

Annual Complaints Monitoring Report 2023-24

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1. Introduction

I am pleased to introduce our complaints monitoring report for 2023-24. As a Council, we are committed to monitoring and learning from engagements with our service users, so I feel that a report like this, where we take the opportunity to reflect on what our data is telling us, is always important.

Perhaps understandably, society can sometimes view complaints in quite a negative way and criticism of services or individual performance can seem personal, particularly in a small place like Shetland. However, as a Council, we are trying to encourage a more positive way of looking at complaints. Alongside reinforcing our Customer First Charter and encouraging anyone making a complaint to be respectful towards our staff, we are looking to create a 'learning organisation' where staff feel supported to 'learn from experiences and feedback' and use the information to help us become a more responsive and agile organisation. Learning from complaints supports continuous improvement in our processes and practice.

I feel that this is a very useful report. Alongside the performance figures for this past financial year, we have included those for 2021-22 and 2022-23, to help us highlight any trends. Further context is also provided through national average figures, so we can see how we compare beyond our council.

We have sought to provide some commentary on the figures and, where this indicates areas for improvement, highlight them with a clear plan for delivering. It is worth remembering that our Council delivers excellent services to our communities, and we regularly receive positive feedback. So, we have also included some of the compliments our services have received throughout the year. Reflecting on and learning from positive feedback is also important, so that we can celebrate success and look to replicate it in other areas. I found some of the comments made by service users, about the personal experiences of Council services they or their relatives have had, truly touching.

Our Corporate Management Team considers feedback from service users throughout the year and so will monitor this area and the improvement actions highlighted. I would like to conclude this introduction by thanking all of my staff who are involved in handling complaints and customer feedback monitoring.

Maggie Sandison, Chief Executive

"We will be a learning organisation with a culture that supports psychological safety, intellectual bravery, experimentation, innovation and a willingness to learn from our mistakes, our experiences, and from employee, customer and community feedback, without fear or defensiveness".

Our Ambition, 2021-26

2. Performance Summary

To help with context, our Complaints Procedure contains two stages. Stage 1 is the ‘frontline’ response where we aim to provide decisions within five working days. The second stage involves complaints that have not been resolved at stage 1 and those that clearly require investigation. The target response time for stage 2 complaints is 20 working days.

We publish performance information on our website, social media channels and also use a digital display screen in the reception at our offices at 8 North Ness. This coming year, we are also planning to have a new email broadcast service where members of the public can sign-up for monthly updates from the Council. So, we will use all of these channels to publicise these figures.

- Roughly one person in 129 in Shetland made a complaint to the Council last year, which is lower than the national average.
- We received 177 complaints last year, with 175 of those being closed within the year.
- 109 complaints were closed at the first stage, 63 at second stage.
- We generally close around two in three complaints at the first stage. The national average is 85.6%.
- 23 of the 109 complaints closed at Stage 1 were ‘upheld’. 25 were ‘not upheld’ and 34 were ‘resolved’. 14 of the 63 complaints managed at Stage 2 were ‘not upheld’.
- We closed half of our stage 1 complaints within the 5-day target set out in our procedure. For stage 2 complaints, we closed three in ten within the 20-day target.
- Our average time to close a Stage 1 complaint was 27 working days. This is much higher than the national average of 9 days.



3. How we handle complaints

Along with other Councils across Scotland, in March 2021, we adopted the updated Model Complaints Handling Procedures published by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. This means that we have a single process for handling complaints across the Council, which helps to make it easier to follow.

A complaint is defined in the procedure as ***“any expression of dissatisfaction about our action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by us or on our behalf”***.

The procedure sets out the timescales for each stage of the complaints process. Guidance documents accompany the procedure and are all published on our website, here:

[Make a Complaint – Shetland Islands Council](#)

4. Indicator 1 – Complaints Received per 1,000 of Population

In order to help with comparisons across Scotland, all 32 Councils are asked to report on the number of complaints they have received, and this is then shown as a number per thousand of the area’s population.

The population in Shetland, according to National Records of Scotland, is 22,940. So, as we received 177 complaints last year, that gave us a figure for this indicator of 7.7 complaints per 1000 people. Or put another way, roughly one person in 129 in Shetland made a complaint to the Council last year.

This figure has been fairly stable over the past three years, with 162 complaints in 2021-22 and 180 in 2022-23.

It’s interesting to note that the figure for Scotland, as a whole, is 9.9 complaints per 1000 population, so we were lower than the national average.

5. Indicator 2 – Number of Complaints

This indicator looks at the numbers of complaints that were closed at stages 1 and 2 of our procedure. As noted, we received 177 complaints, with 175 of those being closed within the year.

Our procedure includes the aim to resolve complaints as close as possible to the point they are made. So, if a complaint can be resolved at stage 1, that is something we would say was good.

- Out of the 175 complaints closed, 62.3% (109) were closed at Stage 1.
- 63 complaints were closed at Stage 2 of the procedure (36%).
- 3 complaints were closed after they had been escalated (1.7%).

This is an important measure of how our services are doing on complaint management, so it is worth looking back to see how this compares with previous years:

- 2021-22 – 100 complaints were closed at stage 1 (63%)
- 2022-23 – 114 (64%)

This shows that, again, our performance has been pretty steady on this indicator. We generally close around two in three complaints at the first stage.

However, this is quite a bit lower than the national average of 85.6%. This is an area we will take as an improvement action and will seek, through our Corporate Management Team, to make improvements in. Resolving more complaints at a first stage is quite a good indicator of efficiency, so is something we will be keen to improve.

Improvement Action 1 – work with services to seek to improve the logging and closing of complaints made at Stage 1. This will also deliver improvements on indicator 5 (percentage closed within timescales).

6. Indicator 3

Indicator 3 - Complaint Outcomes Stage 1

This indicator seeks information on the number of complaints that were ‘Upheld’, ‘Partially Upheld’, ‘Not Upheld’ or ‘Resolved’ at the first stage in our procedure. These are also useful figures for understanding how the issues are being managed.

Over the past year, 23 of the 109 complaints closed at Stage 1 were ‘Upheld’ – which is just over one in five.

- 27 complaints were Partially Upheld – 25%
- 25 complaints were Not Upheld – 23%
- 34 complaints were Resolved – 31%

Our procedure defines a complaint as having been ‘resolved’ when “**both the Council and the customer agree what action (if any) will be taken to provide full and final resolution for the customer, without making a decision about whether the complaint is upheld or not upheld**”.

How does this compare with previous years?

Table 1 Complaint Outcomes stage 1

Year	Upheld / Percentage	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld	Resolved
2022-23	38 (33.4%)	26 (22.8%)	23 (20.2%)	27 (23.7%)
2021-22	18 (18%)	26 (26%)	28 (28%)	28 (28%)

Looking at the last three years, the number of complaints that were ‘upheld’ at Stage 1 spiked and has come back down to 21%. The rates of ‘partially upheld’ and ‘not upheld’ have remained stable at around one in four. And we have seen the rate of ‘resolved’ complaints at stage 1 at around three in ten.

Indicator 3 – Complaint Outcomes Stage 2

Stage 2 is the final stage that a Council considers complaints. After that, the matter is referred to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Looking at the figures for this past year:

- 11 of the 63 complaints closed at Stage 2 were Upheld – 18%
- 30 Complaints were Partially Upheld – 48%
- 14 Complaints were Not Upheld – 22%
- 8 Complaints were Resolved – 13%

How does this compare with previous years?

Table 2 Complaint Outcomes Stage 2

Year	Upheld / Percentage	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld	Resolved
2022-23	3 (12.5%)	17 (70.8%)	4 (16.7%)	0
2021-22	1 (5.9%)	6 (35.3%)	7 (41.2%)	3 (17.6%)

From this data we can see that the majority of complaints dealt with at Stage 2 tend to be ‘partially upheld’.

Indicator 3 – Complaint Outcomes from Escalated Complaints

When a person who has made a complaint remains dissatisfied with the response they received at Stage 1 of the process, they can escalate it to the second stage. This indicator looks at the outcomes from those escalated complaints. As we had only three complaints that were escalated, the numbers are low for this indicator.

- 1 of the 3 complaints closed after escalation were Upheld - 33%
- No complaints were Partially Upheld after escalation
- No complaints were Not Upheld after escalation
- 2 complaints were Resolved after escalation – 66%

Table 3 Complaint Outcomes from escalated complaints

Year	Upheld / Percentage	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld	Resolved
2022-23	7 (17.1%)	20 (48.8%)	10 (24.4%)	4 (9.8%)
2021-22	4 (9.8%)	22 (53.7%)	11 (26.8%)	4 (9.8%)

Looking at the data, it's clear that we've seen a significant drop over the past three years in the number of complaints that have been escalated. There were 41 in 2021-22 and 2022-23, but that was down to three in 2023-24. We're not entirely sure the reasons for this but will monitor and look for a trend.

7. Indicator 4 – Average Times

Our procedure includes an aim for us to respond to and close all Stage 1 complaints within five working days.

As noted previously, we closed 109 complaints at Stage 1, taking a total time of 2,943 working days to do so. Our average time to close a Stage 1 complaint was 27 working days, which is much higher than we would expect and is a clear area for improvement. However, taken together with the fact we close around half within the five-day timescale, the increase in average time could be caused by a few complaints that have gone significantly over.

The figures for the last 3 years can be seen in the graph and show that our performance in this area has reduced by almost 20 days. The national figure for this indicator is nine days, so this is clearly another area where we will need to seek improvement.

Table 4 Average Time to close stage 1 complaint

Year	Average time to close Stage 1 complaint
2023-24	27 days
2022-23	14.9 days
2021-22	7.2 days

We aim to respond to and close all Stage 2 complaints within 20 working days.

In 2023/2024, we closed 63 complaints at Stage 2, with a total sum of 3,065 working days used to close them. Our average time to close a Stage 2 complaint was 48.7 working days, which, again, is significantly over our target.

Our 3-yearly figures show that this is an indicator where we have actually improved our performance, down from 55.8 days in 2022-23. However, nationally, this figure is 23 days, so we have considerable room for improvement.

Table 5 Average time to close stage 2 complaint

Year	Average time to close Stage 2 complaint
2023-24	48.7 days
2022-23	55.8 days
2021-22	48.2 days

In 2023-24 we closed 3 complaints after Escalation, which took 116 working days to do, making our average time to close a complaint after Escalation 38.7 working days. This was 37.8 in 2021-22 and 29.8 in 2022-23. We lag behind the national average of 20.8 days, so another area we can prioritise to improve on.

Improvement Action 2 – work with services to understand more fully the reasons for the increase in average time to close complaints and seek to reduce these, ensuring that complaints are escalated to Stage 2 when it is apparent the Stage 1 target is unachievable. As part of that work, we will aim to achieve the 2022-23 timescales for stage 1 complaints.

8. Indicator 5 – Performance Against Timescales

Stage 1 – We aim to respond to and close all Stage 1 complaints within 5 working days. In 2023/2024, we closed 109 complaints at Stage 1 with 54 of these within timescale, or around half. The average across Scotland is 66%. 5 (4.6%) were closed after an extension was agreed with the customer.

Stage 2 – we aim to respond to and close all Stage 2 complaints within 20 working days. In 2023/2024, we closed 63 complaints at Stage 2, with 20 of these within timescale, or 31.7%. 17 (27%) were closed after an extension was agreed with the customer.

After Escalation – in 2023/2024, we closed 3 complaints after Escalation, with 1 of these within timescale, or 33.3% and the same number was closed after an extension was agreed with the customer.

Table 6 Comparison table

Year	Stage 1 – closed within 5 days	Stage 2	Escalated
2023-24	54 (49.5%)	20 (31.7%)	1 (33.3%)
2022-23	86 (75.4%)	11 (45.8%)	18 (43.9%)
2021-22	64 (64%)	4 (23.5%)	15 (36.6%)

9. Indicator 6 – Extensions to Timescales

Our Complaints Procedure allows for the timescales in Stage 1 and 2 complaints to be extended by agreement with the person making the complaint. This indicator looks at the number and percentage of complaints at each stage which were closed after an extension to the 5 or 20 day timeline was authorised.

- **Stage 1** - 5 extensions agreed (4.6%)
- **Stage 2** – 17 extensions agreed (27%)
- **Escalated** – 1 extension agreed (33.3%)

Taken in isolation, these figures would tend to indicate we are performing reasonably well in this area, with low numbers of extensions being required. However, when viewed alongside the fact we have exceeded the timescales on stage 1 and 2 complaints by so much, a learning point could be that we are not seeking to agree extensions with people who have made complaints, instead we just run over time. This is something that we will look into further and report to our Corporate Management Team with a view to improving performance.

Improvement Action 3 – look at how services are using the ‘extension’ provision within the complaint’s procedure. Seek to ensure services are aware of this and are confident and able to apply it when required.

10. Indicator 7 – Customer Satisfaction

As soon as a complaint has been closed on our system, we send a short survey to the person who made the complaint. This is really valuable feedback and can help us to identify problems or improvements. We then report the quarterly feedback figures to our Corporate Management Team, which allows the Chief Executive and Directors to explore the data further and share their thoughts on how the process is working in their departments.

The following summary tables help to show the feedback we have received in 2023-24.

1. Information about the complaint's procedure was easily accessible				
Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly Agree		7.69%	2
2	Agree		38.46%	10
3	Neutral		30.77%	8
4	Disagree		15.38%	4
5	Strongly Disagree		7.69%	2
			answered	26
			skipped	0

2. I found it easy to make my complaint				
Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly Agree		7.69%	2
2	Agree		38.46%	10
3	Neutral		23.08%	6
4	Disagree		23.08%	6
5	Strongly Disagree		7.69%	2
			answered	26
			skipped	0

3. I was happy that the Investigating Officer fully understood my complaint

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		19.23%	5
2	Agree		19.23%	5
3	Neither agree nor disagree		19.23%	5
4	Disagree		15.38%	4
5	Strongly disagree		26.92%	7
			answered	26
			skipped	0

4. I was given the opportunity to fully explain my complaint

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		15.38%	4
2	Agree		42.31%	11
3	Neither agree nor disagree		19.23%	5
4	Disagree		7.69%	2
5	Strongly disagree		15.38%	4
			answered	26
			skipped	0

5. The points of my complaint were identified and responded to

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		7.69%	2
2	Agree		34.62%	9
3	Neither agree nor disagree		19.23%	5
4	Disagree		11.54%	3
5	Strongly disagree		26.92%	7
			answered	26
			skipped	0

6. The response to my complaint was easy to understand

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		7.69%	2
2	Agree		50.00%	13
3	Neither agree nor disagree		23.08%	6
4	Disagree		7.69%	2
5	Strongly disagree		11.54%	3
			answered	26
			skipped	0

7. Overall, I was satisfied with the handling of my complaint

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		3.85%	1
2	Agree		23.08%	6
3	Neither agree nor disagree		19.23%	5
4	Disagree		26.92%	7
5	Strongly disagree		26.92%	7
			answered	26
			skipped	0

8. I was told if the response was going to take longer than the set timescales (five working days at stage 1 and 20 working days at stage 2)

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		0.00%	0
2	Agree		15.38%	4
3	Neither agree nor disagree		15.38%	4
4	Disagree		15.38%	4
5	Strongly disagree		23.08%	6
6	Not applicable		30.77%	8
			answered	26
			skipped	0

9. I was clearly told what the next stage of the complaints process was for me

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Strongly agree		3.85%	1
2	Agree		38.46%	10
3	Neither agree nor disagree		26.92%	7
4	Disagree		11.54%	3
5	Strongly disagree		19.23%	5
			answered	26
			skipped	0

11. Indicator 8 – Learning from Complaints – Reporting

Our Corporate Management Team meets every eight weeks throughout the year as ‘Learning Board’. This is an important way for us to reflect on various aspects of our service delivery and seek to examine and learn from data and experiences of our managers.

The meetings provide an opportunity to bring complaints monitoring data to the attention of the senior team, with the aforementioned satisfaction figures being reported alongside data on complaints received and closed, a further examination of complaints where the outcome has been ‘upheld’ or ‘partially upheld’, with some exploration of the root causes and any learning that has been logged on our system by the service. A theme that has arisen on a number of occasions is the need to be better at communication with our customers, particularly where services have been disrupted for some reason.

Our reports to CMT also highlight where complaints have not yet been closed and are going beyond our timescales, picking up on some of the data mentioned in this report.

As well as the oversight provided by our managers, throughout the year we report figures to Committee meetings every 3 months as part of the ways we manage our performance. These are included as key performance indicators, alongside each Directorate’s data and other organisation-wide information like freedom of information responses, audit recommendations and sickness absence.

This gives councillors a chance to discuss the complaints figures and ask for any further information. An example of a recent performance report, with the complaints figures included in Appendix D, can be found here - [Shetland Islands Council Committee Information - Submission Documents](#).

Footage from our Committee meetings is available to view through our webcasting library, here:

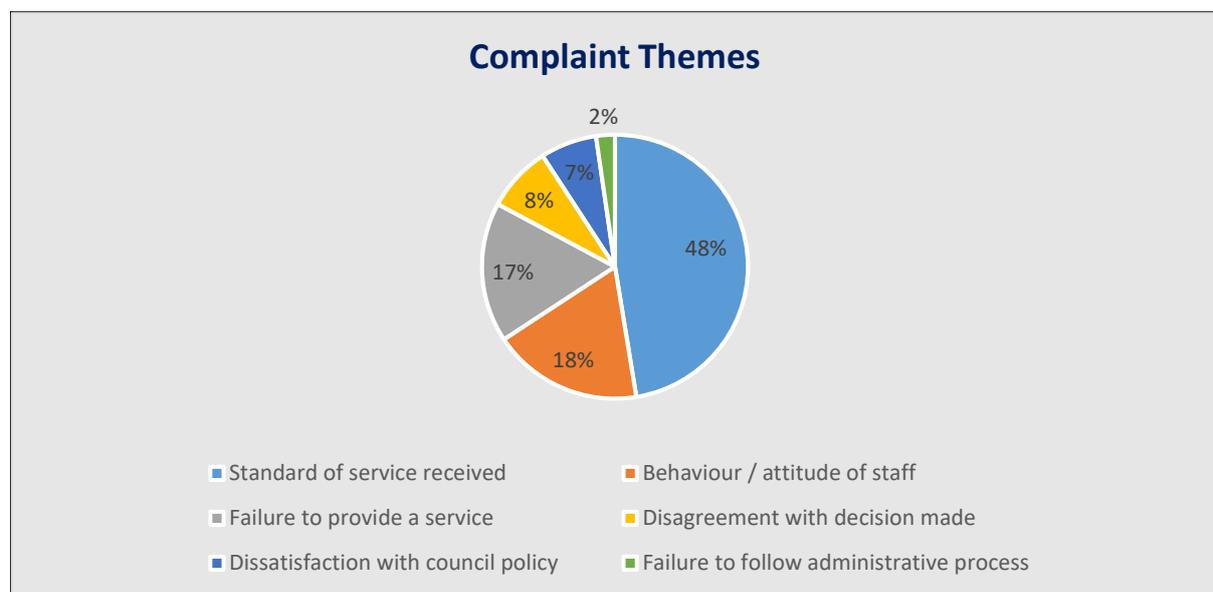
[Webcast library - Shetland Islands Council Webcasting](#)

12. Indicator 9 – Learning from Complaints – Improvements

Looking at the data overall helps us to understand if there are any patterns in the types of complaints we receive and where we can plan improvements. The figures for this past year show that, by far, the theme most complained about relates to the standard of services received. It is perhaps no surprise this is the case as something going wrong with a service would seem to be a natural reason for making a complaint.

We note that behaviour/attitude of staff is second highest and we will do more work to understand the reasons for that. Again, it's natural that someone making a complaint won't always agree with staff and that may feature in the complaint itself, but we expect all of our staff to adhere to our Customer First Charter and our Values. It is interesting to note in the satisfaction data mentioned in the previous section, 57.69% of respondents said that they felt they had been given the opportunity to fully explain their complaint and 42.31% felt that the points in their complaint had been identified and responded to. So, it is perhaps less about the staff who are managing the complaints and more focused on service-related issues.

The third largest area of complaints relates to a failure to provide a service. Again, this is probably to be expected and links to standard of service, both of which would indicate some form of service disruption has been experienced.



13. Referrals to Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO)

When our Council's procedure has been completed at Stage 2, complainants who remain dissatisfied with the response they have received can refer the matter to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Further details of the SPSO's function are available on their website: [Home | SPSO](#)

Over the 2023-24 financial year, **seven** complaints about the Council were referred to the SPSO for review. **None of these resulted in follow-up investigation.** In providing feedback to complainants to explain the reasoning for the course of action being taken, SPSO Complaints Reviewers referred to the fact the Council's procedure had been followed appropriately, with some of the comments being:

"The Council provided a clear response which addressed your points of concern, explaining the steps they took to investigate and the reasons for their position".

"The Council's response to your complaint appears reasonable. This is because they have explained the steps, they have taken to investigate your complaint and they have provided a clear and detailed response".

"I consider the Council's response is reasonable and they have demonstrated that they have taken your complaint seriously by identifying actions for improvement".

This is an important piece of performance data, helping to provide some external validation of the fact Council staff are effectively applying our processes.

14. Positive Feedback

Learning also comes from the positive feedback we receive as a Council, with the aim of sharing and embedding good practice across the organisation. This is an area where we recognise we could be doing more – with the focus generally on complaints and when things have gone wrong. However, for the first time this year, CMT Learning Board took a report on the positive feedback that had been logged. It covered the previous two years for which there was data on our systems and was, admittedly, not a complete record. However, the data showed that:

- **62 compliments** had been logged for the **Community Health & Social Care Department**. Most of the compliments were in Adult Care services.
- **19 compliments** were logged in the **Infrastructure Services Department**. Most of those were in the ferries service and usually recounting experiences where crewmembers had provided excellent customer service.

- **1 compliment** was logged in the **Children's Services Department**. However, it was acknowledged that not all of the positive feedback had been logged on the central system, with some areas like the schools service and Library maintaining local records.

Some examples of the positive comments received included:

Community Health & Social Care:-

"Mum was very comfortable in her short time in care and she couldn't have hoped for better carers - everyone was so professional, caring and supportive.....This is exactly the type of care dementia sufferers need when they are no longer able to stay in their own homes and should be a model Shetland Islands Council promotes to the rest of the country and the Scottish Government!"

"We would all like to say a massive thank you to you and all your team who have helped mam in every way possible, it's such a brilliant job you all do and you are respected and appreciated more than you with ever know....thank you all"

Infrastructure:-

"We have been travelling around Shetland this past 4 weeks in a motorhome, and we wanted to say a big thank you for keeping the public toilets and waste bins clean and tidy, you have the best toilets in the UK keep up the good work, and a great ferry service"

"An email was received to pass on thanks to the crew at Gutcher. The crew assisted her when her car would not start and pushed her car on and off the ferry and then also assisted in getting her car started again. The crew also gave her contact details of who she could speak to in Unst to check over the car. She described the crew as cheerful, kind and hard-working and wanted to ensure that management were aware of this".

"A Customer Feedback Form was received from a passenger who had used the Fetlar Service whilst on holiday. The feedback received was that the service was friendly, helpful, prompt and impressive and they hoped this kind of service would continue into the future".

"A Customer Feedback Form was received through the mail. The passenger wanted to express their gratitude to the crew of the Snolda ferry and wanted the crew to be thanked officially for their thoughtfulness and the kindness that was shown to them on their recent travel on board".

"Ferry Crew spreading salt and clearing passenger walkways at Ulsta and also update to the Yell Voicebank advising passengers of possible delays due to weather conditions at Toft. The update also included an option for passengers to come for an earlier ferry due to the later departure around lunchtime which was seen as a very clear and sensible message".

Executive Services

“Thank you very much for your invaluable help both before and during our recent event at the Town Hall. Your spontaneous and cheerful participation was very much appreciated. With warm thanks”.

Housing Services

Housing Services staff log and monitor feedback from tenants, including carrying out a Repair Satisfaction Survey. The overall year to date satisfaction level with the repairs service is 91%, based on 106 responses. Some comments included:

“Joiners were very polite, efficient and organised, a real credit to sic housing. They explained what they would be doing, the timescale involved and were happy to answer questions”.

“You guys where brilliant, phoned in the morning and job was done by late afternoon. Your tradesman was very friendly and very helpful great job thank you”.

Improvement Action 4 – produce features to highlight positive feedback and publish these on the staff engagement portal and website.

14. Improvement Actions Summary

1. Work with services to seek to improve the logging and closing of complaints made at Stage 1.
2. Work with services to understand more fully the reasons for the increase in average time to close complaints and seek to reduce these, ensuring that complaints are escalated to Stage 2 when it is apparent the Stage 1 target is unachievable. As part of that work, we will aim to achieve the 2022-23 timescales for stage 1 complaints.
3. Look at how services are using the ‘extension’ provision within the complaint’s procedure. Seek to ensure services are aware of this and are confident and able to apply it when required.
4. Produce features to highlight positive feedback and publish these on the staff engagement portal and website.