



# **DARLINGTON**

Borough Council

## **Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Annual Report 2021/22**

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## **Introduction**

1. This report provides an analysis of the complaints, compliments and comments received by the Council during 2021/22 under the Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure (the procedure). The purpose of the report is to identify topics and trends in relation to complaints; identify areas of organisational learning that have taken place over the past year as a result of the complaints received and make further recommendations based on trend data to improve services. The report also highlights any areas of good practice and seeks to identify topics and trends in relation to comments made by members of the public so that the Council can take action where appropriate to improve services.
2. In addition to the statistical information presented in this report it is important to recognise the work of the Complaints and Information Governance (CIG) Team that underpins this in terms of promoting an organisational culture in which complaints are recognised, accepted, owned and resolved as efficiently and as close to the point of service delivery as possible. This also enables the Council to collect accurate information on complaints in order to identify topics and trends and improve services accordingly.
3. It is also important to recognise the work of Housing Services who have ensured that all senior management have taken part in the Housing Ombudsman online complaint training in 2021 with a plan for Housing Officers to also complete this training thereby enhancing the offer to customers and increasing Officer knowledge.

## **Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure**

4. The procedure sets out how the Council will deal with complaints, compliments and comments received about the Council as a social landlord (as well as in respect of its ownership and management of leasehold housing).
5. The procedure has three stages. Stage 1 is a local resolution stage where we try to resolve those complaints that cannot be resolved immediately as part of our day to day business. Stage 1 complaints are dealt with locally, that is within the service being complained about. We aim to resolve the majority of complaints at Stage 1 of the procedure.
6. Stage 2 is a formal investigation stage where complaints will usually be investigated by the Complaints Investigator or Complaints Manager.
7. Stage 3 is a mandatory stage between the Council and the Housing Ombudsman. This is referred to as the 'designated person' or 'democratic filter'. The designated person or democratic filter can be an MP, a local Councillor or a recognised Tenant Panel (from here onwards referred to as the Tenants' Complaints Panel, to differentiate it from our Tenant Panel). In Darlington we do not currently have a recognised Tenants' Complaints Panel. Should a tenant remain dissatisfied with the Council's response to their complaint, they will be required to refer the matter to the 'designated person' or

'democratic filter'. The 'designated person' or 'democratic filter' may help resolve the complaint directly, refer the complaint to the Housing Ombudsman or decide to do neither. If the 'designated person' or 'democratic filter' decides not to take any action the complainant will be entitled to refer the matter to the Housing Ombudsman directly. The complainant will also be able to approach the Housing Ombudsman directly in cases where eight weeks have elapsed since the Council's response to their complaint at Stage 2 of the procedure.

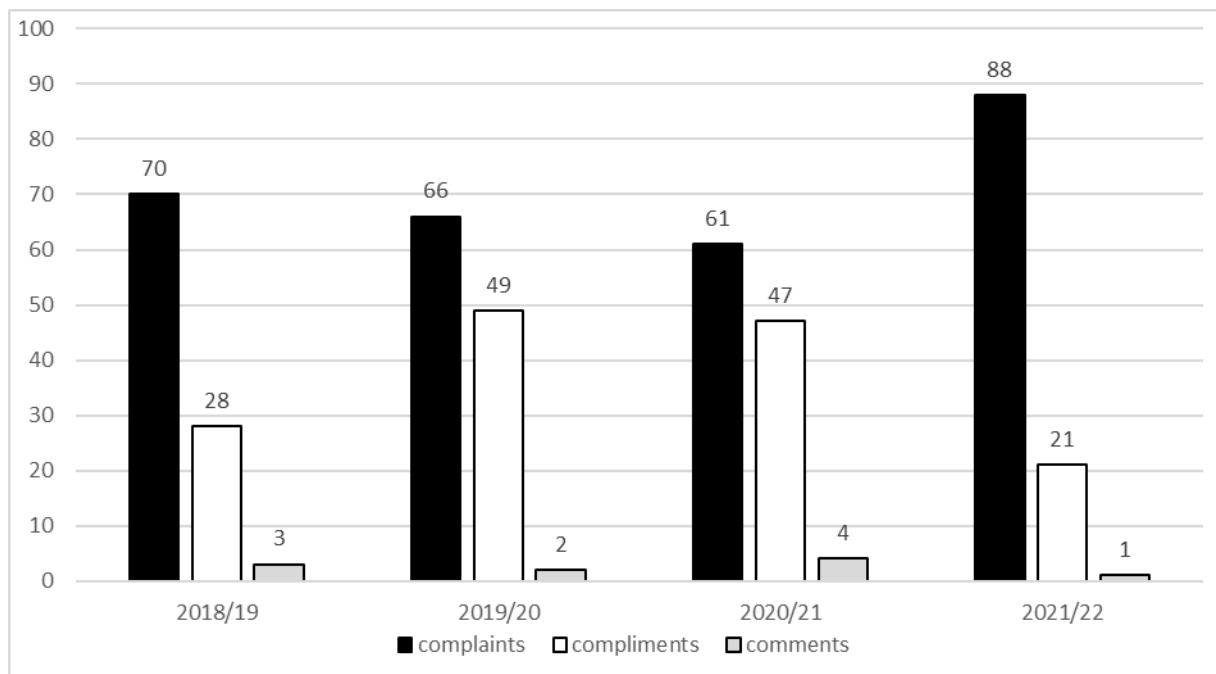
### **Public Information and Accessibility**

8. We are committed to making sure that everyone has equal access to all our services. To help make sure the Council's complaints procedures are easily accessible we have produced two leaflets (one for children and young people and one for adults) covering all Council services to reflect the single point of access for complainants within the Council. The leaflets are available in all Council buildings. They have been written in line with the Plain English Campaign standards. The title is written in the most commonly used community languages and it contains details on how to access the information in other formats, for example, large print, audio and Braille.
9. Information is available on the Council's website which contains an electronic form people can use to make a complaint, pay someone a compliment or pass comment on Council services. People may make a complaint in any format they wish. This can be in writing, email, via the web, over the phone, in person or by any other reasonable means.
10. The Complaints and Information Governance Manager can arrange advocates and interpreters (including British Sign Language interpreters) where appropriate.

## Complaints Information and Organisational Learning

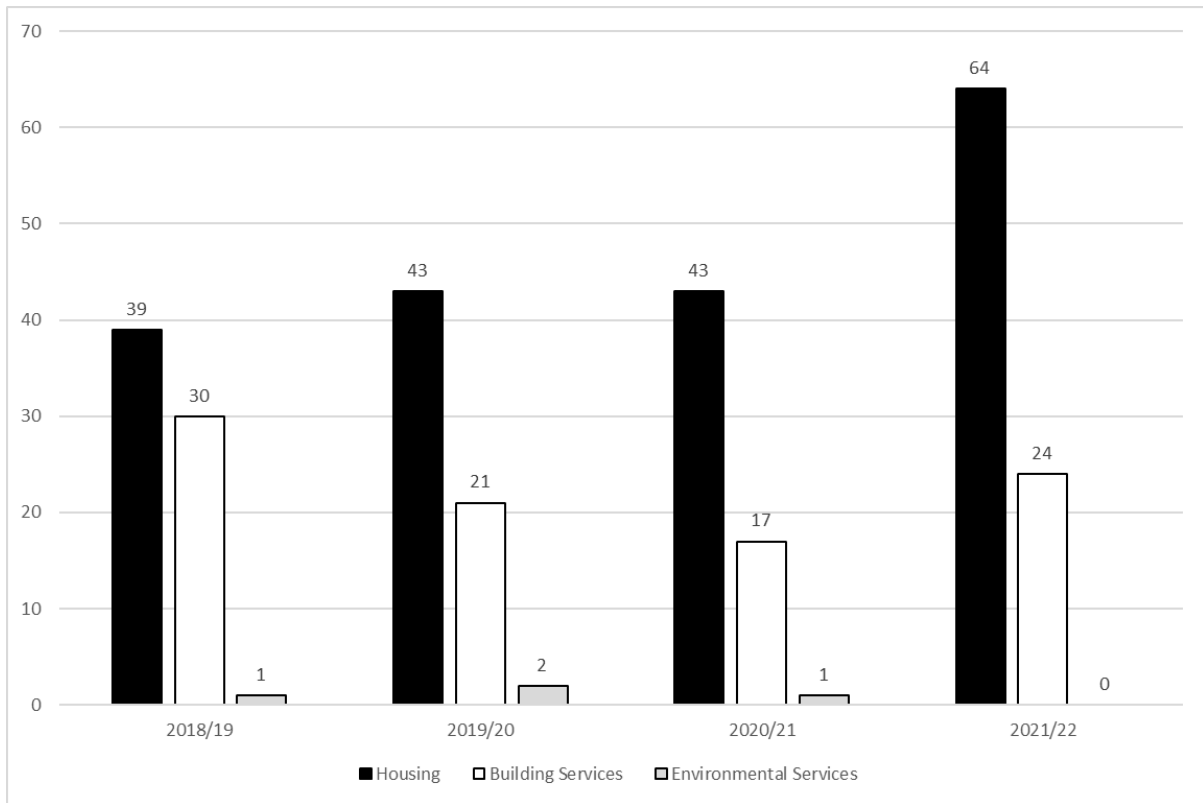
### Overview of Complaints, Compliments and Comments

#### Total Complaints, Compliments and Comments



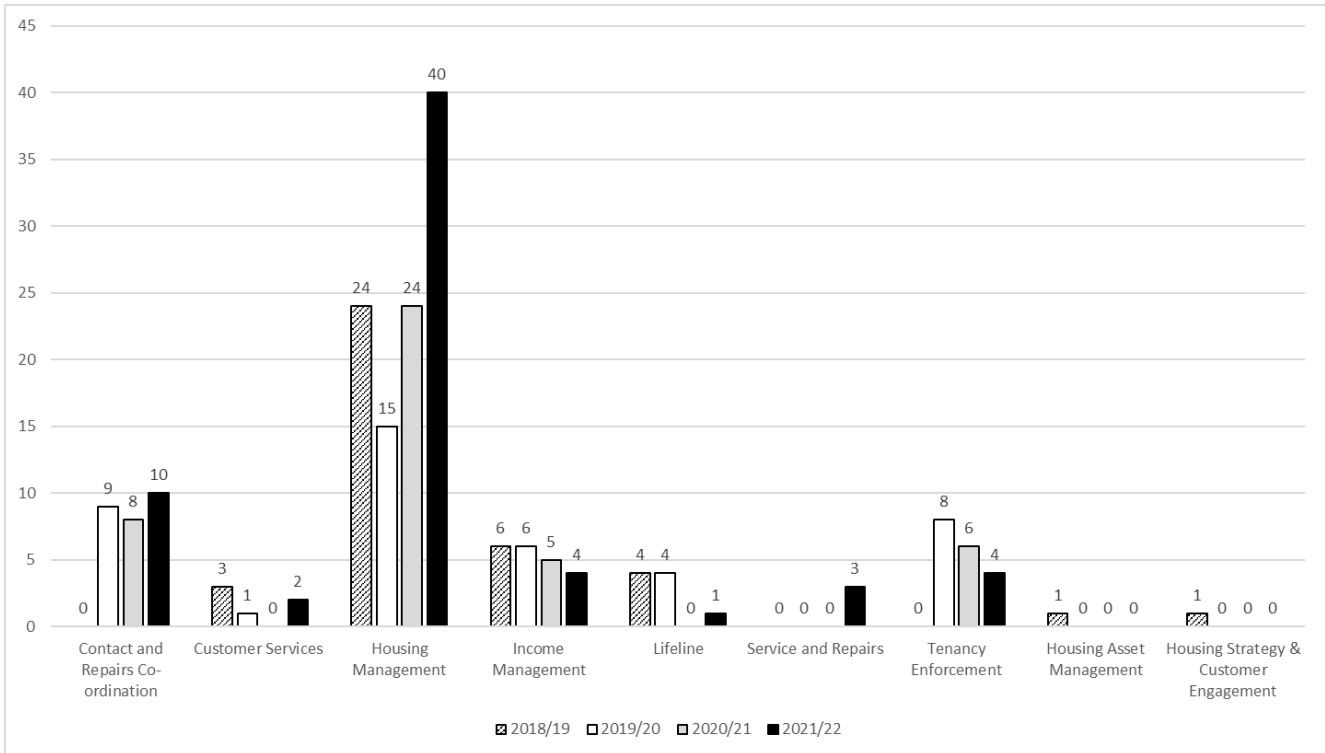
11. Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 the Council received a total of 88 complaints under the procedure, a significant increase from 61 in 2020/21, 66 in 2019/20 and 70 in 2018/19. Housing Services have recently encouraged residents to make contact through the Housing Facebook page, which has continued to increase its number of followers and set up an additional complaints page within their section of the Council's website, which may in part account for the increase. We believe the increase is also, in part, attributable to the legacy of the pandemic, with people reporting fewer issues in the earlier part of the pandemic and spending more time at home resulting in the need for increased contact and repairs during 2020/21. As a result of the restrictions in place officers also had less of a presence in neighbourhoods meaning they were unable to resolve issues as part of their day to day work.
12. A total of 16 complaints were considered at Stage 2, an increase from 13 in 2020/21, seven in 2019/20 and 10 in 2018/19. All of the Stage 2 complaints were initially dealt with at Stage 1. No complaints were considered at Stage 3, as was the case in 2020/21, 2019/20 and 2018/19.
13. The Council received 21 compliments under the procedure, a significant decrease from 47 in 2020/21, 49 in 2019/20 and 28 in 2018/19.
14. The Council also receive one comment under the procedure, a decrease from four in 2020/21, two in 2019/20 and three in 2018/19.

### Complaints by Service



15. Housing received 64 complaints, an increase from 43 in 2020/21 and 2019/20 and 39 in 2018/19.
16. Building Services received 24 complaints, an increase from 17 in 2020/21, 21 in 2019/20 and a decrease from 30 in 2018/19.
17. Environmental Services did not receive any complaints, a decrease from one in 2020/21, two in 2019/20 and 1 in 2018/19.

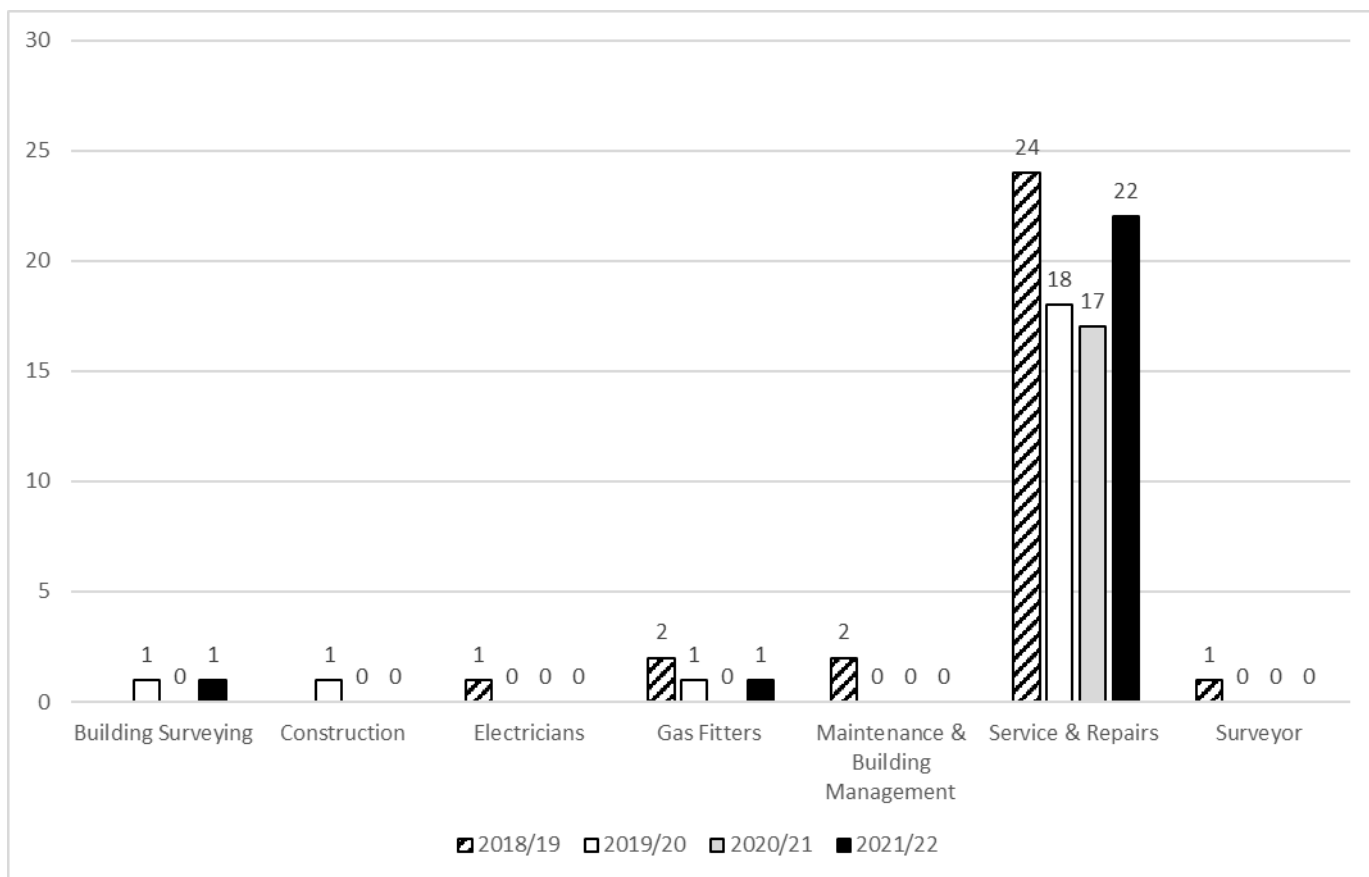
### Complaints by Team – Housing Service



18. Housing Management received 40 complaints, a significant increase from 24 in 2020/21, 15 in 2019/20 and 24 in 2018/19. There is no particular theme that would account for the increase. Complaints concerned communication, the service provided in relation to various housing management issues, dissatisfaction with proposed repairs, changes to the tenancy agreement and the wording of the gas check letter.
19. Contact & Repairs Co-ordination received 10 complaints, an increase from eight complaints in 2020/21, nine in 2019/20 and zero in 2018/19. Complaints concerned communication, appointments not being kept and delays in undertaking repairs.
20. Customer Services received two complaints, compared to zero complaints in 2020/21, one in 2019/20 and three in 2018/19.
21. Housing Income Management received four complaints, a decrease from five complaints in 2020/21 and six in 2019/20 and 2018/19. There were no identifiable themes in the complaints received.
22. Lifeline received one complaint, and increase from zero complaints 2020/21, but a decrease from four in 2019/20 and 2018/19.
23. Service and Repairs received three complaints, compared to zero in 2020/21, 2019/20 and 2018/19.
24. Tenancy Enforcement received four complaints, a decrease from six complaints in 2020/21, eight in 2019/20 and an increase from zero in 2018/19.

- 25. Housing Asset management did not receive any complaints, as was the case in 2020/21, 2019/20. They received one complaint in 2018/19.
- 26. Housing Strategy & Customer Engagement did not receive any complaints, as was the case in 2020/21, 2019/20. They received one complaint in 2018/19.

### Complaints by Team – Building Services

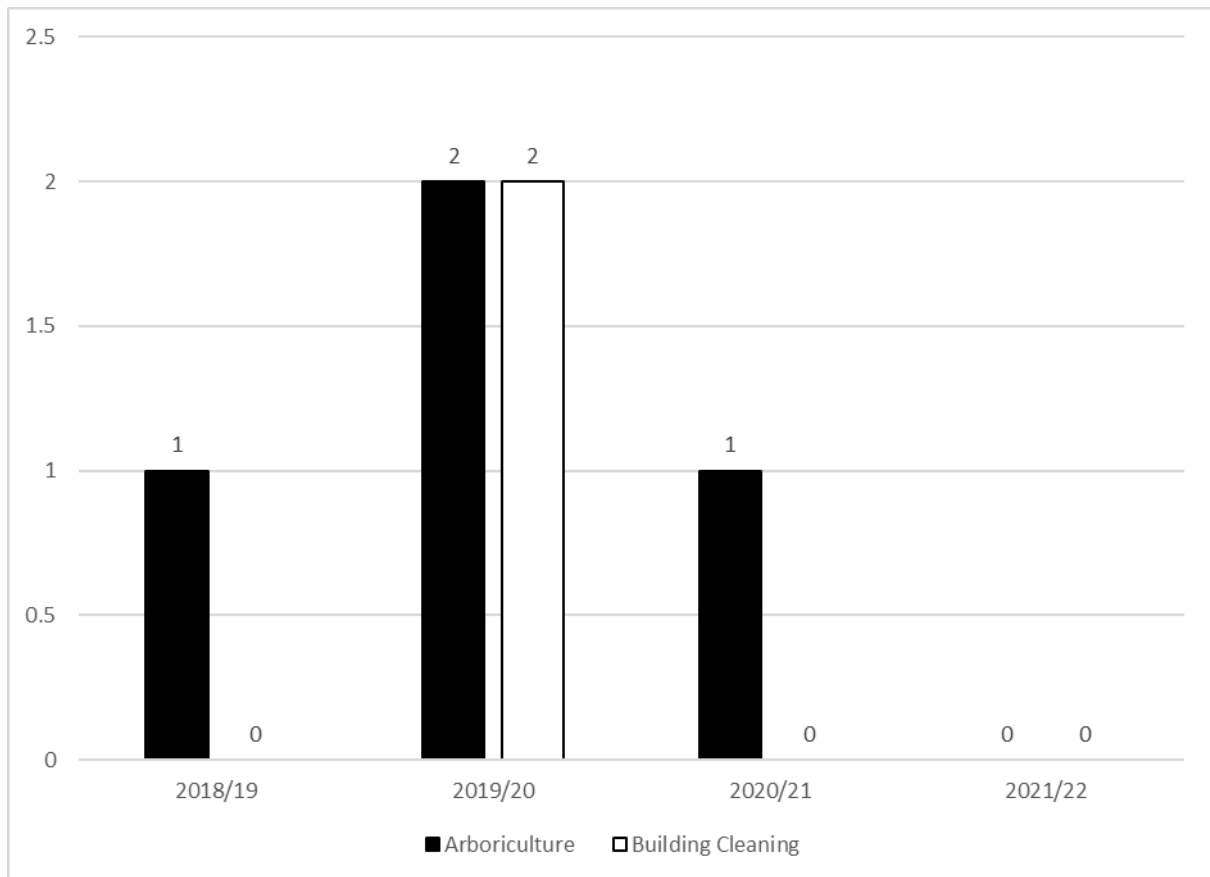


- 27. Building Surveying received one complaint, compared to zero in 2020/21, one in 2019/20 and zero in 2018/19.
- 28. Construction received zero complaints, the same as in 2020/21, compared to one in 2019/20 and zero in 2018/19.
- 29. Electricians received zero complaints again, as in 2020/21 and 2019/20. They received one complaint in 2018/19.
- 30. Gas Fitters received one complaint, compared to zero in 2020/21, one in 2019/20 and two in 2018/19.
- 31. Maintenance & Building Management received zero complaints again, as in 2020/21 and 2019/20. They received two complaints in 2018/19.



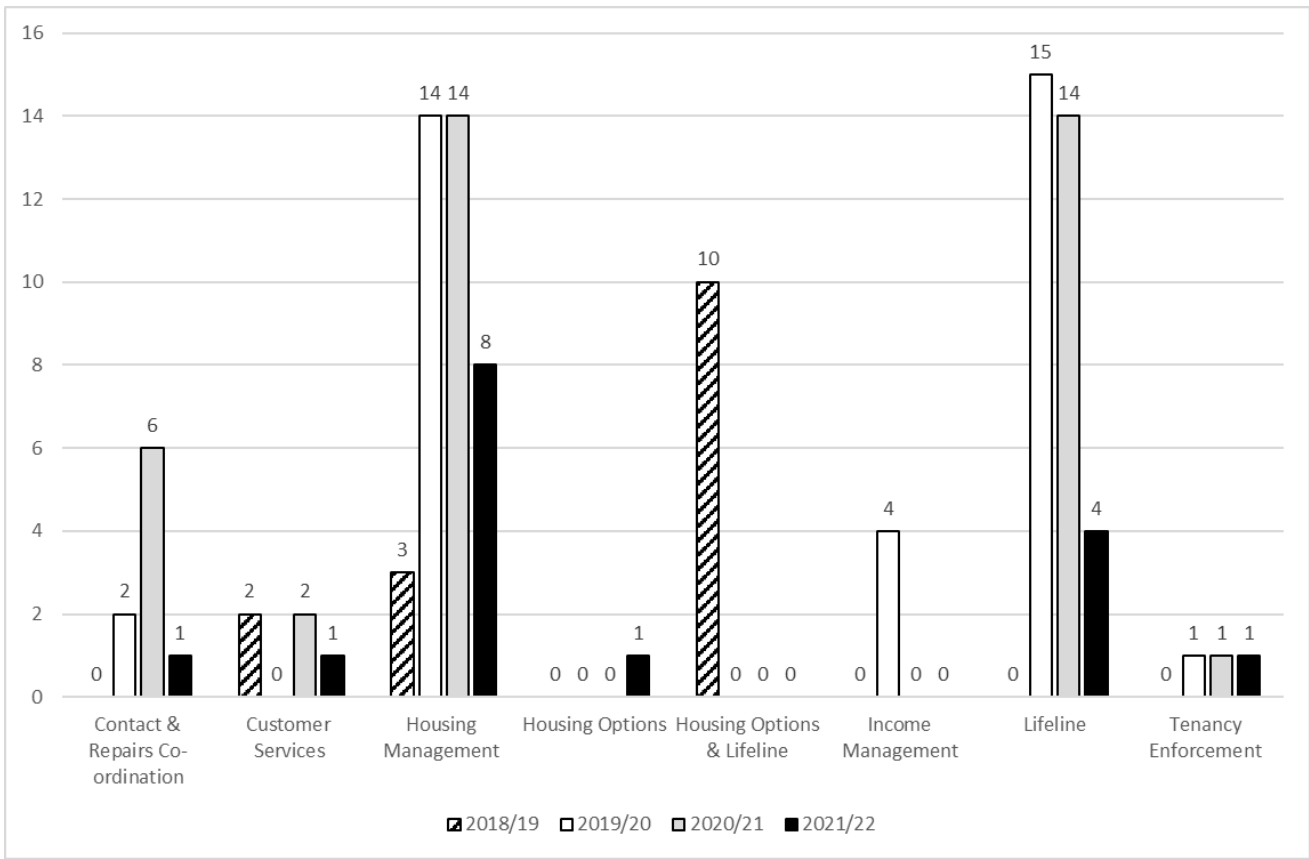
- 32. Service & Repairs received 22 complaints, an increase from 17 in 2020/21, 18 in 2019/20 and a decrease from 24 in 2018/19. The most common cause of complaints were dissatisfaction with quality of repairs, the time take to complete repairs and staff attitude.
- 33. Surveyor did not receive any complaints, as was the case in 2020/21, 2019/20. They received one complaint in 2018/19.

### Complaints by Team - Environmental Services



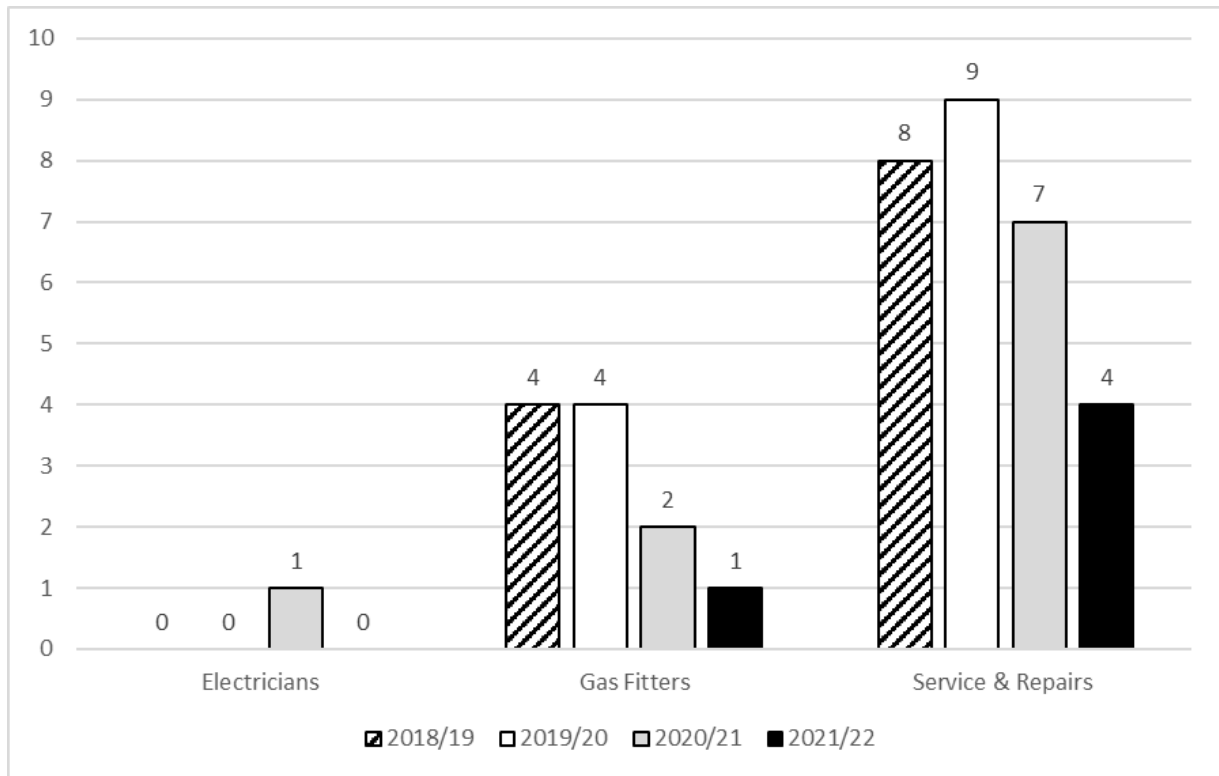
- 34. Arboriculture did not receive any complaints, compared to one in 2020/21, two in 2019/20 and one in 2018/19.
- 35. Building Cleaning did not receive any complaints, the same number as in 2020/21, a decrease from two in 2019/20 and the same number as in 2018/19.

### Compliments by Team – Housing Services



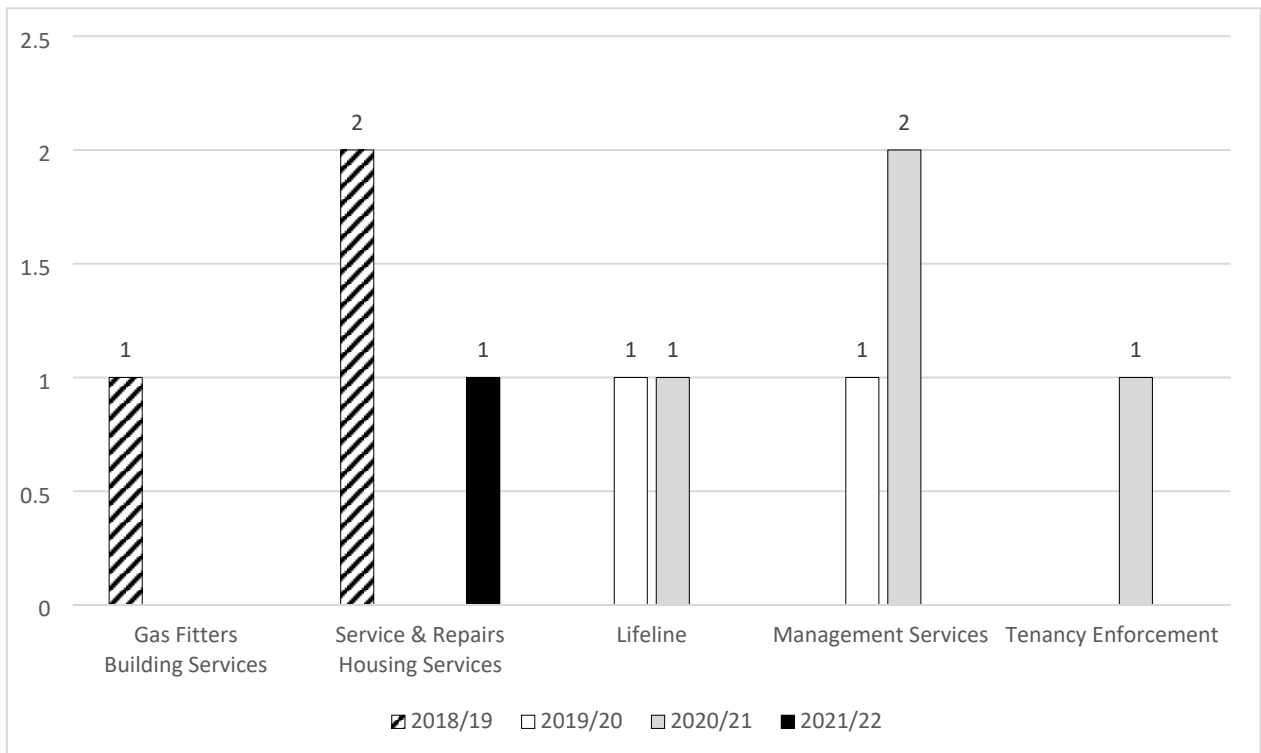
36. Housing received 16 compliments, a significant decrease from 37 in 2020/21, 36 in 2019/20, although slightly higher than the 15 received in 2018/19.

### Compliments by Team – Building Services



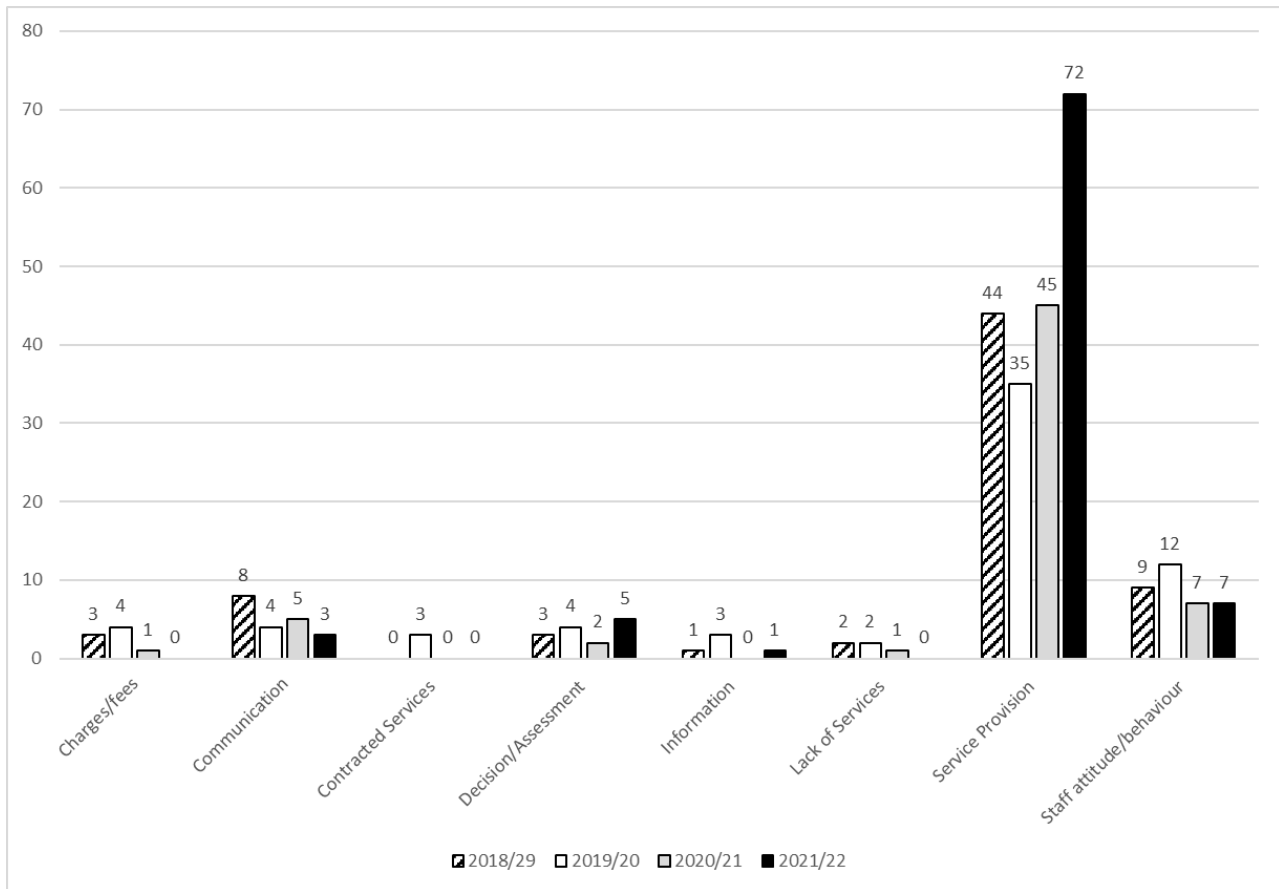
37. Building Services received five compliments, a decrease from 10 in 2020/21, 13 in 2019/20 and 12 in 2018/19.

### Comments by Team - Housing



38. The Council received one comment, a decrease from four 2020/21, two in 2019/20 and three in 2018/19.

### Complaints by Issue

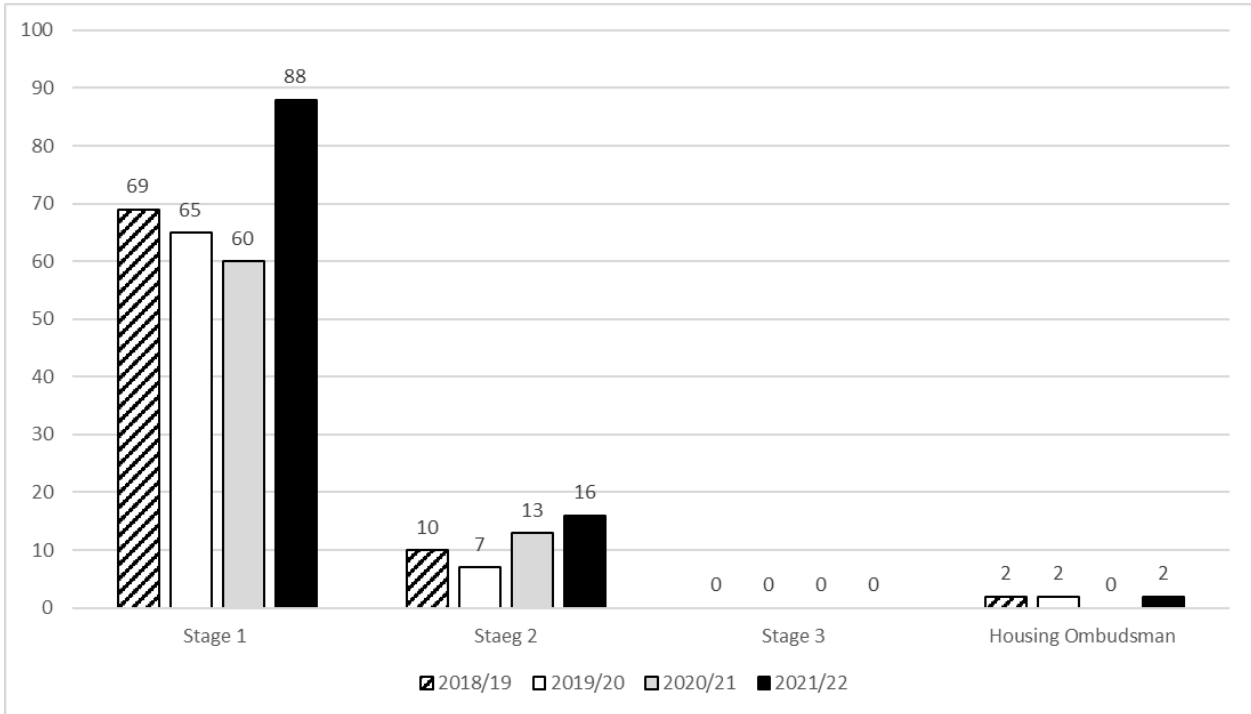


39. No complaints related to charges/fees, compared to one in 2020/21, four in 2019/20 and three in 2018/19.
40. Three complaints related to communication, compared to five in 2020/21, four in 2019/20 and 8 in 2018/19.
41. No complaints concerned contracted services, as was the case in 2020/21, a decrease from three in 2019/20 and the same number as in 2018/19.
42. Five complaints related to decision/assessments, an increase from two in 2020/21, four 2019/20 and 3 in 2018/19.
43. One complaint related to informaiton, compared to zero in 2020/21, three in 2019/20 and one in 2018/19.
44. There were no complaints about lack of services, compared to one in 2020/21, two in 2019/20 and 2018/19.
45. There were 72 complaints about service provision, a significant increase from 45 in 2020/21, 35 in 2019/20 and 44 in 2018/19.

46. Seven complaints related to staff attitude/behaviour, the same number as in 2020/21, a decrease from 12 in 2019/20 and nine in 2018/19.

### Complaints by Stage

47. The below graph shows the number of complaints received at each stage of the procedure during 2021/22.



48. The Council received 88 Stage 1 complaints, an increase from 60 in 2020/21, 65 in 2019/20 and 69 in 2018/19.

49. 16 were investigated at Stage 2, an increase from 13 in 2020/21, seven in 2019/20 and 10 in 2018/19.

50. Two complaints were escalated to the Housing Ombudsman, an increase from zero in 2020/21 and the same number as in 2019/20 and 2018/19.

### Complaints Outcomes

51. The below tables show the decisions reached on complaints during 2020/21.

#### Stage 1

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
<b><i>Housing</i></b>						
Income Management	0	0	3	1	0	4
Contact & Repairs Co-ordination	0	2	1	4	2	9
Customer Services	0	1	0	1	0	2
Housing Management	2	10	11	11	3	37
Tenancy Enforcement	0	1	0	3	0	4
Lifeline	0	1	0	0	0	1
<b><i>Building Services</i></b>						
Building Surveying	0	1	0	0	0	1
Service & Repairs	0	1	2	12	3	18
<b>Totals</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>76</b>



## Stage 2

Service Area/Team	Inconclusive	Not Upheld	Partially Upheld	Upheld	Withdrawn	Total
<b><i>Housing</i></b>						
Contact & Repairs Co-ordination	0	0	0	1	1	2
Customer Services	0	1	0	0	0	1
Housing Management	0	0	6	2	2	10
Tenancy Enforcement	0	0	1	1	0	2
<b><i>Building Services</i></b>						
Service & Repairs	0	0	1	1	2	4
<b>Totals</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>19</b>

## Stage 3

52. The 'designated person' or 'democratic filter' did not determine any complaints during 2021/22.

### Housing Ombudsman

53. The Housing Ombudsman determined two complaints, compared to one during 2020/21 and 2019/20. The Housing Ombudsman also determined two complaints during 2018/19.

54. Full details of those complaints determined by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman are included in the Cabinet reports of 7 December 2021 and 6 September 2022 entitled [Review of Outcome of Complaints Made to Ombudsman](#).

## **Organisational Learning**

55. All resolution and organisational learning actions identified as a result of complaints are assigned to a responsible manager and progress against those actions is monitored by the Complaints Manager. In addition to those actions taken to resolve individual complaints, several service improvements were made following complaint investigations during 2021/22 and are detailed below:

## **Complaints**

56. Following a complaint considered by the Housing Ombudsman Service, the Council has now amended its investigative practice in relation to housing complaints, where the officer and complainant provide conflicting accounts of events.

## **Contact and Repairs Co-ordination**

57. Following a complaint for Contact and Repairs Co-ordination, it was agreed communication between teams and the process for inspecting and ordering work to external contractors needed to be improved.
58. Following another complaint for Contact and Repairs Co-ordination, the Planning Team the importance of getting it right was reiterated with the Planning Team.

## **Housing Management**

59. Following a complaint for Housing Management, further staff training was provided in relation to the process of void inspections and void standards and all major work voids are now jointly inspected by both Asset Management and the Housing Management Officer prior to a person taking on that tenancy, with any failed post-inspections immediately addressed with Building Services.
60. Following a complaint for Housing Management, the Council agreed to look at the processes around voids and glazing to ensure we reduce the chances of delays happening in future.
61. Following a complaint for Housing Management, it was agreed that Housing Management would provide tenants with a copy of repair notices and information on how the right to repair scheme works.
62. As a result of another complaint for Housing Management, the Council agreed to review its 'Belongings left in a Council Property' form.
63. Following a complaint for Housing Management, regarding the handing of a noise nuisance complaint, the Housing Management officer was spoken to regarding the correct process to follow to ensure they respond to future noise nuisance complaints in a timely manner.

64. As a result of a further complaint for Housing Management, Surveyors were reminded letters need to be sent to all tenants before a survey is carried out.
65. Following another complaint for Housing Management, Building Services were reminded of the need to confirm the time and date of appointments before arriving to undertake works and it was agreed a detailed operational manual would be provided to prospective tenants.
66. Following a complaint for Housing Management, the Council advised it indeed to introduce MOT style servicing in relation to Gas checks i.e. where the check would be undertaken within a certain date range each year.
67. As a result of a complaint for Housing Management, Housing Officers and Customer Services staff were made aware of who can apply for the County Durham & Darlington Community Safety Fund to avoid inaccurate advice being given the future.
68. Following a complaint for Management Services considered by the Housing Ombudsman Service, the Council was ordered to ensure it has procedures in place so that it is able to conduct risk assessments when residents report that they have been subject to verbal abuse or threats related to Anti-Social Behaviour.

#### **Tenancy Enforcement**

69. Following a complaint for Tenancy Enforcement it was recommended that the clauses in the Tenancy Agreement regarding succession of properties be reviewed and that all relevant staff receive refresher training in relation to this.

#### **Service & Repairs**

70. Following a complaint for Service & Repairs it was agreed the Head of Building Services would hold a meeting with the relevant members of staff to address the practice issues and training needs identified in relation to boiler repairs.

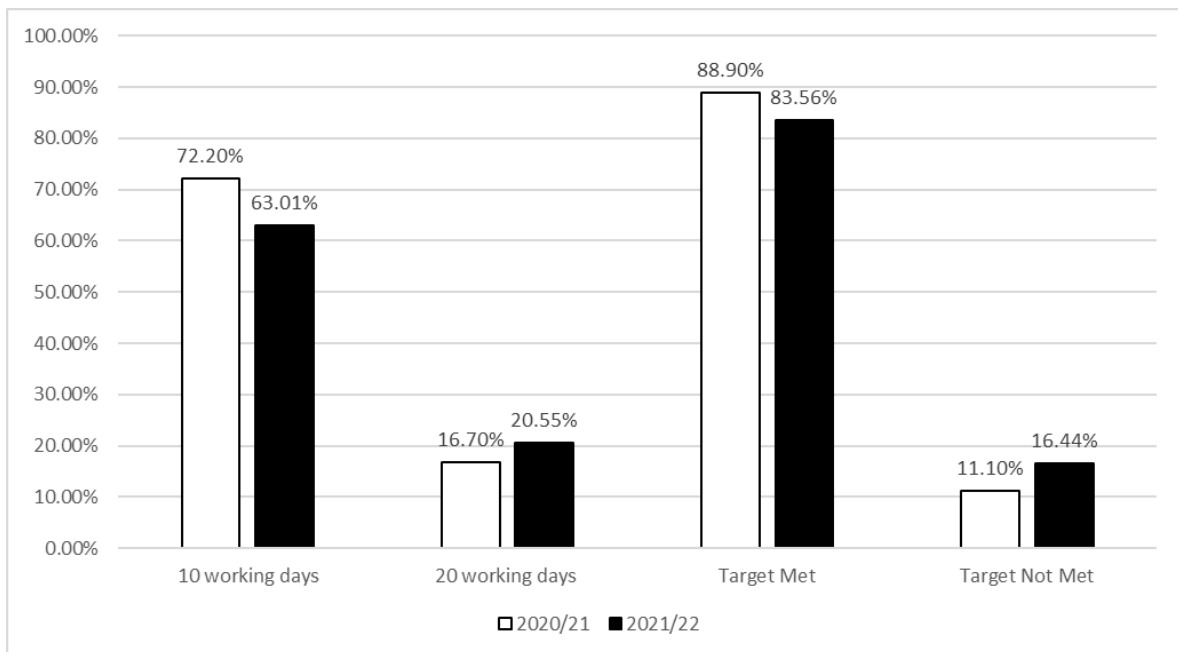
### Performance against the Housing Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure

71. On the 1 January 2021 the Council updated its Housing Complaints procedure to ensure it was compliant with the [Housing Ombudsman Code](#). This included amending the Stage 1 and Stage 2 timescales.

#### Stage 1

72. The below graph shows Stage 1 performance in relation to those complaints received after 1 January 2021.

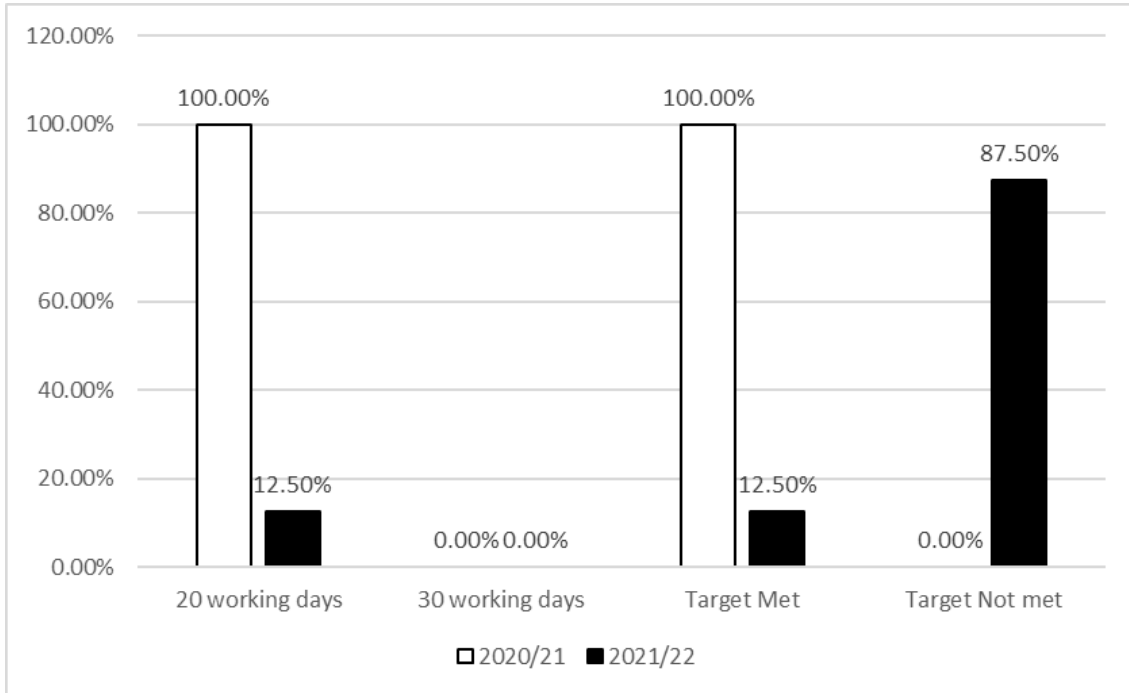
**Performance against Stage 1 response target  
(10 working days, with an extension up to 20 working days)**



#### Stage 2

73. The below graph shows Stage 2 performance in relation to those complaints received after 1 January 2021.

**Performance against Stage 2 response target  
(20 working days, with an extension up to 30 working days)**



**Further recommendations**

74. The Complaints & Information Governance Team should work to improve performance against the Housing Stage 2 response target.