



Audit & Standards Committee Report

Report of: Mark Bennett, Director of HR and Customer Services/ David Hollis,
Monitoring Officer

Date: November 2022

Subject: Annual Corporate Complaints & Annual Ombudsman Reports 2021/22

Author of Report: Paul Taylor, Head of Customer Services

Summary:

This report provides an overview of the annual corporate and ombudsman complaints received, and formally referred and determined by the three Ombudsmen (Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman, Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman and Housing Ombudsman) during the twelve months from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022

The report also identifies future developments and areas for improvement in complaint management.

The report is jointly presented by the Monitoring Officer and the Director of HR and Customer Services who is responsible for managing the Complaints Service.

Recommendations:

The Audit & Standards Committee is asked to consider the Annual Corporate Complaints Report & Annual Ombudsman Report, in order to provide its view on the performance of complaints handling and management within Sheffield City Council.

Background Papers:

LGSCO Annual Letter 2021/22

HO Annual Report 2021/22

Category of Report: OPEN



Annual Complaints Report

2021 - 2022

Contents:

1. Introduction	4
2. Headlines.....	5
3. Volumes of Complaints by Portfolio Area.....	6
4. Volumes of New Complaints by Key Service Areas.....	7
5. Complaint Categorisation	9
6. Accessibility /Equality Monitoring Information.....	10
7. How People Contact Us.....	11
8. Complaint Response Timescales	12
9. Complaint Outcomes	13
10. Complaint Remedies and Service Improvements	15
11. Complaint Escalations	17
12. Ombudsman Complaints.....	17
13. Quality Assurance of Complaint Responses.....	18
14. Summary of Areas of Improvement as noted in this Document	19
15. Key Focus Areas and Future Developments.....	20
16. How to Contact us.....	21

1. Introduction

All councils need to provide complaint procedures to respond to citizens' concerns in an open and transparent way within defined timescales and in accordance with legislation.

The purpose of this report is to outline the complaints and compliments that the Council received in the period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022, highlighting key themes and longer-term trends.

- 1.1 The report also explains how the Council has performed against the required standards.
- 1.2 Sheffield City Council welcomes complaints as an opportunity to maintain high quality performance and a gateway to consistently review and improve the quality of service offered to citizens. A complaint as **'any expression of dissatisfaction whether justified or not'** - this definition is deliberately wide to ensure that complaints are recognised easily and can be addressed effectively and timely.
- 1.3 Sheffield City Council has two-stage approach when dealing with complaints under the corporate complaint's procedure. (See Appendix 1 – Corporate Complaints Procedure). At all stages of the complaints process we advise complainants of who to contact if they are not satisfied with the outcome or the way in which it was handled. There are separate specific statutory procedures for handling Children's Social Care and Adult Social Care complaints. The annual statutory reports for these will be shortly made available.
- 1.4 The data in this report includes complaints considered at the Investigation and Investigation Review stages. Complaints resolved via problem solving have been recorded from November 2021. For consistency in reporting, this measure will be included in the 2022/23 annual report only.
- 1.5 In the reporting year 2021/22, Sheffield City Council had three main Portfolio service delivery areas. These are: Resources (including Policy Performance and Communication), People and Place. In addition, Sheffield City Council's strategic partners include Amey (Streets Ahead roads/pavements); Veolia (Waste Management). See Section 4.
- 1.6 Sheffield City Council's Customer Services Feedback & Complaints Team is responsible for the development and implementation of policy and procedures on complaints. In addition, this team acts as the Council's liaison point with the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), Housing Ombudsman (HO) and Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO). The Annual Ombudsman complaints enquiries and investigations report is available here: [Complaints - Data Mill North](#)

See Also Appendix 2 for Annual Ombudsman Report, LGSCO Annual Letter (Appendix C) and Housing Ombudsman Annual Report (Appendix D).

2. Headlines

22% increase in total number of complaints received from previous year
(Includes Amey and Veolia)

2020/21: 2014 Complaints



2021/22: 2463 Complaints

Sheffield City Council's 2 strategic partners accounted for 57% of the total complaints received (Amey 45%, Veolia 12%) All other Council Service Complaints total 43% – see Table 3.1

The following information excludes Amey and Veolia data:

The top 3 Council Services receiving the highest number of complaints are:
Resources 'other' (8%), Children's social care (6%), and Council Housing Repairs (5%)
see Table 4.1

46% of complaints were responded to within 28 calendar days
(Excludes adults and children's social care statutory complaints) – see Table 8.1

The **average escalation rate is 27%** in 2021/22, this is an increase on the two previous years.
The average escalation rate for 2020/21 was 21% and 2019/20 was 22% - see Table 11.1

The most **frequent reason** for complaints was **Quality of Service*** and
accounts for 21% of all complaint categorisations (276 of 1289)
(See Appendix 1 for definitions) * - see Table 5.1

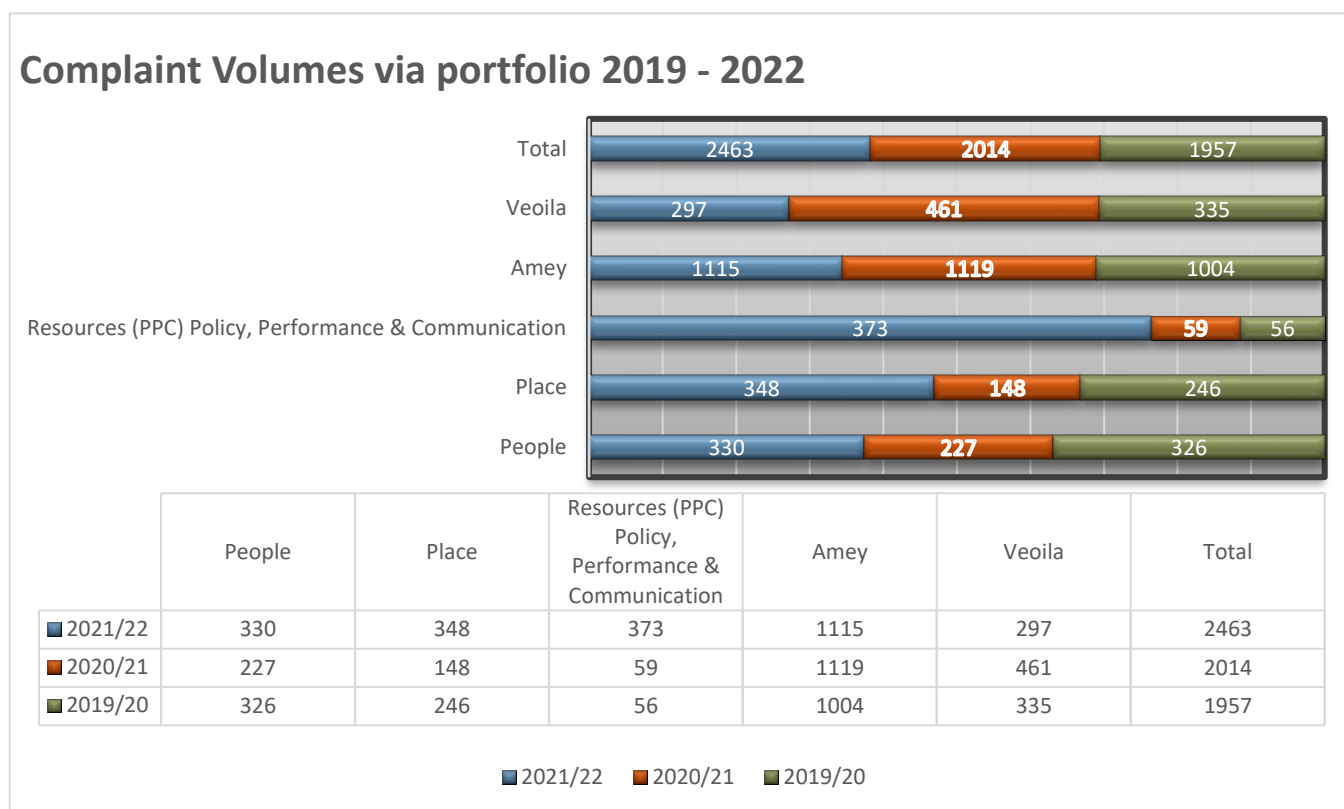
In addition to offering citizens an apology (138), **the top 3 remedies and service improvements were:**
Take action or enforce a decision (64); Change Service Provider (37) and Change, Review or Provide a
Service (28) – see Table 10.1

The LGSCO upheld 15 complaints out of 20 complaints
(75% of complaints investigated by the LGSCO were upheld)
and the HO upheld 2 complaints
See Ombudsman's Reports in Appendix 2

The LGSCO has reported that 114 complaints/enquiries were received about the Council during
2021/22, compared with 95 in 2020/21 and 143 in 2019/20.
The Housing Ombudsman's report is based on 38,877 homes for which Sheffield acts as Landlord.
See Ombudsman's Reports Report in Appendix 2

3 Volumes of Complaints by Portfolio Area

3.1 The table below shows the comparison of complaint volumes for the years 2019-2022:



- There is an overall 22% (449) increase in the number of complaints received than in the previous year. Three out of the five service areas have shown an increase in complaints.
- The overall increase in complaints is likely due to the implementation of a new Complaints Case Management Recording System, which encouraged more accurate recording of feedback and complaints. This included council wide recording of complaints resolved at the first point of contact via problem solving. Other factors included the transition from the Covid-19 pandemic and media events which focused on the conduct of Sheffield City Council's Chief Executive.

3.2 People Portfolio Increase:

People Portfolio accounted for 13% (330 of 2463) of the complaints recorded and an increase noted across all 3 areas: Adult Health & Social Care, Children & Families and Wider people- (People Portfolio excluding the three former service areas) which includes SEN (Special Education Needs Services). The higher volumes are noted in Wider People / SEN.

2.3 Place Portfolio:

Place Portfolio accounted for 14% (348 of 2463) of the complaints recorded. The increase for this area is due to the increased number of complaints referred to the Repairs and Maintenance Service. This was expected, as in line with government guidelines during the Covid-19 pandemic, service delivery was restricted. Only urgent and emergency repairs were prioritised. This resulted in higher demand for the service during the 2021/22, as a backlog of repairs required completion.

3.4 Resources Portfolio including (PCC) Policy, Performance & Communication

The Resources Portfolio accounted for 15% of the complaints recorded. Revenue and Benefits Team (Finance) resumed debt recovery following the national lockdown which resulted in higher complaint volumes being recorded than in the previous year.

This area also had a total of 174 complaints assigned due to the Chief Executive enquiry.

Customer Services also experienced a higher volume of complaints, linked to the post pandemic increase in demand for Council Services, which led to higher call volumes received and increased response times to these calls.

4 Volumes of New Complaints by Key Service Areas

4.1 The table below shows a more detailed breakdown of complaints received by the key service areas within each portfolio group.

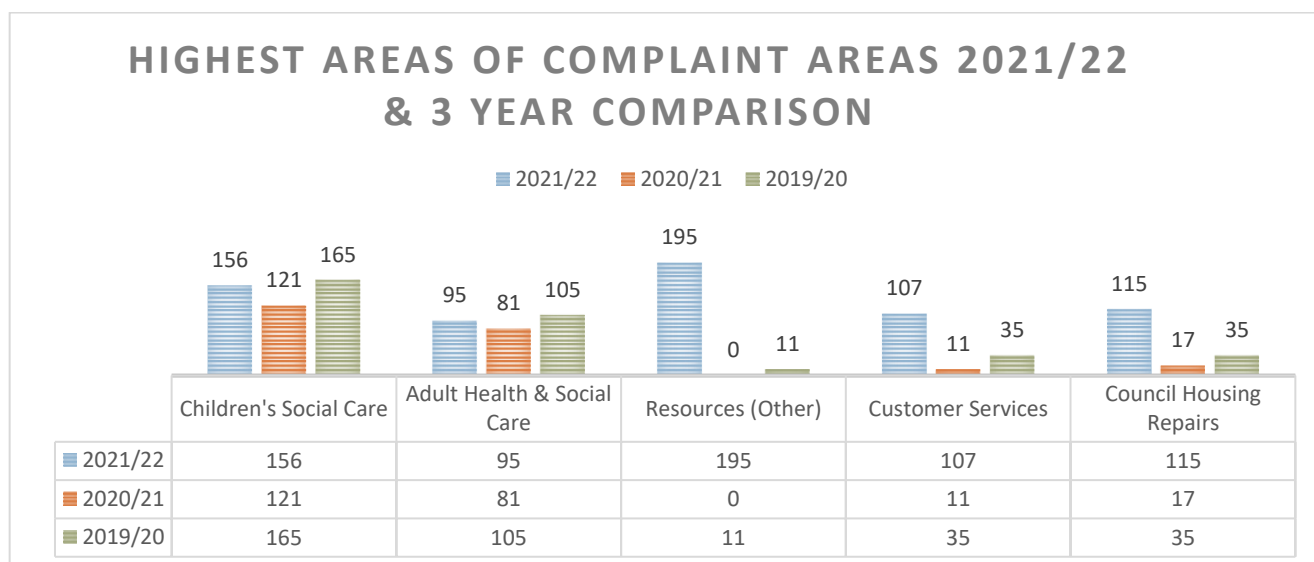
Note -The complaint numbers recorded below are those considered at the 'Investigation Stage' of Sheffield City Councils complaints procedure. Dissatisfaction at the 'Problem Solving' stage is not captured within this report.

Portfolio	Service Area	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
People	Social Care – Adults	105	81	95
	Social Care – Children	165	121	156
	People – Other	56	25	79
	People Total	326	227	330
Place	Council Housing incl. Housing & Neighbourhood Services	119	45	95
	Council Housing Repairs	35	17	115
	Environmental Services	6	1	9
	Waste Management Client Team	39	15	5
	Culture & Environment	6	6	20
	City Growth	30	53	28
	Traffic & Parking	9	4	15
	Transport & Facilities Management	2	4	5
	Place – Other	0	3	56
	Place Total	246	148	348
Resources, including Policy Performance and Communication (PPC) <small>(Revenues and Benefits previously recorded under Capita)</small>	Customer Services	35	11	107
	Legal	1	3	1
	Finance & Commercial	9	0	70
	Benefits		42	
	Revenues		3	
	Other	11	0	195
	Resources & PPC Total	56	59	373
Total Complaints Excluding Strategic Partners		628	434	1051
Amey	Streets Ahead	1004	1119	1115
Capita <small>(Moved to Resources 2020)</small>	Benefits	76		
	Revenues	25		
	Capita Total	101		
Veolia	Waste Management	335	461	297
Strategic Partner Complaint Total		1440	1580	1412
Overall Total		2068	2014	2463

Strategic Partner Complaints (Amey and Veolia) account for 57% (1412) of the total number of complaints. This compares with 78% in the previous year. Overall, there has been a 21% **decrease** in complaints in this area.

- **Veolia** (SCC Waste Management Service) complaints **decreased** in volume by 164. The increase in the previous year was due to the introduction of charges for providing new and replacement black bins.
- **Amey** (Streets Ahead) total number of complaints had a minimal increase of 4 complaints (1115 to 1119). Streets Ahead are working closely with Sheffield City Council to review and analyse the complaints information to understand any learnings on the volume of complaints received. To put these figures into context, Streets Ahead received a total of 39,320 enquiries, service requests and information requests during 2021/22. Complaints made up 2.9% of the work Amey /Streets Ahead completed as part of the contract they hold with Sheffield City Council.

4.2 The graph below shows the council service areas where the highest volumes of complaints were recorded during 2021/22 and comparison over the past 3 years 2019 – 2022 (This excludes strategic partner data Amey & Veolia):



Children's Social Care recorded the highest complaint category as 'Quality of Service'

Adult Social Care recorded the highest complaint category as 'Quality of Service'

Resources(including Customer Services) recorded the highest category of complaint as 'Delay'

220 complaints were recorded against this area without a category for complaint – this has been identified from the new management recording system and work is underway to address this issue.

Council Housing Repairs recorded the highest complaint category as 'Delay'

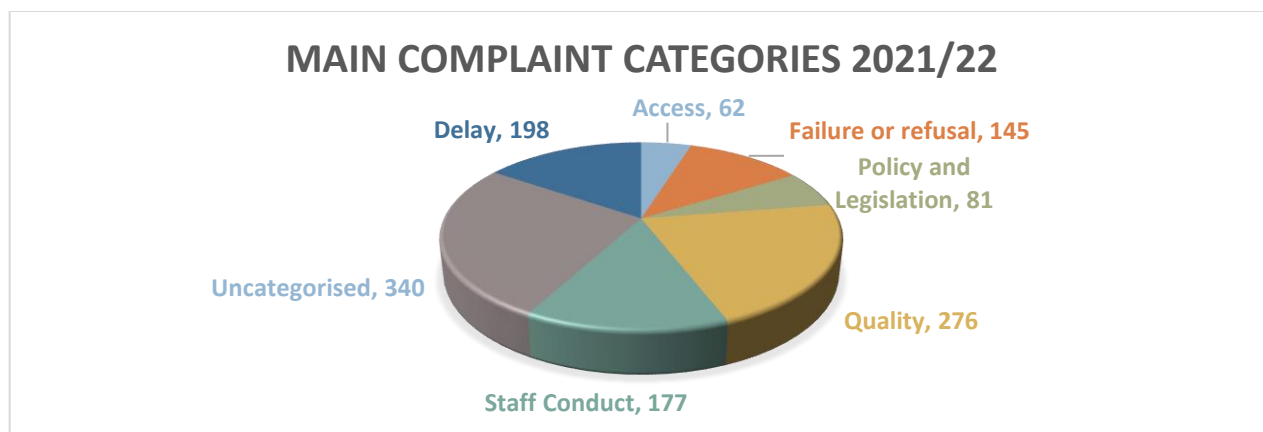
5.0 Complaint Categorisation

It is important that we understand what our citizens complain about, so Sheffield City Council use generic categorisations across all complaint areas to understand these themes.

*Note – a number of complaint reasons may be recorded against each complaint

5.1 The chart below shows the 6 main reasons for complaints (see [Appendix 1](#) for definitions).

‘Quality of Service’ is the highest reason for complaints received in the reporting year 2021/22.



Improvements is required in communication and personal contact with complainants. Responding managers to ensure regular and timely updates.

This is being embedded as part of the culture change associated with the Complaints Transformation Project.

Improvement in complaint case management recording and accuracy is required. The Feedback & Complaints Team are supporting Case Coordinators and Responding Managers to make these improvements.

6.0 Accessibility /Equality Monitoring Information

In 2021/22, little demographic information (including protected characteristics data, such as gender, ethnicity, age etc) was captured as part of our complaints handling process. However an Equalities Action Plan has been completed for the period 2021-2023 and is included in Appendix 3.

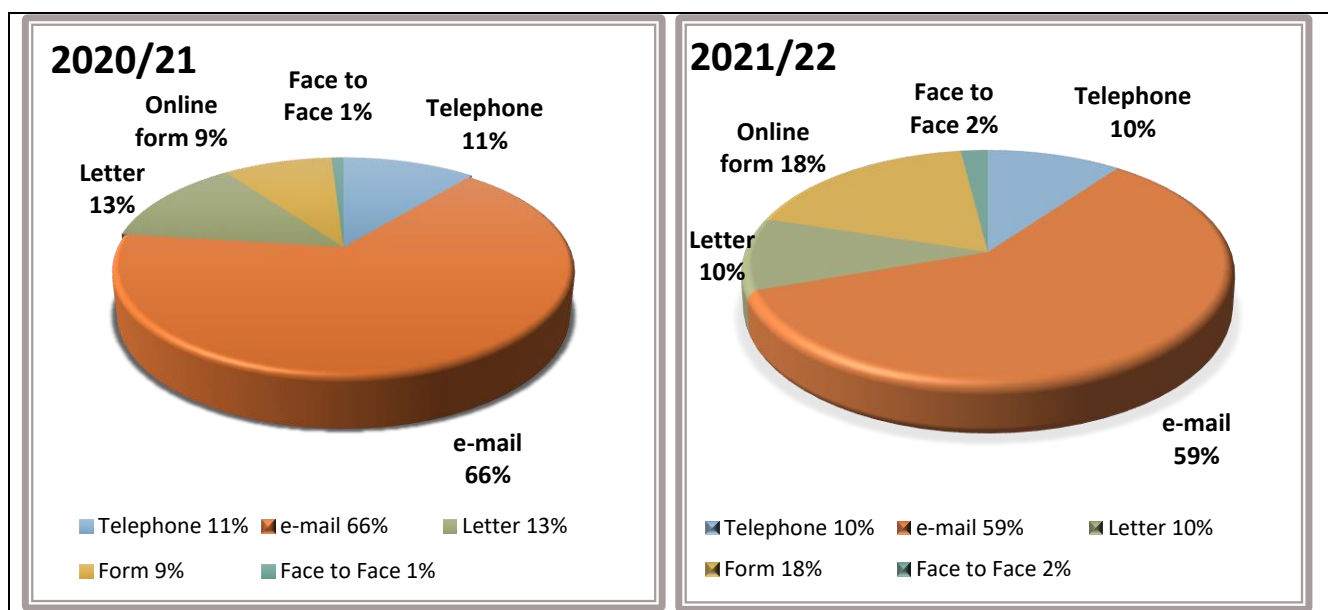
The recorded equality data is limited and requires further development to ensure that Sheffield City Council can demonstrate that it provides fair and accessible services for all.

See Appendix 3

7. How People Contact Us

It is our intention that people should be able to make a complaint in any way they choose, including through our website, by email, by telephone, in writing or in person.

7.1 The table below shows how citizens have interacted with us during 2021/22 to notify us they were dissatisfied and a comparison with 2020/21:



The information demonstrates the highest access channel for complaints is via e-mail although this has decreased by 7% in comparison to 2020/21. The second highest access channel is by online form which has doubled in usage from 9% to 18%. Letter and phone contact have both decreased. (This information does not include problem solving data).

Data showing for 2021/22 only reflects the first half of the reporting year 1st April 2021 – 31st Oct 2021 – this was due to a transfer in system

Further development is required to improve the digital offer for citizens when making a complaint. Accessibility for non-digital citizens should also be considered.

7.2 The table below shows contact via service:

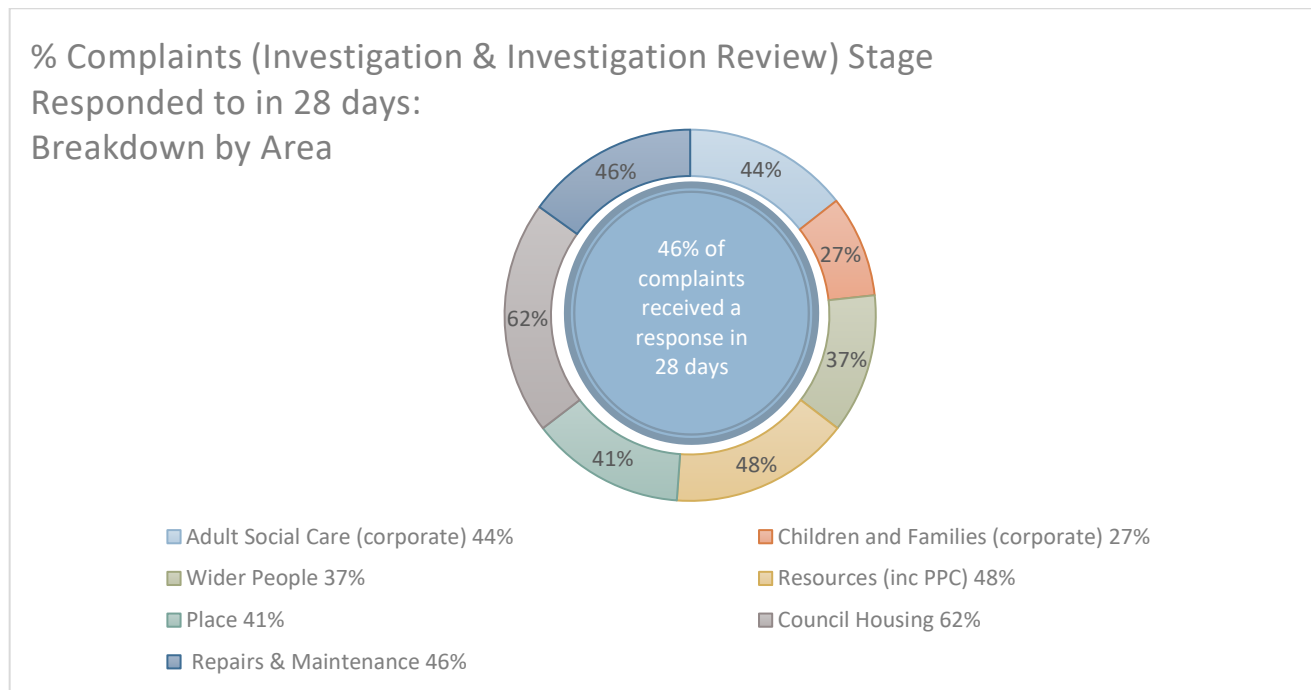
Portfolio / Service Area	ACCESS CHANNELS				
	Email	Face-Face	Form	Letter	Telephone
(2021/22 Complaints)					
Adult Social Care (Statutory)	34	1	3	10	2
Adult Social Care (Corporate)	7	0	3	1	2
Children and Families (Statutory Stage 1)	29	0	18	4	5
Children and Families (Corporate)	16	0	12	6	3
Wider People	38	0	0	2	2
Resources inc. PPC	41	0	4	2	3
Place	31	0	7	2	0
Council Housing	14	2	13	9	16
Repairs	14	5	9	4	7
Total	224	8	69	40	40

Data is only available for the period 1st April 2021 – 31st October 2021, due to the system change

8. Complaint Response Timescales

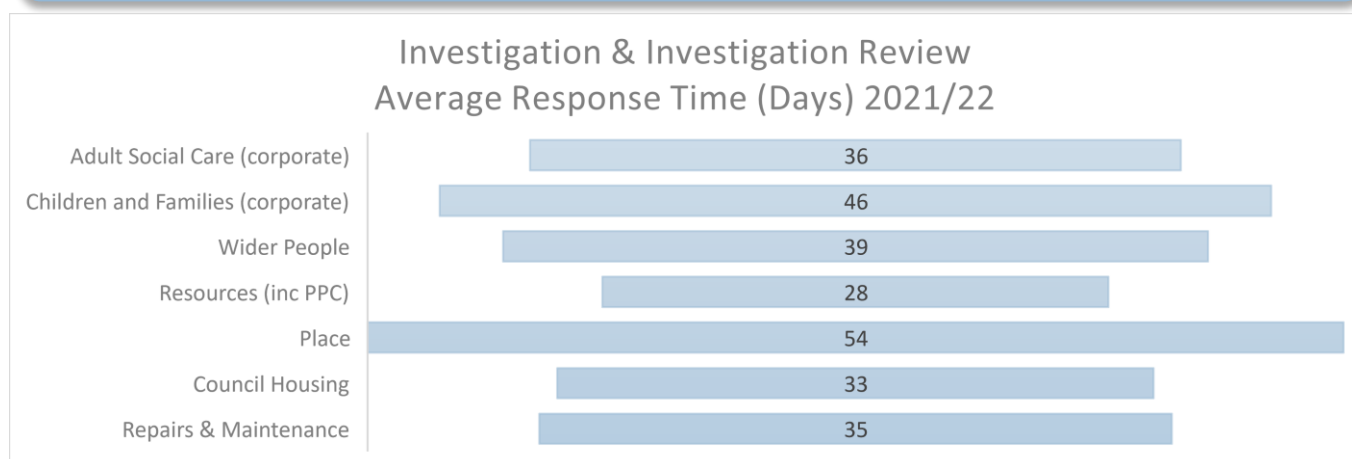
In line with the Corporate Complaints Procedure, Sheffield City Council aims to respond to complaints within 28 calendar days. {Note - There are different timescales for complaints which follow the statutory procedure - Adults & Children's social care - and so these are not included in the chart below}:

8.1 The chart below shows performance in the key service areas:



- 46% of complaints were responded to within 28 calendar days. This is a 4% decrease on the previous year. The increase in complaints received has likely affected this alongside the Covid-19 Pandemic; however more work needs to be done to improve timeliness of response.
- The overall average number of days for responding to complaints in 2021/22 was 39 days. Again, this was potentially due to the disruption to service during the Covid-19 pandemic and increase in complaints received.

Ongoing work required across all service areas to improve response times especially in complaints managed through the corporate procedure relating to children's social care and wider people.



The data above does not include complaints resolved within 3 days via problem solving

9. Complaint Outcomes

Sheffield City Council measure the outcomes from complaint investigations/reviews against five main areas:

Service failure remedied (upheld). This is where the complaint has been found to be completely justified and the service has accepted errors were made or inappropriate action(s) were taken.

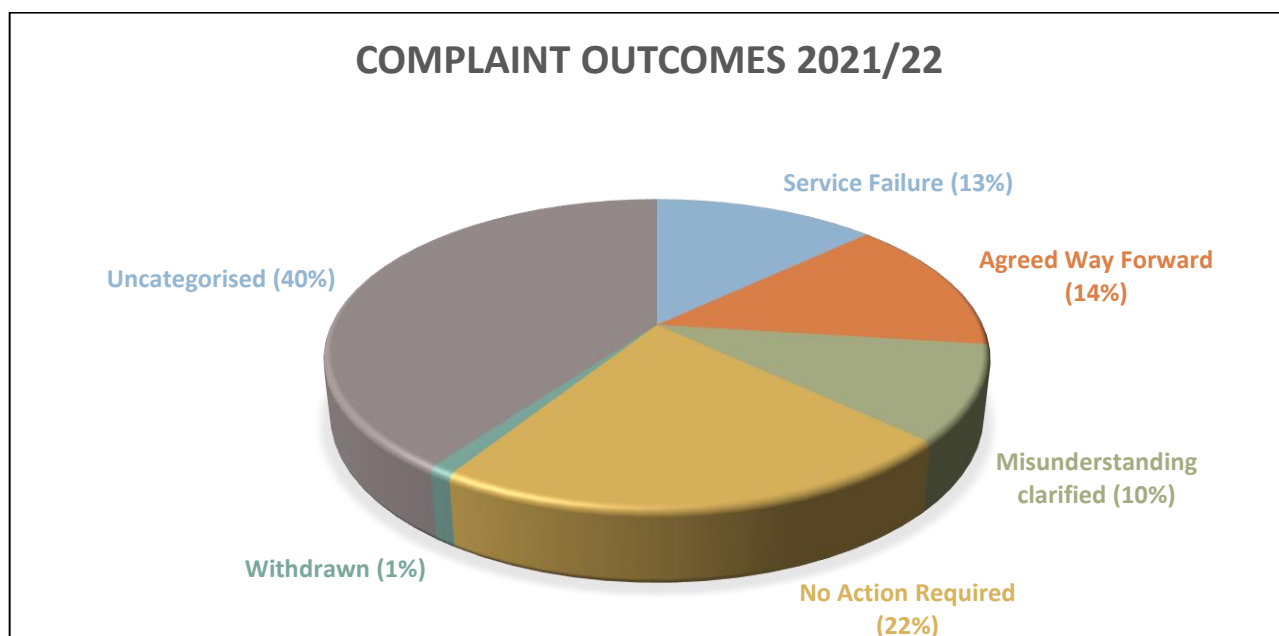
No action necessary (not upheld). This outcome is where the complaint has been found to be completely unjustified and the service is clear that there is no reasonable action which should be taken to improve any aspect of the matter complained about.

Agreed way forward (partially upheld). This is where some elements of the complaint are justified, yet others are not. It is also where, although no inappropriate actions or decisions have been made, the complainant's viewpoint is accepted and there are ways in which improved ways of working could be adopted either for the individual concerned or for all users of the service.

Misunderstanding clarified. This is where, although there have been no inappropriate actions or decisions, the basis of the complaint is found to be a lack of understanding and the complaint response focuses on explaining why certain actions were taken in a manner which is resolution focused. It is likely that improved communication earlier may have prevented the complaint.

Withdrawn. This is when the complainant decides not to pursue their complaint prior to them receiving an outcome. A complaint is not withdrawn if action has been taken to resolve the matter and a response has been made. A complaint is only withdrawn if the complainant did initially intend to make a complaint, then simply changes their mind.

In 2021/22 there were a total of 1176 complaint responses issued that resulted in one of the 6 following outcomes:



A number of outcomes have not been recorded – this is due to an input error which is being remediated

Following the complaint response, where fault is found, Sheffield City Council recognise the need to apologise and ensure corrective action is taken to remediate the issue and make service improvements as required.

Where we identify service failure, we aim to put the complainant back into the position as if the problem had not occurred and our approach to remedies is consistent with the principles used by the Local Government Ombudsman.

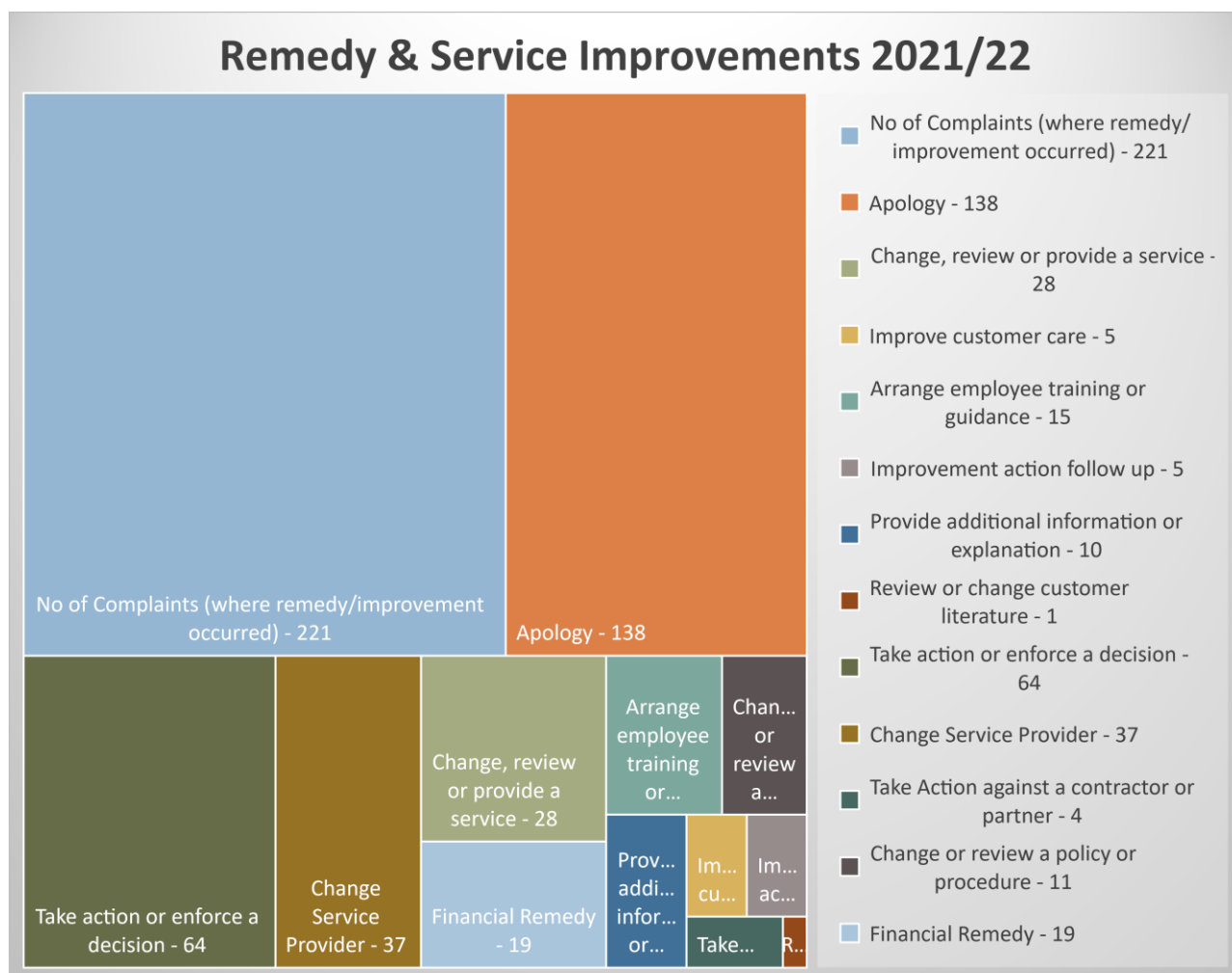
Service failure accounts for 13% (61) of complaints. (This does not include strategic partners)

Further development is required to review the above outcomes definitions to ensure these are unambiguous and more clearly demonstrates where there has been even partial service failure (currently included in the 'Agreed Way Forward' outcome)

10. Complaint Remedies and Service Improvements

In 2021/22 Sheffield City Council recorded 337 remedies or service improvements in respect of 221 complaints. [Note - More than one remedy or service improvement can be recorded against a single complaint].

10.1 The chart below shows remedies and service improvements identified following investigation or review of a complaint:

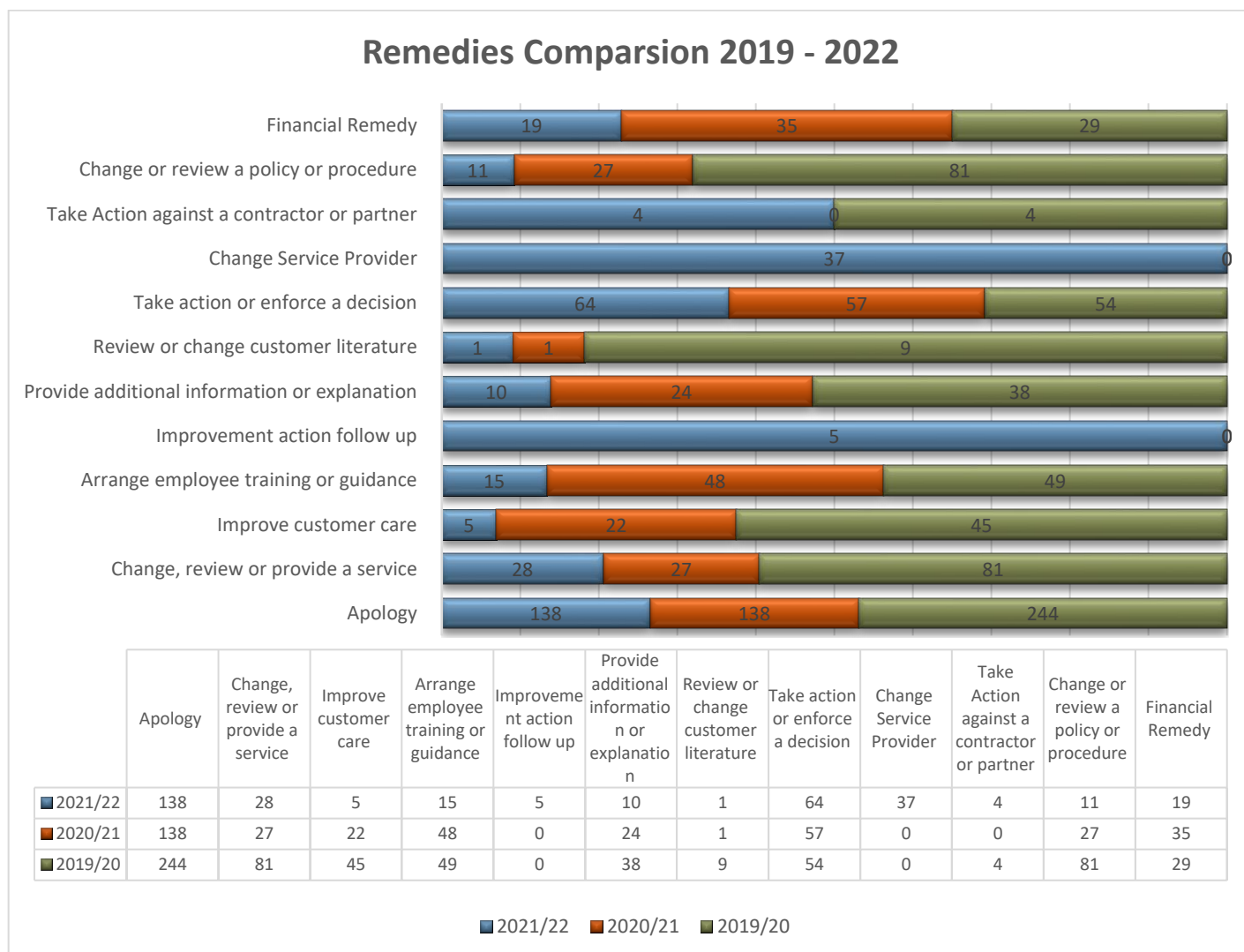


. *This excludes Amey / Veolia data

Top 4 remedies and service improvements were:

1. Apology (138)
2. Take Action or Enforce a Decision (64)
3. Change a Service Provider (37)
4. Change, Review or provide a service (28)

10.2 The chart below shows a comparison of the same data (remedies and service improvements) over the past 3 years:



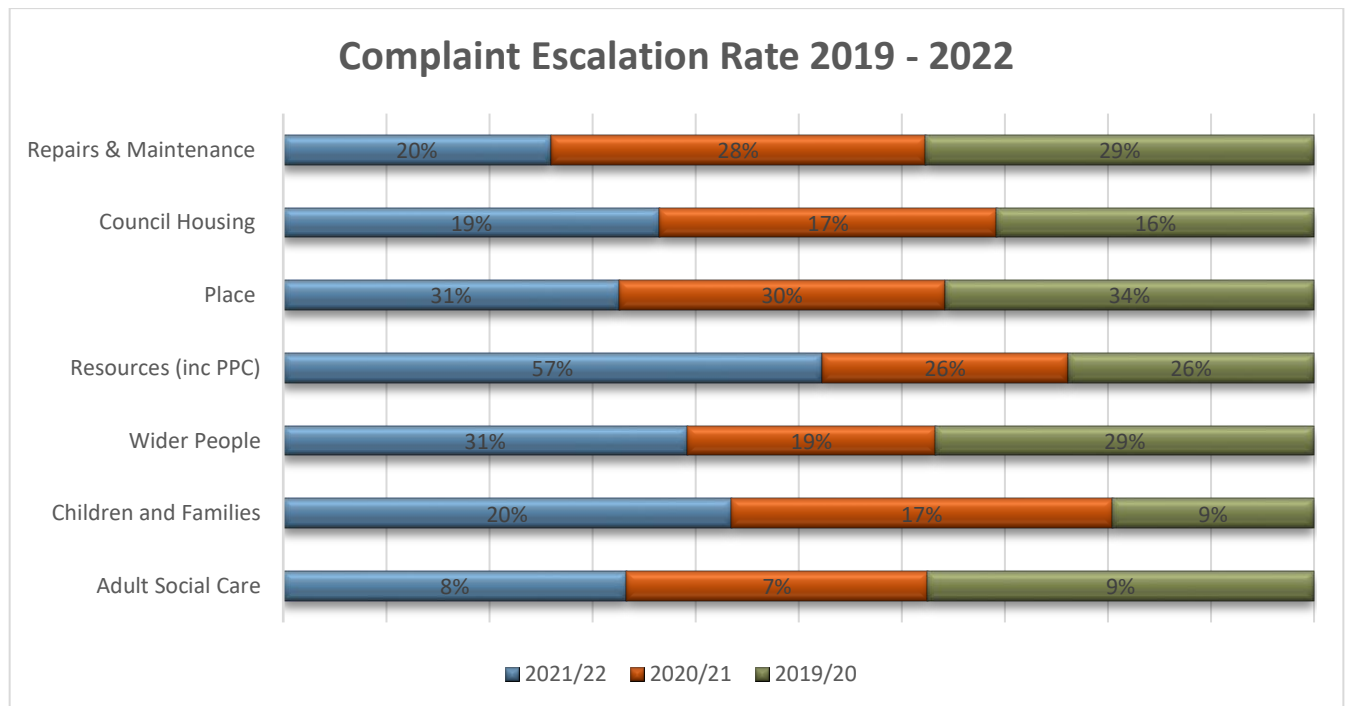
Improvements and Support to services is needed to identify learning and to demonstrate to citizens how learning has been implemented. Also, to ensure the recording of remedies is consistent across the organisation.

Improvement is still required in this area.

11. Complaint Escalations

An important measure of successful complaint handling is the escalation rate i.e. the percentage of complaints where an initial response is issued, and the complainant remains dissatisfied and requests escalation of the response. Lower escalation rates demonstrate improved customer satisfaction as it means complaints are dealt with as early as possible.

11.1 The chart below shows the escalation rates in each reporting area over the past 3 years:



- **Resources** had the highest escalation rate of 57% in 2021/22.
- **Place & Wider People** had the second highest number of escalations (31%) in 2021/22.
- Repairs & Maintenance & Children & Families had the third highest number of escalations (20%) in 2021/22.

The average escalation rate is 27% in the reporting year 2021/22, this is an increase on the two previous years. The average escalation rate for 2020/21 was 21% and 2019/20 was 22%.

12. Ombudsman Complaints

- See Appendix 2

13. Quality Assurance of Complaint Responses

A Quality Assurance Framework is embedded within Sheffield City Council's Feedback and Complaint procedures to review the standards of complaint responses.

It places emphasis on customer focus (personal contact, empathy, positive tone, user friendly) and the complaint outcome (clear explanation of investigation findings, remedies and signposting).

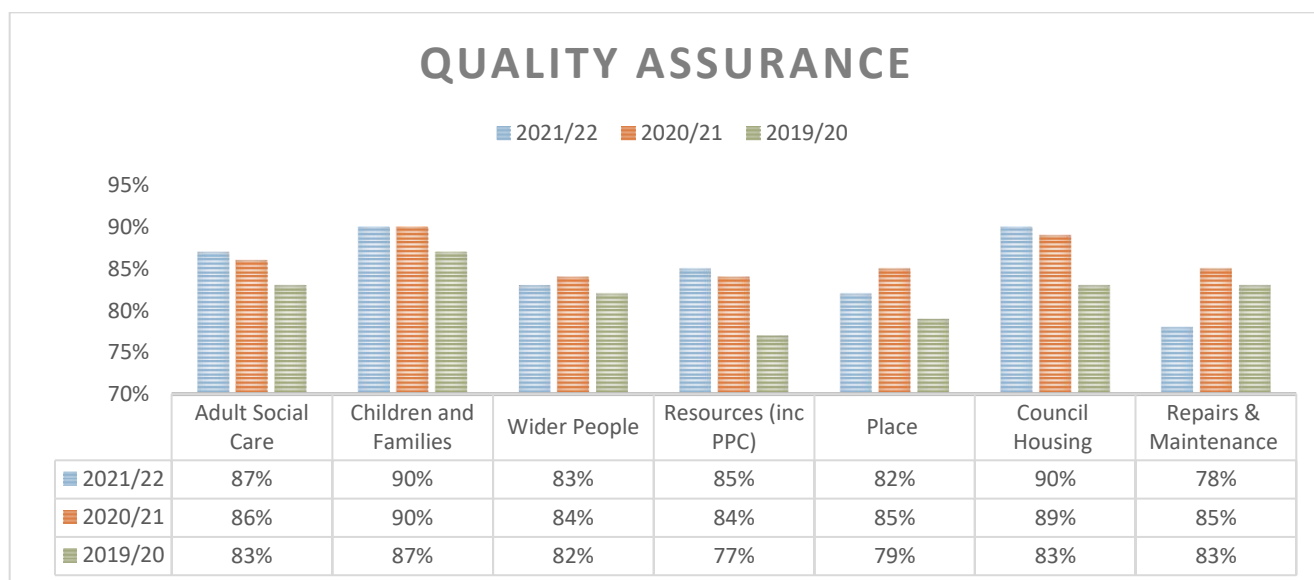
Customer Services Feedback and Complaints team, each quarter will take a sample of responses which are evaluated against the framework as follows:

- Identify areas of improvement and good practice
- Use the outcome of the evaluation to provide a platform for guidance and development on complaint handling

The corporate target for Quality Assurance is 80%. This target will be increased to 85% in 2022/23.

All areas have met or exceed the Quality Assurance Target for 2021/22 except for the Repair & Maintenance Service (78%) a decrease of 7% since the previous year.

The table below shows the results for 2021/22 vs the previous 3 years:



The Quality Assurance Framework requires review, and we propose that the benchmark is raised to 85% from 1st April 2022. All managers will continue to receive ongoing support and training to ensure quality responses. The Feedback & Complaints Team will continue to support services, highlighting responses which fall significantly below this target.

14. Summary of areas of Improvement as noted throughout this document:

We are collaborating with our strategic partners to provide more detailed analysis of high volumes of complaints

Improvements to communication with complainants must be addressed and support provided to responding managers to ensure regular and timely updates. This is an on-going development area.

Further improvements to customer satisfaction is required, especially in the area of quality of service delivery. Poor customer care is unacceptable, and Service Managers should collaborate with staff to ensure citizens are always treated with dignity and respect, and that we listen and learn from the feedback they provide, showing empathy and professionalism when communicating with them.

Equality data is limited and requires further development to ensure that Sheffield City Council can demonstrate that it provides fair and accessible services for all. From August 2022 we started to capture this information on all responses to complaints surveys following closure of the complaint.

Further development is required to improve the digital offer for citizens when making a complaint. Accessibility for non-digitally enabled citizens is currently being considered.

Improvements and Support to services is needed to identify learning and to demonstrate to citizens how learning has been implemented. This will also ensure that the recording of remedies is consistent across the organisation.

The implementation of the new complaints recording system from November 2021 has been designed to capture this information. Staff engagement and compliance is required to ensure this information is consistently and accurately recorded.

The complaint process now includes consistent recording of all complaints resolved, including those resolved through problem solving (at the first point of contact, within three working days).

This information will be available in the 2022/23 report.

The Quality Assurance Framework requires review, and we propose that the benchmark is raised to 85% from 1st April 2022. All managers will continue to receive ongoing support and training to ensure quality responses. The Feedback & Complaints Team will continue to support Services, highlighting responses which fall significantly below this target.

14. Key Focus Areas and Future Developments

The Key Focus Area during 2021/22 has been to launch the new Feedback and Complaints Case Management system. This was successfully implemented on the 2 November 2021.

- ❑ The new Feedback and Complaints Case Management System has been designed to capture all complaints (including those resolved at the Council's 'Problem Solving' stage) in one system. The 'One System One View' approach will ensure consistency in the recording of complaints regardless of access channel used, or the service the complaint is recorded by.
- ❑ Recording all complaints information into one system will provide structured reporting across all three Council Portfolio Areas and will also provide valuable data to individual services to show how they are performing in key areas which we would like to improve.
- ❑ The reporting includes key themes such as timescales and indicating how long a complaint has been open. This will allow us to focus on responding to citizens more efficiently.
- ❑ We have focused on Complaint Ownership and Accountability. The new complaints recording system builds in the Accountable Manager for the Service who is responsible for adherence to the Complaints Policy.
- ❑ The reporting function of complaints will be less labour intensive and more automated to ensure information relating to complaints management is more accessible.
- ❑ The Feedback and Complaints Case Management System has a mandatory functionality to record Learning Outcomes on each complaint recorded which will provide a valuable source of information to develop our services and colleagues to better meet the needs of our citizens.
- ❑ We have launched an internal SharePoint Site to support development and education in respect of complaints including performance and survey results against our agreed KPIs for all services.
- ❑ Training via Teams has been completed by all Case Coordinators who are responsible for recording complaints on the new Feedback and Case Management System.
- ❑ The Feedback and Complaints Team will continue to provide training and support, and to monitor Responding Managers across the Council to ensure an effective transition to, and improvement in complaint handling.
- ❑ The online training course for Effective Complaints Handling has been revised and relaunched from November 2021 which provides advice and support to all staff dealing with complaints.

In addition, the new system will:

- ☐ Give an opportunity to help customers feel listened to and have an improved experience of dealing with us
- ☐ Work in a more efficient way with customer information
- ☐ Help us deal positively with feedback and complaints
- ☐ Keep better records of the feedback and complaints we receive
- ☐ Provide better oversight of the management and handling of customer feedback so that we learn from the things we do well and make improvements where necessary.

15. How to Contact Us

If you would like to make a complaint, suggestion, or compliment, you can do this by completing an on-line form on Sheffield City Council's website:

<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/content/sheffield/home/your-city-council/complaints.html>

You can also telephone us on 0114 273 4567, or write to: Customer Services, Sheffield City Council, Town Hall, Pinstone Street, Sheffield S1 2HH

If you would like to comment on this report, or have any questions about the complaints procedure, please contact the Customer Feedback and Complaints Team at:

Email complaintsmanagers@sheffield.gov.uk

Telephone 0114 273 4567 or write to us at the address given above.