7.2 There was an increase in enquiries and formal complaints with respect to the Refuse and Recycling service and most of the enquiries were resolved as service requests. There has been an increase in complaints about Highways, although many of the complaints were not upheld.

8.7.3 Complaints about Parking fell by over 50% compared with 2019-20. This is likely due to parking being made free and no enforcement taking place for a period of time. Furthermore, parking officers now wear body cameras, and this may deter members of the public challenging officers issuing them tickets or raising complaints.

8.7.4 Complaints about Cemeteries and Cremations services also fell in 2020-21.

## **8.8 Lessons Learnt for Corporate Complaints (CSS)**

8.8.1 The Revenues Team have rolled out telephone de-escalation training covering improving empathy, impact of staff wellbeing and how it affects their interactions with customers; understanding the 'markers' of when a situation is escalating and how to respond appropriately.

8.8.2 A review of standard letters and Council Tax bills was undertaken with the view to simplifying the wording and making them easier to understand.

## **8.9 Lessons Learnt for Corporate Complaints (Services to Place)**

8.9.1 A system anomaly meant that a complainant was unable to submit his objections regarding a planning application for a 5G Mobile Mast outside Cheadle Sports Club Kingsway Cheadle Stockport. The error occurred as the planning application was "spatially attached" to the complainant's property. Planning Services now ensure site maps are manually checked for relevant neighbouring properties.

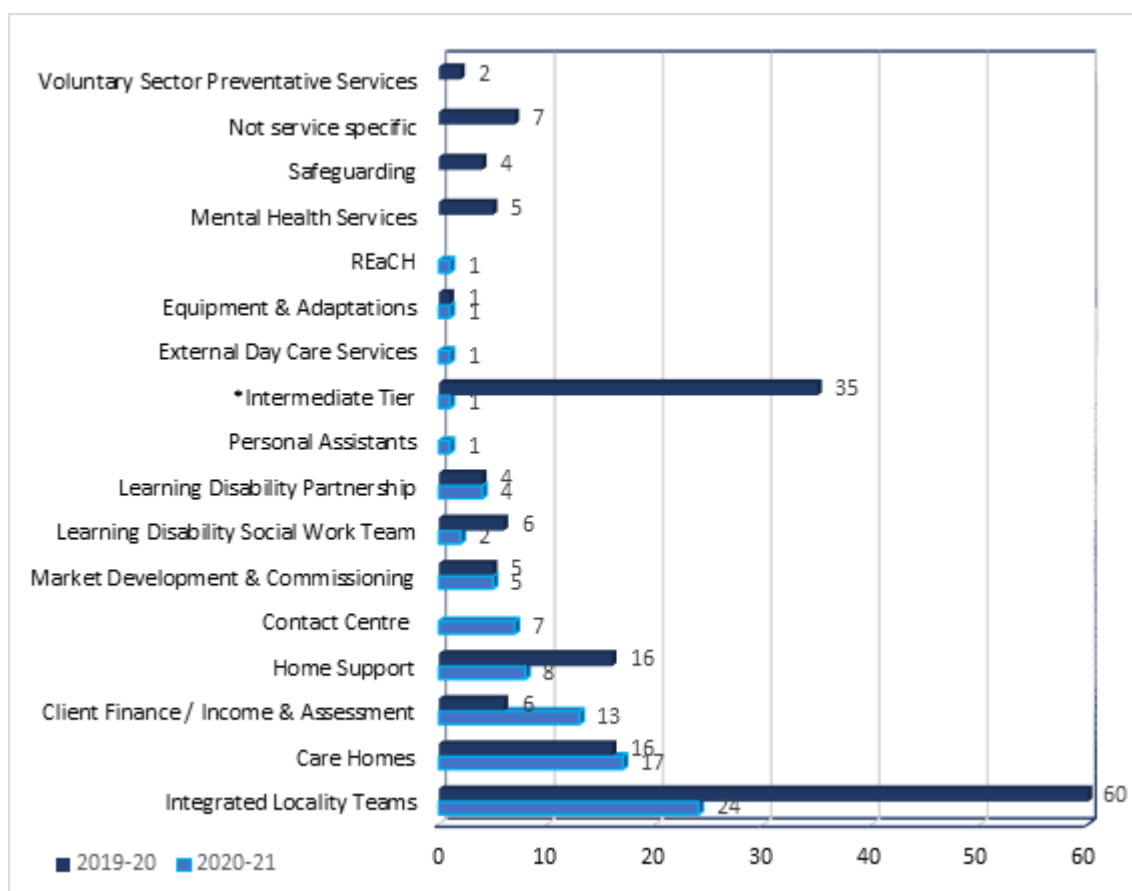
## **8.10 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman**

8.10.1 There was one corporate complaint that escalated to the Ombudsmen and the council accepted the findings and implemented the recommendations. The matter was when the Council erred in attaching a Tree Preservation Order on a tree the applicant wanted felling.

## **9 OVERVIEW OF ADULT SOCIAL CARE COMPLAINTS**

9.1 Adult Social Care complaints are handled under the 'Adult Social Care Policy and Procedure for Handling Complaints and Processing Compliments and Comments'.

Figure 10: ASC complaints received <sup>5</sup>in 2020-21 and 2019-20



9.2 There were 85 formal complaints registered in 2020-21, compared with 167 complaints in 2019-20. Complaints dropped by almost 50%.

9.3 There is some evidence that front line staff are being more actively encouraged to try and address concerns rather than escalating complaints through a formal process although it is likely that the impact of the pandemic, including reduced visits to care homes by family and friends has also had an impact of the number of complaints received.

#### 9.4 Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman

9.4.1 There were four Adult Social Care complaints that escalated to the Ombudsmen and the council accepted the findings and implemented the recommendations. These were in relation to charging policy, assessments, support plans.

### 10 OVERVIEW CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE COMPLAINTS

10.1 There was a slight drop in the number of statutory social care complaints with a total of 36 raised during 2020-21, compared with 41 during 2019-20. However, it should be noted that this is against an increased case load.

10.2 There was only one case that was upheld by the Ombudsman, it was found that the Council did not increase the complainant's Special Guardianship Allowance and did

not carry out annual financial reviews. The service accepted the findings and are implementing the recommendations.

## **11 STATUTORY SCHOOLS COMPLAINTS**

11.1 Schools' complaints are recorded within an academic year 1<sup>st</sup> September to 31<sup>st</sup> August. The figures for 2021 includes complaints only up to 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021. There were 25 schools' complaints within 2020-21, of these only 2 have escalated to stage 2.

11.2 Previously, schools' complaints were not part of this annual report and to reflect the converging of complaints processes into one Stockport team, all future annual reports will contain a comprehensive review.

## **12 OVERVIEW OF STOCKPORT HOMES COMPLAINTS**

12.1 Stockport Homes has a two stage complaints process. Stockport Homes records any issue raised by customers in a wide variety of formats. This is reflected in the number of complaints and compliments received.

12.2 Stockport Homes closed a total of 380 complaints in 2020-21, compared with 416 complaints in 2019-20 and 602 complaints in 2018-19.

12.3 Although complaints have fallen compared with the previous year, it has been a challenging period, with the first three quarters seeing an increase in complaints relating to anti-social behaviour and customer safety, which has been attributed to the impact of Covid-19.

12.4 The Anti-Social Behaviour Team has seen a 70% increase in the number of ASB cases dealt with, which is also a trend reported by other housing providers.

### **12.5 Housing Ombudsman**

12.5.1 The Housing Ombudsman is set up by law to look at complaints about the housing organisations that are registered with them. During 2020-21, there were three enquiries for information received from the Housing Ombudsman. Two were received for Maintenance and Commercial Services, all of which was investigated with the outcome of 'no maladministration'.

## **13 RECOMMENDATIONS**

13.1 The Cabinet is asked to:

- Note the information contained in this report
- Note the progress being taken to improve complaints handling across the council

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

There are none.

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Kirsteen Roe on telephone number Tel: 0161 474 3376 or alternatively email on [kirsteen.roe@stockport.gov.uk](mailto:kirsteen.roe@stockport.gov.uk)