

ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORT 2022-2023

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, PLACE DIRECTORATE

1 FOREWORD FROM CAROLINE SIMPSON, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

- 1.1 Our Annual Complaint report gives an overview of the complaints we have received this year and more importantly the lessons we have learnt in dealing with these complaints. At Stockport Council we see it as a priority to handle complaints in a fair and timely manner, ensuring that all residents are listened to and that their comments are taken onboard.
- 1.2 Over the past year there has been a focus on learning and sharing skills to improve the complaints process. This includes introducing a new complaints dashboard, briefing sessions for managers, dedicated resources and e-learning and learning from others to constantly improve.
- 1.3 The report shows that the Council has seen a decrease in complaints escalating to stage 2 – so that means we are resolving more complaints without the need for escalation. The latest Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman report on complaints also showed the work the Council are doing to ensure that our responses are satisfactory before complaints reach the Ombudsman: this has resulted in Stockport Council being in the top in the Northwest out of 22 local authorities for this area.
- 1.4 This a great achievement and demonstrates that the improvements that have been rolled out over the past year are having a great impact.
- 1.5 I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Complaints Service and all the teams involved in the work to improve our services and create the absolute best opportunities for all our residents, businesses, and communities.

2 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of complaints received by the Council and the lessons learnt from complaints in 2022-23. This report includes complaints received by the local authority which are managed by the 'Complaints Service.'
- 2.2 The scope of complaints included in this report covers:
- Corporate complaints
 - Adult's social care complaints
 - Children's social care complaints
 - School complaints
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3 COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES AND DIRECTORATES

3.1 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.

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

4 ONE TEAM APPROACH TO COMPLAINTS

4.1 During 2022-23, the council continued to build on the one complaints team approach to oversee statutory Adult Social Care, statutory Children's Social Care, Corporate complaints and Schools complaints.

4.2 A year on and the new management team is going from strength to strength; overseeing a number of improvements to the complaints handling process across the council. This includes streamlining systems, data and processes; working with services to ensure lessons learnt are embedded in their culture and values as part of this process.

4.3 These values sit at the heart of the complaints process; from the way we respond to a complaint, to how we learn from what we have heard and challenge ourselves on how we can make things better.

- Thinking Stockport – we keep people at the heart of what we do
- Achieving as a Team - we give and receive feedback in a constructive way
- Working with ambition – we have the courage to challenge how we do things
- Showing everyone respect – we treat everyone with respect

4.4 The focus remains on early resolution and getting to the root cause of the issues raised by residents.

5 HEADLINES FOR 2022-2023

5.1 The Complaints Service has also been involved in several areas of work during 2022-23 to improve the complaints system and to name a few:

- Entire team now has a shared skill set across all complaints processes
- The new complaints dashboard is live

- Historical data has been cleansed and systems have been streamlined into a single source of data for corporate complaints; this has resulted in changes to some data
- Current data collection is more streamlined and there are regular data quality reviews
- E-learning module on complaints handling developed and ready to launch
- Dedicated complaints intranet pages, which includes useful resources on the effective management of complaints are live
- Briefing sessions for managers to update or refresh skills held on regular basis
- Regular meeting with senior managers about caseload and lessons learnt are ongoing

5.2 The culmination of these improvements were highlighted in the latest Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman report on complaints that recognised our collective focus to ensure that our responses are satisfactory before complaints reach the Ombudsman. This has resulted in Stockport Council being at the top in the Northwest out of 22 local authorities for this area.

6 HEADLINE FIGURES FOR COUNCIL COMPLAINTS

6.1 This section details annual volumes of complaint by level and service. For each complaint process (except School Complaints, which the Council administers) a selection of lessons learnt are also included in each section.

6.2 With much improvement to the data handling of complaints during 2022-23, some figures may differ from the previous annual report.

6.3 The overall complaints received by the council are as follows:

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
All formal complaints received ¹	558	377	588	433
All stage 1 complaints received	457	302	441	328
All stage 2 complaints received	101	74	142	102
All stage 3 complaints received	0	1	5	3

6.4 There was significant reduction in complaints received in 2022-23 when compared to the previous year; a highlight of this is the reduction with statutory adult social care and significant reduction in corporate complaints escalating to stage 2. This can be attributed to a focus on de-escalation, early resolution and improvements to their processes as a result of learning from complaints.

6.5 Furthermore, we saw a similar reduction in non statutory stage 2 complaints and this indicates that stage 1 complaints were handled in a satisfactory manner and avoided escalation.

6.6 Corporate Complaints

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Stage 1 complaints investigated	178	132	143	161
Escalated from stage 1 to stage 2	92	65	112	52

6.7 Adult's Social Care Complaints

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Stage 1 complaints investigated	151	84	146	89

¹ In some cases, the same complaint could have been counted more than once depending on whether it escalated.

6.8 Children's Social Care Complaints – statutory

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Stage 1 complaints investigated	43	36	52	28
Escalated from stage 1 to stage 2	0	1	1	1
Escalated from stage 2 to stage 3	0	0	1	0
Escalated from stage 3 to LGSCO	0	0	0	1

6.9 Children's Social Care Complaints - non statutory

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Stage 1 complaints investigated	35	25	49	80
Escalated from stage 1 to stage 2	4	6	15	21

6.10 Statutory School Complaints

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Statutory Schools Complaints	50	25	51	59
Escalated to stage 2	5	2	14	28
Escalated to stage 3	0	1	4	3
Escalated from stage 3 to DfE	0	0	0	0

6.11 Some complaints escalated to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and this is highlighted further on in the report.

6.12 When considered in the context of the number of services and support the Council provides to over 291,000 residents of Stockport, overall formal complaint numbers represent a very small proportion of resident interactions.

6.13 Whilst we saw an increase in complaints during the previous year 2021-22 when compared to 2020-21, our last report attributed this to be most likely as a direct result of the pandemic and associated restrictions during that year. For this year, overall complaints have reduced.

6.14 The following sections provide an overview of each complaints process including trends about the issues raised, their outcomes from investigation and lessons learnt.

7 CORPORATE COMPLAINTS

7.1 The scope of corporate complaints includes services across the council for example Place and Corporate & Support Services. This section will look at each stage in more detail.

7.2 Stage 1

7.3 Complaints are investigated by the services and although the Complaints team has oversight of this process, the service determines whether the case is upheld or not upheld. There is also a requirement for stage 1 complaints to be completed within a given timeframe of 20 days.

7.4 When comparing the number of cases received in 2022-23 (161) with the previous year (143), there was a slight increase in stage 1 complaints received.

7.5 This could be attributed to higher than normal planning applications and parking complaints however, it should be noted that very few parking complaints at stage 1 had escalated to level 2.

7.6 Of the complaints received 161, 50 (36%) were upheld or partially upheld.

Complaints Closed Stage 1 (04 April 2022 to 24 March 2023)					
Service	Late Response		Response within SLA		Grand Total
	Upheld or Part Upheld	Not Upheld	Upheld or Part Upheld	Not Upheld	
Parking		2 (5%)	11 (30%)	24 (55%)	37 (100%)
Planning	5 (16%)	6 (17%)	7 (22%)	14 (44%)	32 (100%)
Council Tax			5 (28%)	13 (72%)	18 (100%)
Highways		1 (11%)	1 (11%)	7 (72%)	9 (100%)
Refuse & Recycling	1 (11%)			8 (89%)	9 (100%)
Traffic Services		2 (22%)	2 (22%)	5 (56%)	9 (100%)
Building Control		2 (25%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	8 (100%)
Registration Services	1 (13%)		3 (38%)	4 (50%)	8 (100%)
Libraries & Information			4 (67%)	2 (33%)	6 (100%)
Greenspace		1 (20%)		4 (80%)	5 (100%)
Environmental Health		2 (50%)		2 (50%)	4 (100%)
Legal Services		1 (50%)		1 (50%)	2 (100%)
Regeneration		2 (100%)			2 (100%)
Advice & Information			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Bereavement Services			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Blue Badge Scheme			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Contact Centre			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Electoral services	1 (100%)				1 (100%)
Housing & Council Tax B			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Information Governance			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Licensing		1 (100%)			1 (100%)
Public rights of way		1 (100%)			1 (100%)
Stockport Museums		1 (100%)			1 (100%)
Street Cleansing				1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Trading Standards	1 (100%)				1 (100%)
Grand Total	9 (6%)	22 (14%)	41 (25%)	89 (55%)	161 (100%)

7.7 During 2022-23, planning, parking and council tax saw the most complaints received and as a result there were many lessons learnt that helped the council improve its services. This is described in more detail in 6.16 of this report.

7.8 Stage 2

7.9 This is where Stage 1 complaints have in the main escalated and are investigated by the councils complaints service and the 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.

7.10 The complaints team who provide ongoing support to officers with improving the complaints handling across the council, their focus remains on early resolution communication.

7.11 When comparing the number of stage 2 cases received in 2022-23 (52) with the previous year (112), there has been a significant reduction in escalated stage 2 complaints. This can be attributed in part to improved complaints handling at stage 1 indicating that services have benefited from targeted activity from the complaints team to improve complaint handling and data management.

7.12 Of the 52 complaints received, 26% were upheld or partially upheld. 92% were handled with 20 days which is a significant improvement on the previous year (72%). With regards to the outcomes and performance for complaint handling with responding to the complaints see the table below.

Stage 2 resolution by complaints team | Cases closed previous year

Complaints Closed Stage 2 (08 April 2022 to 6 March 2023)					
Service	Late Response		Response within SLA		Grand Total
	Upheld or Part Upheld	Not Upheld	Upheld or Part Upheld	Not Upheld	
Planning		1 (9%)	7 (64%)	3 (27%)	11 (100%)
Refuse & Recycling			2 (33%)	4 (67%)	6 (100%)
Council Tax		1 (20%)		4 (80%)	5 (100%)
Greenspace			1 (20%)	4 (80%)	5 (100%)
Highways				4 (100%)	4 (100%)
Building Control			1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)
Other			1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)
Bereavement Services	1 (100%)				1 (100%)
Children's Social Care				1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Community Safety				1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Electoral Services			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Grounds Maintenance				1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Housing & Council Tax Benefit		1 (100%)			1 (100%)
Traffic Services			1 (100%)		1 (100%)
Grand Total	1 (2%)	3 (7%)	14 (33%)	24 (57%)	42 (100%)

7.13 Whilst there was no evidence of systematic failure or trends identified in terms of the complaints upheld, the majority fell within the broad categories of delays, council error, inaction, quality of service, staff conduct and breach of policy/procedure.

7.14 Examples of learning from complaints

7.15 Setting expectations and the need for more effective communication is a common theme across complaints and some areas have implemented a series of improvements that involve reviews of the service and staffing levels. Planning is a positive example of this whereby complaints have led to a systemwide review and assessment is in progress.

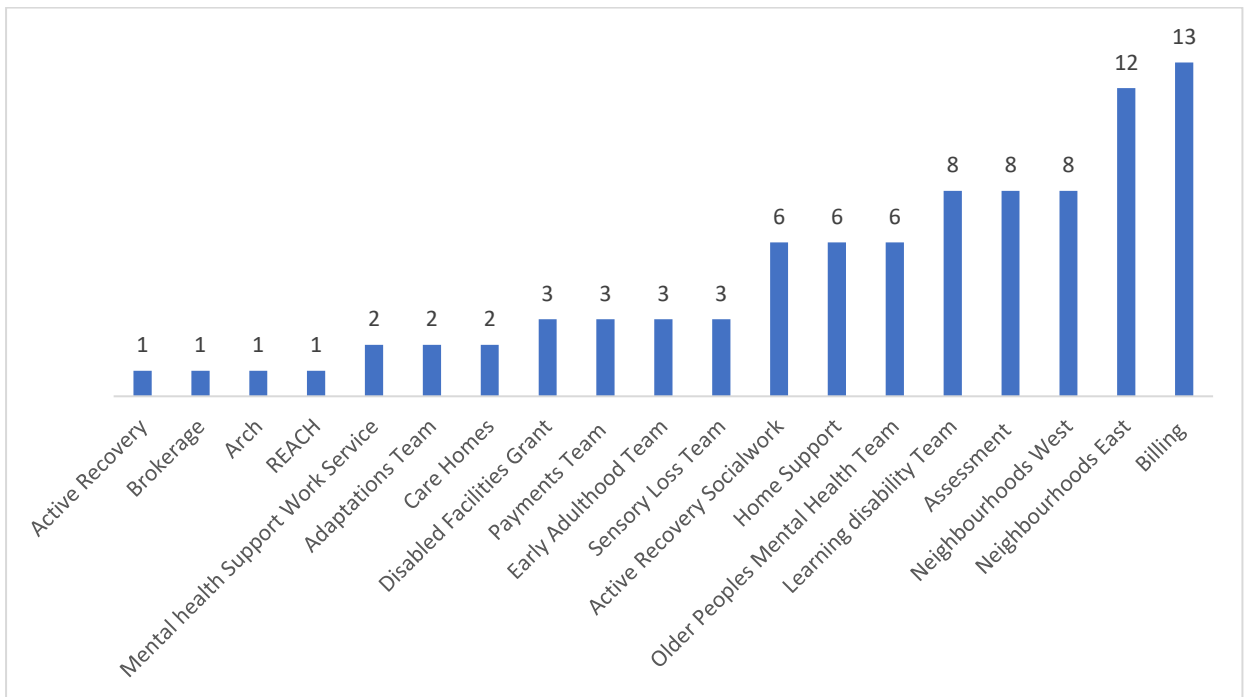
7.16 Furthermore, some services are reviewing how they communicate with residents to ensure that in future, where timely full responses cannot be provided, an explanation is given including timescales of when they can be expected. This can be seen in Public Realm and CSS with work in progress to better communicate with residents and in particular the tone and content of written correspondence.

7.17 Within CSS there has been a review of finance communication with residents, with a focus on being clear, simple, person centred. This includes improved processes to help set resident expectations and is led by their senior managers with regular review meetings.

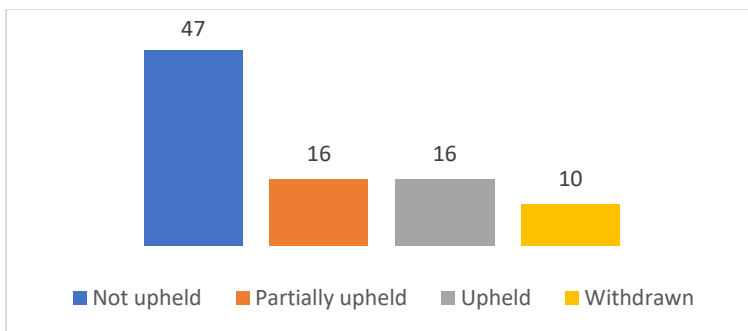
8 ADULT SOCIAL CARE (ASC) COMPLAINTS

8.1 This section takes a closer look at ASC complaints which are investigated by the service area in partnership with the Complaints Team who acknowledge, signpost, monitor and record the end-to-end complaints process.

8.2 When comparing the number of cases received in 2022-23 (89) with the previous year (146), there was a significant decrease in complaints received and the range of complaints related to these services.



8.3 Of the complaints received 32 (36%) were upheld or partially upheld and 49% were completed within the given timeframe of 20 days (the process allows up to 65 days).



8.4 The overall reduction in numbers related to an increase in focus on early resolution, in some cases resulting in residents withdrawing complaints where solutions were provided.

8.5 Many complaints related to charging and billing and social work practice. When compared to the previous year there has been a reduction in complaints received for care homes and this may be attributed to improved signposting to ensure residents follow the correct pathway.

8.6 Examples of learning from complaints

8.7 There is a commitment to encourage a culture of learning from complaints and improvements have stemmed from this. As an example, with relation to the large scale transformation project to review Social Care Charging; the complaints manager has been integral to the project by sharing the resident stories and issues. This has led to significant changes in communication and staff training, with the development of clearer outlines of roles and responsibilities.

8.8 The complaints team has developed strong relationships with senior leaders to enable a joined up working approach ensuring learning from individual complaints is shared and is part of wider service action plans.

8.9 A complaint relating to the Disabled Facilities Grant raised issues with assessment and the time it took to reach a decision. This has led to an identified need for a review of the pathway focussing on a whole family approach to make a difference. There is now a

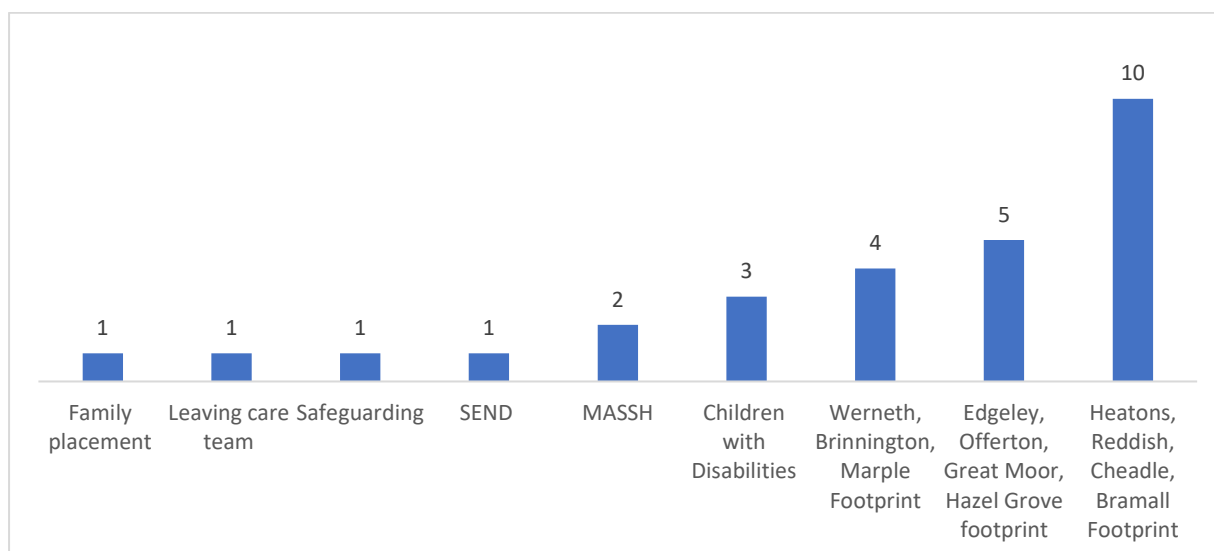
commitment to improve the pathway, training for staff, briefing sessions, and effective responses to residents plus increased clarity around ownership of the role of lead officer when other services are involved.

9 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE COMPLAINTS

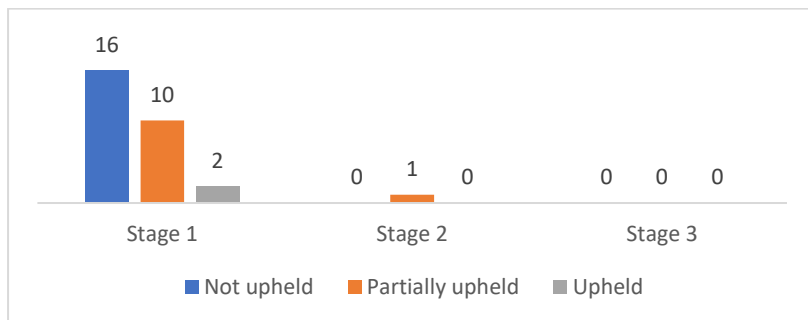
- 9.1 Children's Social Care Complaints are made by or on behalf of children who use services provided or commissioned by the council. Complaints are investigated by the service in partnership with the Complaints Team who acknowledge, signpost, monitor and record the end-to-end complaints process.
- 9.2 Complaints include: social work services, residential care, fostering, adoption and the provision of support to families, children with disabilities and young people in trouble with the law.
- 9.3 Complaints in this service can be categorised as either statutory or non statutory; and we will look at both within this section.

9.4 Statutory

- 9.5 28 complaints were received in 2022-23 and of these 82% were completed within the given timeframe of 20 days. When we compare the number of stage 1 cases received with the previous year (52), there was a reduction in complaints received. Some of this reduction may be attributed to an improved complaints pathway which has resulted in a rebalance between statutory and non-statutory complaints.
- 9.6 Whilst we received 28 complaints only 1 escalated to stage 2 which signals the robust process in place for early resolution that is supported by the one team approach for handing complaints. This is enabled by a strong working relationship between the complaints team and service managers to ensure a swift and satisfactory resolution for the complainant.
- 9.7 Fewer escalations result in a better use of council resources and officer time. This is because a stage 2 investigation or a stage 3 independent panel is time consuming, and costs are incurred as the local authority is legally obliged to employ independent investigators and independent persons.
- 9.8 The 28 complaints can be attributed to aspects of social work practice such as delays, communication issues and where the quality of service failed to satisfy the resident. The services that received complaints related to the following services:



9.9 Looking at the outcome of the 28 investigations, 12 (43%) were upheld or partially upheld. Those complaints that were partially upheld indicate that the council did not agree with all of the elements of the complaint.



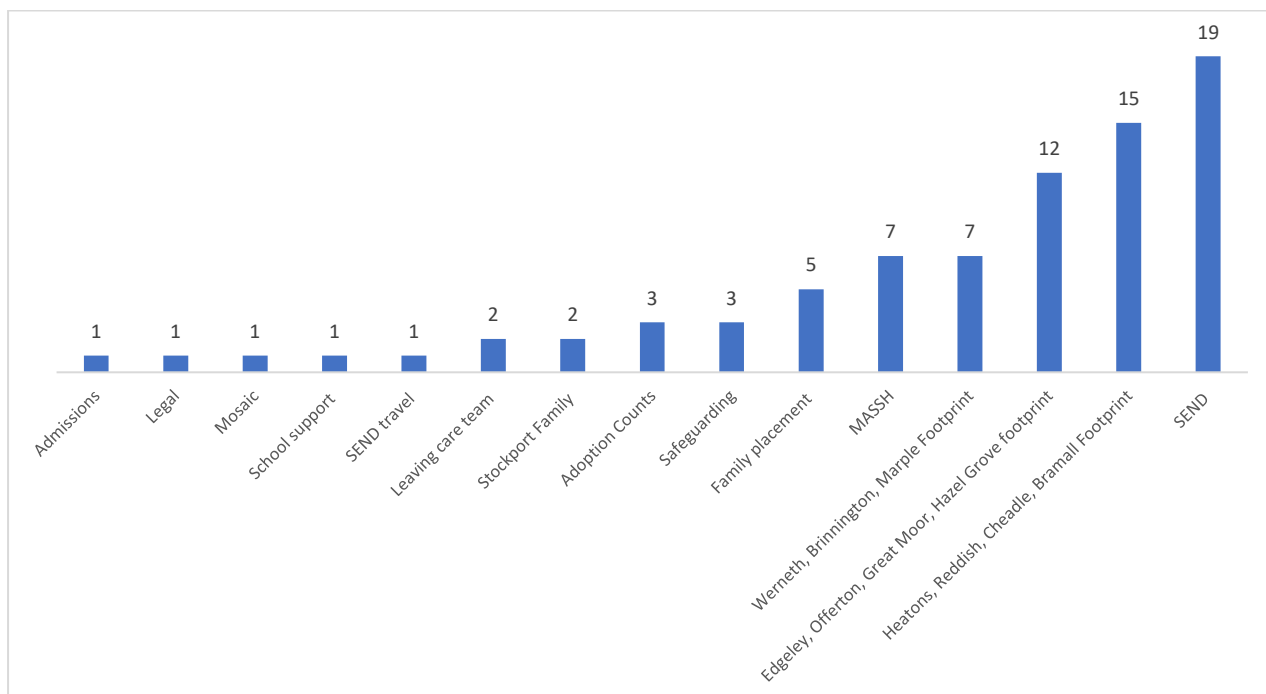
9.10 Non-Statutory

9.11 80 non-statutory complaints were received in 2022-23 and of these 74% were completed within the corporate given timeframe of 20 days.

9.12 When we compare the number of non statutory stage 1 cases received with the previous year (49), there was an increase in complaints received; and as above, some of this increase may be attributed to an improved complaints pathway which has resulted in a rebalance between statutory and non-statutory complaints.

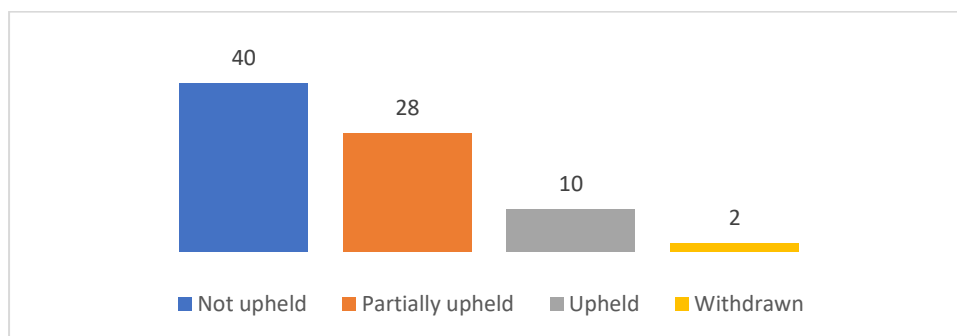
9.13 There has been an increase in special educational needs and disability (SEND) complaints as a result of the high demand for Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) assessments; this is an increase of 37% for assessments referrals when compared to last year and has created a backlog of cases for review and completion.

9.14 The services that received complaints are below:-



9.15 These complaints can be attributed to a range of themes that involve behaviours and communication (or lack of) from the case officer. In some circumstances, the issues raised relate to the timeliness of written communications and the lack of awareness of the processes by the resident.

9.16 Looking at the outcome of the investigations, 38 (47%) were either upheld or partially upheld. Those complaints that were partially upheld indicate that the council did not agree with all of the elements of the complaint.



9.17 Examples of learning from complaints

9.18 As a result of learning from complaints, there is a focus on clear communication and for standard operating practice understood by our residents. Examples include:-

- ensuring things such as decision making processes or the specific role of those within service are explained more clearly to residents
- Social workers have been reminded of the importance of providing paperwork in a timely manner and of contingency plans that may be needed if they will be away from the office so that colleagues can take over
- There have also been discussions at both individual and team level with regard to complaint outcomes together with a variety of refreshers on expected standards of practice.

9.19 In response to the aforementioned increase in SEND complaints, the service has reviewed staffing profile and operating practices in this area; including bolstering the team that undertakes EHCP assessments; appointing managers with specific oversight, reprioritising the focus of the Educational Psychology team on early intervention and prevention, and prioritising further, elsewhere in the service, for those in greatest need, such as those who are without an education provision. Early indications show improvements in wait times and performance.

10 STATUTORY SCHOOLS COMPLAINTS

10.1 Many maintained, voluntary controlled, voluntary aided and academy schools have a service level agreement with the complaints service to assist them with their own complaints process and policy. This covers the functioning of the school and the conduct of head teachers.

10.2 Schools' complaints are recorded within an academic year and the figures that follow are for the date range 1st September 2022 through to 31st July 2023. The total complaints received in 2022-23 was 59.

10.3 There has been a slight increase when compared to the previous year (51) as well as, a doubling of complaints at stage 1 escalating to stage 2.

10.4 The reasons for school complaints can be varied and include: bullying, dissatisfaction with school policy, lack of support and staff conduct. The complexity of the complaints continues to increase as other agencies such as SEND and Safeguarding become involved.

10.5 Furthermore, there is an increase in complaints relating to Headteachers directly, and because of this they must be investigated at Stage 1 by the Chair of Governors. Any cases escalated to Stage 2 are then reviewed by a Local Authority Officer within Education Services.

11 LOCAL GOVERNMENT & SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN (LGSCO)

- 11.1 The LGSCO (the Ombudsman) provides the final stage for complaints about local authorities and some other organisations providing local public services. The Ombudsman will usually only consider complaints that have already been through the Council's complaints procedures.
- 11.2 During 2022-23 the LGSCO received complaints from 65 Stockport residents and made decisions on 79 complaints within the same period. The majority of these were closed after initial enquiries which indicates that the council is taking appropriate action when concerns are raised.
- 11.3 Of the 79 decisions, the Ombudsman carried out 21 investigations, of which 18 were upheld (86%), compared to 9 out of 14 (64%) during 2021-22 and 10 out of 17 (58%) during 2020-21.
- 11.4 Of the 18 cases that were upheld in 2022-23, 8 contained recommendations for the council to implement. All of these recommendations were addressed and completed and demonstrates a commitment to learning from complaints so that improvements can be made which will then benefit our residents.
- 11.5 The upheld complaints related to:-
- 3 x Adult social care assessments and funding
 - 1 x Adult social care charging
 - 1 x Adult social care support
 - 1 x Care home safeguarding
 - 1 x SEND
 - 1 x Childrens social care section 47 enquiry (safeguarding)
 - 1 x Childrens social care support around autism assessment
 - 6 x Planning, including 4 issues about the 5G mast
 - 1 x Taxi licences test delays
 - 1 x Bereavement process
- 11.6 Each year the LGSCO produces a report on their activity and pulls together the national picture of trends and common issues that have arisen from complaints over the last year that they have investigated. The council has received its annual update from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and this can be found at this location on the internet. [Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council - Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#).
- 11.7 The council and complaints team is committed to resolving complaints as early as possible – this is shown by the significant increase in the number of complaints that have been resolved before the complaint reaches the LGSCO.
- 11.8 Summary of LGSCO findings:

86% of complaints we investigated were **upheld**.
This compares to an average of **77%** in similar organisations.

In **100%** of cases we were satisfied the organisation had successfully implemented our recommendations.

In **37%** of upheld cases we found the organisation had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the Ombudsman.

11.9 Furthermore, there have been no Public Reports issued against the Council since 2018-19.

11.10 The LGSCO may consider issuing a Public Report in the event of:- reoccurring faults; significant fault, injustice, or remedy (by scale or number of people affected); Non-compliance with an Ombudsman's recommendation; a high volume of complaints about one subject; a significant topical issue (such as those in raised our Focus Reports); systemic problems and/or wider lessons.

12 RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 CRMG is asked to:

- Note the information contained in the Annual Complaints Report
- Note the positive progress being taken to improve complaints handling across the council

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

13.1 There are none.

13.2 Anyone requiring further information, please contact Emma Handby, Head of Resident Services